

Organized Skepticism Revisited

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My essay entitled “The Pathology of Organized Skepticism” was published in JSE 16-1 (Leiter, 2002). Essentially, it described my continuing engagement with, and observations of, PhACT, the Philadelphia Association for Critical Thinking, a local skeptics group. Recently, one of PhACT’s members unintentionally confirmed two of the key contentions of the above essay in separate *published* statements. These two new data points are described below, but first some background regarding the PhACT member in question:

His name is Bill Wisdom. He is a very active, long-time member of PhACT (actually a founding member) and a current member of PhACT’s governing council. He also holds a Ph.D. in Philosophy and is a retired Temple University professor, primarily of Formal Logic. Having a last name that matches your professional pursuits may be a distinct advantage, and I am probably not the first to notice that, nor the last. I have known him since my first contact with PhACT. He would be a worthy member of SSE, and I have encouraged him in that direction, but without success. All in all, he is a likable, intelligent, academically accomplished person. When my above essay was published, and based on an earlier promise to him, he was the first PhACT member to whom I gave a reprint of same.

I have searched my own files extensively, but to no avail, trying to find his letter of response to my essay for possible quotation here. Fortunately, that letter’s specific contents are not especially relevant in this context but, needless to say, he was strongly (but gentlemanly) critical of my essay’s observations, subsequent conclusions, and its overall position regarding PhACT in particular, and organized skepticism in general¹. Ironically, two of his *more recent, published* pieces serve to confirm two of my essay’s key contentions respectively and his above letter’s tone suggests confirmation of a third, albeit less significant contention.

My essay’s primary conclusion, based on observation and personal knowledge of a number of PhACT’s members (but heretofore, *not* including Wisdom) was that:

*“Each one who has disclosed personal details of their formative years, say up to their early 20’s, has had an unfortunate experience with a **faith-based** philosophy, most often a conventional major religion. Very often their family or community has (almost forcibly) imposed this philosophy on them at a very early age; but then as they matured, they*

threw off this philosophy with a vengeance, vowing at a soul level never to be so victimized again."

Wisdom is an avowed atheist², as most members of organized skepticism appear to be. It is the *specific process* by which he became an atheist that is yet another individual confirmation of my above primary conclusion. In a copyrighted posting² under the heading "Why I am not a Christian" on his web site, he makes the following telling statement:

"Although throughout high school I claimed to be a bible-believing Christian, I never thought much about what I was committing myself to. It was only when I got to college that I took up the challenge to examine the nature and grounds of my beliefs. A bit of reflection revealed that much of Christian doctrine was preposterous."

I greatly appreciate the preceding statement, i.e. his personal *post hoc* confirmation of my essay's primary conclusion. His entire piece² provides an interesting insight into the man and the development of his personal philosophy. I trust that, following the publication of this essay, his web site will still provide access to the entire piece.

I am somewhat bemused by (what I see as) Wisdom's essentially exclusive dependence on (formal) logic as a personal philosophical guide, although, based on his career path, that is certainly no surprise. For myself, as a career engineer, I have always placed much more faith in empirical findings. Thus, one of my favorite quotations is, "One test is worth a thousand expert opinions." I am not positive of the source of that gem, but I heard it was inscribed on a small brass plaque, routinely mounted above the large force-indicating dial on early "Riehle" physical-testing machines, during their assembly.

In an even more recent published piece by Wisdom, he essentially confirms a secondary conclusion of my essay, where I said:

*"In fact, many 'Skeptics' will not even read significantly into the literature on the subjects about which they are most skeptical. I have direct experience with this behavior on the part of a number of PhACT members. Initially, I attributed that behavior to just plain laziness, but lately I've begun to suspect that those individuals may actually have a **phobia** about reading material that is contrary to their own views. It seems entirely possible that they fear 'contamination' from that exposure will eventually lead to (Gasp!) acceptance of the opposition's position."*

Permit me to explain his mode of confirmation: For a couple of years now, PhACT has had its own on-line lending library. Wisdom, as a retired professional academic with his own extensive personal library, is far-and-away the most generous contributor to that on-line lending library. In a letter published in a recent issue of PhACT's newsletter, *Phactum*³, Wisdom complained about the essentially total lack of member-patronage of the lending library, as follows:

*"As I look over this list [of books offered for lending to PhACT members and others], I can't believe that none of our members are interested in any of these books. **If you***

read books at all, you should at least look the list over, to see if there might be something of interest to you.” [Bold print by current author]

Earlier in his letter, he describes the range of books offered by the lending library as follows:

“There are books not only on skepticism, but also on history, religion and theology, science, mathematics, parapsychology, philosophy, magic (for entertainment), miracles, UFO’s, creationism, free thought, and on and on and on.”

