

Varieties of Naturalism¹

Many philosophers call themselves naturalists and mean by this that they have the goal of accommodating traditional categories of philosophical inquiry – belief, consciousness, personhood, knowledge, free will etc. – within the naturalistic or physicalistic world-view of modern science. Within this camp, we find much variation in detail. One important source of variation consists in what is regarded as the legitimate concepts of natural science in terms of which one might effect a reduction of the (as one might generally refer to them) mental concepts, some philosophers allowing only extensional concepts (i.e. no modal notions like ‘necessarily’), some also causal-nomological ones, some these plus natural teleological ones. Another important source of variation concerns the status of the proposals offered (or that these philosophers recommend



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should be offered – here we have a further source of variation that concerns whether one argues for the programme or actually tries to carry it out!). Thus, some see the reductive theories as upshots of conceptual analyses of mental concepts, whereas others (probably the majority these days) see them more like empirical

theories (this does not have to mean ‘bridge laws’ in the manner of so-called ‘classical’ reductionism). What all these philosophers have in common, however, is their belief that there is an important reductive project to be carried out, and that philosophy’s and/or cognitive science’s chief role should be to carry it out.²

Many other philosophers are not naturalists in this sense because they believe that there are certain features of our mental life that resist capture by scientific ideas. This is something we can know to be the case by reflection on our everyday modes of explanation and understanding, a reflection which enunciates a special place for the mental as autonomous from the understanding of the world that science gives us. This second kind of philosopher should be immediately contrasted with those who agree that science will never explain certain features of our mental life, but that this is due to inherent, though ultimately contingent limitations in the cognitive capacities of human beings: Just as rats will never understand calculus, so we will never understand (to take three central examples) how pain can be a brain state, how scientific belief-formation can be computationally tractable, or how language-use can be both creative and appropriate to circumstances. The thinkers who have argued for this kind of ‘cognitive boundedness’ have not seen it as implying the availability of an alternative mode of understanding of the things we will never understand scientifically. This is just what the second kind of philosopher thinks is available. However, many of these would also balk at being called non-naturalists, carrying with it as it does implications of belief in supernat-

ural entities or tracts of reality. As they see things, there is no reason not to see our common sense explanatory practices, centrally involving persons, mental states and their actions, as latching onto thoroughly natural features of the world – namely persons, their mental states and their actions – and no reason to think that the felicity of doing this is dependent on, or can be further illuminated by, some deep theory about what these things are – a theory that at best could show our common sense practices to be more or less in order. This way of thinking is also apt to stress the distinction between *Verstehen* and *Erklären* introduced by 19th century German anti-positivists as a way of backing up the distinctiveness of common sense psychological explanation without reneging on a materialistic ontology.³

My preferred variety of naturalism is a middle way between these two. Like the first kind of naturalists (the reductionists), I am impressed by the achievements of modern science, and see the understanding we gain from this enterprise as providing our best hope for knowledge and understanding *tout court*. However, like the second kind of naturalists (the anti-reductionists), I do not see this commitment to science as entailing commitment to the project of reducing mental concepts or phenomena to physical ones; thus, unlike the reductionists, I do not take it for granted that cognitive science's or philosophy's proper aim is giving significantly reductive theories. Such reductive projects, though certainly a part of science, are by no means exhaustive of or criterial for it. Wholesale reduction in modern science is a fairly remote ideal in view of the 'exploded' nature of modern physics and the rise of autonomous biological science. Further, there are (at least in my view) no good metaphysical arguments against the credentials of unreconstructed mental properties – mental properties *as such* – in the natural world. A good naturalist should accept the primacy of science, but also relinquish reduction as the criterion of the real. Doing otherwise will simply smack of *a priori* dogmatism inimical to the scientific spirit.⁴

Unlike the anti-reductionists on the other hand, I do not think there is any way of hermetically sealing off some realm of understanding to which the mental concepts are proprietary – of definitively or *a priori* ruling out the possibility of reduction to some more basic level, any more than there is with any other special science. There are two aspects to my scepticism on this score, one concerning the idea of a common sense understanding or world, the other the distinction between *Verstehen* and *Erklären*. To start with the latter, my scepticism can again be broken down into two sub-arguments: On the one hand, if one seeks to demarcate *Verstehen* (viewed as the understanding proprietary to intentional states and action) from *Erklären* by relating the latter to science and trying to point to various features of scientific theories that *Verstehen* allegedly lacks, one will fail. For example, if it is claimed that scientific theories explain by causal laws, then, if one means strict laws, this will be false, whilst if one means non-strict laws, it will be true, but then also a feature that applies to *Verstehen*. On the other hand, if one seeks to demarcate by pointing to something distinctive about *Verstehen*, such as, as is typical, the *normative* character of its explanations, one will have to contend with the fact that meaningful explanation of actions involving what *ought* to be the case must

always be relativised to the agent's *belief* about what ought to be the case, in a way that makes the normative element *as such* disappear in the explanation.⁵

