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A Bit More Sinuosity: John Herschel's Graphical Method

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The word “graph” entered the English language only in 1878. Graphs themselves first appeared in the mid-eighteenth century and became common in the 1830s. The entire Scientific Revolution took place without graphs. Graphs received a boost in 1833 when John Herschel published a graphical method for determining the orbits of double stars. He argued that his method, which depended on human judgment rather than mathematical analysis, gave better results than did analytical methods, considering the uncertainty in the data. Herschel found that astronomy and terrestrial physics were especially suitable for graphical treatment and he expected that graphs would soon become important in all areas of science.