

Through the Philosopher's Glass

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Abstract

Scientists have typically divergent attitudes towards philosophy, ranging from those who think that science without epistemology is “primitive and muddled” (Einstein) to those who claim we should not expect philosophy to provide them “with any useful guidance about how to go about their work” (Weinberg). Although both positions contain an element of truth, in this talk I'll side with the former, in the conviction that a greater awareness of the philosophical questions underpinning one's research field can only be beneficial and, in any case, can't do any harm. In particular, I'll take the view that machine learning and pattern recognition are “a continuation of epistemology by other means” (*), and will try to critically examine some of the most fundamental (and often tacit) assumptions of our field through a philosopher's lens. This could be an opportunity for reflection, reassessment and possibly some synthesis, with a view to provide the field a self-portrait of where it currently stands and where it is going as a whole.

[* Liberally adapted from Carl von Clausewitz.]

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