

Naturalistic philosophy

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Thesis (Naturalism)

Naturalism maintains that philosophical inquiry is continuous with scientific inquiry.

(cf. Aristotle)

Question: what does this mean more precisely?

E.g. philosophy can use results from science to help answer philosophical questions **even in the philosophy of science**

⇒ **Circularity charge**: viciously circular to use scientific results to justify scientific practice...

- scientific theory must first be put on a firm and secure foundation, which must be external to science
- once scientific practice is justified by such an external standpoint, it inherits the respectability of this standpoint
- Naturalism denies the existence of and the need for any such foundation, bc description of knowledge and science no more certain than science itself.



- 1 philosophy should not give foundation for scientific knowledge
 - 2 epistemology should be absorbed by scientific psychology; only questions that can be answered by psychology are relevant
- Churchlands: neuroscience!

Alternative version of naturalism

- \exists distinctly philosophical questions, although science contributes to their answers
- science as **resource** for philosophy, not as its **replacement**

Examples of philosophical questions

- 1 normative questions (involving value judgment) ⇒
“normative naturalism”

Definition (Naturalistic fallacy)

(Alleged) fallacy of identifying an axiological (= pertaining to values) concept with a “natural” concept.

For our purposes, “natural” concepts are those drawn from the special sciences.

Definition (Hume’s law or the is-ought fallacy)

It is (allegedly) impermissible to derive a claim about what ought to be from statements of what is.

Question: how can normative naturalism avoid these (alleged) fallacies?

Answer: normative judgments in epistemology are made in **instrumental** way

⇒ an action is said to be **instrumentally rational** just in case it is a good (or promising) way of achieving the pursued goal

If an action A is undertaken to achieve a goal B , it is a **factual matter** whether or not A is conducive to the realization of B .

- ② relationship bw commonsense view of world (“manifest image”) and scientific picture of world (“scientific image”)
 - 2a naturalistic philosophy of mind: relationship bw thoughts, beliefs, desires and mind in neuroscientific sense
- ③ relations bw different sciences

- historically, philosophy has served as incubator for novel and speculative ideas, often engendering scientific inquiries

Naturalistic philosophy of science should seek to achieve

- 1 general understanding of how humans gain knowledge about world
- 2 understanding of what privileges science as epistemic endeavour

Challenge: science is **not** genuinely responsive to world

Counter via distinction bw “in principle” and “in practice”

- 1 does nature of human thought/perception permit that scientific beliefs can be made responsive to world?
- 2 even if possible in principle, do **actual** scientific communities operate such that this responsiveness occurs in practice?

Theory-ladenness of observation

Thesis (Theory-ladenness of observation; Kuhn, Feyerabend)

"[O]bservation cannot function as an unbiased way of testing theories [or paradigms] because observational judgments are affected by the theoretical beliefs of the observer." (Godfrey-Smith, p. 156)

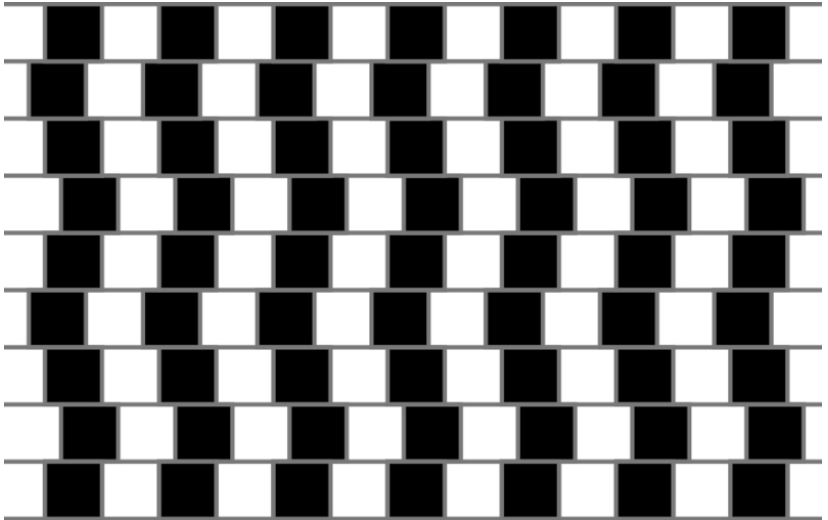
Two issues

- 1 **Reliability**: is observation reliable way of acquiring faithful representations of the world; and if so, to what extent?
- 2 **Neutrality**: is observation neutral between competing theories and thus provides intersubjective basis for theory choice?

Four levels of theory-ladenness

- 1 **Guidance** of obs by theory: harmless
- 2 **Selection** of obs by theoretical background: more serious, ultimately needs thy of confirmation
- 3 **Language** of obs reports theory-laden bc holistic meaning, two cases:
 - a either thys infecting language are low-level, not at stake ⇒ harmless
 - b obs reports affected by thy being tested: but perhaps although thy provides concepts for obs reports, these reports might still spell trouble for thy
- 4 **experiences themselves** might be influenced by beliefs, thys

Café wall illusion



Tile floor of Basilica St John Lateran in Rome



- illusion is not affected by knowledge that it is an illusion
- so observation may not be biased by whether a particular sci thy is accepted or not
- naturalist observation as natural phenomenon, to be studied by psychology, neuroscience etc
- perceptual mechanisms might depend on low-level thys s.t. perception is reliable without low-level thys themselves being true