

Journal of Philosophy, Inc.

Is Realism Really the Best Hypothesis?

Author(s): Berent Eng

Source: *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 87, No. 11, Eighty-Seventh Annual Meeting American Philosophical Association, Eastern Division (Nov., 1990), pp. 667-668

Published by: [Journal of Philosophy, Inc.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2026859>

Accessed: 03/09/2013 14:37

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Journal of Philosophy, Inc. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of Philosophy*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

IS REALISM REALLY THE BEST HYPOTHESIS?*

Jonathan Vogel argues for the conclusion that the real-world hypothesis (RWH) is a better explanation of our experience than the skeptical hypothesis (SH). His argument moves in two stages; in the first stage, he imposes the requirement that any alternative hypothesis has to be structurally (syntactically) isomorphic to the RWH; in the second stage, he argues for the explanatory superiority of the RWH over any hypothesis which shares the structure of the RWH but which rejects its ontology. Vogel's reasoning here is that the RWH will avail itself of the metaphysical necessary truths that govern physical objects, whereas its competitors will have to write these in as additional empirical laws.

I propose to show that, in both stages, Vogel has been unfair to the skeptic.

(1) History of science provides us with examples of new theories which dethroned old ones and which were not structurally isomorphic to the old ones. (One example is Galilean versus Aristotelian mechanics.) In these cases, it would have been unfair to dismiss the new theory merely on the grounds that it failed the isomorphism requirement. Lack of resemblance to the structure of an established theory is not by itself sufficient to convict a theory, because each theory has a different way of marking off the boundaries of its proper explananda, of classifying them, and of evaluating the significance of "observables." In saying this, I am not recommending a Kuhnian view of science; I am merely noting that the logical-empiricist supposition about the existence of a pool of rock-bottom neutral observation sentences against which *all* theories are to be tested is a convenient oversimplification. And if two theories do not share the same observation sentences, they are unlikely to possess identical structures.

The above result about scientific theories has immediate application to epistemology: to assume that the experience to be explained by the SH is properly to be described in the language of the RWH is to be unfair to the SH. The inferential and learned nature of our perceptual mechanisms may already be programmed with a rudimentary form of the RWH; and the skeptic could consistently maintain that, once we "unlearn" that program, our experience will become very different. (Here the skeptic has a lot to learn from Berkeley,

* Abstract of a paper to be read in an APA symposium on Cartesian Skepticism, December 30, commenting on a paper by Jonathan Vogel, this JOURNAL, this issue, 658-666.

who argued that the only rock bottom “givens” in our visual experience are colors and light intensities—distances, sizes, etc., being imposed on the given by “habit.”)

(2) We can see how Vogel is being unfair to the skeptic in the second stage if we suppose a SH that *is* structurally isomorphic to the RWH. The argument here is reminiscent of contemporary debates between scientific realists and antirealists. It is true that when, in one interpretation of a scientific theory, physical objects are the referents of the theoretical terms, and on another interpretation, “fictitious” entities or “pseudo objects” become the referents, one can show, along the lines that Wilfrid Sellars, Hilary Putnam, and Richard Boyd have used and Vogel adopts, that the first interpretation is explanatorily superior. But I tend to think that more sophisticated versions of antirealism (e.g., Bas van Fraassen’s) are immune to this criticism. Adopting one such version, the skeptic could reasonably maintain that his hypothesis “saves all the phenomena” that the RWH does, and it does this *without* introducing “pseudo objects,” *without* giving any semantic interpretation to any of the nonlogical terms that do not refer to sensory experience.

Being a village realist myself, my heart is with Vogel, but I think a complete victory is not yet at hand.

BERENT ENÇ

University of Wisconsin/Madison