

We consider the recent decision by the International Astronomical Union to rename Hubble's law as the Hubble-Lemaître law in order to recognise the contribution of Georges Lemaître [1,2]. We find the proposal problematic from a historical and philosophical perspective. In the first instance, we find that the proposal conflates observational astronomy with theoretical cosmology, i.e., conflates Edwin Hubble's observation of a linear relation between redshift and distance for the galaxies with Georges Lemaître's derivation of a theoretical law of cosmic expansion from the general theory of relativity. In the second instance, we find that the proposal overlooks the erstwhile common practice of naming an empirical relation between two observables as a scientific law and the fact that Hubble's law was accepted as such by many astronomers who did not at the time accept the hypothesis of an expanding universe. In conclusion, we suggest that the renaming of Hubble's law constitutes a misreading of history and serves as an example of the perils of re-interpreting past scientific advances through a lens of today's knowledge.

References

[1] <https://www.iau.org/news/pressreleases/detail/iau1812/>

[2] <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-07234-y>