

Committee for the History and Philosophy of Science
Distinguished Speaker Series Presents:

“Reframing the Problem of Vaccine Hesitancy”

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Abstract:

Struggling to make sense of persistent vaccine hesitancy and refusal, commentators routinely bemoan scientific illiteracy among the general publics or fret over a destructive cultural embracing of “anti-intellectualism” and the resulting “death of expertise”. This is allegedly part of a larger cultural war on science that threatens the future of liberal democracies. Science, it is assumed, cuts through partisan politics, and the publics fail insofar as they refuse to see this.

This talk challenges popular framings of vaccine hesitancy as “public misunderstanding of science” and “death of expertise”, demonstrating instead that public resistance stems from poor trust in scientific institutions. Working with an understanding of science as socially situated highlights the importance of trust and credibility in the successful operations of science—both within research communities and in relation to the publics. Public mistrust of science is thereby not a problem with the publics but a problem of scientific governance; specifically, a failure of scientific institutions to maintain the credibility required to achieve their social and epistemic aims. The talk ends with general recommendations regarding how vaccine outreach efforts can be modified in light of this insight.

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