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What (Good) is Historical Epistemology? 24–26 July

The title question of the conference held at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science (Berlin) was primarily framed by the organizers (Uljana Feest and Thomas Sturm) in order to clarify certain topical relationships; namely, what *good* has historical epistemology (HE) been for historiographical concerns within the history of science? What *good* has HE been as a possible contributor to the history of epistemology? And finally, can HE be of any good to traditional epistemological concerns, such as the nature of justification and belief? The conference, all in all, aimed at presenting various available conceptions of HE to a philosophical audience that has up to now often neglected it.

After three intensive days and about twenty-one presentations by philosophers, historians, and sociologists (and various combinations thereof), and many lively discussions, what became clearer were many possible answers, approaches and interpretations to the title and associated questions. It would be impossible to present all these here, but some key aspects should suffice to give an impression of this important event. Before we begin, it might be of interest to note some of the more prominent participants of the conference: Lorraine Daston, Daniel Garber, Michael Friedman, Philip Kitcher, Martin Kusch, Sandra Mitchell, Jürgen Renn, Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, Robert J. Richards, Barry Stroud, Catherine Wilson and M. Norton Wise. The number of audience members came to nearly one-hundred and twenty.

Generally speaking, some seemed to approach the main question by contrasting HE to what it may not be; namely to things like history of epistemology, history of knowledge practices, and the philosopher's reconstructive history. Along with Thomas Sturm's (Berlin) paper, Lorraine Daston's (Berlin) characterization of HE, for instance, was a good example of this approach. She suggested that HE be understood as standing in a continuum between the history of knowledge practices and the history of epistemology; where HE examines the emergence and articulation of novel epistemological categories and problems in the sciences out of knowledge practices. Dan Garber (Princeton), however, seemed to feel by the end that none of these should be distinguished from HE, and both Hans-Jörg Rheinberger (Berlin) and Jean François Braunstein (Paris) reminded us of the contingent nature of these distinctions, especially upon language, national traditions and discipline formation.

Another approach to the question was to relate HE to traditional philosophical epistemology, which became, more specifically, the question: what good is *history* to epistemology? In the main, there seemed to be two ways in which this was answered: by either expanding the traditional notion of epistemology, or by showing how history may be included into its traditional task. Uljana Feest (Berlin) provided an instance of the former. In answering her question—what kind of HE is provided by studying “epistemic objects”?—she claimed that unlike the concern of the philosopher of science with justification of theory and results, her focus was rather the norms of the concepts used in experimental design; in other words, the focus is on the process rather than the justification of results. Barry Stroud (Berkeley), in contrast, provided a good example of the latter, in suggesting that history might come into play as a ‘diagnostic’ to a stalemate between divergent solutions to a traditional epistemological problem. This came also close to Philip Kitcher's (New York) keynote address, where he suggested that the epistemologist should actually enter the ‘historical laboratory,’ which may possibly help her not only to resolve difficult cases in philosophy, but also to historically answer a traditional epistemological question: how do you identify good methods for changing beliefs? Along with Michael Heidelberger (Tübingen) and Sandra Mitchell (Pittsburgh), Kitcher's address attempted to combine HE with another approach to epistemology, naturalism. In making such a connection, they were actually advancing a new version of HE. It remains to be seen, as Michael Friedman (Stanford) noted in discussion, whether such a task is a coherent one, considering that notions like ‘knowledge’ and ‘object’ may not be treated in the same way as ‘organisms’, for instance, are in science.

Due largely to the philosophical tenor of these issues the inverse problem—what good is *epistemology* to history?—was discussed far less; but when it was, what became evident was that the historian's conception of epistemology seemed much broader than traditional philosophical conceptions. Where the two—philosophical approaches to HE and those in the history of science—may have converged was in their mutual recognition in the importance of identifying where, historically, epistemological questions come from. Apart from these two approaches, I can only mention Martin Kusch's (Cambridge) three historiographical desiderata for any HE, and Hasok Chang's (London) memorable paper, which advanced a kind of ‘activist’ approach to reviving ‘killed’ scientific entities in light of his notion that even such entities embody (scientific?) knowledge.

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