

Society for Philosophy of Science in Practice

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# NEWSLETTER #15



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# From the editor

We hope that the newsletter reaches you while preparing for a relaxing holiday, and that it will provide a stimulating summer read.

The SPSP originated from an ambition to acknowledge and explore the diversity of epistemic practices, in science and philosophy of science alike. We therefore find it very appropriate to discuss the topic of epistemic decolonization. In this volume, Saana Jukola talks to Azita Chellappoo and Zinhle Mncube, who recently organized an online lecture series on the topic with Katherine Furman and Dominic Berry. We hope this will inspire further discussions on how we can challenge colonial injustices and mobilize global dimensions of philosophy of science.

The spring of 2021 brought new hope with the Covid-19 vaccines. At the same time, the debates on the safety of the vaccines also demonstrate the increasing relevance of philosophical analyses of the factors affecting public trust in science. We have talked to Maya Goldenberg, who has just published the book *Vaccine Hesitancy. Public Trust, Expertise and the War on Science* (2021). Maya explains why vaccine hesitancy is not reducible to the problems of low science literacy and lack of information, and how she has experienced the reactions to her work. And this time, Jacob Stegenga takes the Proust Questionnaire.

We end the newsletter with a reminder to save the dates for the 2022 SPSP meeting, where the University of Ghent will again host us for a wonderful reunion of the SPSP-family!

On behalf of the SPSP-newsletter team,

Sara Green

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# Epistemic decolonization

*An interview with Azita Chellappoo and Zinhle Mncube*



Zinhle Mncube is a Philosophy [Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Johannesburg](#)



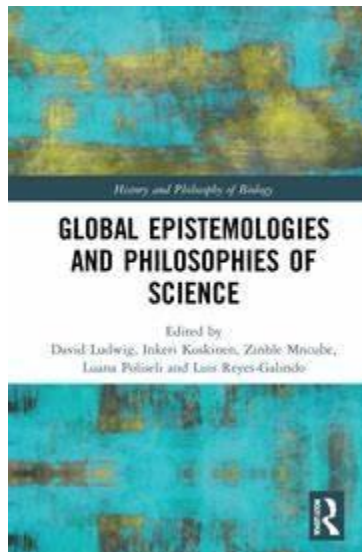
Azita Chellappoo is [postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Philosophy, Ruhr-University Bochum](#).

**The *Epistemic Decolonization* lecture series was organized by you, Katherine Furman and Dominic Berry between November 2020 and March 2021. Could you say something about how you came up with the idea of organizing the series and how you conceptualized it (e.g., about the goals of the series, choice of the speakers, etc.)?**

In terms of specific events that prompted the creation of the seminar series, part of the motivation came from a 2020 special issue of [Philosophical Papers on 'Epistemic Decolonization'](#) edited by Veli Mitova, and a forthcoming edited collection, [Global Epistemologies and Philosophies of Science](#), edited by David Ludwig, Inkeri Koskinen, Zinhle Mncube, Luana Poliseli, and Luis Reyes-Galindo.

We noticed the growing interest in addressing these issues within philosophy, and we wanted to build on that to further discussion and reflection amongst philosophers of science concerning questions of the legacies and influences of colonial power on the understanding of what knowledge production entails (e.g., what science is, and how it works), as well as what kinds of redirection, reorientation, and change are needed in the field to address these issues.

In terms of speaker choice, we intended for the series to target philosophers of science first, and we had this goal in mind when selecting speakers. We chose speakers who could ask broader questions about what epistemic decolonization means, what epistemic decolonization means in the context of philosophy of science, and the effect of decolonization on scientific inquiry and how we do philosophy about scientific inquiry. We also chose speakers who are themselves centering on non-western philosophy in their work: for example, one of the speakers (Smita Sirker) gave a talk on Indian logic. Jonathan Chimakonam gave a talk related to African logic.



[Global Epistemologies and Philosophies of Science](#), edited by David Ludwig, Inkeri Koskinen, Zinhle Mncube, Luana Poliseli, and Luis Reyes-Galindo.

