Description as a Way of Knowing: An Interdisciplinary Exploration

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Description is an established practice to produce valued knowledge in certain scientific cultures. In others, descriptive approaches are considered to be inferior, only supplementary or old-fashioned in comparison with alternative epistemic practices. In the history, philosophy, and social studies of science, description has received only limited attention. On this background, our Workshop aims to explore description as a way of knowing by bringing together historical, philosophical, cultural, and sociological perspectives. It will analyze its epistemic potential and associated modes of valuing in various historical and contemporary scientific cultures, viewing description in its relation with (seemingly) opposing or contrasting epistemic practices, aims, and ideals. The Workshop will foster a comparative approach by bringing together scholars who investigate distinct research fields, historic periods, and modes of scientific practice.

The Workshop is motivated by findings from two projects (directed by HLV), one on the visual culture of modern cell biology, and another on the history of descriptive research in this field since the 1950s. In cell biology, mechanistic explanations of cellular phenomena have been promoted as an epistemic ideal since the 1970s. In this context, descriptions of cellular structure seem to have lost their status as a valued strategy for producing an independent body of knowledge. Nonetheless, descriptive morphological and phenomenological knowledge is still understood as a prerequisite for raising questions about cellular functions. At the same time, it remains unclear who is responsible for producing this type of knowledge as it is considered to be less prestigious and often not appropriate for publication in the leading scientific journals. Our findings that attitudes towards description are paradoxical and potentially conflicting inspired a set of questions that should be of interest beyond cell biology. The aim of the Workshop is to promote a pluralistic understanding of scientific practices and raise attention to sometimes conflictual relations between distinct ways of knowing.

Selected questions for discussion
- Description as a way of knowing: What are the characteristic features of description as a way of knowing? Can we identify distinct types of description in different scientific fields and times?
- Descriptive knowledge: How can knowledge produced through description be characterized? To what extent does the body of knowledge in a particular research field rely on description?
- Discursive constructions: How is description discursively constructed in various scientific and public debates? Which social, epistemic, and/or other issues are implicitly or explicitly addressed in these debates?
- Instruments and methods: How do technological and methodological innovations affect the practices of description, its valuing, and the prevailing epistemic norms?
- Description’s ‘others’: Which epistemic practices are being considered as opposing or contrasting description; according to which characteristics and to what effect? And which tensions can be identified within a scientific culture in this context?
- Reflection: What are our respective conceptual lenses, presuppositions, and biases when we study description?

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