An Epistemologically Arrogant Community of Contending Scholars: A pre-Socratic Perspective on the Past, Present, and Future of the Pavlovian Society

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Abstract—The paper begins with a statement of the Society’s purpose and its pre-Socratic roots. The Society differs from other contemporary scientific and scientific-professional societies in that it is thoroughly apolitical, unusually open to discussion and debate, and has had a restricted scholarly written impact. I then suggest and interpret six phases in the Society’s history: (1) the pre-Socratic roots; (2) Pavlov and the young Gantt; (3) the Society’s Gantt score of years; (4) the Joe McGuigan decade; (5) the Stewart Wolf era; (6) reforming the Society. I conclude with the hope that even if the content of the Society’s interests changes, it will preserve the pre-Socratic approach against the various forms of intellectual barbarism that continue to arise.

Keywords: Pre-Socratics, disinterested discussion, conflict of ideas, contending scholars, Pavlovian procedures

“People who love wisdom must be acquainted with many things indeed”, fragment from Heraclitus, www.forthnet.gr/phil/presocratics/heracltn.htm.

Introduction

As I have argued in an earlier presidential address (Furedy, 1990), I maintain that the Pavlovian Society’s approach to scholarship and discussion parallels the perspective of the pre-Socratic philosophers who sought intellectual clarity by allowing different views to contend, with the purpose of achieving a sharpening of understanding. It was the pre-Socratics who were the first group to systematically practice a form of disinterested inquiry that focused on examining problems for their own sake, rather than worrying about the relation that those problems bore to individuals or to groups of individuals in terms of what we today would call “comfort.”

The view that controversial issues need to be examined on logical, rather than “comfort,” criteria is a form of epistemological arrogance. The essence of our Society is captured by the concept of a “community of contending scholars”. (I use the term “scholars” rather than the more restrictive term “researchers”, to indicate that wisdom can come from those who are not presently engaged in empirical research as well as from those who are).
Some Unique Aspects of the Pavlovian Society

There are at least three important and intriguing ways in which the Society differs to some extent from other contemporary scientific societies such as the American Psychological Society and the Society for Psychophysiological Research, or from scientific/professional organizations such as the American Psychological Association and the Applied Psychophysiology and Biofeedback Society of America.

The first is that the Pavlovian Society is totally apolitical. We have not engaged in activities that relate to politics rather than to science. Consider, in contrast, the activities in the mid seventies of the Society for Psychophysiological Research (SPR) in relation to the ERA (the U.S. Equal Rights Amendment). At the time that ERA was a major political issue, I recall being on the board of directors of SPR and arguing that, since SPR was purely research-oriented, and international (I noted that most non-North American members did not even know at that time what “ERA” stood for), SPR had no business in taking a position, as an organization, on ERA. My arguments were totally unsuccessful: SPR actually cancelled, with less than a year’s notice, the next annual conference in Miami on the grounds that the state of Florida had failed to pass the ERA. At the time, I was accused by several of my scientific colleagues on the board of being insensitive, sexist, and anti-ERA. I maintained, and still do, that I was merely insisting on the apolitical nature of an organization that should be devoted (see also Furedy, 1990) solely to the epistemological function of research.

The second aspect of the society is its relative openness to genuine debate and discussion. This is particularly apparent at our conferences (see also Furedy, 1990). Genuine debate used to be a feature of annual meetings of SPR in the sixties and early seventies, but active audience participation in discussion has declined significantly since then. Our commentary on this decline was published in SPR’s official journal, but appears to have had no practical impact (Furedy & Scher, 1985; see also Furedy, 1990, where I argue that the relatively small increase in audience size is not responsible for this decline in active participation).

Another interesting case is the Society for Neuroscience (SFN) meetings, where the poster sessions are quite interactive, but where the so-called symposia often allow no time for questions from the audience. Moreover, even when some time is allotted, no exploration of complex or fundamental issues is possible, if only because there is a proscription against reformulating or re-asking questions that are not clearly answered in the first place.

Finally, if I may mention a touchy subject, I suggest that the scholarly impact of our journal is far less than official journals of other societies like SPR and SFN. This low-impact problem, discussed in more detail later, has been a continuing feature of the society’s journal since its inception. In contrast, SPR’s journal, Psychophysiology, started off as a relatively noninfluential journal in the mid-sixties, but, beginning with the editorship of Bill Prokasy in the mid-seventies, it has become one of the highest impact journals in psychology. And this has not simply been a function of an increase of membership, which has been stable around the 900 mark since the mid-seventies.

Of course, scholarly impact, although it is objectively measurable, may not reflect true scientific worth, or even perceived interestingness. As someone whose main area of specialization is psychophysiology, I am quite convinced that SPR’s journal has become duller over the last two decades. For the reader, the main symptom is a plethora of papers that offer statistically and technically sound data that are interpreted only as being consistent with various abstract (not to say metaphorical) models of information processing. Few papers relate to the testing of actual theories about real psychological functions. Consistent