

WHO KNOWS? UNCERTAINTY, CONTROVERSY AND THE NATURE OF SCIENCE¹

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary debates in the philosophy of science acknowledge that scientific thinking is entering a “post-normal” phase. Practical and ethical considerations limit the ability of scientists to provide simple answers to questions which are complicated in terms of both factual and value judgements. However, “Science” is still expected to give “correct” and unambiguous answers for policy and decision making.

The paper considers the recent controversy in the UK over bovine spongiform encephalopathy (“mad cow disease”), discusses the social contexts surrounding the controversy, and practical issues related to the conduct of science, concluding that the results of science cannot be viewed in isolation from the social relationships in which they are produced.

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