In a convoluted way, I may have been the “trigger” for Wisdom’s letter to *Phactum*. As a “dues-paying non-member” of PhACT (I have to pay the dues amount to receive *Phactum* and also to attend PhACT social functions without overt personal embarrassment), I always try to attend PhACT’s year-end party; not a Christmas party, nor a New Year’s party mind you, but typically a “Winter Solstice Party”. At the “end-2003 party” I asked Wisdom, in passing, how many PhACT members had availed themselves of his generous offer to lend/give books from his personal library. His answer was, “None”. His above letter of complaint appeared in the next issue of *Phactum*.

In deference to my fondness for Wisdom, I want to tread lightly regarding what comes next, but in my essay, I cited the sensitivity of critical skeptics to criticism by “skeptics of skeptics” like me. His personal letter (mentioned earlier) in response to my essay was indicative of that sensitivity. (Also, please see Note 1.)

Fortuitously, when I had finished a rough, penciled draft of this current essay, and while I was transferring it to MS WORD[®], two other PhACT members, in separate posts on PhACT’s web-site message-board⁴, unknowingly testified (again *post hoc* by people aware of my essay and its contents) to the accuracy of my essay’s above primary conclusion, beginning with: “*Each one who has disclosed personal details . . .*”. Specifically, the first poster, Cathy Fiorello, said:

“I guess my father’s just not very good at child abuse, since the strict Catholicism didn’t take.”

To which the responding poster, Al Erpel, replied:

“Yes, my parents were guilty of it too. Although, compared to just about all of my friends, I had a mild case of ‘believe in my superstition’ imposed on me. I never thought of it as such as a child, I even mostly looked forward to church (the superstition) stuff. The negative didn’t occur to me until being an adult (how could it?).”

I encourage readers of this current essay to visit PhACT’s web-site⁴ to see these posts for themselves and to “draw out” the PhACT (and other) skeptics who post there, as fellow SSE member (and “Master Skeptic of Skeptics”) Bill Beaty and I often do. It is a priceless, almost addictive experience.

Notes

¹ A much more extensive critique of my essay was published in *Phactum*, PhACT’s bimonthly newsletter. Entitled, “Misguided Stigmatization Of

‘Organized Skepticism’”, by Amardeo Sarma, it appeared in the June/July 2002 issue of *Phactum*. This critique of both my essay and of Dr. Henry Bauer’s related editorial comment was nearly as long as the essay itself. Sarma is a member of several skeptics’ organizations, including CSICOP, the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal.

The current editor of *Phactum* rejected my submission of a rebuttal to Sarma’s critique, which was the second time a *Phactum* editor has refused to publish one of my rebuttals to criticism of my work that has appeared in *Phactum*. I was somewhat amused by the fact that Sarma chose to have his critique published in *Phactum*, rather than submitting it for publication in JSE. I am sure he knows the proper professional protocol for such rebuttals, and I mentioned his failure to follow that protocol in my own rejected rebuttal. JSE would have given him a much larger audience of readers, and readers who had *actually* read my essay, but would have exposed Sarma to formal JSE editorial strictures, my own rebuttal, and probably other critical SSE commentary as well.

Surprisingly, PhACT itself did *not* respond to my essay via *Phactum*, choosing instead to let Sarma speak therein for it, even though most of my essay related to PhACT, not to CSICOP.

² See <http://www.unconventional-wisdom.com/WAW>, and the piece entitled, “Why I Am (Or Am Not) A . . .”.

³ See “*Letter to Phactum*”, *Phactum*, Jan/Feb 2004.

⁴ See <http://www.PhACT.org>. Then click icon “PhACT Board” (PhACT’s Internet message board). Next, go to the message-thread entitled “proof of reincarnation” by “Al” on Apr 17, 2004, 6:20 PM. Then, in that thread read the post: “Yes really!” by Alfred Erpel June 11, 2004 at 8:50 PM. (Note: If the above thread or post is no longer listed on the message board’s index page, go to bottom of the current index page and click on preceding index pages in sequence.)

Reference

- Leiter, L. D. (2002). The pathology of organized skepticism. *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, 16, 125–128.