Truth and Representation in Science: Two Inspirations from Art

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Abstract

Realists regarding scientific knowledge — those who think that our best scientific representations truly describe both observable and unobservable aspects of the natural world — have special need of a notion of approximate truth. Since theories and models are rarely considered true simpliciter, the realist requires some means of making sense of the claim that they may be false and yet close to the truth, and increasingly so over time. In this paper, I suggest that traditional approaches to approximate truth are insensitive to two crucial features of scientific knowledge, and that for each of these, analogies between representational practices in the sciences and in art prove useful to understanding how this situation can be remedied. First, I outline two distinct ways in which representations deviate from the truth, commonly referred to as 'abstraction' and 'idealization'. Second, I argue that these practices exemplify different conventions of representation, and that for each, the conditions of approximation relevant to explicating the concept of approximate truth must be understood differently. The concept is thus heterogeneous; approximate truth is a virtue that is multiply realized, relative to different contexts of representation. This understanding is facilitated, I suggest, by considering the distinction between realistic and non-realistic representation in art.

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