

Normativity and Philosophical Naturalism

– Peircean Lessons

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Contemporary meta-ethics

Three main alternatives:

- Naturalism: a reduction of normativity to the descriptive (conceptual content or reference)
- Non-naturalism
- Expressivism (non-cognitivism): naturalism without scientific study of normative questions

What is naturalism?

Ontological naturalism (ON): what there is, is what science tells us there is

- Particular forms based on a choice of special science
- E.g. physicalism: what there is, is what physics tells us there is

Methodological naturalism (MN): all inquiry should be conducted with scientific method(s)

A question of consistency

- ON or MN do not seem to be *scientific* claims
- Or what is the science to make those claims?
 - Quinean criticism of Carnapian external questions fits uneasily with – philosophical naturalism!
 - Is naturalism a claim in “first philosophy”?

What is science?

- ON and MN defer ontology/methods to science
- But what is *science*?
- The study of the *natural* world?

⇒ Leads to a circularity of definition

⇒ What (ontological) naturalism is and what it implies depends crucially on the form of *scientific realism* assumed

Forms of scientific realism

A-SR: things are (approximately) as our best scientific and common sense theories claim (Devitt)

C-SR: scientific theories are our best but fallible guides to what there is (Niiniluoto)

Inevitably lead to the rejection of the scientific study of normative questions – simply because there is no such science!

Contemporary pragmatists

Richard Rorty and Huw Price:

- All domains of language (including normative language) make ontological commitments
- Ontological “deflationism”
- The primacy of scientific discourse merely perspectival, not absolute

Hypothetical realism

H-SR: science is underwritten by the hypothesis that there is a reality independent of our views

- Science is defined as the attempt to find out how things are
- *Rather* than reality understood as that which science delivers

Peirce, “Fixation”

“Such is the method of science. Its fundamental hypothesis, restated in more familiar language, is this: There are Real things, whose characters are entirely independent of our opinions about them; those Reals affect our senses according to regular laws, and, though our sensations are as different as are our relations to the objects, yet, by taking advantage of the laws of perception, we can ascertain by reasoning how things really and truly are; and any man, if he have sufficient experience and he reason enough about it, will be led to the one True conclusion. The new conception here involved is that of Reality.”

Hypothetical realism and normative science

⇒ There is no principled barrier to the scientific study of normative questions

- Don't block the way of inquiry!
- Denial is *scepticism*

In meta-ethics:

- Naturalism without reductionism, or
- Anti-reductionism without non-naturalism

Consistency resolved

- If science is defined by reference to reality, no need for a further argument that science *studies* reality
 - No need for first philosophy
- Normative science may study scientific norms
- The “primacy” (if any) of science lies in its introduction of hypothetical realism

Levels of ontological commitment

- Unlike Rorty and Price think, different discourses may have different “depths” of ontological commitment
- Any discourse can be turned into a scientific one by introducing hypothetical realism
- E.g. moral discourse can move from its religious (or traditional) and “philosophical” (or aprioristic) phase to a scientific one

Further issues

- Remnants of representationalism, e.g. moral claims are not “about” the world
- Distinction between reasons for belief and action (or epistemology and ethics)
- Empirical basis of e.g. ethics
- The *causal question*: is an emotion caused by a “moral” feature (e.g. wrongness?)

Recap

- The “threat” of naturalism on normativity depends on our choice of a version of scientific realism
- HR poses no such threat
- It has the benefit of consistency: arguments for naturalism turn out to be needless
- It enables us to see different discourses as having different levels of ontological commitment