Arguing for Scientific Realism: Some Lessons from Confirmation Theory

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The most commonly cited argument for scientific realism is the so-called 'no miracles' argument. According to this argument, it is highly implausible to claim that the predictive success enjoyed by some scientific theories is the product of a long series of lucky coincidences. A more plausible, indeed some argue the only plausible, claim is that the corresponding theories are true, or, at the very least, contain some non-negligible truth content. The majority of realists deem novel predictive success, roughly the ability of a theory to predict hitherto unknown types of phenomena, to be particularly telling in favour of the second claim. In this talk, I argue against the superiority of novel as opposed to non-novel predictive success. I do so by pointing out that objective standards in confirmation theory can only be had if confirmational assessments remain invariant under anything other than the evidence and the hypothesis under consideration, something that is not true in accounts of novel predictive success. After laying the foundations of what I take to be the correct conception of confirmation relations, I argue that support from evidence to different parts of a theory does not spread as broadly as has been popularly maintained. Among other things, this conception of confirmation relations has crucial consequences for the defence of scientific realism, consequences that I plan to explore in some depth during the last part of my talk.