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Inquiry, Evidence, and Experiment: The ``Experimenter's Regress'' Dissolved

Brown, Matthew J. (2008) *Inquiry, Evidence, and Experiment: The ``Experimenter's Regress'' Dissolved*. In: [\[2008\] 24th Regional Conference on the History and Philosophy of Science \(Boulder, Oct. 10-12, 2008\)](#).



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Abstract

Contemporary ways of understanding of science, especially in the philosophy of science, are beset by overly abstract and formal models of evidence. In such models, the only interesting feature of evidence is that it has a one-way ``support'' relation to hypotheses, theories, causal claims, etc. These models create a variety of practical and philosophical problems, one prominent example being the experimenter's regress. According to the experimenter's regress, good evidence is produced by good techniques, but which techniques are good is only determined by whether they produce the evidence we expect. The best answer to this problem within the traditional approach relies on the concept of robust evidence, but this answer ultimately falls flat because it creates impossible requirements on good evidence. The problem can more easily be solved by rejecting abstract, formalistic models of evidence in favor of a model of inquiry which pays attention to the temporal complexity of the process of inquiry and the distinction between observational and experimental evidence.

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Item Type: Conference or Workshop Item (UNSPECIFIED)

Keywords: evidence, inquiry, experiment, experimenter's regress, robustness, discordance, Dewey

Subjects: [General Issues > Confirmation/Induction](#)
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Conferences and Volumes: [\[2008\] 24th Regional Conference on the History and Philosophy of Science \(Boulder, Oct. 10-12, 2008\)](#)

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Date Deposited: 11 Sep 2008

Last Modified: 07 Oct 2010 11:17

Item ID: 4191

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