

# Utility as epistemology: a pragmatist take on science policy

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Truth and utility have often functioned as opposites in epistemological and political debates about the governance of science in the post-war Western world. In the name of truth, for example, ‘autonomy’ and ‘pure science’ have been defended against the alleged economic emphasis on utility in science policies. But this is a false dichotomy that relies on, and reinforces, distinctions between science and politics as well as knowledge and values. The principal muddiness of these distinctions, both historically and conceptually, has been pointed to (e.g. Kitcher, 2001; Latour, 2004; Douglas, 2009). Still, there exists discontent about the involvement of the state with directing research, discontent about the relevance of scientific studies, as well as discontent about the role of scientific experts in society. By thinking utility *as* epistemology it is possible to criticize limiting forms of science policy as well as pointing towards fruitful directions of democratic governance. In this paper, I will take utility as starting point, rather than an end result, to think the practice and policy of scientific research. First, I take stock of the epistemological functioning of utility in several recent philosophical and sociological accounts of scientific research. This includes for example ‘technoscience’, ‘mode-2 knowledge’, and ‘responsible research and innovation’. The comparison of utility in these concepts points to the historicity of epistemology and the necessity to situate characterizations of science. Second, I propose to capture this dynamic meaning of utility as (historical) epistemology in a conceptual framework informed by pragmatist philosophies (Dewey, 1938; Stengers, 2010). What if we take the idea seriously that scientific research is a social, material and discursive practice entangled in a democratic society? Utility re-emerges as a fundamental feature of the situation of the research practice (and the researchers) in the world. The alleged extremes of ‘pure truth’ and ‘profit’ can both be understood as local manifestations of this general feature of investigative practices. This pragmatist reading of scientific research poses, in new terms, questions to past and current science policies and funding practices: how did different understandings and manifestations of the utility of science play a part in the process of planning science for the public good – and what consequences for the practice of research did this have? Ultimately, ‘utility as epistemology’ invites reflections on the historicity and situatedness of science policy and makes us wonder how alternative futures of valuable research are possible.