



PŘEDNÁŠKOVÁ SÉRIE LECTURE SERIES

Zuzana Parusniková (Institute of Philosophy, CAS)

The Case of Ignaz Semmelweis Revisited: A Plea for Popperian Science

Semmelweis' discovery of the etiology of childbed fever has long attracted the attention of historians of medicine and biographers. In recent years it has also become of increasing interest to philosophers. In this paper I discuss the interpretation of Semmelweis' methodology from the viewpoint of the inference to the best explanation and argue that Popperian methodology is superior at capturing the dynamics of the growth of knowledge. Furthermore, I criticize the attempts to explain the failure of Semmelweis to have his discovery accepted on the basis of the Kuhnian concept of paradigms, and warn that this view may endorse dogmatism as the norm. The Kuhnian position also raises the problem of the authoritarian nature of scientific institutions which defend a paradigm against unorthodox, rebellious views, such as in the case of Semmelweis. Popperian philosophy is seen as a challenge to promote a link between an open society and open science with its main aim being to cherish a free critical spirit.

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