

Naturalism is (Literally) Self-Explanatory

Stephen Petersen
steve@stephenpetersen.net

Department of Philosophy
Niagara University

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Outline

- What is naturalism?
 - The stakes
 - Naturalism as scientism
- Problems for naturalism
 - Demarcation
 - Naturalism as self-undermining
- A solution
 - Science as explanation
 - The solution applied
 - Conclusion

Natural-ism

- The CFI, the Brights, and other political groups publicly *advocate* naturalism in the public sphere.
- Many philosophers advocate it in the philosophical sphere.
- Both often use “not naturalistic” rhetorically as an accusation.
- It’s an ideology—an *ism*—a normative move.

Why worry?

- Suppose someone dared to ask “what is naturalism anyway?”
- And, “why is naturalism good, and anti-naturalism bad?”
- There’d better be a good answer for the position to have any normative force!

Sample answers

- Quentin Smith: what's not supernatural.
- David Papineau: begs off the question entirely.
- W. V. Quine: philosophy as continuous with science.
- From the CFI statement of philosophy:
“...antinaturalists maintain that we must go beyond the concepts and methods of science ...”
- So it seems according to *naturalism*, we *don't* need to go beyond the concepts and methods of science.

Naturalism as scientism

Naturalism: a first pass

Science is the only route to knowledge.

- This characterization is simple and straightforward.
- Consistent with the Quine characterization of “philosophy as continuous with science.”
- This is the position I'll defend.

Demarcation

- What is *science*?
- To the new Kansas board, science is
“a human activity of systematically seeking *natural* explanations.”
- Postmodernists and the explicitly faith-based dismiss science.
- It's more pernicious to *masquerade* as science.

Pseudoscience

- Demarcation problems:
 - Creationism / intelligent design
 - ESP, Astrology
 - David Chalmers' “naturalistic dualism”
 - Math, history, economics, AI, ethics, *etc.*
- These are problems for setting boundaries to science.
- These are also problems for naturalism.
- (“Naturalism = scientism” explains this coincidence.)

Falsificationism falsified

- Maybe it's scientific if and only if it's "falsifiable"?

The Quine-Duhem Thesis (Radical Version)

The theoretical core of *any* consistent theory is consistent with *any* body of observations.

- Simply modify the "auxiliary hypotheses"
- This is doom for simple falsificationism.
- Demarcation is not easy!

Those who cannot remember the past . . .

Remember this old chestnut?

Verificationism

The meaning of a proposition is fully determined by the observable tests for the truth or falsity of that proposition.

"Oh? And what's the meaning of *that* claim?"

. . . are condemned to repeat it.

Compare this:

Naturalism

Science is the only route to knowledge.

"Oh? And what scientific procedure led to *that* claim?"

- Looks like naturalism is a non-naturalistic view.
- This problem is not unique to my version of naturalism.
- The "only" part is the culprit.
- It's also the interesting, ideological part.

Inference to the best explanation

Hypothesis 1

To do science is just to do inference to the best explanation.

- "Fit" the observations by explaining them (or explaining them away)
- "Best" \approx *simplest*
- Eliminate what's not explanatory
- Plausibly covers all (non-deductive?) inference

Unification

Hypothesis 2

Explanation is *unification* (à la Kitcher and Friedman).

- To explain observations is to subsume them into a wider pattern
- Compare “consilience” (Whewell, Wilson)
- Explanations reduce the number of brute facts
- Builds in simplicity and data-fit
- Contrast explanation as causation (Salmon, Lewis)

A continuity

- Good philosophy plausibly attempts to systematize concepts.
- \approx good philosophy seeks best explanations (of our conceptual intuitions)
- \approx good philosophy is scientific (“continuous with science”)
- \approx good philosophy is naturalistic.
- Note this needs explanation as unification.
- (Causal accounts won’t do.)

Naturalistic naturalism

- Is it a naturalistic claim to endorse naturalism?
- \approx Is it a scientific claim that “science is the only route to knowledge”?
- \approx Is it an explanatory claim that “inference to the best explanation is the only route to knowledge”?
- Yes, plausibly:
 - good inference is the domain of epistemology,
 - which is a philosophical enterprise,
 - which is (should be) naturalistic.

Naturalism is self-explanatory

- In this sense naturalism is literally “self-explanatory”
- IBE may not prove that “only IBE is legitimate” to the satisfaction of all other “inference” forms.
- But at least it’s self-endorsing, not self-undermining.

A demarcation

- The key problem for demarcation: the Quine-Duhem Thesis.
- Inference to the best explanation gives a principled way to pick one of the underdetermined theories,
- in a way that rules out *ad hoc* theory-saving through epicycles.
- To be scientific is to seek the *best* (most unifying) explanation.

The demarcation applied

What's scientific?

- ESP, Astrology, *etc.*?
 - No!
- Math, history, economics, AI, ethics, *etc.*?
 - To the *extent* they seek best explanations.
 - (Ethics \subseteq philosophy.)
- Chalmers and naturalistic dualism
 - Not ruled out *a priori* by naturalism.
 - Presumption with physicalism as best explanation
- Kansas, "intelligent design", and God
 - Also not ruled out *a priori*!
 - Again, presumption of simplicity with materialism.

Summary

Slogan

Naturalism is scientism is explanationism is unificationism.

- This can solve two major problems for naturalism:
 - Demarcation of the natural and non-natural
 - Internal coherence
- It also explains naturalism's normative force.
- The force can (and *should*) be cashed out by appeals to explanatory power.