

Two Notions of Naturalism

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- 1 Two ways of taking science seriously in philosophy
- 2 Tackling the placement problems
- 3 The role of semantic ladders
- 4 Why subject naturalism comes first
- 5 Should object naturalism be validated? Three reasons for pessimism
- 6 A return to the material conception?
- 7 A natural plurality of topics of talk

Object naturalism

- The world is the world-as-studied-by-science
- Whatever exists, exists “in the natural realm”.

Subject naturalism

- We humans are natural creatures
- Human thought and talk is “part of the natural order”.

What is the relationship between these two kinds of naturalism? Is the latter merely a sub-species of the former?

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- **No** (in my view).
- Subject naturalism turns out to be importantly “prior” to object naturalism.
- This priority turns on the fact that object naturalism **presupposes** a particular view of human linguistic activity – roughly, a “representational” or “referential” view.
- As a view about human language, this presupposition is properly assessed from a **subject naturalist** standpoint.

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The role of semantic ladders

Why subject naturalism comes first

Should object naturalism be validated?

A return to the material conception?

A natural plurality of topics of talk

Two kinds of naturalism

The Priority Thesis

The Invalidation Thesis

The Priority Thesis:

Naturalistic philosophy needs to *begin* with subject naturalism. Object naturalism depends on “validation” from a subject naturalist perspective.

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Validation

- “Validation” means having the representational presuppositions of object naturalism approved, by a good theory of human linguistic behaviour.
- I think that there are good reasons for thinking that object naturalism fails this validation test. I want to defend the following claim ...

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Hard problems

- What makes object naturalism challenging is that there are several important topics whose subject matter seems difficult to “place” in the natural world: mentality, meaning, modality, value, abstract objects, etc.
- I’ll call these issues “placement problems”.
- We need to distinguish two conceptions of the source of placement problems ...

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The material conception

- Placement problems are primarily problems about the nature of **objects** or **entities** of some kind: What is value? What is meaning? What is causation? ...

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My strategy

- **Assume** the **linguistic conception** for now, and argue for the Priority Thesis and the Invalidity Thesis.
- Then ask whether this conclusion can be avoided by adopting the **material conception**.

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The Representationalist Assumption

- Assuming the linguistic conception, placement problems are initially problems about human linguistic behaviour.
- **Question:** What turns such a concern into a concern with the nature of (apparently non-linguistic) entities, such as causation, values, numbers, etc.?
- **Answer:** The "Representationalist Assumption", viz., that the terms "stand for" or "represent" something.

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Semantic descent

- The shift in focus is from a concern with the **term** "X" (or **concept** X), to a concern with its assumed **object**, X.
- The move is thus a **semantic descent**: a semantic relation (e.g., reference, or truth) provides the "ladder" that leads us from an issue about **language** to an issue about **non-linguistic reality**.
- But this is a **genuine logical descent**, not a mere reversal of Quine's deflationary semantic ascent.

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Quine on semantic ascent

- Quine's semantic ascent never really leaves the ground. As Quine puts it: "By calling the sentence ['Snow is white'] true, we call snow white. The truth predicate is a device of disquotation."
- For Quine, talking about the referent of the **term** "X", or the truth of the **sentence** "X is F", is just another way of talking about the **object**, X.
- So if our original question was really about language, and we "rephrase" the issue in these deflationary semantic terms, we've simply **changed the subject**. We haven't traversed a semantic "ladder", but simply taken up a different issue – we've just abandoned the **linguistic issue**, and taken up the **material issue** instead.

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From words to objects

- In other words, if we combine
 - 1 the linguistic conception of the origin of placement problems, with
 - 2 a deflationary view of truth and reference,then object naturalism commits a fallacy of equivocation – actually a mention–use confusion – in moving from a linguistic issue to an objectual or material issue.
- Given a linguistic conception of placement issues, it takes a properly mediated “shift of theoretical focus” to get us to an issue about the nature of non-linguistic objects.

