

Testing for Theory-Ladenness: The Stimulus Exchange Procedure

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Observation plays a central role in our everyday and scientific lives. Safeguarding its objectivity is therefore of paramount importance. Let us call 'veridicalism' the view that observational reports are largely truthful and that there exists a great deal of inter-subjective agreement concerning their content. Perhaps the biggest threat to this view is the so-called 'theory-ladenness' of perception and/or observation, an idea that has long been studied by both philosophers and psychologists. Roughly speaking, this is the idea that theoretical factors, broadly construed, influence the content of perceptual beliefs and observational reports. Such factors, it has been suggested, are most obviously found to be operating in divergence when we compare the observational reports of experts to those of laypersons. This talk proposes the design of some experiments whose aim is to determine whether differences in the content of expert vs. layperson observational reports, where these do indeed exist, can be removed under controlled conditions. Clearly, if such differences could be removed at least sometimes, theory-ladenness of this sort would pose less of a threat to inter-subjective agreement on, and ultimately to the objectivity of, observational reports. It is conjectured that such differences are indeed within our ability to expunge. What is more, it is argued that the content of the resulting observational reports preserves at least some of its evidential relevance. Finally, the approach is compared to Gerhard Schurz's ostensive learnability criterion for theory-neutral observation concepts. It is argued that there is considerable common ground between the two approaches.