

Anti-realism and Aesthetic Cognition

Berrios, Ruben (2006) Anti-realism and Aesthetic Cognition. In *Proceedings [2006] Beyond Mimesis and Nominalism: Representation in Art and Science (London, 22-23 June 2006)*.

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Abstract

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At the core of the debate between scientific realism and anti-realism is the question of the relation between scientific theory and the world. The realist possesses a mimetic conception of the relation between theory and reality. For the realist, scientific theories represent reality. The anti-realist, in contrast, seeks to understand the relations between theory and world in non-mimetic terms. We will examine Cartwright' s simulacrum account of explanation in order to illuminate the anti-realist position.

Science consists of phenomenological and theoretical laws. The former are concerned with appearances, or those phenomena that can be directly observed; the latter involve the unobservable reality that is alleged to underlie appearances, and are capable only of indirect confirmation. Phenomenological laws are said to be descriptive, whilst theoretical laws are understood as explanatory. Cartwright is concerned with the theoretical. She claims that the standard realist account of the explanatory efficacy of theoretical laws is faulty.

The explanatory power of theoretical laws consists in their ability to provide an explanation of physical phenomena. According to Cartwright, the realist claims that laws explain phenomena by providing an abstract description of them, in terms of their micro-structural features, that is alleged to be true. On this view, explanatory power is entirely dependent on descriptive adequacy. As phenomenological laws describe appearances, so theoretical laws describe the fundamental reality that governs appearances.

Cartwright rejects the preceding view and in its place proposes a simulacrum account of explanation. According to Cartwright, the explanatory power of theoretical laws is related not to descriptive adequacy, but rather to the construction of adequate models. To explain a phenomenon is to construct a model which best or most adequately accommodates the phenomenon to a theory. The model will consist of various posited objects that serve to explain the phenomena in terms that are consistent with a set of theoretical laws. Cartwright claims that theoretical laws are true of, or describe, the objects of the model. The objects of the model, however, are not descriptive of reality. They are simulacra. They have, that is, the form or appearance of things, without possessing their substance or proper qualities.

In light of the foregoing account we can summarise the distinction between scientific realism and anti-realism as follows. The realist claims that theoretical laws literally represent real objects. The anti-realist claims that laws represent objects of a model that are simulacra of reality.

Anti-realism has an aesthetic dimension. The movement from realism to anti-realism is also the movement from the mimetic conception of the scientist as holding a mirror to nature to the constructionist view of the scientist as engaging with nature through invention. There is a lot of the artist in the anti-realist' s view of the scientist. This is true for Cartwright as well as, for example, Van Fraassen in his doctrine of constructive empiricism.

It would appear, then, that the philosophy of science has absorbed some concepts that are ordinarily housed in aesthetics. And it has done so profitably. The aim of this paper is to reverse the direction of disciplinary influence. Can art, in relation to its status as a cognitive enterprise, be illuminated by scientific anti-realism? I will

argue that it can.

In an unexpected reference to the Nicomachean Ethics, Cartwright draws a suggestive parallel between theoretical laws and general moral principles, on the one hand, and physical phenomena and everyday moral conduct, on the other hand. If we add to this the claim that a central component of art's value is cognitive, then we have the basic materials with which to flesh out a broadly anti-realist view of art.

In the production of art, artists can construct models that mediate between everyday ethical phenomena and general ethical tendencies. These models reveal the ways in which there are implicit consistencies or inconsistencies, conflicts or congruences and so forth, between the phenomena and the tendencies. On this basis art can contribute to the reflective understanding of ethical life. This constitutes to a large degree art's status as a cognitive enterprise. To apprehend art cognitively as artist or critic is to engage in aesthetic cognition.

Subjects: [General Issues: Ethical Issues](#)
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Conferences and Volumes: [\[2006\] Beyond Mimesis and Nominalism: Representation in Art and Science \(London, 22-23 June 2006\)](#)

ID Code: 2809

Deposited By: [Berrios, Ruben Ernesto](#)

Deposited On: 26 June 2006

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