Thought Experiments in the History of Philosophy of Science: A Special Issue of HOPOS

Advisory Editors: Michael Stuart (London School of Economics) and Yiftach Fehige (Toronto)

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Themes and Topics:

Thought experiments play important epistemological roles in scientific practice. But philosophical debate on how they work has reached something of a stalemate: there are now empiricist, rationalist, naturalist, Kantian, phenomenological, pluralist, contextualist, and skeptical accounts on offer, with no consensus in sight. We think a fresh investigation into the historical trajectory of the discussion could break the stalemate and be of independent historical interest.

Motivating questions include (but are not limited to) the following: Are there lesser known writings on scientific thought experiments by traditionally unrepresented philosophers or philosophically-minded scientists that deserve more attention? Were Popper and Kuhn's epistemological concerns about thought experiments the same as those we discuss today? Many positivists used thought experiments and were interested in the methodology of science, yet they appear to be relatively silent on the topic. Is this really the case, and if so, why might that be? What did Lakatos intend when he likened mathematical proof to thought experiment? To what extent were Duhem and Meinong really skeptics about scientific thought experiments? How can we relate the views of early neo-Kantians on thought experiments to current neo-Kantians? How have feminist philosophers of science, pragmatists and others interacted with scientific thought experiments?

This issue of HOPOS calls for a return to our history in order to advance our present understanding of scientific thought experiments.

Please direct any questions to Mike Stuart (mike.stuart.post@gmail.com) or to Yiftach Fehige (yiftach.fehige@utoronto.ca).

All essays will be anonymously peer reviewed.

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