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The Concept of the Sciences in Bernard de Fontenelle's Philosophy

Wednesday 17 September 2025 09:15 (1h 30m)

Description of the panel:

We focus on texts by Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle (1657–1757), secretary of the Académie royale des sciences, who published the annual yearbooks *Histoire de l'Académie royale des sciences* (HMARS, 1699–1740) summarising the activities of the Académie. These handbooks contained articles by academics, Fontenelle's summaries of the articles, and Fontenelle's eulogies (*Éloges des académiciens*) for academics who had died that year. In our panel, we focus on the various ways Fontenelle explained scientific research at the Académie and on selected aspects of its reception. First, we address the strategy that Fontenelle used for legitimating scientific research in a society that based its education on Greek and Roman literature. Second, we pay attention to the way Fontenelle represented the lives of academics, their importance in the history of science, and their moral virtues. Thirdly, we describe Fontenelle's conception of the history of the sciences, the mechanisms of their progress, the appreciation of the role of individual scientists –and the reception of this conception by Marquise du Châtelet. These themes intersect in our three papers, and we hope contribute to a better understanding of the significance of Fontenelle's work and its influence on later representatives of the Enlightenment.

Presenter: Daniel Špelda

Title of the paper: Bernard de Fontenelle's *Histoire de l'Académie royale* (1699–1714): Science Pulls Back the Veil of Nature

Between 1699 and 1740, Bernard de Fontenelle prepared an annual *Histoire de l'Académie royale des sciences* (HARS), in which he tried to explain the nature of scientific research to his contemporaries, who were educated in classical literature. Fontenelle liked to refer to the metaphor of a mysterious Nature hidden behind a veil –the veil of Isis. The metaphor served him as a means of articulating and describing the epistemological problems that the members of the Académie des sciences faced in their research. The personified Nature served as an antagonist to the personified Académie: sometimes the uncovering of Nature's secrets turned into a hunt and a chase; at other times Nature flirtatiously winked at the academics. Focusing on HARS volumes 1699–1714, I argue that Fontenelle used the metaphor to explain to the public the epistemological challenges academics faced in learning about nature. I further assert that the culmination of Fontenelle's intelligent work with metaphor was its incorporation into an overall philosophy of history that understood the history of humankind as a gradual progression of human knowledge from fables to modern sciences. According to this philosophy, no one could further question the legitimacy of the sciences because they represented the necessary and logical outcome of a long development that began in ancient Greece.

Presenter: Dagmar Pichová

Title of the paper: The Deaths of Academicians in Fontenelle's *Éloges des académiciens*

In his *Éloges des académiciens*, French philosopher and secretary of Académie des sciences Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle employed various strategies to build the credibility of scientists, promote scientific institutions, and justify scientific research in general. The *Éloges des académiciens* highlighted personal qualities that enabled scientists to develop, share, and apply their knowledge, emphasising their ability to explain discoveries in simple terms and engage in scientific debate with openness, modesty, and peacefulness.

Fontenelle chronologically recounted the lives of academicians, including their physical and mental conditions and ultimately, their deaths. In my paper, I examine the role of the “good death” in shaping the new scientific

persona in Fontenelle's *Éloges des académiciens*. I hold that the depiction of the deaths of academicians coheres with the persona of scientists and the virtues Fontenelle attributed to them, reflecting an implicit ethical perspective.

Presenter: Eszter Kovács

Title of the paper: Giants in a Scientific Battlefield: Du Châtelet's Annotations on Academic Eulogies

Two series of miscellaneous manuscript notes prove the interest that Émilie Du Châtelet took in the genre of the academic eulogy. One of them is currently housed among Voltaire's manuscripts in Saint Petersburg; it was first published by I.O. Wade in 1958. These notes were recently republished by the Center for the History of Women Philosophers and Scientists (see <https://stp.historyofwomenphilosophers.org/documents/view/notes>). The other series figures in one of Du Châtelet's notebooks found in 2010 (currently in a private collection); it has not been published. The second series contains excerpts from academic eulogies interspersed with Du Châtelet's reflections on the laws of motion.

As I aim to show, this material can be considered more than simple working notes. The eulogies, in which Fontenelle excelled as the perpetual secretary of the Academy, were important sources for Du Châtelet's scientific activity while seeking her own methodology. Du Châtelet respects intellectual giants in the spirit of the image *nanos gigantum humeris insidentes* (see the Preface to the *Foundations of Physics*, 1740) but she also regards national impartiality and open dialogue as necessary conditions to scientific progress.

