

Seminar SAW

Rethinking Practices and Cultures in the History of Science

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Pluralism about Epistemic Cultures: Reflecting on the Sanskrit Knowledge Systems

Abstract – “Epistemic cultures”, says Karin Cetina in her seminal study of knowledge societies, are “cultures that create and warrant knowledge, and the premier knowledge institution throughout the world is, still, science”. Although a pluralist about epistemic cultures Cetina is not a relativist or social constructivist about the world they explore. In my own work too I have sought to inhabit the elusive ground that respects epistemic pluralism but denies social constructivism. I have investigated the plurality of classical Indian philosophical śāstras, a śāstra being not merely a systematic representation of a network of ideas but a fluid disciplinary practice for the production of knowledge of a certain sort in a certain domain. They have been described as “Sanskrit knowledge systems”, and since their concern is not only with the manufacture of a body of belief but with how such beliefs are warranted—how beliefs are argued for and what kinds of evidence can be provided—it seems entirely correct to describe them also as “epistemic cultures” in Cetina’s sense. I will draw upon materials from within the tradition to defend a “plural realism”: pluralism about epistemic cultures combined with realism about the world they investigate. I will argue that there is a convergence between this defence and recent work by Geoffrey Lloyd, Charles Taylor and Hubert Dreyfus, and I will show why the argument against epistemic pluralism put forward by Paul Boghossian in his influential book *Fear of Knowledge* does not succeed.