

Get Real!: Realism as a Goal for the Sciences and for HPS

A conference celebrating 60 years of HPS at Leeds

19-20 September 2017

University of Leeds

Scientists tend to want to discover the truth about nature beyond its appearances. They want to get nature right (“scientific realism”). Historians and philosophers generally try to understand what the sciences are really like, undistorted by the views of science’s propagandists and critics. They want to get science right. This two-day conference, in commemoration of 60 years of integrated History and Philosophy of Science (HPS) at the University of Leeds, invites papers looking at these two goals – getting nature right and getting science right – and the links between them.

One aim is to use the issue of realism to take stock of developments in the field since the classic writings of Stephen Toulmin (who founded Leeds HPS), Mary Hesse (who figured in its prehistory), Thomas Kuhn and others. The question of whether and how scientific knowledge latches onto reality was one of the central ones in the field well into the 1980s. Although that debate continues, the intellectual ecology around it has grown very complex. It’s not at all clear to many that a true-to-life account of the sciences, technosciences, medicine and engineering – a realistic account, in that sense – should pay anything like the level of attention formerly paid to “scientific realism,” or even that the terms of that debate make sense, historiographically or philosophically. A second, related aim of the conference is to ask what light an HPS perspective on the realism issue, broadly construed, can throw on the field itself – its past but also its present and possible futures.

A far-from-exhaustive list of topics touching on this theme includes:

- Changing notions of what counts as real at different times (realism’s epistemologies) and of who gets to decide (realism’s politics)
- How the increased visibility of female, non-white, non-Western and other “hidden figure” practitioners is altering our picture of real science and the role of ideas of the real
- Scientific realism as a regulative ideal, in theory and practice, and in complex relationships to other kinds of realism, antirealisms, and third-way options such as pragmatism
- Historians’ own realism debates, concerning the existence of e.g. the Scientific Revolution, the Second Scientific Revolution, classical physics, the Bacteriological Revolution, the ca. 1900 revolt against morphology, the linear model etc.
- How descriptive and normative elements interact in different, putatively realistic philosophies and historiographies of the sciences, and with what consequences
- The contested relationships between theoretical success, technological success, and the case for scientific realism
- Museums, textbooks, popular-science publishing and TV etc. as sources of public knowledge of what the sciences are really like

On the evening of the 19th there will be an evening public lecture from Dr Jonathan Topham on a Victorian printing press, as part of the History and Philosophy of Science in 20 Objects series currently underway in association with the University of Leeds Museum of the History of Science, Technology and Medicine.

We hope to announce keynote speakers shortly. We also hope to be able to offer travel bursaries for postgraduate students.

To submit a title plus abstract (1-200 words) for consideration, please email them, along with your name and institutional affiliation, to Polina Merkulova at pr15pm@leeds.ac.uk by Monday 24 July. Talks should be about 25 minutes long (which will leave 15 minutes for discussion). We will send decisions out by the end of the month.

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