

Conference: Knowledge, Understanding, and the Sciences

June 18, 19, 20, 2026, Paris

Since the mid-twentieth century, the philosophy of science has largely operated within a Hempelian framework, which prioritized investigating the so-called objective aims of science, such as explanation and knowledge. Although knowledge played a central role in this paradigm, as Bueno (2016) notes, attempts to integrate insights from mainstream epistemology remained scarce – even though, in the wake of Gettier’s 1963 article, the very viability of the concept of knowledge had come into question. One might have expected that such a weakening of the notion of knowledge would reverberate within the philosophy of science, but in fact these two fields only began to converge toward the end of the twentieth century, around the notion of understanding. This convergence proved fruitful, both for epistemology and for the philosophy of science. Yet, it remains incomplete. Philosophers of science have still not fully engaged with the epistemological approaches that may hold particular promise for their field – most notably, the knowledge-first program (Bird, 2024). Furthermore, debates at the intersection of the philosophy of science and epistemology, those that concern understanding, would benefit from the study of new scientific domains, most notably that of the historical sciences. If debates on understanding were heavily centered on models and idealizations, the integration of the notion of knowledge of the past can provide new insight.

This conference will provide an opportunity to foster dialogue between epistemologists and philosophers of science whose work lies simultaneously at the cutting edge of their disciplines. It will take place over three days, each focusing on a particular topic in relation to the two others. The first will be dedicated to the concept of knowledge and the knowledge-first framework, the second to understanding and the simple view, and the third to the sciences with a focus on the historical sciences.

Knowledge has traditionally been the pillar upon which philosophical reflection on the relation between human minds and the world has rested. Nowhere is this more evident than in the sciences, whose very aspiration is to produce valuable epistemic achievements. However, belief is often thought to be conceptually prior to knowledge and, thus, knowledge is generally analyzed in terms of belief. In this belief-first framework, knowledge turns out to *just be* belief plus other conditions, such as truth and justification. Yet, it is clear that human beings aim to know the world around them and that this epistemic achievement is irreducible to lesser epistemic states. Therefore, the claim that knowledge is a distinctive achievement seems difficult to maintain alongside a traditional belief-based analysis. Furthermore, the traditional problems of epistemic luck that the definition of knowledge has faced follow from the conceptual priority of belief. This is precisely why Timothy Williamson’s knowledge-first approach, which inverts the usual order of explanation by putting knowledge at the forefront of epistemology, is so relevant. This inversion has wide-ranging repercussions, many of which remain underexplored in the philosophy of science – except, to some extent, in the growing field of the epistemology of understanding. The first part of this conference will, therefore, examine Williamson’s knowledge-first approach as it relates both to the philosophy of science and to the epistemology of understanding.

The study of understanding, like the knowledge-first approach, partly arose in response to problems that had long troubled the theory of knowledge, such as the Gettier problem and the problems of

the value of knowledge. However, it also traces back to the efforts of philosophers of science who sought to move beyond the Hempelian primacy of explanation – often interpreted as a primacy of knowledge – and to incorporate later works that emphasize the role of belief in scientific practice. Furthermore, Catherine Elgin’s *True Enough* (2017) has majorly contributed to this debate by proposing a divorce of knowledge and understanding based on their factivity – a move that parallels Williamson’s own strategy for distinguishing knowledge and belief. Out of these debates, a central question has emerged: do the sciences aim primarily at knowledge, and thus at providing explanations, or do they aim at understanding? And can understanding itself be reduced to the possession of an explanation? On this question, Michael Strevens’ account (2008; 2013; 2024) is especially influential: he defends what he calls the simple view – that to understand a phenomenon is to grasp an explanation of it – while also distinguishing between grasping an explanation and possessing knowledge. Building on Strevens’ work, the talks in this second part of the conference will examine the interrelations between understanding, knowledge, and the philosophy of science.

These debates about knowledge and understanding take on a new urgency when applied to the distinctive challenges of the historical sciences. While some epistemologists of the historical sciences, such as Tucker (2012), appeal to methodological considerations in order to draw a boundary between these sciences and the experimental sciences, Currie’s approach describes these sciences as methodological omnivores in his book *Rock, Bone and Ruin* (2018). Currie does not attribute a particular method to the historical sciences, but a distinctive epistemic situation in which the scientists seek to study a past event based on the present traces that they have access to. Since the very premise of this situation is that historical scientists do not come in contact with the events they study, and must import a host of further elements to produce their explanations, the question of what achievement can be attained in this way is pertinent. Do these sciences primarily aim at constructing explanatory knowledge, or at achieving a broader form of understanding that integrates fragmentary evidence? Answers to this question will vary depending on one’s theory of knowledge and understanding. But one’s view of these achievements should also depend on how one conceives of the inquiries that aim to produce them. The conference’s third day will, therefore, stage a mutually beneficial dialogue between theory and practice by applying these core philosophical debates to the special case of the historical sciences.

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