The Observation-Ladenness of Theory

Ioannis Votsis
University of Düsseldorf

Discussions of theory-ladenness have traditionally focused on the extent to which observations and observational language are pure, i.e. unaffected by theory, and hence can function as neutral adjudicators in theory testing. By contrast, the purity of theories and of theoretical language is never brought into question. My aim in this paper is to contest this view by arguing that theories and theoretical terms can be afflicted by observation-ladenness.

It is widely known that observational considerations help guide theory formation and subsequent development. Yet they do much more than that. Among other things, they affect the meaning of theoretical terms in a way analogous to how theory affects the meaning of observational terms. In other words, at least part of the meaning of the certain theoretical terms is determined by the meaning of related observational terms. This is merely one of many ways in which theory is laden with observational considerations.

By way of definition, I offer the following as a first approximation of observation-ladenness: Since theories are formulated and utilised in observation-specific contexts, they are often imbued with the specificities of those contexts. Unlike theory-ladenness, observation-ladenness does not seem to tell against the testing and accountability of theories. On the contrary, it potentially mitigates the impact of theory-ladenness by making sure that theoretical prejudices have empirical considerations built into them. These considerations ultimately act as checks and balances to the truth-content of their respective theories.