



From Discrete to Continuous: The Broadening of Number Concepts in Early Modern England (Studies in History and Philosophy of Science) (Volume 16)

By K. Neal

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In the early modern period, a crucial transformation occurred in the classical conception of number and magnitude. Traditionally, numbers were merely collections of discrete units that measured some multiple. Magnitude, on the other hand, was usually described as being continuous, or being divisible into parts that are infinitely divisible. This traditional idea of discrete number versus continuous magnitude was challenged in the early modern period in several ways. This detailed study explores how the development of algebraic symbolism, logarithms, and the growing practical demands for an expanded number concept all contributed to a broadening of the number concept in early modern England. An interest in solving practical problems was not, in itself, enough to cause a generalisation of the number concept. It was the combined impact of novel practical applications together with the concomitant development of such mathematical advances as algebraic notation and logarithms that produced a broadened number concept.

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