Statement of Research

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My central topic of research is the epistemology and methodology of metaphysics, particularly the relationship between metaphysics and science. My research on that topic asks: *What relationship should metaphysics stand in to current science? Must good metaphysics be responsive to current science, and if so, how?* In response to those questions, I develop and defend a program for the naturalization of metaphysics. Those interests have also lead me to pursue work on metaontology, scientific realism, and Quine.

Naturalizing Metaphysics

In their (2007) book *Every Thing Must Go*, James Ladyman and Don Ross famously railed against what they call ‘neo-scholastic metaphysics’. Their polemic has inspired much renewed interest in the epistemic and methodological credentials of the discipline of metaphysics, as well as in the prospect of reform. While I am sympathetic to their self-described scientism, I argue that Ladyman and Ross fail to show that science — in particular, physics — should be assigned ‘epistemic supremacy’. Further, their program of naturalization fails to sufficiently reflect the complex and pluralistic state of the current sciences. So there is much work to be done to articulate and motivate a sophisticated program for the naturalization of metaphysics. My main research contributes to that work.

In my view, current metaphysical practice falls into one of two camps: *free range* or *scientifically responsible*. *Free range* metaphysics is constrained only by logical, aesthetic, and psychological demands, such as demands for consistency, simplicity, intuitive plausibility, and explanatory power. In my view, free range metaphysics cannot claim to produce justified theories of reality, because the constraints on its content are too weak and fail to secure epistemic warrant. By contrast, *scientifically responsible* metaphysics is conscientiously engaged with the theories and practices of the current sciences. I claim that scientifically responsible metaphysics is better constrained and supported than free range metaphysics, and therefore can better claim to produce justified metaphysical theories.

I have produced three papers directly on this topic. The first levels my criticisms of free range metaphysics, considers some of its collateral benefits, and makes a normative conclusion for the discipline of metaphysics. The second articulates and defends an epistemology for naturalized modal metaphysics that takes current science as an evidence-base for the justification of modal claims and as a model of good modal reasoning. My account of naturalized modal metaphysics does not rely on dubious modal intuitions, allows for greater resolution of disagreement relative to rationalist accounts, and can better account for modal error. The third paper examines the naturalistic credentials of the grounding literature. It collects examples of work in the grounding literature that I take to be scientifically responsible (Audi 2012; Schaffer 2003, 2010, 2015) and synthesizes a number of recommendations for how theorists of grounding can fruitfully engage with science.
In future research on this topic, I plan to attend in greater detail to the place of scientific practice in a naturalized metaphysics. I’d like to flesh out and give specific examples of modes of metaphysical engagement with scientific practice, such as such as attending to the categories and conceptual frameworks that are used fruitfully in science (see for instance Ereshefsky 1991, 1994, 2001). I also plan to do some first-order metaphysics on modality and grounding to demonstrate what my conception of scientifically responsible metaphysics looks like concretely. Furthermore, while I make my program of naturalization sensitive to the possibility of scientific pluralism, I intend to investigate more fully what the truth of scientific pluralism would mean for naturalized metaphysics. In particular, I’d like to consider whether scientific pluralism implies some kind of metaphysical pluralism, and what its features would be.

I also plan to produce a book on the topic that will 1) situate my program for naturalizing metaphysics in relation to other such programs, 2) outline a number of desiderata for programs of naturalization, 3) show how my program satisfies the desiderata more fully than others, 4) lay out and defend my negative and positive claims, 5) deal with metaphysical topics that prima facie resist naturalization, and 6) perform some first-order, scientifically responsible metaphysics.

**Metaontology**

In relation to my interest in the epistemology and methodology of metaphysics, some of my research investigates the theoretical legitimacy of ontological views that are permissive in the sense that they make the conditions for existence so weak that many or most putative things exist (see Ecklund 2006, 2009; Lewis 1986; Schaffer 2009; Williamson 2002). Prima facie, these permissive views violate a number of theory-governing norms, including norms favoring simplicity, empiricism, nominalism, and logical consistency. However, I argue that none of those apparent norm violations are egregious. Over the course of this research, I was struck by certain biologically motivated criticisms of Ockham’s Razor (Wimsatt 1994) and other epistemic norms (Ereshefsky and Reydon 2015). In future research, I will examine the tenability of Ockham’s Razor and other theory-governing norms in certain scientific domains, and consider what the results mean for scientifically responsible metaphysics.