### **What does epistemic decolonization entail and why should philosophers of science be interested in it?**

One way of thinking about epistemic decolonization has been brought out in Veli Mitova's recent article "Decolonising Knowledge Here and Now" (Mitova 2020). She frames epistemic decolonization as having a negative and a positive programme: the negative programme would involve eliminating "unreflective western influences on our knowledge supplies and production", and the positive programme would involve proactively drawing on

marginalised epistemic resources to advance knowledge in a range of fields. Part of the process of colonisation involved the imposition of a single perspective or single set of epistemic practices as authoritative, and the process of epistemic decolonization involves an epistemic 're-centering', and therefore taking a range of perspectives and knowledge systems seriously. This means more than just the acknowledgement of diversity, or the integration of diverse knowledges into pre-existing structures with already defined questions, goals, frameworks, concepts, and so on. Rather, as David Ludwig, one of the speakers in our series, outlined, epistemic decolonization involves not just the recognition of epistemic diversity but the mobilisation of these knowledges to challenge colonial legacies and injustices.

In concrete terms, this might mean rejecting an automatic appeal to the western 'canon' within philosophical education, as well as drawing on a broad range of intellectual traditions to further research. However, one thing we were conscious of with the series is not trying to impose definite answers to what epistemic decolonization is, what it entails, and how we should bring it about -

these issues are still contested and might differ importantly depending on the local context. Additionally, we want to recognise that there are open questions regarding the appropriateness of 'decolonization' as a term for the kinds of changes going on within academic disciplines, as well as the precise connection between processes of epistemic decolonization and material decolonization (e.g., land back demands).

Epistemic decolonization has implications for all academic fields, philosophy of science included. Philosophers of science should be particularly interested, given central concerns with knowledge practices, and the avenues that confronting epistemic decolonization offers for a richer understanding of the range of scientific methods, practices, and epistemologies that have developed across the globe.

**How could philosophers of science contribute to the project of epistemic decolonization (e.g., in relation to the research topics or methods we choose, how teaching is organized, in relation to institutional practices)?**

The aim of the series was to interrogate the topic in the first place and raise awareness of these discussions within philosophy of science. One important step is platforming these kinds of conversations within the discipline.

As mentioned, we want to refrain from being in the position of telling people exactly what they should do, given contestation over what epistemic decolonization means and differences in local contexts. Our suggestions would be exploratory.

In broad terms, decolonize the curriculum or decolonize the university initiatives have been ongoing in many Philosophy and HPS departments in different countries around the world. These initiatives have had diverse aims, which include the addition of a diverse range of authors to reading lists, explicit acknowledgement of and engagement with colonial influence on knowledge production in teaching, as well as larger systemic changes on the level of hiring and publication practices. In terms of research methods, one of the speakers in our series, David Ludwig, reflected on his and his group's work with communities in Brazil, and the need not to go in with pre-determined concepts and methods and ontologies, but rather to enter a process of negotiation around them with these communities. This might include running community workshops, working closely with actors in a particular community to understand the kinds of questions that should be raised and the problems that should be addressed.

Within our own institutions, we should be thinking carefully about whether and how current institutional practices disadvantage and contribute to the marginalisation of particular groups, and considering what ways in which we can reform and address these challenges both as individuals and as members of an academic community.

### **How was the reception of the series?**

We were very pleased with how many people attended. Across the 6 seminars, 800 distinct people registered, many of whom attended more than one seminar. We also had very lively and stimulating Q&A sessions at each seminar.

All six seminars are available on YouTube, with reading lists. To date, they have accrued over 2000 views between them.

### ***Are any similar events planned for the future?***

After the lecture series, we organized a panel discussion in the beginning of July. The aim of the panel discussion was to gather students and faculty members who have been engaged with decolonization initiatives 'on the ground', to reflect on the connection between theorising about epistemic decolonization and activism or practice, and to learn from the progress that has already been made.

