

Inaugural Engaged Philosophy Workshop

Infertility, Epistemic Risk, and Disease Definitions

Professor Rebecca Kukla

Georgetown University

Respondents: Judy Andre, Jamie Nelson

1:00 - 3:15 PM | Friday, September 30, 2016

MSU Union Bldg., Lake Superior Room

49 Abbott Rd, East Lansing, MI 48824

Reception and dinner to follow

RSVP required to Joy Franks: franksj@msu.edu

I explore the role that values and interests, especially ideological interests, play in managing and balancing epistemic risks in medicine. I will focus in particular on how diseases are identified and operationalized. Before we can do biomedical research on a condition, it needs to be identified as a medical condition, and it needs to be operationalized in a way that lets us identify sufferers, measure progress, and so forth. I will argue that each time we do this, we engage in epistemic risk balancing that inevitably draws upon values and interests, often including social and ideological values. My main interest here is in the conceptualization of infertility as a disease. Infertility is a rich test case for exploring the interplay between interests and epistemic risk management. There is no uncontested or standardized definition of infertility. The various definitions of it are internally ambiguous and tension-ridden, and in spectacular contradiction with one another. Many interest groups who are invested in framing infertility as a pressing problem deserving of social and medical redress are quick to insist that it is a legitimate 'disease,' but they cannot agree on which disease it is, what its symptoms or diagnostic markers are, or even what its basic ontology is. I suggest that there are political explanations for this epistemic mess. Indeed, I contend that there are good scientific and ethical reasons to reduce away the category of 'infertility,' especially understood as a scientific or medical category; I argue that we should excise the concept from our research and clinical practices.

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