The theory of universal attraction is the real focus of her annotations. Several of her remarks point to Fontenelle's refusal to admit Newton's discoveries because of the French academic loyalty to Cartesian vortex theory. A study of these notes shows that Du Châtelet believed in scientific progress as a continuous development and also –and more importantly– as a change of paradigm. Her annotations on the eulogies can thus be interpreted as a more polemical first approach, nuanced in the Preface to the *Foundations*.

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Daniel Špelda is a professor at the Department of Philosophy, Masaryk University in Brno. For many years he has been interested in the historical self-reflection of early modern science and philosophy, the idea of scientific progress, and the work of Bernard de Fontenelle. He recently published the monograph *The Origins of the Idea of Scientific Progress: Bernard de Fontenelle and His Contemporaries* (Springer 2024). In collaboration with other colleagues, he has published five volumes of annotated translations of the works of G. Galilei, I. Newton, J. Kepler, J. Bernoulli, and B. de Fontenelle (2019). He also wrote the preface to the collection of Fontenelle's philosophical texts as translated into Czech by Dagmar Pichová (2024). His more recent articles include 'The Concept of Scientific Curiosity in *Histoire de l'Académie royale des sciences (1699-1710)*' (*Early Modern French Studies*, 2024) and 'Collective Empiricism at the Paris Observatoire in the Late Seventeenth Century' (*The seventeenth century*, 2022).

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Dagmar Pichová is an Associate Professor at the Department of Philosophy, Masaryk University in Brno. She earned her Ph.D. at Masaryk University and Université Paris XII (co-tutelle) in 2006. As a Fulbright grant holder, she spent three months as a visiting scholar at the Department of Philosophy at Harvard University (2024). In her scientific and research activities, she focuses on the history of women philosophers and eighteenth century French philosophy and literature. She is the author of 'Fontenelle's *Éloges des académiciens*: Creating the Scientific Persona', in *Filozofia*, vol. 79, n° 10 (2024); *Czech Women Philosophers and Scientists* (with Zdeňka Jastrzemska and Jan Zouhar, 2021); *Émilie Du Châtelet, femme de lettres* (2018); "Émilie Du Châtelet: devenir femme de lettres", in *La condition des femmes dans l'Europe du XVIIIe siècle*, *Lumières*, n° 24 (2015); *100 myšlenkových experimentů ve filozofii/100 Thought Experiments in Philosophy* (with Marek Picha, 2013); and *La communication ironique dans Le Roman comique de Paul Scarron. Étude comparative avec Don Quichotte de Cervantès* (2007). She translated *Le Discours sur le bonheur* by Émilie Du Châtelet (2016), *Les Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* by Fontenelle (2019), and selected *Éloges des académiciens* by Fontenelle (2024) from French to Czech.

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Eszter Kovács is a postdoctoral research fellow in the ERC StG project VERITRACE at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. She earned her Ph.D. in French literature in 2008, under joint supervision at the École normale supérieure de Lyon and at the University of Szeged. A revised publication of her thesis was entitled *La Critique du voyage dans la pensée de Diderot: De la fiction au discours philosophique et politique* (Paris, Honoré Champion, 2015). In 2024, she earned a second Ph.D. in philosophy at the Eötvös Loránd University (Budapest) with her thesis entitled *Early Modern Female Conceptions of Freedom: Anne Conway, Mary Astell, Émilie Du Châtelet*. Her major publications on the philosophy of Du Châtelet include “Fontenelle and Émilie Du Châtelet: savants et philosophes médiateurs” (*La Lettre clandestine*, no 28, 2020, p. 299–312), “La liberté est la santé de l’âme: du pouvoir soi-mouvant au culte de la liberté chez Émilie Du Châtelet” (In A. Brown, U. Kölvig (eds.), *Émilie Du Châtelet: son monde, ses travaux* (Ferney-Voltaire, CIEDS, 2022, p. 291–301), and “Les manuscrits d’Émilie Du Châtelet, preuves de l’originalité d’une pensée” (*Revue philosophique de Louvain*, no 120, 2023, p. 385–406). Her current research interests include the formation of early modern metaphysical and scientific terminology.

Keywords

Bernard de Fontenelle, Émilie Du Châtelet, Académie royale des sciences, early modern science

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