

Vagelis Koutalis, "**Making discoveries for a better life vs. bringing fruits to the national treasury: Davy, Babbage, Brewster and the (ongoing) struggle for the soul of science**", *Almagest*, 5.1, May 2014, 53-109.

Abstract

In 1830, a heated debate over the “decline of science in England” erupted, in which Charles Babbage and David Brewster had the leading role. Humphry Davy was one of the prime targets of this criticism against the “backwardness” of British science, representing in the eyes of the reformers an outdated research tradition excessively concentrated on the complexities of electricity, at the expense of more pragmatic concerns, and less liable to formalization and precision than the continental analytical mechanics and the analytical chemistry. The contradiction here is between two significations of science. Davy’s version of scientific discourse, producing fertile questions instead of profitable answers, retained a philosophical dimension which accentuated the creative, self-valorizing aspect of living labour. The possibility of interaction with other expressions of human creativity, such as poetry, was inherent in his project, while science education was defined principally as selfeducation, a process which fulfills the Enlightenment ideal of autonomy. On their part, the declinists implicitly introduced new standards, such as the degree of professionalization and state control, for evaluating the status of science, by idealizing the experience of the Napoleonic educational reforms, and positing operability, precision, discipline, and political resilience as the special intellectual virtues which science is meant to exemplify.