Letters are selected for their expected interest for our readers. Some letters are sent to reviewers for advice; some are accepted or declined by the editor without review. Letters must be brief and may be edited, subject to the author’s approval of significant changes. Although some comments on published articles and notes may be appropriate as letters, most such comments are reviewed according to a special procedure and appear, if accepted, in the Notes and Discussions section. (See the “Statement of Editorial Policy” in the January issue.) Running controversies among letter writers will not be published.

THE SPIN-STATISTICS THEOREM

In a 1994 “question” in this journal, Neuenschwander asked whether anyone had yet met Feynman’s challenge of providing an elementary proof of the spin-statistics theorem. This innocuous question led to a series of supposed answers, then a “meta-answer” by Hilborn, who pointed out that several earlier answers were perhaps interesting but in fact not truly relevant to the theorem in question, a long article by Duck and Sudarshan, and a book by the same authors. Although Duck and Sudarshan had hoped to find a proof that would satisfy Neuenschwander, they concluded, regrettably, that the best they could provide was an argument that was “still not completely free from the complications of relativistic quantum field theory.”

Recently, however, there was published in this journal a letter to the editor by Broyles, in which it was claimed that a proof meeting Neuenschwander’s criteria had been published long ago. This letter gave no supporting details but merely referred the reader to an unpublished 1999 posting on the Los Alamos e-print archive, a posting that primarily serves to point to a special procedure and appear, if accepted, in the Notes and Discussions section. Most such comments are reviewed according to a special procedure and appear, if accepted, in the Notes and Discussions section. (See the “Statement of Editorial Policy” in the January issue.) Running controversies among letter writers will not be published.

In spite of the importance of the spin-statistics theorem and the attention that has been devoted to it, the physics community still waits—probably in vain—for an elementary proof. We are all indebted to Neuenschwander for reminding us of Feynman’s challenge; though the direct answer to Neuenschwander’s question is still negative, publication of his question has led to a better understanding of the theorem and its implications for those of us who have followed with interest the recent discussion.

References:
5. Reference 4, p. 485. See also Ref. 3, p. 300 (referring to a 1975 argument by Sudarshan): “Sudarshan’s proof eliminates the explicit dependence of the proof on relativistic quantum field theory. A critical implicit dependence on relativity is still present, however.”
8. As one further note, Berry and Robbins have recently published an interesting article on the subject [M. V. Berry and J. M. Robbins, “Indistinguishability for quantum particles: spin, statistics and the geometric phase,” Proc. R. Soc. London, Ser. A 453, 1771–1790 (1997)]. See also Berry and Robbins in Hilborn and Tino (Ref. 3, pp. 3–15). The Broyles and Robbins argument surely does not merit the adjective “elementary”; further, their argument seems potentially vulnerable to the same sorts of criticisms as those directed by Hilborn (Ref. 2) at the initial AJP “answers”.
9. What Neuenschwander actually asked was whether anyone had made any progress toward an elementary argument for the spin-statistics theorem (italics added). To that question, the various items discussed in this letter might be said to provide a cautiously positive answer. I might also add that many physicists are actually not quite clear on what the theorem is. Those who write most carefully on the subject are careful to draw a distinction between the spin-statistics theorem and the spin-statistics connection. Duck and Sudarshan write (Ref. 3, p. 301): “Although the Spin-Statistics Theorem is simply stated, it is by no means simply understood or simply proved.” Hilborn would probably disagree with the “simply stated” portion of that remark or would at least point out that many of us harbor misconceptions as to what the theorem states. He writes (Ref. 2): “Many physicists believe that the infamous spin-statistics theorem of relativistic quantum field theory provides the theoretical basis for the spin connection. However, the theorem actually proves less than we would like, and it is disappointing in both its limitations and its lack of a physical picture of why the connection obtains. The theorem is actually a negative statement. It tells us what quantum field theory cannot do. . . .”

Robert H. Romer
Department of Physics
Amherst College
Amherst, Massachusetts 01002
Electronic mail: rromer@amherst.edu
2 April 2002