Cartwright′s Realist Toil: From Entities to Capacities

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Abstract

In this paper I develop five worries concerning Cartwright′s realism about entities and capacities. The first is that while she was right to insist on the ontic commitment that flows from causal explanation, she was wrong to tie these commitments solely to the entities that do the causal explaining. This move obscured the nature of causal explanation and its connection to laws. The second worry is that when she turned her attention to causal inference, by insisting on the motto of ′the most likely cause′, she underplayed her powerful argument for realism. For she focused her attention on an extrinsic feature of causal inference (or, indeed, of any ampliative inference), that is the demand of high probability, leaving behind the intrinsic qualities that causal explanation should have in order to provide the required understanding. The third worry is that her objections to Inference to the Best Explanation were unnecessarily tied to her objections about the falsity of fundamental laws. The fourth worry is that though her argument for positing capacities and being realist about them was supposed to take strength from its parallel with Sellars′s powerful argument for the indispensable explanatory role of positing unobservable entities, there are important disanalogies between the two arguments which cast doubt on the indispensability of capacities. The final (fifth) worry is that laws—perhaps brute regularities—might well have to come back from the front door, since they are still the most plausible candidates for explaining why objects have the capacities to do what they can do.

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