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Defining the Modern Scientist by Writing History: Scholarly Vices in Nineteenth-Century Histories of Science

In nineteenth-century Europe, the notion of the "modern scientist" emerged as an idealized figure, characterized by certain virtues and positioned in opposition to certain undesirable "scholarly vices." This presentation explores how the literary genre of scientific historiography contributed to the creation and long-term transmission of these idealized images. Writers of *general* histories of science used "scholarly vices" such as "ignorance" and an excessive "reverence for authority" to distinguish the modern scientist from his premodern and non-European predecessors. Writers of *disciplinary* histories of science—often practicing scientists themselves—charged historical and contemporary figures with vices such as "prejudice" or "speculation" (see figure) in order to establish boundaries within the emerging system of modern scientific disciplines, particularly between science and philosophy. In this subgenre of the nineteenth-century history of science, which was particularly popular in the German-speaking context, the virtues of the disciplined astronomer, botanist, chemist, physicist, physiologist, zoologist, and so on were systematically contrasted with vices of philosophers, especially those who espoused Idealism. I conclude by considering how the contemporary philosophical genre of vice epistemology, which has become increasingly popular in recent years, might benefit from a more thorough historicization.



The "Icarus flight of speculation" was an important trope for various 19th c. German researchers, allowing them to think philosophical speculation to the vice of hubris. In this image, the "Fall of Icarus" is depicted in Jacob Peter Gowdy's 17th c. painting <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gowdy-icaro-prado.jpg>



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DIALOGO

Dienstag, 19. Nov. 2024
Hörsaal M17.17 im K II,
Keplerstr. 17, 17:30-19:00