



## REPORTS

### FROM WASHINGTON:

#### VELIKOVSKY RIDES AGAIN

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The September 1963 issue of *The American Behavioral Scientist* devoted itself to an impassioned defense of Epanuel Velikovsky, the worlds-in-collision man, and consequently to an impassioned denunciation of scientists for arrogantly refusing the man a fair hearing. The three articles developing these accusations were published under the collective title, "The Politics of Science and Dr. Velikovsky." "While Velikovsky's ideas are not at all beyond criticism," the articles conclude, "as a cosmologist he appears in the company of Plato, Aquinas, Bruno, Descartes, Newton, and Kant. What would therefore be only the duty of the critics of science—to defend ordinary or even mistaken scholars becomes, by accident, an occasion to defend a great savant of the age."

This is pretty heady stuff. The reasons given for the massive injustice done to Velikovsky range wide, beginning with the conventional accusation that scientists are unwilling to listen to someone without formal credentials, and ending with a bizarre suggestion that "an informal left-wing network might well have been in operation." But all this is by the way. The principal theory advanced in *Behavioral Scientist*, and also in an article in *Harper's* by Eric L'Abree, is that the scientists are reacting irrationally to a challenge which they are unable to refute, but which threatens large parts of the scientific worldview built up since Newton. This is the reaction which accounts, according to the editors, for "the prolonged emotional outburst in which almost the entire scientific community of the 1950s took part, an outburst of what Soren

Kierkegaard termed 'fear and trembling.'"

How did Velikovsky free himself of the prejudices that blind the physical scientists? "When the Velikovsky affair is considered in the light of the history of science it loses its puzzling qualities. Velikovsky," we are told, "saw what other scholars were not able to see because he relied on pieces of evidence that they had chosen to neglect, namely the accumulated records of human experience. Natural scientists who scorn these records put themselves in the position of the early astronomers who held that no truly respectable scholar should resort to the telescope."

On this basis, it is unsurprising that the magazine's editor, Alfred de Grazia, a professor of government at New York University, should issue a rallying cry to his readers: "What has not been appreciated," de Grazia writes "... is the high involvement of the social and behavioral sciences. The social sciences are the basis of Velikovsky's work. . . . It is by the use of the methodology of social science and the dates of history that Velikovsky has launched his formidable assault upon the heroes and theories of the classics, astronomy, geology, and historical biology. Yet the social scientists have been generally unaware of his work and almost totally disengaged."

None of this seems to have had much impact. The magazine's readers responded favorably in letters. But the physical scientists who were the focus of the attack seem barely to have noticed the challenge. There is no indication that behavioral scientists in significant numbers are talking to the call to defend Velikovsky. Conse-

quently, the intent of this report is not to discuss the controversy, since no perceptible controversy seems to have developed. What is of most interest here is that this attack on scientists incidentally and quite unintentionally provides an indication of the kind of confusion that must be expected when technical matters become the focus of public debate. For here we have a case in which there is none of the emotional and political passions that appear in matters like those involving fallout or fluoridation; none of the obvious economic and prestige influence that cannot be avoided on issues of where to set up a new space center or to build a new multibillion volt particle accelerator; none of the major national security issues so clearly involved in matters like the test ban or whether to build an antiballistic missile system; in short, we have to contend with none of the powerful factors that make it difficult to get a reasonably dispassionate public discussion of the technical side of political issues. We would expect a nice, reasonably reasonable weighing of objective evidence for and against Dr. Velikovsky. The *Behavioral Scientist* attack is not even directed particularly against those scientists who thirteen years ago felt that an appropriate response to the book was to bring pressure on its publisher to abandon the project. It is a general, unqualified attack on anyone who dismissed Velikovsky's work as plain hokum. And what makes the attack interesting, coming in a scholarly journal with a prestigious board of editorial advisors, is that Velikovsky's work, as clearly as anything can be in this world, is plain hokum.

Velikovsky's view is that around 1500 a.c. the planet Jupiter expelled the planet Venus as a comet, which then brushed past the earth, producing vast catastrophes (for example, boiling oceans) and incidentally the ten plagues of the biblical Exodus, the splitting of the Red Sea, and the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night which the Hebrews followed in the desert for the next forty years. The visit of Venus either temporarily stopped the earth's rotation or tilted it over on its axis, to produce the effect of prolonged night in the Near East. Fifty-two years later, the comet returned, according to Velikovsky, again stopping or tilting