The Epistemic Goal of a Concept: Accounting for the Rationality of Semantic Change and Variation

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Abstract

The discussion presents a framework of concepts that is intended to account for the rationality of semantic change and variation, suggesting that each scientific concept consists of three components of content: 1) reference, 2) inferential role, and 3) the epistemic goal pursued with the concept ' s use. I argue that in the course of history a concept can change in any of these components, and that change in the concept ' s inferential role and reference can be accounted for as being rational relative to the third component, the concept ' s epistemic goal. This framework is illustrated and defended by application to the history of the gene concept. It is explained how the molecular gene concept grew rationally out of the classical gene concept despite a change in reference, and why the use and reference of the contemporary molecular gene concept may legitimately vary from context to context.

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