

The Parallel Lives of Concepts and Theories

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Concepts, like theories, come in various shapes and sizes. Some are narrow, others broad. Some are rigorous, others irreparably tethered in intuition. Some embody ideals of simplicity and unity, others exhibit intricate and tangled parts. Concepts can also be said to perform their epistemic duties more or less adequately and tend to succeed one another in history. In this paper, I explore the parallel lives of scientific concepts and theories with a view to an improved understanding of the structure and dynamics that underlie their formation, alteration and elimination. Using the scientific realism debate as a template, I offer some practical suggestions as to how we ought to make decisions about concept choice. The general picture I draw is one of science that can learn from its past mistakes by utilising formal tools (particularly logic) to diagnose and remove defective elements.