Responsible Research: social, cultural and material aspects

Workshop at the Department of Philosophy, University of Tartu, 10 September 2015

Jakobi 2, room 337, 13.15 – 18.30

Programme:

13.15-13.30 Endla Lõhkivi Workshop opening

13.30 -14.15 Emanuele Bardone RRI: Empty toolbox or an opportunity to seize?

14.15 – 15.00 Waltraud Ernst Materialising responsibilities

15.00 – 15.45 Jaana Eigi How (not) to make philosophical proposals about social organization of science

15.45-16.15 Coffee

16.15 – 17.00 Marja Vehvilainen Feminist politics of eating

17.00 – 17.45 Maris Sõrmus Ethical concerns in contemporary environmental literary studies: material ecocriticism

17.45 – 18.30 Endla Lõhkivi New materialism vs. social constructivism?
ABSTRACTS

RRI: Empty toolbox or an opportunity to seize?
Emanuele Bardone, Center for Educational Technology, Institute of Education, University of Tartu, Estonia

The term Responsible Research and Innovation has recently gained currency, as it has been designated to be a key-term in the European research framework Horizon 2020. At the level of European research policy, Responsible Research and Innovation can be viewed as an attempt to reach a broader vision of research and innovation as public good. Apart from some generic appeal to inclusiveness and more participatory forms of governance, the current academic debate seems to be too much biased towards a quite restrictive idea of how the social sciences and humanities can actually contribute, that is, a vision that leaves the core business, namely, scientific and technological innovation for its own sake, virtually untouched.

In my presentation I will argue that the current debate might be fruitfully re-oriented by making a categorial shift. Such categorial shift involves moving away from a mere technocratic interpretation of RRI, which is ultimately based on the application of abstract procedures and templates to complex and often ambiguous situations, towards a more pluralistic one rooted in the idea of phronesis. In the present context phronesis points the attention to the “rough ground” of one’s everyday engagements with research. Such rough ground is ultimately characterized by a multiplicities of elements (i.e., values, evidence, emotions, practicalities, sensitivities, etc.) often inconsistent with each other, which nonetheless do not relieve the researcher of the need for applying judgment and making choices.

Materialising Responsibilities
Waltraud Ernst, Johannes Kepler University of Linz, Austria

Categorical hierarchies are widely accepted and assumed to be a necessary causal effect of development, being it natural development in narratives of evolution or cultural development in narratives of social stratification. But this worldview has not remained uncontested. Especially feminist science and technology studies have discussed alternative accounts of the world.

There, patterns and norms which are basic categories in science and engineering are considered as conventions negotiated by scientific communities and underlying historical shifts. Similarly, norms and patterns of gender are conceived as being objected to negotiation and conventional shifts. Although they are basic components of cultural and legal frameworks, social interactions and personal identities, gender norms, our patterns of femininity and masculinity, are subject to historical change. The paper asks about the following interconnections. How do transformations in gender norms, e.g. the regulation of women’s and men’s access to certain fields of (paid) work, provoke new patterns in the design or construction of new technologies and vice versa? How do current or historical patterns of knowledge production, e.g. the methods of investigation of hormonal or brain functions in non-human organisms relate to cultural patterns of gendered persons?
In order to overcome outdated gender norms in science and engineering, new feminist materialism offers a new focus on entanglements of matter and meaning, of humans and non-humans, of sex and gender. The paper will discuss, if the ontological account of the posthuman by Rosi Braidotti (2013) and her ethical theory on transpositions (2006) may be helpful in order to understand and achieve new genderings in new materialisms. In trying to relate ontological, epistemological and ethical problems of the production of technoscientific knowledge (and reality), Karen Barad (2007) suggested, that organic as well as inorganic existence has to be conceived in a new way. In relation to this, the hypothesis of the paper is the following: If it is a normative regime of power and knowledge which differentiates living organisms in categorical hierarchies or any categories with more or less clear cut frameworks of belonging and exclusion, it will be the challenge to think beyond this worldview. What happens if we consider the world as an ongoing becoming in relation? And if it is the sort of relationality we should care for in responsibility? It is in this way, that new materialism may offer new ways to investigate the social, symbolic and material reality of sex, gender and sexuality without reinforcing binary gender norms.

By the discussion of these questions, the paper will investigate overlaps and controversies in epistemologies and ethics of new materialisms. A special concern thereby is the discussion of the relation of new materialism with older ones and the implications for feminist research in the field of natural sciences and engineering as well as philosophy of science.

