

Philosophy of Science and Beyond

25 June 2026

The replication crisis

9:30 - 10:00: Nicholas Brown, Linnaeus University, Sweden [virtual]

Can science investigate itself?

The investigation of scientific fraud is an asymmetric activity. Investigators, including so-called “sleuths”, are hampered by having to work within the rules of the academic game and present their evidence in a “scientific” way, while the perpetrators of fraud – having already transgressed by committing that fraud – are working within a completely different set of rules. In this talk I will argue that we need a radically different approach to the investigation of scientific misconduct.

10:00 - 10:20: Coffee break

Academic freedom

Three short talks followed by a response and a panel discussion.

10:20 - 10:40: Abhishek Saha, Queen Mary University of London, UK [in person]

Keeping the funnel open: How should we conceptualise academic freedom?

Academic freedom is generally understood as a right – related to, but not identical with, freedom of speech – that protects scholars from unwarranted interference. But what, precisely, does it protect, and against whom? This talk examines three recurring fault lines: whether academic freedom is an individual right or also encompasses institutional autonomy; whether it protects only work within a scholar’s area of expertise or extends more broadly; and whether the responsibilities often attached to academic freedom are binding or hortatory. Drawing on Jonathan Rauch’s metaphor of the epistemic funnel, I argue that many contemporary accounts of academic freedom both overreach and underreach, and that academic freedom is best understood as a broad individual right protecting the open entrance to inquiry. This is based on a recently published article: <https://www.freetheinquiry.com/p/the-limits-of-academic-freedom-inquisitive>

10:40 - 11:00 Alice Sullivan, University College London, UK [in person]

Academic freedom and sex

I will address the issue of academic freedom with reference to the issue of sex and gender identity. Threats to academic freedom in this area include: the refusal to allow data collection on sex; suppression of research; harassment and smear campaigns; no-platforming, disinvitations and disruption of events; and bureaucratic barriers. In discussing these issues, I will draw on my own experiences as well as a government-commissioned report published last year on ‘Barriers to Research on Sex and Gender’: <https://www.sullivanreview.uk/barriers.pdf>

11:00 - 11:20 Alan Sokal, University College London, UK [in person]

Academic freedom, no-platforming, and appeals to “disciplinary competence”

I will critically assess Simpson and Srinivasan’s (2018) defense of some instances of no-platforming at universities. I will raise, and then analyse, three questions: What does it mean for a once-controversial issue to be “settled”? What should be done when two or more academic disciplines come to different judgments about the competence of a scholar or the admissibility of a set of ideas? Which fields of inquiry qualify as genuine academic disciplines? In all three cases I will contend that epistemic criteria must be paramount, and sociological criteria secondary. I will illustrate, with explicit examples, some of the ways in which purported judgments concerning “disciplinary competence” or appeals to “settled science” can be employed to disguise what is in fact the suppression of dissident views on nakedly ideological grounds. This is based on a recently published article: <https://journalofcontroversialideas.org/article/6/1/318>

11:20 - 11:40: Rob Simpson, University College London, UK [in person]

Comments on Saha, Sullivan and Sokal

11:40 - 12:00: Discussion among panel and audience

12:00 - 14:00: Lunch break

Philosophy and history of science

14:00 - 14:30 Helen Pluckrose, independent researcher, UK [in person]

Power, knowledge and language: Why the Enlightenment must not die

In this talk, I discuss my own encounter with postmodern thought as a student and the role Alan Sokal played in clarifying the distinction between scientific skepticism and radical skepticism. I will explore how radically skeptical postmodern ideas about power, language and knowledge, applied politically, influenced theories in newer fields of cultural and identity studies and how these ideas later echoed in wider political and cultural movements. At the same time, I will argue that the human tendency to treat narratives as creators of reality rather than descriptions of it is far older and broader than postmodernism itself. From radically constructivist theories on the left to contemporary post-truth populist politics on the right, humans repeatedly succumb to the belief that ideological narratives can determine what is true. Our best defence against this enduring temptation is to uphold the Enlightenment tradition of open inquiry, evidence and criticism.

14:30 - 15:00 James Robert Brown, University of Toronto, Canada [virtual]

Sokal on politics and the nature of science

To what extent, if any, do politics and science mix? This has been a persistent theme in Alan Sokal’s work since the time of the Hoax, 30 years ago. I will critically examine some rival views, including Alan’s and my own.

15:00 - 15:30: Coffee break

15:30 - 16:00 Jean Bricmont, Université de Louvain, Belgium [virtual]

From relativism to idealism and back

The goal of the talk will be to show that contemporary relativism relies on a version of idealism: namely, a socialized form of idealism, where the framework or the *a priori* on which our knowledge is based, is determined by our society, our culture or our gender, and not by an abstract (and maybe universal) mind. Both versions of idealisms go against the empirical spirit of the natural sciences.

16:00 - 16:30 Helena Sheehan, Dublin City University, Ireland [virtual]

Capitalism and cognition: The fate of science in a system in decline

Science is under attack on multiple fronts: from the crude falsities and funding cuts of the current US government to the sophisticated postmodernist exotica of anti-science science studies. There has never been such a clear need to put science on secure foundations. Many scientists, adhering to an implicit liberalism and positivism they have never explicitly examined, believe that science would be fine if only governments, ideologies and humanities academics kept out of it. Some definitely believe that the eventual replacement of the Trump administration with a Democratic Party alternative would do the job. This presentation will call into question the liberal-positivist defense of science and argue that a systemic analysis of capitalism in the current conjuncture is necessary to understand the deeper epistemological, sociological, political and economic endangerment of science.

16:30 - 17:00: Yann Kindo, Lycée Vincent d'Indy, France [in person]

When science and politics collide: Marcel Prenant and the Lysenko affair

Marcel Prenant (1893-1983) was a French biologist who was deeply involved with the French Communist Party (PCF). As a biologist, he was an advocate of the Darwinian synthetic theory of evolution and rejected the idea of inheritance of acquired characteristics. But as a member of the Central Committee of the PCF, he was in 1948 expected by his Party to promote Trofim Lysenko's opposite views, and he faced a harsh dilemma, which I will recount. This talk is based on my recently published biography of Prenant: <https://www.materiologiques.com/yann-kindo-le-labo-et-la-faucille>