

On the Current Status of the Issue of Scientific Realism – Richard N. BOYD

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Assess the strengths and weakness of the various “traditional” arguments for and against scientific realism. “Theoretical terms” in scientific theories (i.e, non-observational terms) should be thought of as putatively referring expressions; scientific theories should be interpreted “realistically”. Scientific theories, interpreted realistically, are confirmable and in fact often confirmed as approx. true by ordinary scientific evidence interpreted in accordance with ordinary methodological standards. Argument which represents the basis for the rejection of scientific realism by philosophers in the empiricist tradition: Suppose that T is proposed theory of unobservable phenomena, which can be subjected to experimental testing. A theory is said to be empirically equivalent to T just in case it makes the same predictions about observable phenomena that T does. Now it is always possible, given T, to construct arbitrarily many alternative theories. Therefore no scientific evidence can bear on the question of which of these theories provides the correct account of unobservable phenomena. Theoretical claims are incapable of confirmation or disconfirmation. We may choose the “simplest” “model” for “pragmatic” reasons, but if evidence in science is experimental evidence, then pragmatic standards for theory-choice have nothing to do with truth or knowledge.