RE-ORIENTING DISCUSSIONS OF SCIENTIFIC EXPLANATION: A FUNCTIONAL PERSPECTIVE


Philosophy of science offers a rich lineage of analysis concerning the nature of scientific explanation, but the vast majority of this work, aiming to provide an analysis of the relation that binds a given explanans to its corresponding explanandum, presumes the proper analytic focus rests at the level of individual explanations. There are, however, other questions we could ask about explanation in science, such as: What role(s) does explanatory practice play in science? Shifting focus away from explanations, as achievements, toward explaining, as a coordinated activity of communities, the functional perspective aims to reveal how the practice of explanatory discourse functions within scientific communities given their more comprehensive aims and practices. In this paper, I outline the functional perspective, argue that taking the functional perspective can reveal important methodological roles for explanation in science, and consequently, that beginning here provides resources for developing more adequate responses to traditional concerns.

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