

Four Grades of Modal Naturalism

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I. Introduction

In this paper I first explore what it is for a theory to be naturalistic (§II), canvassing existing accounts of naturalistic metaphysics. I distinguish between epistemic and methodological forms of naturalism, focusing on an epistemic conception of naturalism in a broadly Quinean tradition (§III). Next I apply my preferred form of epistemic naturalism to the topic of objective modality, outlining four increasingly radical grades of naturalism concerning modal metaphysics, as well as two ways (modal conventionalism and modal rationalism) of avoiding any evidential bearing of science on objective modality (§IV). §V is a conclusion.

II. What is naturalistic metaphysics?

“The more a metaphysical theory engages... with the empirical data, theoretical insights, and practices of the current sciences, the more scientifically responsible it is.” (Bryant 2017, p.97)

“Our acceptance of an ontology is, I think, similar in principle to our acceptance of a scientific theory, say a system of physics: we adopt, at least insofar as we are reasonable, the simplest conceptual scheme into which the disordered fragments of raw experience can be fitted and arranged.” (Quine 1948, p.16)

“metaphysical beliefs, like other beliefs, should be empirically adequate, and contemporary science is our best guide to empirical adequacy.” (Hawley 2006, p.465)

“entertain the possibility that it is our a priori and metaphysical convictions that should be modified, in the light of the physics, rather than that physics should fit in with them as they stand.” (Saunders 1997, p.46-47)

“Any new metaphysical claim that is to be taken seriously should be motivated by, and only by, the service it would perform, if true, in showing how two or more specific scientific hypotheses jointly explain more than the sum of what is explained by the two hypotheses taken separately...” (Ladyman and Ross 2007, p.30)

“there is no interesting species of metaphysical modality that is largely immune to science. Our modal intuitions are historically conditioned and possibly unreliable and inconsistent. The only way to weed out the good from the bad is to see what results from a comprehensive theory that seriously attempts to model some or all of the actual world.” (Callender 2011, p.44)

“given the central methodological role of the actual in systematic modal theorizing and physics’ privileged role within it, metaphysicians cannot but engage with the philosophy of physics.” (French & McKenzie 2012, p.56-57)

“any metaphysical theory invoking entities x and deployed at some time t should be compatible with at least some independent, well-supported, overall ‘serious’ scientific theory that directly describes or that is otherwise relevant to those entities, should such a theory exist at that time.” (French & McKenzie 2015, p.15)

“(PI) We ought to have metaphysical commitment to all and only the entities, structures, or principles that are indispensable to our best scientific theories.

(P2) X is indispensable to our best scientific theories.

Therefore,

(C) We ought to have metaphysical commitment to X .” (Ney 2012, p.61)

“Both fields are interested in discovering truths about entities or features of the world that are sometimes observable, but are often unobservable, indirectly confirmable, and abstract... Both fields rely on a priori reasoning in addition to a posteriori reasoning.” (Paul 2012, p.9)

III. Epistemic Naturalism

Epistemic Naturalism in Metaphysics: Truths revealed by natural science are evidentially relevant to some metaphysical hypotheses.

Radical Epistemic Naturalism in Metaphysics: Truths revealed by natural science are evidentially relevant to every metaphysical hypothesis.

The Package Deal Approach: An adequate total theory of the nature of reality will involve both metaphysical and scientific components.

Epistemic Metaphysicalism in Natural Science: Truths revealed by metaphysics are evidentially relevant to some natural scientific hypotheses.

IV. Four Grades of Modal Naturalism

[Ungraded: There is no such thing as objective modality.]

[Grade Zero: Scientific evidence has no evidential bearing on objective possibility.]

Grade One: Scientific evidence can support expanding our view of the objective possibilities.

Grade Two: Scientific evidence can support contracting our view of the objective possibilities.

Grade Three: Scientific evidence can support contracting our view of the structure of the objective possibilities.

Grade Four: Scientific evidence bears on what objective possibilities are.

V. Conclusion

Epistemic naturalism, of a broadly Quinean kind, is a useful way to characterize naturalistic metaphysics. The resulting characterization allows for degrees of naturalisticness, and different accounts of modality come out as naturalistic to greater or lesser degrees. We ought to be open to theories of modality that are more naturalistic than has previously been thought feasible.