

SSCE Special Mid-Term Committee Meeting

17–18th March 2015 (Edinburgh)

1. Debriefing the questionnaires - SSCE in the long-view

We began our meeting with coffee and sandwiches and those present had some time to review the answers committee members provided to the surveys I distributed in the previous week.

We began our discussion formally by trying to answer the following question (in considering answers to survey question 1):

Starting with question one: in a word or phrase — what are aspects of the society which stand out in common across our various answers as things which have made the society successful or important for this group? Remember to try and reduce this to a just a word or three!

Answers given included the following phrases and key words: “unique conversation,” “intimacy,” “friendship,” “academic community” “supportive / safe,” “formative”

We had a discussion over these latter terms, with several members noting the tension between a society which seeks to be “supportive” and “discerning”. We also noted how the dynamics of “support” or to put it a different way, a society that is focussed on the “formation” of its members can have different modes and scales of accomplishing the same thing - this can serve in a sense of constraining participation or conduct; or oriented towards a goal.

I asked as a follow-up in debriefing answers to the first survey question whether the SSCE has an wider influence on British society and there was a general consensus that we do not (in some contrast to a body such as TRS-UK or the Royal Geographical Society which are engaged in more active advocacy).

We moved on next to consider the following question:

What constituencies are emphasised in the answers given? Are there any missing that we might like to better address?

In our discussion, we concluded that there were two primary constituencies emphasised: (1) academic professionals: i.e. postgraduates, lecturers, and professors and (2) non-academics, which primarily involved the church (like Malcolm Brown) or pseudo-independent scholars who were fit the first category but lacked formal institutional affiliation. We also discussed the ways in which our postgraduate members tend to find themselves on a trajectory towards professional academic work or church-based pastoral work, but there isn't much representation of those who mean to pursue secular ethicists in a professional context.

We tried to distill this discussion in a more formal way by discussing the following question (looking towards survey question 2):

Turning to question two, based on what everyone has written in response to these questions, how might we boil down the the telos of our society into one or two brief sentences, i.e. what is the society for?

Over the course of our discussion of this question, the following initial suggestions came up:

"We get/keep certain conversations going..." "...over time" "[it is] More about the stability of participants in the conversation and not the topics"

In focussing this discussion, we crystallised this sense of identity/conversation around several overlapping, but distinct, teoi:

1. To support the academy of theological ethicists through activities characteristic of academics; conferences, papers for peer reviewed journals, etc. [there was some discussion about whether this is to support *theological* ethicists or Christian ethicists, i.e. scholars that are more narrowly defined in terms of subject area]
2. To provide an aspect of interface or praxis which might contrast the SSCE from other societies (like SCE); to "[be] an academic community"

I Asked the Group to Discuss the Following Next:

*Looking up at this list of "important things" [see above] what might threaten or undermine these things?
More concretely, what are some ways in which we have fallen short as a society?*

Answers included the following:

1. The intimacy or "safeness" of our community can be threatened by a lack of clarity in terms of standards of conduct. Though, in seeking to protect community and vulnerable members, this shouldn't crassly be about "risk management" or limiting liability, as ethics can often be in secular contexts.
2. A lack of involvement by members in management and operation of society or on reflection on praxis can threaten the coherence of society identity, though strong or universal involvement might represent something of a novel direction.
3. To pursue a "community" identity can also lead to the risk of becoming "static" as a society, i.e. just preserving ways of reflection or meeting from previous years.

In Looking Loosely Towards Question 3, We Next Discussed the Following:

*Looking towards our answers to **question three**, without abandoning the ideals we've already identified, what might be some ways that we could try to grow the society in new directions?*

Some suggestions included:

- Bigger conferences and a more substantial critical mass of audience for short-paper sessions.
- Diversifying the content of our conferences, i.e. a resident artist, poster sessions, seminar format papers, etc.

- Having more flexibility but not necessarily growth.
- More Irish participation (drop .uk from domain name?)
- More interfaith participation.
- A great big conference of conferences of RS societies

2. Sub-Group Meetings

Next we broke into two sub-groups to discuss more concrete matters of concern - (1) Conferences / events and (2) Membership. After meeting, these groups reflected their discussion back to the group and we generated some action items as a group:

2a. Conferences

Picking up from the discussion above, this group led us in discussion about how we might diversify the format of our conferences to capture new members whilst maintaining the core aspects of SSCE identity and purpose we identified at the outset. The PG conveners explained how they have asked their successors to consider changing the format of the PG forums, moving the Spring event to London, and reformat it as a symposium rather than a more straightforward conference. We generally agreed that it might be appropriate to try and grow the society, but only modestly towards a conference attendance of 100 (which would be up from 60–75) and to cautiously consider (in light of the potential financial risk) alternative venues in light of lowering per delegate costs and raising the ceiling for audience on our plenary sessions.

Action items included the following:

- explore new options for PG forums location / format - possibly extend to non-PG members.
- explore alternative conference venues which could accommodate larger group, up to 100.
- re: transparency, put criteria for evaluation of short papers on website; also describe process for plenary paper selection.
- explore possible new format sessions (seminar style, panel discussion, book review panels, a “big ideas” non-concurrent session with 3–5 min. presentations, including formal respondents to plenary addresses, etc.)

2b. Membership

After some discussion, the group reached a consensus that we should begin the process of developing a statement of professional conduct as a requirement for new and existing society memberships. We agreed that this process would be best opened with a constrained scope (as with the SCE), i.e. to cover conduct by members only at an activity relating to the society. This could then offer a framework for a review of society procedures (plenary speaker selection, membership, etc.) and that in the interim while such a code is developed, the society should nominate a conduct officer who would be independent from the SSCE committee and could receive reports of misconduct for consideration.

3. Business Meeting

We concluded on the second day with a brief business meeting which covered the following points:

- JK asked whether the committee would mind if he looked into the possibility of becoming an AAR affiliated society (this would entitle all SSCE members to a significant discount for AAR events without requiring a membership; see <https://www.aarweb.org/about/partnerships>). The group agreed and suggested that JK recommend this to the AGM in Sept.
- We discussed a possible short-list of plenary speakers for the 2016 conference. Based on this list, we have extend initial invitations and Ellen F. Davis and Carol Adams have both accepted our invitation. Keeping in mind David Clough's address, this leaves two more spots to be filled. We are aiming to have at least three speakers with a Christian theological/ethical background (including Drs. Clough and Davis).
- We discussed the possibility of a *Societas Ethica* collaboration in 2017 and the group agreed that this was worth pursuing right away with the intention of bringing a more realised proposal to the next AGM in Sep.
- Our PG conveners both noted their intention to retire from service this year and provided two recommendations to the committee for their replacements: Nick Baumgartner (Durham) and Esther Chew (Exeter). *JK note: The committee enthusiastically supported these nominations and both have since confirmed that they are happy to be co-opted to co-convenership at the next AGM*