

Philosophical Debates about Models and Representations: What are they Good for?

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Numerous object-level questions have arisen in the context of discussing models and representations. For example: What kind of things are models? What is the nature of scientific representation? How can we learn from models? What kind of things are theories? How do models relate to theories? To each such object-level debate corresponds at least one meta-level one: Is arguing about what kinds of things models are worthwhile? Does it really matter (e.g. epistemically) what the relations of a scientific representation are? We can also formulate a very general one: Will any of the answers to the object-level questions throw light on the epistemology, metaphysics & methods of science? Callender and Cohen (2006) raise serious concerns about a number of discussions over scientific representations: "... some of the debates in the literature are concerned with non-issues" (67). In particular, they attempt to deflate 'the constitution problem' of scientific representation, namely the problem of what constitutes the representation relation between a model and the world? Although I agree with the general, meta-philosophical, tenor of Callender and Cohen's paper, I diverge on the things I complain about. In this talk, I throw doubt on some points of contention that appear in the literature on models & scientific representation. To be exact, I raise concerns having to do with the futility and superficiality of some arguments and distinctions.