

Models as make-believe

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Abstract

According to a widespread view of scientific modelling, the false 'prepared descriptions' and theoretical laws that scientists write down when they model a system do not represent that system directly, but instead define an abstract object. It is this object that is the model and it, in turn, represents the system. This view of modelling raises a problem that is the subject of a burgeoning literature in the philosophy of science. For we now require an account of the non-linguistic representation relation purported to exist between model and system. This paper proposes an alternative account of scientific modelling. To do so, it draws upon Kendall Walton's 'make-believe' theory of representation from the philosophy of art. I argue that scientists' prepared descriptions and theoretical laws represent the system being modelled directly, by prescribing imaginings about it. This account will not require us to postulate any abstract object of which the scientists' modelling assumptions are true, or present us with the task of understanding how such objects represent the world.

Keywords: models, idealization, representation, make-believe

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