

PHIL 285

NATURALISM AND NATURALISTIC METAPHYSICS



Figure 1: Joseph Wright of Derby, *Two Boys Fighting Over a Bladder*, 1770.

Fall 2019

Instructor: Kerry McKenzie

Seminars: Thursday 1-3.50pm, HSS 7077.

Office Hours: Monday 9.30-11.30am, HSS 8088.

1 Introduction.

‘Naturalism’, understood as a methodological orientation in philosophy, ‘has been the predominant orientation in analytic philosophy for perhaps the last third of the 20th Century, especially in the United States; even its critics now commonly endorse some more tolerant and inclusive version of naturalism.’¹ And the same can be said of its ontological counterpart, ‘physicalism’, which is now ‘about as close to a bit of orthodoxy as one will find in contemporary philosophy’.² In spite of its popularity, however, there remains little if any consensus on what the doctrine of ‘naturalism’ amounts to – indeed, there is not even consensus on whether it should be regarded as a doctrine at all. Naturalism is usually summed up in the idea that philosophy should be ‘informed’ by the relevant science, but this gloss prompts more questions than it answers. What is it for a philosophical claim to be ‘informed’ in a meaningful and non-tokenistic way? What should our policy in philosophy be when it seems there is no relevant science for us to defer to? What, indeed, do we mean by ‘science’ in the first place? Without answers to these questions there is the worry that naturalism becomes ‘equivocal dogma’³ that can be bent to serve any ideological end whatsoever. As such, a key question for us will be the extent to which a commitment to naturalism exercises a meaningful constraint.

Although – as the above quotes suggest – naturalistic commitments appear all across the spectrum of philosophy, our primary focus will be on naturalism in metaphysics. What is ‘naturalism’ construed as an ontological thesis, and why is a naturalistic approach to metaphysics thought to be methodologically superior to its a priori counterpart (and what precisely is it that divides these approaches)? Each of these questions requires us to face the *problem of theory-change* that vexed philosophers of science for decades. In that context, the worry was over whether our best scientific theories may be regarded as making progress at the theoretical as well as empirical level; here we will consider the implications for the idea that a philosophy based on those theories may be regarded as making progress too.

¹Rouse 2008, Review of *How successful is naturalism?*, ed. George Gasser, NDPR.

²Hall 2010 (David Lewis’ Metaphysics, *SEP* supplement; see also Crane and Mellor 1990.

³Williamson 2013

Syllabus.

- **September 26th. Welcome and Overview.**
 - Don Howard, ‘The trouble with metaphysics’, unpublished manuscript.
- **October 3rd. Demarcation I**
 - Timothy Williamson (2013), ‘What is naturalism?’.
 - Alexnader Rosenberg (2013), ‘Why I am a naturalist’.
 - Larry Laudan (1983), ‘The Demise of the Demarcation Problem’.
- **Oct 10th. Theory Change.**
 - Thomas Kuhn (1962), ‘Progress Through Revolutions’
 - Larry Laudan (1983), ‘A Confutation of Convergent Realism’.
 - Optional: Tim Lyons (2002) ‘Scientific Realism and the Pessimistic Meta-Modus Tollens’.
- **Oct 17th. Ontological Naturalism**
 - Bas van Fraassen 2002, *The Empirical Stance*, Chapters 1 and 2. (Focus on the very last sections).
 - Carl Hempel (1966), *Philosophy of Natural Science* (excerpt).
 - Optional: Alyssa Ney (2008), ‘Physicalism as an Attitude’.
- **Oct 24th. Epistemic Naturalism**
 - Larry Laudan (1987), ‘Progress or Rationality? The Prospects for Normative Naturalism’.
 - Excerpts from Laudan, *Science and Values* and *Science and Hypothesis*.
- **Oct 31st. Naturalistic Metaphysics**
 - Dudley Shapere (1990), ‘The origin and nature of metaphysics’.
 - Anjan Chakravartty (2013), ‘On the Prospects of a Naturalized Metaphysics’.
- **Nov 7th. Humean Metaphysics**
 - Tim Maudlin (2008), ‘Why be Humean?’.
 - Fraser MacBride (1999), ‘Could Armstrong have been a Universal?’ (sections)
- **Nov 14th. Theoretical Virtues**
 - Sam Cowling (2013), ‘Ideological Parsimony’.
 - Juha Saatsi (2015), ‘Explanation and Explanationism in Science and Metaphysics’.

- **Nov 21st. Criticisms of Metaphysics**
 - Uriah Kriegel (2013), ‘The Epistemological Challenge of Revisionary Metaphysics’.
 - Kerry McKenzie (2020), ‘A curse on both houses: a priori vs naturalistic metaphysics and the problem of progress’.
 - Agnes Callard (2018), ‘How Philosophy Makes Progress’.
- **Nov 28th. No class: Thanksgiving**
- **Dec 5th. Short presentations.**

Assessment.

- **Mid-course mini-essay.** A five or six-page essay (double-spaced) will be due in class in Week 7 (Nov 7th). This text should describe why one of the questions raised by the readings or discussed is (a) important and (b) *difficult to answer*. This assignment will be marked Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory.
- **Final Essay** of approx. 4-5000 words. Your final essay will be due on the Tuesday of exams week (Dec 10th), on a topic connected to the course. (I will propose some essay questions but you are welcome to develop your own.) **By November 28th at the latest**, you will have identified your essay question or approached me to help you decide on one. You are welcome to consider the topic of naturalism from within your own subfield (ethical naturalism, naturalism in mathematics etc). But you **must** display some engagement with and understanding of some of the texts and concepts explicitly covered in the course.
- **10-minute elevator presentation** on your final paper: pass/fail.
- **Weekly online forum:** Each week, by 8pm Wednesday evening at the latest, you should post a paragraph raising a question you think it would be interesting or helpful to discuss in class. The forum can also be used to simply raise issues, ask questions or discuss the reading: but each week at least one question should be posted to the class.

Academic Integrity.

UCSD is committed to academic integrity. According to their *Policy on Integrity of Scholarship*⁴,

"Integrity of scholarship is essential for an academic community. The University expects that both faculty and students will honor this principle and in so doing protect the validity of University intellectual work. For students, this means that all academic work will be done by the individual to whom it is assigned, without unauthorized aid of any kind.

⁴Go to <https://students.ucsd.edu/academics/academic-integrity/policy.html>

If you are at all unsure of what acting with integrity demands of you in this context, I'll be happy to discuss it with you.