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Critical Appraisal of Physical Science as a Human Enterprise

Dynamics of Scientific Progress

 Springer

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VOLUME 36

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Critical Appraisal of Physical Science as a Human Enterprise

Dynamics of Scientific Progress

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ISBN 978-1-4020-9625-9

e-ISBN 978-1-4020-9626-6

Library of Congress Control Number: 2009920028

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Printed on acid-free paper

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*For Magda and Sabuhi
For their love, patience, and understanding*

Acknowledgments

My institution, Universidad de Oriente (Venezuela) has been the major sponsor of most of my research activities for the last 20 years, through various grants provided by the Consejo de Investigación. I am indebted to Juan Pascual-Leone (York University, Toronto), Richard F. Kitchener (Colorado State University), Michael R. Matthews (University of New South Wales, Australia), Stephen G. Brush (University of Maryland), and Gerald Holton (Harvard University) for helpful discussions on various aspects of history and philosophy of science. A special word of thanks is due to Art Stinner (University of Manitoba, Winnipeg) and colleagues (especially Stephen Klassen, University of Winnipeg) for providing a congenial and stimulating intellectual environment during my three very productive visits in 2001, 2003, and 2007.

Thanks are due to the following publishers for reproduction of materials from my publications: (a) Elsevier (Chapter 5); and (b) Oxford University Press (Chapter 7)

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Chapter 1

Introduction

It is generally believed that doing science means accumulating empirical data with no or little reference to the interpretation of the data based on the scientist's theoretical framework or presuppositions. Holton (1969a) has deplored the widely accepted myth (experimenticism) according to which progress in science is presented as the inexorable result of the pursuit of logically sound conclusions from unambiguous experimental data. Surprisingly, some of the leading scientists themselves (Millikan is a good example) have contributed to perpetuate the myth with respect to modern science being essentially empirical, that is carefully tested experimental facts (free of *a priori* conceptions), leading to inductive generalizations.

Based on the existing knowledge in a field of research a scientist formulates the guiding assumptions (Laudan et al., 1988), presuppositions (Holton, 1978, 1998) and "hard core" (Lakatos, 1970) of the research program that constitutes the imperative of presuppositions, which is not abandoned in the face of anomalous data. Laudan and his group consider the following paraphrase of Kant by Lakatos as an important guideline: philosophy of science without history of science is empty. Starting in the 1960s, this "historical school" has attempted to redraw and replace the positivist or logical empiricist image of science that dominated for the first half of the twentieth century. Among other aspects, one that looms large in these studies is that of "guiding assumptions" and has considerable implications for the main thesis of this monograph (Chapter 2).

Many major steps in science, probably all dramatic changes, and most of the fundamental achievements of what we now take as the advancement or progress of scientific knowledge have been controversial and have involved some dispute or another. Scientific controversies are found throughout the history of science. While nobody would deny that science in the making has had many controversies, most science textbooks and curricula consider it as the uncontroversial rational human endeavor (Machamer et al., 2000).

The objective of this monograph is to reconstruct historical episodes and experiments that have been important in scientific progress, to explore the role played by controversies and rivalries among scientists. Although progress in science has been replete with controversies, scientists themselves either ignore or simply downplay their role. Such presentations lack the appreciation of the dynamics of