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Blackburn on 'Ramsey's Ladder'

- Blackburn calls the step from "P" to "'P' is true" *Ramsey's Ladder*. He notes that it is "horizontal" – it doesn't take us to a new theoretical level.
- He makes fun of philosophers who "take advantage of the horizontal nature of Ramsey's ladder to climb it, and then announce a better view from the top."
- My point is the same, only in reverse: if we really start at the linguistic level, a horizontal ladder won't take us down to the material level.

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Why subject naturalism comes first

- Assuming a linguistic conception of placement issues, **object naturalism** thus rests on a substantial theoretical assumption about language: roughly, the assumption that substantial “word–world” semantic relations are a part of the best scientific account of our use of the relevant terms.
- This assumption lies in the domain of **subject naturalism** – *and is non-compulsory*. (More on this in a moment).
- This gives us ...

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Should object naturalism be validated?

Three reasons for pessimism:

- 1 Deflationism
- 2 Stich's puzzle
- 3 The threat of incoherence.

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- 2 Boghossian argues that deflationism is incoherent, because (he says) a deflationist must claim, e.g., that “reference” doesn’t refer. But this overlooks the distinction between **denying** that “reference” refers (which a deflationist cannot do); and saying **nothing theoretical** about whether “reference” refers (which a deflationist can, indeed must, do).

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- Stich argues that even a **non-deflationary** scientific account of semantic relations such as reference is unlikely to be determinate enough to do the work that object naturalism requires.
- Questions such as:
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- In general, object naturalism requires that we acknowledge the empirical possibility that a given term “X” **fails to refer**; but as Boghossian notes, we can't acknowledge this possibility for the term “reference” itself.
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1. The cat is out of the bag

- Linguistically-based approaches to placement problems are already on the table.
- Even if we accept (with Stich?) that “realist” versions of such views are confused about the nature of the problem, there are also “irrealist” views, such as non-cognitivism, which **presuppose** a linguistic starting point.

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- Once
 - ① the linguistic conception of the problem is in play, and
 - ② we recognise that the representationalist assumption is non-compulsorythen we have the prospect of a (subject) naturalistic account of the relevant aspects of human linguistic behaviour, for which the material question (“What are Xs?”) **simply doesn't arise.**
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2. The semantic toolkit of modern metaphysics

- Semantic notions appear to play a crucial role in the methodology of contemporary metaphysics.
- However, it is often not easy to tell whether these uses are “merely Quinean” – i.e., compatible with a deflationary view of reference and truth.
- This is a big topic, but let's explore one reason for thinking that object naturalists can't avoid these semantic tools.

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Lewis's program for physicalism

- In one influential conception (“the Canberra Plan”) analytic metaphysics generalises Lewis’s approach to theoretical identification in science.
- In theoretical definition *à la* Lewis, objects of interest are identified as **occupiers of causal roles**.
- If a theoretical term “X” is defined in this causal way, we know how to answer the question “What is X?” – we experiment in the world, until we discover just **what it is** that does the causal job our theory assigns to X.

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Beyond causation?

- Assume that Lewis's program works in causal cases.
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Three options:

- 1 Metaphysics doesn't extend beyond the causal realm – where causation stops, irrealism (noncognitivism, eliminativism, formalism, etc.) begins. (Problem: What about causation itself? But leave this option aside for present purposes.)
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- In this case, the procedure for answering the question “What is X?” is analogous to the one described above, except that the aim of the investigation – conceptual, now, rather than experimental – is to discover to what the term “X” **refers** (or what **makes true** the claim that X is F).
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- We say, “X is what makes this Ramsey-sentence true”, but this is a convenient way of saying “X is the thing such that ...”, and then going on to *use* the Ramsey-sentence.
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- Lewis's argument relies on the premise that all causation is physical causation – “the explanatory adequacy of physics”, as Lewis puts it.
- Without such a premise, there is nothing to take us from the claim that a mental state M has a particular causal role to the conclusion that M is a physical state.
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- 1 If they invoke **substantial semantic relations**, there's some prospect of a Lewis-style argument for naturalism (based on the claim that all truths have natural truthmakers). But this implies a **linguistic** conception of starting point, and faces the problems identified earlier.
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Conclusions

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