



AUSTRALIAN RESEARCH COUNCIL
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CAMPION COLLEGE
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Catholic Learning in the Liberal Arts

Scientific Institutions and Experimental Science: 1657-1757

Symposium

Campion College, Friday 4 December 2009

The Accademia del Cimento in Florence, widely regarded as the first scientific institution in Europe, was founded in 1657. One hundred years later, dozens of scientific societies were in operation across Europe and philosophers were beginning to reflect on the history and purpose of these organisations. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for instance, in an essay for the Académie de Dijon in 1750, questioned whether the aims and practices of scientific societies benefited the condition of humanity.

Regardless of Rousseau's scepticism, studies of the early scientific institutions have traditionally explored the origins of modern, organised experimentalism. Yet 'experimental science'—if taken to mean an efficacious method for acquiring knowledge of nature free of theoretical speculation—did not triumph unconditionally within the first century of the existence of European scientific institutions. The Bolognese *Accademia delle Scienze* (f. 1714), despite publicly priding itself on its use of an experimental philosophy, used mechanistic principles to guide its experiments. The *Societas Regia Scientiarum* (f. 1700) in Berlin and the *Accademia Scientiarum* of Saint Petersburg (f. 1724), both purportedly based on an experimental philosophy, were motivated by financial challenges and intellectual concerns. And in Sweden, the *Societatis Regiae Scientiarum* (f. 1728) and the *Vetenskapsadademie* (f. 1739) juggled the philosophical demands of their colleagues in universities. Meanwhile, all scientific institutions were subject to the whims of their patrons and philosophical disputes between members. All these issues indicate a far more complex intellectual environment within and across European scientific institutions, than a simple story of the triumph of organised, modern experimental method.

The aim of this symposium, therefore, will be to survey and examine the experimental philosophies of the scientific institutions during this period and to find out more about early modern experimentalism and the intellectual context in which societies carried out experiments. Did the idea of experimentalism change over a

period of one hundred years? Did 'experimental philosophy' mean different things within different institutions? And can we detect a difference between the experimental rhetoric of these societies and their actual activities? It is anticipated that such questions will be addressed in this symposium as a preliminary to further investigations into this topic in 2010.