

How and Why to be a Metaphysical Naturalist

Nina Emery
emery@mtholyoke.edu

1 Set-up

To be a *naturalist* about metaphysics is to think that when designing and defending metaphysical theories we ought to be respectful of our best science.

There are many kinds of naturalism. Here are two:

Content naturalism. Metaphysicians should not accept theories that conflict with the content of our best scientific theories.

Methodological naturalism. When choosing between candidate theories, metaphysicians should, whenever possible, use the same methodology that scientists use.

Note that it is compatible with content naturalism that it is sometimes difficult to discern what the content of our best science happens to be.

Note also that methodological naturalism is compatible with the claim that the methodology of science leaves some (or even most) metaphysical debates open. But it is plausible that methodological naturalism will have at least some impact. This is because scientific methodology plausibly involves the appeal to extra-empirical reasoning (e.g. appeals to explanatory power, elegance, unification, etc.) and such appeals plausibly impact metaphysical debates as well.

2 Thesis

Here is the central thesis of my talk:

The Content-Methodology Link. One should not accept content naturalism unless one also accepts methodological naturalism.

The content-methodology link has significant ramifications for contemporary metaphysics.

For one thing, the vast majority of contemporary metaphysicians are content naturalists. But few of them make any more than a casual gesture toward methodological naturalism.

Moreover, contemporary metaphysics tends to assume that scientific considerations are only relevant to some metaphysical debates. But if methodological naturalism is correct, and once we recognize the role of extra-empirical reasoning in science, then we should be very suspicious of this distinction.

3 Argument

Here is the basic argument for the content-methodology link:

There is no reason to respect the content of our best scientific theories if we do not also respect the methodology that produces those theories. If one does not think that the methodology that produces scientific theories tracks the metaphysical truth, then why would one care if one's favored metaphysical theories conflict with our best scientific theories? Those scientific theories were produced by a methodology that, however excellent at producing good science, is not reliable when it comes to metaphysics.

In order to present the argument in a more formal way, you need to take a stand on what the aim of metaphysical theorizing is. Let's assume, for the moment, that metaphysics aims at true theories about what the world is like.

P1-T If you are a content naturalist who thinks that the goal of metaphysical theorizing is to put forward true claims about what the world is like, then you should think that the content of our best scientific theories is true.

P2-T If you think that the content of our best scientific theories is true, then you should also think that standard scientific methodology is a good guide to the truth.

P3-T If you are a content naturalist who thinks that the goal of metaphysical theorizing is to put forward true claims about what the world is like, then you should think that standard scientific methodology is a good guide to the truth.

C-T If you are a content naturalist who thinks that the goal of metaphysical theorizing is to put forward true claims about what the world is like, then you should be a methodological naturalist.

If you don't think that metaphysics aims at the truth then substitute in whatever epistemic feature you like for "true claims about what the world is like". The argument (*mutatis mutandis*) will still go through.

When thinking up objections to this argument keep in mind that the content methodology link is a conditional. Objections to content naturalism alone are perfectly compatible with the link, as are objections to methodological naturalism that also undermine one's reason for being a content naturalist.

Note also that many of the same conclusions will follow even if you only accept a weak version of the link:

The weak content-methodology link. If you are a content naturalist, there are good, though perhaps ultimately defeasible, reasons for you to be a methodological naturalist.

4 Applying the link

I argue that content naturalism ought to be the default view, and that therefore, given the link, the default view should be to adopt methodological naturalism.

Why? Because science has been incredibly successful in putting forward theories about what the world is like, and there is no clear demarcation between the metaphysical domain and the scientific domain.

It's also worth noting that:

Content naturalism doesn't require one to accept scientific realism, as long as one thinks that the goals of metaphysics and the goals of science are similar.

Concerns about the pessimistic meta-induction may give rise to a limited version of content naturalism. In this case, the argument above will yield a limited version of methodological naturalism. (The details here are complex, though.)

Moreover, we should expect methodological naturalism to be widely impactful. This is because: (i) our scientific commitments are regularly underdetermined by the data that scientists collect, (ii) when this happens, scientists often choose which commitments to take on using various extra-empirical principles, and (iii) these kinds of extra-empirical principles are the kinds of principles that can be used to settle metaphysical debates.

Re (i): I take both actual historical cases of underdetermination to be relevant here, as well as "mere" philosophical underdetermination.

Re (ii): I prefer this way of thinking about the role of extra-empirical reasoning in science but there are alternative accounts, e.g. extra-empirical reasoning might play a role in determining the data itself or in various kinds of confirmation theory. What matters is just that on any account there is some aspect of scientific methodology that is extra-empirical and that plausibly impacts metaphysical debates.

Re: (iii) it is important to establish that there is no straightforward disanalogy between metaphysical debates and scientific debates, e.g. it is not the case that all and only scientific debates have been narrowed by empirical data before underdetermination arises.

It is entirely compatible with all of this to think that the extra-empirical principles that actually play a role in science (and therefore should play a role in metaphysics) are nuanced and surprising.

Nothing I've said here requires us to think, for instance, that "choose the simplest theory" is in fact one of the extra-empirical principles guiding scientific theory choice.

That's all pretty abstract. Here are three specific principles that I argue for in the book.

The pattern-explanation principle. When choosing between competing empirically adequate theories, if one theory is explanatorily adequate and the others are not, choose the theory that is explanatorily adequate even if that theory involves the introduction of some type of entity that is metaphysically weird or novel.

The principle of minimal divergence. Insofar as you have two or more candidate theories, all of which are empirically and explanatorily adequate, you ought to choose the theory that diverges least from the manifest image.

The excess structure principle. When choosing between competing empirically adequate theories, one ought not choose a theory that posits excess structure.

And here are some consequences that I think follow for metaphysics once we accept these principles:

It follows from the pattern-explanation principle that we ought to endorse a governing conception of laws.

It follows from the principle of minimal divergence that we ought not endorse nihilism about composition.

It follows from the excess structure principle that if we think that the objection from special relativity rules out presentism we should also think that a related objection rules out actualism.

5 Loose Threads

How is the content-methodology link complicated by various views about the relations between different sciences?

How plausible is it to respond to the content methodology link by rejecting content naturalism. What should metaphysics look like if we take that route?

*For more on both of these, see *Naturalism Beyond the Limits of Science*, out in June with OUP*

What further applications of methodological naturalism are there?

Future work that I welcome others to join!