

What Kind of Thing is a Potato?

Agriculture and the Aims of Science

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Agricultural science is weird: it is neither a natural nor a social science, and it draws on a wide variety of “basic” sciences including physics, chemistry, biology, and engineering. Like medical science, agricultural science aims not just to understand pieces of the world but to improve them; it is fundamentally a *meliorative* science. Unlike these other fields, philosophers of science have neglected agricultural science and what it reveals about the nature of scientific knowledge.

In this talk I share some of early findings from interviews of farmers and agricultural scientists in Michigan and Kentucky, using the lens of potatoes. Potatoes are plants, or organs of plants; they are a row crop; they are an economic commodity; they are food; they are biofuel; and, they are objects of significant religious, cultural, and historical value. They are a focal point for agricultural science research across soil systems, genetics and breeding, pest and disease control, cropping procedures, and storage. Through analysis of the many ways that agricultural science studies and improves potato agriculture, I begin to sketch a vision for how agricultural science works—and what that vision reveals about how science itself works in the 21st century.