Testing Philosophical Theories Against the History of Science

CALL FOR REGISTRATION

A workshop, September 21-22, 2015

Location:
Oulu Centre for Theoretical and Philosophical Studies of History
Faculty of Humanities
University of Oulu
Finland

An event combining:

- The Oulu Centre for Theoretical and Philosophical Studies of History
  http://www.oulu.fi/centreforphilosophyofhistory/
- The AHRC project ‘Contemporary Scientific Realism and the Challenge from the History of Science’
  http://community.dur.ac.uk/evaluating.realism/index.html

Speakers

Steve Fuller (Warwick)  ‘What is the entity to which a theory of scientific rationality applies, such that it might be tested?’

Katherina Kinzel (Vienna)  ‘Historicism and the problem of historical evidence’

Helge Kragh (Aarhus)  ‘The emergence of modern cosmology in the light of philosophical theories of scientific change’

James W. McAllister (Leiden)  ‘Method of cases in analytic philosophy and HPS’

Elliott Millinor and Michael Funk Deckard (Lenoir-Rhyne)  ‘Observations upon confrontation models in HPS’

María del Rosario Martínez Ordaz and Luis Estrada-González (Mexico)  ‘Inconsistency and theory choice in the reconstruction of scientific episodes: The case of heterogenesis and biogenesis’

Samuel Schindler (Aarhus)  ‘Ad hoc-ness: a historico-philosophical analysis’

Raphael Scholl (Pittsburgh) and Tim Räz (Konstanz)  ‘Towards an explicit methodology for integrated history and philosophy of science’

Luca Tambolo (Trieste)  ‘The Problem of rule-choice redux: Why the history of science does not help with the justification of methodological rules’

Participation is free for everyone

PLEASE REGISTER BY SEPTEMBER 16, 2015: ilkka.o.lahteenmaki@oulu.fi
Summary

Ever since philosophers first started formulating theories of science those theories have been compared with (reconstructions of) episodes in the history of science. The thought is that descriptive theories need to match ‘what really happens’ in science, and that even normative theories need to match up with what happens in good science. Such comparisons have led to a wide variety of different conclusions. At one end of the scale the reconstruction is taken to be ‘accurate’, and the conclusion reached is either that the history evidentially threatens (even falsifies) the philosophy, or alternatively that the history evidentially supports (even corroborates) the philosophy. At the other end of the scale the reconstruction is taken to be just one possible reconstruction amongst several others, such that how it bears on the philosophy is much less clear. And it has also been suggested that the whole project of comparing philosophical theories with the history of science is misguided.

On this issue one finds heated discussion in the 1960s and 70s, when some sought to turn philosophy into a testable enterprise, with history taking the place of scientific experiment. Whilst the more radical interpretations of this idea quickly fell out of favour, more moderate versions are still very much alive today. Indeed, much philosophy of science is ‘case study based’, and thus premised on the idea that bringing history of science to bear on philosophy of science can (at the very least) teach us important lessons. But more recently Jutta Schickore (2011) has taken issue with this ‘confrontation model’, on the grounds that all history of science requires a perspective.

The purpose of this workshop is to bring this debate back to the table, assessing it in light of the fact that so many debates in contemporary philosophy of science make implicit, controversial assumptions about how history of science can bear on philosophy of science. Key questions will be:

(i) Which philosophical theories (if any) truly can be tested by the history of science? And what do we even mean by ‘tested’?
(ii) Under what circumstances is one reconstruction ‘better’ than another? How can we tell?
(iii) What are we to make of a philosophical theory which is consistent with one reconstruction of a particular historical episode, but inconsistent with another?
(iv) Is Schickore (2011) right to claim that the model of ‘confronting’ philosophical theories with historical data is “highly problematic and should be abandoned”?