



Seminar

ANANDI HATTIANGADI

Pro Futura Scientia Fellow, SCAS.
Professor of Philosophy, Stockholm University

Science Studies Without Relativism

Tuesday, 3 October, 11:15 a.m.

In the Thunberg Lecture Hall
SCAS, Linneanum, Thunbergsvägen 2, Uppsala
www.swedishcollegium.se

S W E D I S H
C O L L E G I U M
for ADVANCED STUDY

ABOUT ANANDI HATTIANGADI

Anandi Hattiangadi received a BA in Philosophy from York University, Toronto; an MA in Philosophy from the University of Toronto; and a Ph.D. from the Department of History and Philosophy of Science, University of Cambridge. In 2000, she took up a Research Fellowship at Trinity College, University of Cambridge, and from 2005 to 2013, she was University Lecturer at the Philosophy Faculty and Tutorial Fellow in Philosophy at St Hilda's College, both at the University of Oxford.

Hattiangadi specializes in the philosophy of mind and language, and has research interests in epistemology, metaphysics, metaethics and philosophy of science. Her publications include *Oughts and Thoughts: Rule Following and the Normativity of Content* (Oxford University Press, 2007); 'Is Meaning Normative?' in *Mind and Language* (2006); 'Semantic Normativity in Context', in *New Waves in the Philosophy of Language* (ed. Sarah Sawyer, 2009); 'The Love of Truth', in *Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science* (2010); and 'The Open Future, Bivalence and Assertion', in *Philosophical Studies* (with Corine Besson, 2013).

While at SCAS, Hattiangadi will work on a new monograph provisionally entitled 'The Fundamentality of Intentionality', in which she will defend the radical view that the intentional and semantic properties of mental and linguistic representations – their meaning, content, truth or falsity – cannot be reductively explained in non-semantic terms, and that intentionality must be regarded as fundamental.

ABSTRACT

Researchers in Science and Technology Studies (STS) have recently been ruminating about whether the current age of so-called 'post-truth' politics raises a challenge for the discipline. The term 'post-truth' is an adjective defined as 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief'. It is generally agreed that if the phenomenon of post-truth politics poses a challenge, it has something to do with the widespread commitment within STS to the view that scientific knowledge is in some sense relative to a social or cultural practice, either because *truth* is practice-relative, or because *epistemic* and *rational norms* are practice-relative, or because scientific *facts* are socially constructed (or all three).

In this paper, I take up the suggestion of Evan Baker and Naomi Oreskes (2017) that post-truth raises the familiar *quietism* objection to relativism: if the relativist accepts that all truths and epistemic norms are practice-relative, it would be incoherent to then go on to insist that it is just plain true that, say, greenhouse gases cause global warming, or that Trump's claim that climate change is a hoax is just plain false. If the relativist accepts that all epistemic norms are relative to a practice, it would be incoherent for her to go on to claim that some other epistemic practice in which she does not herself participate—such as that of conspiracy theorists—is epistemically defective. And if all facts are socially constructed, then climate change deniers can, in principle, construct 'alternative facts' to those that are constructed by mainstream climate science. On pain of incoherence, the relativist must remain quiet on these matters; yet quietism is no use when we need to make individual and collective decisions about what to do, on the basis of the best information available, in the here and now.

My aim in this paper will be to investigate whether the quietism objection to relativism sticks. I will begin by looking at Wittgenstein's rule following considerations, which provided the theoretical underpinnings of the particular form of relativism that has been highly influential in STS. In this setting, I argue, the quietism challenge sticks: responses to the quietism charge on behalf of Wittgensteinian relativists are not compelling. I close by considering some of the ways we might resist the Wittgensteinian arguments for relativism, and thereby justify doing science studies without relativism.