The idea of common sense also fails to seal off psychology from science. If humans universally employ an explanatory scheme for understanding the mental states and actions of others, this is most naturally seen as a folk theory – alongside that we have of physical bodies – that we absolutely can compare to real science, and maybe seek thereby to correct and/or precisify. Though the latter will probably obtain to a lesser extent than in the case of folk physics (not surprisingly), the adequacy of folk psychology is nevertheless a contingent, empirical fact. Moreover, we can seek to understand the existence of such folk theories in relation to a more inclusive theory about their cultural or evolutionary origin (this does not presuppose reductive ambitions). Finally, the idea of a common sense ontology – that the world of ordinary middle-sized objects, persons and their actions is radically distinct from that physical science describes – is not without plausibility, but it does not insulate common sense from science, for this ontology, or at least a subset of it, is one that some sciences also presuppose and seek to understand – notably biological science. Given this overlap, it would seem odd if for some reason the categories relevant to understanding humans were radically incommensurable with those of the animal world. (Language of course complicates our lives enormously, but the question here is whether there is some wholly autonomous human realm that might demand a special kind of understanding, and to that the answer seems clearly negative.)⁶

In sum, I am neither a reductionist nor an anti-reductionist naturalist, but, I believe, a naturalist in the true sense of the word: We can only seek an understanding of the world within our best ongoing enterprise, which enterprise is roughly that of modern science, including cognitive science. Though successful reductions are part of that enterprise, and part of what makes it exciting, they are not criterial for it. My naturalism is thus compatible with those who hanker after substantive psychological theorising in a way that may also vindicate aspects of our common sense psychology. In the end, however, no idea can effect an absolute divide between science and the mental such that the latter will necessarily require a distinctive and non-scientific mode of understanding.

Notes

1 A more extended exposition of the ideas in this paper was presented at the XV Inter-Nordic Philosophical Symposium, *Science: A Challenge to Philosophy?* in Helsinki, May 2004, and I would like to thank the audience there for their comments. Thanks also to Jennifer Hornsby for feedback at a seminar at the CAS that has led, I hope, to a dialectically tighter presentation.

2 For different varieties of reductive projects, cf. F. Jackson *From Metaphysics to Ethics* (Oxford UP 1988), who espouses a conceptualist variety of reductionism); J. Fodor *Psychosemantics* (MIT Press 1987), who offers a more empirically-based theory of intentional states and content; A. Goldman 'What is justified belief?' (reprinted in H. Kornblith, ed., *Naturalizing Epistemology*, 2nd edition, MIT Press 1997), who offers a reductionist theory of justified belief; and D. Papineau *Philosophical Naturalism* (Blackwell 1993), who seeks to give a naturalistic account of just about everything from intentional content to mathematics that nevertheless allows itself the idea of natural teleology.

3 Two of the most influential naturalists of this second kind in the philosophy of mind are John McDowell (cf. his *Mind and World*, Harvard UP 1994) and Jennifer Hornsby (cf. her *Simple*

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Mindedness, Harvard UP 1997). In epistemology, a somewhat similar view is espoused by Susan Haack in *Evidence and Inquiry* (Blackwell 1993). The idea that we are cognitively bounded with respect to certain 'mysteries' of the mind has been forcefully argued for by Noam Chomsky, cf. e.g. *Reflections on Language* (Fontana 1976).

4 My recommendation of a generally scientific outlook is reminiscent of that of W. V. O. Quine's (cf. e.g. his *Theories and Things*, Harvard UP 1981), but Quine is also an avid physicalist of a kind that destroys much of the attraction and, I think, consistency of his naturalism. The kind of pluralistic view of science alluded to in this paragraph is defended by John Dupré *The Disorder of Things* (Harvard UP 1993) and T. Crane & H. Mellor 'There is no question of physicalism' (*Mind* 1990). For arguments against the need to vindicate mental properties, cf. J. Knowles 'Does intentional psychology need vindicating by cognitive science?' (*Minds and Machines* 2001).

5 These arguments, and others, are presented more fully in J. Knowles 'Is folk psychology different?' (*Erkenntnis* 2002).

6 Some philosophers, influenced by behaviourist thinking, regard mental phenomena as somehow 'subordinated' to language and linguistic behaviour (e.g. Quine, Dummett, Davidson). This might furnish another way of carving out a special place for mental explanation (assuming the public nature of language) – but only insofar as the mental would thereby fail to be the robustly real phenomenon I am here taking it to be.