

Beyond Case-Studies: History As Philosophy

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Abstract

What can we conclude from a mere handful of case studies? The field of HPS has witnessed too many hasty philosophical generalizations based on a small number of conveniently chosen case studies. One might even speculate that dissatisfaction with such methodological shoddiness contributed decisively to a widespread disillusionment with the whole HPS enterprise. Without specifying clear mechanisms for history-philosophy interaction, we are condemned to either making unwarranted generalizations from history, or writing entirely "local" histories with no bearing on an overall understanding of the scientific process.

I propose a move away from the habit of viewing historical cases as an inductive evidence-base for general philosophical theses. The relation between historical and philosophical studies should not be seen as one between the particular and the general, but as a relation between the concrete and the abstract. An abstract framework is necessary for telling any concrete story at all. In this paper I explore how doing concrete history can help our abstract philosophizing. In the absence of ready-made philosophical concepts appropriate for understanding a given historical episode, the historian is compelled to craft new abstract philosophical concepts. Therefore, history-writing can be a very effective method of philosophical discovery.

I will illustrate these claims through a discussion of two investigations in HPS from my own recent and current work: (1) temperature measurement and epistemic iteration; (2) constitution and laboratory practices in the Chemical Revolution. (This will also raise, and solve, a problem of reflexivity: how can we use case studies to show how to go beyond case studies?)

Keywords: HPS, temperature, iteration, Chemical Revolution

Conferences and Volumes: [\[2007\] &HPS1: Integrated History and Philosophy of Science 1](#)

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