

WHAT SCIENTISTS CAN LEARN FROM SOCRATES

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Among many other things, Socrates taught us that there are causes and there are conditions (Plato, 1937). Science studies causes or, if you will, behaviors. In general, Science must be silent about conditions--or motives, or social action. Of course, Socrates knew things, and he knew that he knew things, such as certain geometric proofs, such as, for example, the interplay of bones and muscles to cause his joints to work. But there is another kind of knowing, that which is related to the "why" question--the motive, the value, the wisdom of the individual. And of this latter kind of knowing, Science provides little help to those who would seek to know why Socrates chose to remain in jail--when he could have walked out free. It isn't that materialistic Science should be faulted for not providing a proper explanation about the world, it's that Science cannot provide the entire explanation. Science can explain how beasts run, but can't deal nearly as well with the fact that the person is running faster than he ever ran before because a tiger is on his heels.

What troubles me is that scientists sometime act as if they are studying motives, when in reality they are looking at causes. Indeed, when they're careful not to make that error, most behavioral scientists make it quite clear that all they can do is report about their observations of behavior, getting at what makes a person do certain things, but always disclaiming knowledge about the reasons for behavior. When behaviorists reject "in the head" stuff because they

can't see it or measure it, they are in a way agreeing with the Socratic dichotomy between causes and conditions. However, what too many scientists fail to remember is that "in the head" stuff is very real; it's there, albeit unattainable by scientific inquiry.

Then, how are we in the disability field to deal with that which scientists can't study? How do we deal with Socrates' decision not to escape from jail when it would have been easy to leave? One thing we could do is to ask the person, "Why didn't you leave?" Another thing we might do is "pick up" where Science leaves off, and not attempt to develop elaborate and false scientific explanations for a complex individual's decisions. For example: if "society" decides that the Ten Commandments are good rules by which to live; and although those ideas may have once enjoyed better days, they are nevertheless seriously supported, even in our own time; then, we can plan our lives together as if those are good ideas, and that we should live by the Ten Commandments. However, if we expect to eventually design a sufficiently ingenious experiment to test the value, or the goodness, of the Ten Commandments, then we will be doomed to experimental failure after experimental failure. Where is the original experiment which led to the Ten Commandments? Stated another way, in questions concerning judgment and wisdom--e.g., questions concerning values, justice, virtue, beauty--there is no logical link from "is" to "ought." It is about those questions which Socrates claims that the most we can learn is what isn't, what we don't know, what remains to be revealed.

There are other interesting examples of what I am driving at here. Many of the accounts of research in my area of interest, mental retardation, seem to dwell on what can be done to the subjects--what we can do to teach them better, calm them more than we have in the past, ameliorate some of their concomitant

disabilities, help them become more "acceptable." Yet, as I keep pointing out, possibly the more important research question is what can be done to help the rest of the world better appreciate that our lives can be enriched as we increase the variance of our associations and interests. This is especially true for professionals who, for the most part, remain "distant" and, thus, preclude their becoming important in the lives of their clients. Therefore, while a "research question" may have to do with how to help a retarded child read more, the "other question" has to do with influencing a society to reconsider its values so that, possibly, reading is not an important criterion for being (if not "normal") entitled to live in a normal world.

Another example has to do with reconsideration of the premise that good "research" requires the detachment of the researchers. There is sufficient literature connected with human behavior which suggests that attachment is a potent variable. And so, I see from time to time research studies which purport to make people feel important, while the researcher records the consequences of such an intervention. If Socrates were here, he might have been tempted to indicate that such research is dishonest, that if scientists want to study what occurs when people are made to feel important, then we should make them be important. There is something intellectually dishonest about research which, on the one hand, insists on its "objectivity" when, on the other hand, it is trying to get at things which are very subjective--opinions and judgments. And then it "blows" the goal by "fooling" the unsuspecting subject.

Research in mental retardation need not necessarily be free of subjectivity, but should adhere to certain rules of argument (logic) so that one can rationally follow and, if necessary, dispute them. Whether a report is faithful to facts and whether an argument is valid are matters that rational judgment can determine.

And an element of such judgment must be in remembering the dichotomy between what Science can do for us--establish causes--and what reason can do--establish rationality.

Read Socrates.

Reference

Plato, Phaedo. In B. Jowett (trans.), The dialogues of Plato. New York:
Random House, 1937.