Values, Norms and Ideologies in Early Modern Inquiry: An Introduction

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Early modern epistemic discourses were heated by an intense competition of various ideals of intellectual activity, not exclusively in the field of epistemic values, but also in those of artistic, moral, and religious ideals; and not merely theoretically, but also with respect to actual practice. How to produce knowledge, how to understand what had been produced, and questions concerning useful and legitimate ways of applying the knowledge thus gained were central issues.

Knowledge-making practices have always been accompanied by answers to such questions that one could aptly call ideologies: that is, more or less explicit ways of making sense of these practices, justifying their relevance, and circumscribing the sphere of legitimate inquiry and applications. Since ancient times, natural inquiry had been driven by the need to make the world intelligible. The standards of intelligibility, however, were under constant revision in the early modern period, and consequently knowledge claims underwent a process of continuous re-evaluation. The Baconian ideology of knowledge production put an increased emphasis on the usefulness of knowledge alongside its moral goodness. These values—intelligibility and usefulness—bring to the fore the relations of abstract ideas (e.g., of methodologies and ontologies) and concrete practices (e.g., of producing and using knowledge). Knowledge produced in various ways was also put to non-Baconian, artistic, and ideological uses too. In these contexts, ideas had a pragmatic significance beyond their literal meaning.

Historical research in previous decades has done a great deal to explore the social and political context of early modern natural and moral inquiries. It has revealed in many ways how theories were embedded in contexts of

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non-epistemic values, and reconstructed on several planes their non-epistemic content and pragmatic relevance. As a result, we have ingenious and revealing narratives about theories put forward in epistemic contexts as attempting to reach certain social goals and bearing on ideological conflicts. At the same time, the epistemic content of inquiry has been frequently relegated to a secondary role.

Particularly since Simon Schaffer and Steven Shapin’s *Leviathan and the Air-Pump* (1985), which exposed the political and religious commitments and purposes underlying the debate between Robert Boyle and Thomas Hobbes on the experimental method and the existence of a vacuum, we have become accustomed to studies which attribute epistemological stances and debates to clashes of political and theological ideologies. The worth of such studies, revealing the ways in which texts apparently organized with an eye on epistemic values and virtues did in fact serve social and political aims and motivations, is not here in question. The present volume suggests that with an awareness of this context, it is now worth turning back to questions of the epistemic content itself.

The contributors to the present collection were invited to explore how certain non-epistemic values had been turned into epistemic ones, how they had an effect on epistemic content, and eventually how they became ideologies of knowledge playing various roles in inquiry and application throughout early modern Europe. These ideological conflicts reflected the fact that the list and hierarchy of the various values attached to knowledge-making practices were also unstable, and were coupled with a similar instability in how the proper methods of inquiry were conceived, and how their results could be turned into practice. By the end of the period, as Peter Dear has argued, the Baconian ideology of instrumental utility emerged at the top of this hierarchy; it is still the dominant one today. But this outcome was not inevitable, and early modern inquiry was not homogeneous: it was a gradual process at the end of which instrumentality proved to be triumphant. And although this ideology is dominant in modern science, its eventual triumph was preceded by a clash of diverse ideologies also present in Bacon, among the members of the Royal Society, and indeed, throughout the scholarly communities of Europe.

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