The series will continue next year under the guidance of new organisers to continue furthering these kinds of important conversations.

### **Where can an interested reader find more material on the topic (e.g., are the talks online)?**

Yes! The talks are available online via this [link](#).

Another great source of information is the recent special issue, edited by Veli Mitova.

[Mitova, V. \(Ed.\). \(2020\). Epistemic Decolonization \[Special Issue\]. \*Philosophical Papers\*, 49\(2\).](#)

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# Vaccine hesitancy

*An interview with Maya Goldenberg*

*The topic of vaccine hesitancy is more important than ever, and so are discussions about how philosophy of science in practice can contribute to the understanding of the problem. We have talked to Maya Goldenberg, who has just published the book Vaccine Hesitancy. Public Trust, Expertise and the War on Science (2021) with University of Pittsburgh Press.*



*Maya Goldberg is associate professor at the Department of Philosophy at the University of Guelph in Canada.*

## **How did you end up working on the topic of vaccine hesitancy?**

My interest in vaccine hesitancy began shortly after I'd read an investigative report exposing Andrew Wakefield for fabricating data in his infamous study linking vaccines to autism. This was early 2011, and the exposé had just been published in a 3-part series in the *British Medical Journal*. The findings were damning, and like many people who read the report, I expected vaccine hesitancy to end right there. Instead it has endured and vaccine-preventable disease outbreaks have even increased. So I wondered: what evidence was going to convince people to drop this concern about vaccines? What missing source of information was needed? As a philosopher of science and medicine, who works on how knowledge claims are constructed and justified in health care, I was in a good position to find out.

My first finding was that I was asking the wrong question. I incorrectly assumed that vaccine hesitators were missing some key scientific evidence that kept them from embracing the strong scientific consensus on vaccine safety and efficacy. This is a common error, and it is grounded in a mistaken view of the relationship between science and the public. I wanted to correct this. That's when the research got interesting and what I thought would be a short project turned into a book-length project.

**What would you describe as your main contribution to the current debate?**

My research has afforded me a far more complex picture of vaccine hesitancy than the usual characterization of people being science deniers or stupidly believing anything they read on the internet. I draw from qualitative research on vaccine hesitant parents in industrialized countries, science communications, social and behavioural science, sociology of expertise, philosophy of science, and feminist research to present a more charitable reading of vaccine hesitators.

I presented an alternative thesis that vaccine hesitancy is a problem of poor public trust in scientific and government agencies and institutions. This alternative is grounded in a different account of the nature of science than what underpins the dominant narrative of why people resist scientific claims. I call the dominant view "the war on science", evoking the commonly used hostile metaphor that divides 'us,' the scientifically literate, and 'them,' the science deniers. The alternative is a "crisis of trust", which also differently characterizes the relationship between science and society. This new characterization of vaccine hesitancy recasts moral responsibility by characterizing a problem of scientific governance rather than a problem with the public, specifically the epistemic and moral failings of some of its members.

Vaccine communications and outreach are also redirected towards earning and maintaining public trust rather than the current practice of educating the public with the facts. The public needs good information, but I question why nearly all public communications take the form of "just the facts" and "busting myths".

There is more to vaccine hesitancy than information gaps. In the end, the solution to vaccine hesitancy lies in strengthening public trust in these institutions by ensuring those institutions are both trustworthy and credible (recognized as trustworthy by public stakeholders). That's not easy to do, but it can be done.

**How have you experienced the reactions to your work?**

I found that calling things a problem of trust is sufficiently agreeable to suit all sides, so no one actively disagrees with my analysis. The details matter though; what does mistrust imply?



