Report 'Science versus Democracy?' workshop

(by Laszlo Kosolosky)

On the 10th of June, the Centre for Logic and Philosophy of Science (Ghent University, Belgium) organized a one-day workshop, 'Science versus Democracy?', on the relation(s) between Science and Democracy (http://logica.ugent.be/centrum). In light of the commotion surrounding a recent action of the Field Liberation Movement against an experimental, genetically modified potato field in Wetteren (Belgium) and the sacking of an academic researcher because of her public support, one cannot but notice that this workshop addressing the interface between science and democracy couldn't come at a better time to clarify at least some of the misconceptions, which popped up in local media reports and academic reasoning (detailed information and an international petition to reinstate Barbara van Dyck can be found here: http://threerottenpotatoes.wordpress.com/).

The five speakers addressed 'hot' topics, such as the democratization of expertise, selective ignorance in science, the ideal of scientific consensus, the role of values in science, scientific integrity and objectivity in democracy.

In the first lecture, Kevin Elliott used recent agricultural research as a case study for exploring the range of factors that contribute to selective ignorance in science. These factors include not only obvious decisions to pursue some research topics rather than others but also more subtle choices about what metrics to employ, what research strategies to pursue, and even what language to use for describing phenomena.

By evaluating the Food and Drug Administration's ideal of an 'objective scientific review by independent, outside experts' in light of philosophical accounts, Julian Reiss concluded that it would be hard to maintain that current FDA drug approval practice is justified either epistemically or politically. As an alternative, Julian suggested a model, in which an independent jury makes decisions (or recommendations) after hearing evidence and testimony about the safety and medical benefit of a drug and where experts are to serve as witnesses rather than decision-makers.

In the afternoon, Jan de Winter defended his account of scientific integrity against those of Douglas and Steneck. Scientific integrity is the quality of possessing and steadfastly adhering to three moral principles, i.e. (1) research should not infringe human or animal rights, (2) scientific practices should be appropriate for producing non-misleading information and (3) the expected value of the research performed should be at least as high as the expected value of any alternative, non-performed research that could be performed with the same amount of resources and that is in accordance with the first two principles.

Drawing from his recent book 'Science in Democracy', Mark Brown argued that the familiar dichotomy between politics and science reinforces a similar dichotomy between direct democracy and representative government. He developed an alternative perspective based on the mutual shaping of participation and representation in both science and politics. Political representation requires scientific expertise, and scientific institutions may become sites of political representation. Different institutional

venues mediate different elements of democratic representation. If we are to understand democracy as an institutionally distributed process of collective representation, it becomes easier to see the politicization of science not as a threat to democracy but as an opportunity for it.

Laszlo Kosolosky tried to cope with the tension between (1) establishing scientific consensus as it is imperative to solve certain controversies and (2) emerging questions concerning the ideal of scientific consensus in light of plurality and dissent. He elaborated on joint work with Jeroen van Bouwel, in which they argue to shift our focus from looking at consensus on the simple level, that is, as the result of alternative theories/models tested against one another eventually leading to some consensus *outcome*, to analyzing the meta-consensus that stipulates the *procedure* to be followed. The resulting account of consensus should be a social one, analogous with Longino's social account of objectivity.