

FLECK LECTURE 2015

EXTRACTING MEANING FROM THE PAST AND THE FUTURE:
THE PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE AND THE PHILOSOPHY
OF HISTORY COMPARED

Prof. Gabriel Motzkin
(Executive Director, The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute)

Wednesday, October 7, 2015, 6:15 pm
ETH Main Building, Room D 5.2, Ramistrasse 101, 8006 Zurich

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How do science and history differ from the philosophy of history and the philosophy of science? Philosophies of history and philosophies of science seek to extract meaning from their respective domains. Are philosophies of history and philosophies of science inverse disciplines? Philosophies of science have to raise the question of what is the meaning of scientific predictions. Are scientific predictions certain, or are they rather calls to action? Do philosophies of science say something about things in the world or just about how scientists work? Similarly, do philosophies of history deal with what historians write, or do they deal with the meaning of events?

A deeper question is whether the study of how people have behaved is amenable to the same kind of analysis that describes how particles behave. Are the models of the interaction between contingency and determinacy the same in history and in natural science, or are they different? If they are different, how are they different? In history the question of contingency and determinacy is not just a scientific question; it is also an ethical question. This ethical problem reveals the differences between conceptions of historical truth and of scientific truth. Is the relation between truth and probability different in these two spheres? Can the philosophy of science and the philosophy of history learn from each other, or are they too different from each other because of a difference between human history and the scientific study of nature?

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