Vaccine skeptics agree that the problem is poor trust, and insist that this mistrust is warranted given industry influence on health research, regulatory capture, political agendas, etc. I receive a lot of emails from vaccine skeptics who agree with the analysis that trust is the problem - they say that much - but then feel the need to justify their mistrust to me by citing questionable sources making dubious claims. Their certainty about the integrity of their own epistemic claims betray the important consideration that mistrust in expert knowledge systems creates epistemic vacuums, where the evaluation of information sources becomes more complicated. It becomes harder to know who warrants epistemic trust. If you think the conventional systems of expert knowledge are corrupt and therefore untrustworthy, the response ought to be epistemic uncertainty rather than doubling down on alternative sources and holding them up as surely trustworthy.

On the other end, there is a genre of vaccine communicators who, steeped in the deficit model, use media platforms to debunk vaccine myths, mock and shame vaccine hesitators and refusers, and insist that everyone should trust science because *it's science after all*. This group also agrees that mistrust is the problem, but they put the onus on the public to correct their poorly placed mistrust. These public-facing communicators don't seem to notice that my analysis impugns their assumptions and their communications practices. I hope they read my book and reconsider what passes as science communication these days.

### **What are you currently working on? What is your next project?**

I finished my manuscript early in the pandemic and pivoted easily into COVID-related issues of public trust, expertise, and vaccine hesitancy. My attention to equity and justice vis-à-vis vaccine confidence and hesitancy somehow seems more obvious in the context of COVID than it was in the context of pediatric vaccine hesitancy in the global North. Since the pandemic began, I have given a ton of talks and presentations, thanks to online platforms. I have been more public facing than usual, speaking to health professional groups, government agencies and non-profits (including WHO and PAHO), and getting a lot of media requests. I am enjoying having these platforms to do public philosophy.

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# The Proust Questionnaire

Saana Jukola talks to Jacob Stegegnä



**Who are your favourite heroes or heroines? In real life or in fiction.**

Tank Man in Tiananmen square, 1989.

**Which words or phrases do you overuse?**

I suppose I use speech disfluencies too often, as most people do—umms and ahhs—and I admire people who speak without them. Yesterday I listened to an

interview with the psychologist Daniel Gilbert, who spoke so clearly without these verbal fillers. It was impressive.

**What is your favourite food?**

In the last few years I've developed a fondness for Ukrainian food: borscht, gretschka, piva. When I cook at home I often make curry lentil soup and other vegetarian dishes.

**What is the most critical academic or non-academic feedback you ever received?**

Our profession uses many forms of criticism so often, perhaps too much, and after a few years my skin has thickened and so now I don't really notice or remember critical academic feedback. I've received some non-academic critical feedback from exes.

**Where do you write your best work?**

At home, in my quiet office, sitting in a comfortable chair, with my dog beside me. I've been away from home for many months during the UK lockdown, so I miss it.

**What is your favourite entertainment?**

I can't choose a single favourite. Listening to music, watching a great show, swimming in the sea...

### **What profession would you like to attempt besides your own?**

I would like to be an investigative journalist, or a photographer. Or something extreme like a deep sea scuba diver or an astronaut.

### **What is your greatest achievement?**

I suppose my first book.

### **What is your most treasured possession?**

I'm not the kind of person who treasures possessions. Some people are sentimental about possessions, and while I do tend to be sentimental, it's memories rather than objects that elicit such feelings. Though I do value some of my possessions instrumentally: my sharp knife set, my bicycle, my camera.

### **Where were or are you happiest?**

Often when I'm writing I have a kind of contentment which is something like happiness. Swimming underwater with fish is amazing. I guess I'm a hedonist. In a typical day I'll sleep in, exercise, read and write, eat tasty food, have sex, and drink beer while listening to music in the company of a friend. All these pleasant days blur together and so I don't have a happiest moment.

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## **Save the dates: SPSP2022 is on!**

The *9th biennial conference* will take place on 3 days in the period between 2 July and 8 July 2022. This is thanks to the generosity of Erik Weber (who is also a OC member), Maarten van Dyck and their colleagues at the [University of Ghent](#), who have generously agreed to host us again - thereby taking advantage of their experience in hosting SPSP2018. Further details of the meeting and the precise dates will follow soon.

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## The editorial team



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