**Scientific Realism**

In addition to my research on the relation between science and metaphysics, some of my research concerns science itself — scientific realism, in particular. If the epistemic credentials of naturalized metaphysics hang on the epistemic credentials of science, we need to know what those latter credentials are. In particular, if scientific realism turns out to be false or untenable, then it will be harder to motivate naturalization. On the subject of scientific realism, I have been gripped by recent work on the base-rate fallacy — an error in probabilistic reasoning that threatens to fatally undermine the no miracles argument and the pessimistic meta-induction. In essence, the error is to ignore the prior probability (probability not conditional on any particular evidence) of the relevant hypothesis. The base-rate fallacy is disastrous to probabilistic reasoning. My paper on this subject...
rejects several realist defences of the no miracles argument (Psillos 2006; Worrall 2007, 2011, unpublished) against accusations that it commits the base-rate fallacy (Howson 2000, Lipton 2004, and Magnus and Callender 2004). The no miracles argument does, I argue, commit the base-rate fallacy and should be abandoned. In future research, I plan to consider the special motivations for naturalization that might emerge from an anti-realist point of view.

Some advocates of naturalized metaphysics (French and Ladyman 2003; French 2014; Ladyman 1998; Ladyman and Ross 2007) argue that physics motivates a particular variety of realism: Ontic Structural Realism (OSR), according to which science acquaints us with the ontologically fundamental underlying structure of the world. Since science makes OSR a live theoretical option, I am interested in OSR’s tenability. One of my papers considers whether versions of OSR that posit objectless ontologies can accommodate causation. Some critics (Busch 2003, Chakravartty 2003, Psillos 2009) argue that objectless structures don’t have the sorts of properties (first-order properties) required to enable causal relations. I argue that taking structures to be concrete and understanding objects, properties, and events in structural terms allows us to square causation with OSR. The upshot is that advocates of OSR can comfortably appeal to causal explanations. I plan to continue my work on OSR. In particular, I would like to grapple with a thorny challenge facing the full articulation of OSR: what to make of relations.

Quine

Lastly, in relation to my work on naturalizing metaphysics, I have an interest in Quine’s system of thought, particularly his epistemology — its naturalism and holism — and his resultant philosophy of logic. One of my papers (Bryant forthcoming) grapples with the tension in Quine’s work regarding the rational revisability of logic. On the one hand, Quine’s commitment to the universal revisability of the web of belief clearly commits him to the rational revisability of logic. On the other hand, the translation argument and the ‘change of logic, change of subject’ argument appear to rule out successful discussion of alternate logical principles — and it’s not clear how revision can proceed if rival logics aren’t communicable (see also Priest 2006, 2014; Resnik 2004). My paper articulates a Neo-Quinean view that preserves and brings into alignment the universal revisability thesis, translation argument, and ‘change of logic, change of subject’ argument. On that view, everything is reversible in some manner or other — it’s just that the logical principles that laypersons find (actually or potentially) obvious and tacitly use to govern their everyday inferences can’t be revised quickly and all at once. Since, in Quine’s view, what most people find obvious resists change, changes to laymen’s logic must be gradual.

In my exploration of Quine’s broader system of thought, I have been compelled by his holism, on the one hand, but unwilling to accept the radical epistemological and methodological naturalism it implies, on the other. That is, while I advocate for the naturalization of metaphysics, I don’t reject a priori knowledge and justification out of hand, nor do I wish to advocate for the naturalization of all forms of inquiry. In future work, I wish to develop a strategy to avoid the slippery slope from
epistemic holism to radical naturalism — a way of accepting holism about justification, while adopting moderate, domain-specific forms of naturalism.

Works Cited