**How (not) to make philosophical proposals about social organization of science**

Jaana Eigi, Institute of Philosophy and Semiotics, University of Tartu, Estonia

What considerations should a philosophical proposal about the social organisation of science take into account? James Robert Brown (2008) proposes “socialising” science to overcome epistemic problems caused by its commercialisation. Brown argues that, given the epistemic justification of the proposal, it should not be criticised in terms of social values it may help to advance. I argue that possible strategies for justifying this immunity are problematic and that discussing the acceptability of likely social consequences of a proposal cannot be justifiably avoided. At the opposite end of the spectrum, Janet Kourany argues for “socially responsible science” that adopts the advancement of the “egalitarian ideal of human flourishing” (Kourany 2003, 6) as its aim. Kourany uses the underdetermination thesis (the possibility of alternative empirically adequate theories on the basis of the same evidence) in order to defend her proposal from epistemic criticism: theories developed on the basis of egalitarian ideal may be different but still can, and are required to, be empirically adequate. I argue that Kourany makes a mistake that mirrors Brown’s when she excludes as unnecessary discussion of particular epistemic consequences of her proposal on the basis of a problematic general assumption. I conclude that regardless of the primary aim—improving science epistemically or making it more socially relevant—one has to defend the acceptability of one’s proposal in light of both social and epistemic consequences.

References

Feminist politics of eating?

Marja Vehviläinen, School of Social Sciences and Humanities
University of Tampere, Finland

In the presentation, I explore feminist politics of everyday eating. I look for the practices of producing and consuming food that question the dominant and naturalised food production governed by international companies, including intensive factory farming of animals and vegetables, and the numerous intersecting injustices in food production. Material feminist theories and Donna Haraway’s (2008) companion species approach in particular make the framework for the analysis. Eating is done in material-discursive practices of companion species networks within bio-socio-technical apparatuses across the globe. The politics of companion species argues for respect among partners in companion species networks. The analysis starts from a qualitative empirical study of a large Finnish home-economics women’s organisation Marthas (interviews, participatory observation, documents, and magazines), and a pilot study (web pages, one interview, and a participatory observation of a two day event) of an East London based feminist organisation, Women’s Environmental Network. Both organisations offer insights for feminist politics of eating. They work through local women’s groups typically to women’s movement, and they produce communally situated knowledge and practices of eating. The paper proposes one particular version of feminist companion species politics, and it further suggests that situated knowledge intertwines with the politics of respect in everyday practices of eating. It further examines tensions and contradictions in everyday politics of eating. The hierarchical division between species is naturalized and often too hard to be questioned in everyday practices of eating.

Ethical concerns in contemporary environmental literary studies: Material ecocriticism

Maris Sõrmus, Tallinn University, Estonia

Agency, storied matter, naturecultures, material-semiotic, trans-corporeality, intra-action, and posthumanist ethics – these are the key tenets of material ecocriticism, the latest, third wave direction within the broad field of environmental literary criticism. In this presentation, material ecocriticism is first introduced as a new outlook in ecocriticism, following from the material or posthuman turn in the humanities and the shifting of focus from the human to the more-than-human. Thereafter, nature’s agency, voice, and the intra-active co-shaping of nature and culture are argued for, suggesting a non-anthropocentric vision and posthumanist ethics relevant for the 21st century where nature and culture are no longer dichotomous.

The major ethical cornerstone of material ecocriticism is first reconsideration of agency – extending beyond the human and highlighting nature’s active potential. Material ecocritics innovate thereby the traditional understanding of nature as passive, suggesting furthermore nature’s narrative, meaning-making potential. The manifestation of narrative agency is next discussed as a new development in contemporary environmental literary studies, adding to such provocative understandings of nature as sentient (David Abram) and voiced (Christopher Manes), if not reading and writing, as some scholars (Vicki Kirby) have contended. What would it mean to acknowledge that nature is not passively inert but
actively engaged in the human world – influencing their lives but even communicating? How does nonhuman voice manifest itself and how is this agency narrative? These questions are rooted in the natural-cultural vision of material ecocriticism, acknowledging nature’s agency in co-shaping human lives. Lastly, the ethical potential of material ecocriticism is discussed, challenging anthropocentrism and suggesting a different, more responsible attitude to nature and agency.

**New materialism vs. social constructivism?**

Endla Lõhkivi, Institute of Philosophy and Semiotics, University of Tartu, Estonia

Karen Barad has suggested posthumanist performativity as an alternative to the traditional representationalist view of nature and culture in philosophy of science. She has presented an extensive criticism of language-centered social constructivism (Barad 2003, 2007). According to Barad (2007): “A performative understanding of scientific practices, for example, takes account of the fact that knowing does not come from standing at a distance and representing but rather from a *direct material engagement with the world*.” (p. 49) She has characterised her agential realist understanding of performativity as allowing „matter its due as an active participant in the world’s becoming, in its intra-activity“ (p. 136).

In my presentation I shall raise two questions: 1) whether Barad’s criticism is entirely justified as some social constructivist accounts of science such as Karin Knorr Cetina’s and Andrew Pickering’s could be seen at least as reconcilable with anti-representationalism and agential materialism; 2) new materialism offers criticism of traditional representationalist epistemology and social constructivism, it shows what, how and why is significant in a particular research context, but it apparently does not advise us how to reorganize scientific practices for both epistemic and social improvement – therefore the question is whether new materialism could be made normative with respect to organization of science?

References:


