1. Introduction

It can hardly be doubted that in the last few decades a vast naturalistic turn has taken place in the philosophical world, especially in the analytic community. In this light, David Papineau (1993, p. 1) wrote that today “nearly everybody wants to be a ‘naturalist’”. Similarly, but in a much less sympathetic tone, Hilary Putnam (2004, p. 59) asserted

Today ... philosophers – perhaps even a majority of all the philosophers writing about issues in metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of language – announce in one or another conspicuous place in their essay and books that they are “naturalists” or that the view or account being defended is a “naturalist” one... It is supposed to be clear that any view that is not “naturalist”… is anathema, and could not possibly be correct.

At least three main questions can be raised with regard to these statements. First, one can ask whether, from a sociological point of view, it is true that the fortune of naturalism is as high today as held by Papineau and Putnam. In the following, some evidence that this is the case will be produced.

Second, one could wonder which of the numerous versions of naturalism have become so common today. I will argue that the most common views belong to the family of “scientific naturalism” (which, sometimes, is more tendentiously called “scientistic naturalism”); however, as we will see, in recent years some more liberal forms of naturalism have been rapidly growing. With regard to this, I will argue that liberal naturalism incorporates some of the most valuable insights of the masters of pragmatism, whereas scientific naturalism tends to replicate the scientistic spirit of nineteenth-century positivism.

Finally, a normative question can be raised in order to evaluate the respective merits and faults of these forms of naturalism. My thesis will be that scientific naturalism is deeply unsatisfactory, even according to its own standards, while some more liberal forms of naturalism recommend themselves, since they can preserve what is appealing in naturalism in general without compromising themselves with scientism.

2. Scientism, anti-naturalism and pragmatism

Many different versions of naturalism (such as Pre-Socratic, Aristotelian, Renaissance, Spinozistic, Scottish, Positivist, and Pragmatist) have been developed over the history of philosophy. Today, however, one version is clearly dominant: the so-called “scientific naturalism”. This is a very innovative and sophisticated view, but, despite such originality and sophistication, the spirit of scientific naturalism is clearly reminiscent of nineteenth-century positivism.¹ This is because these views share, in fact, a clearly scientistic spirit.

This is not an uncontroversial remark, though, since the term “scientism” has a clearly negative connotation. Recently, for example, scientism was defined as,

An exaggerated and often distorted conception of what science can be expected to do or explain for us. One aspect of scientism is the idea that any question can be answered by science. This, in turn, is very often combined with a quite narrow conception of what it is for an answer, or a method of investigation, to be scientific (Dupré 2002, pp. 1-2).

Given such a bad connotation of the term “scientism”, the proposal of applying it to contemporary scientific naturalism has to be carefully justified. The first thing to notice with regard to this is that, when it was introduced in the intellectual debate – in English first (according to the *Merriam Webster* it first appeared in 1877) and in French afterwards – the word “scientism” did have a neutral connotation. It labeled a doctrine defined by either of these two claims:

(i) “[Natural] science alone is capable of providing a true account of reality” (Stroll 1999, pp. 648-649).
(ii) “There are no limits to the validity and the extension of scientific knowledge” (Abbagnano 1971, p. 770).

According to the former claim, the natural sciences can access any knowable truth about reality (but not necessarily all the truths); according to the latter claim, science can offer, at least potentially, a complete account of reality. Already the most judicious among nineteenth-century positivists, however, recognized that the second claim was overly optimistic, since there are issues, and arguably the deepest ones, about which we will remain ignorant forever (think about the famous slogan, “Ignorabimus!” [“We will ignore forever”], by Du-Bois Reymond, or about Spencer’s “Unknowable”).

Thus, even in the positivist headquarters, it was soon recognized that science could not offer a complete account of reality. For this reason, the meaning of the term “scientism” was generally limited to the first of the two above-mentioned claims, the one according to which the natural sciences covered all our epistemic access to reality. In this perspective, all other alleged ways of knowing and understanding (such as intuition, philosophy, common sense, the social sciences, and the arts) had to be viewed as illegitimate, as parasitic on the sciences or, in the best case, as surrogates for the explanations of the natural sciences. To state it differently, since we are ignorant, we cannot help appealing to other alleged forms of knowledge, but, at least in principle, the natural sciences could replace, or eliminate, all of them. For this reason, it is fair to say that nineteenth-century positivism – by seeing the natural sciences as the only legitimate source of knowledge – was a form of naturalism steeped in scientism (understood as in the first definition given above).

I just said that, in the beginning, the term “scientism” was not perceived as negative. Soon, however, the anti-positivists, and especially the French spiritualists, began to use that term in a derogatory sense. Bergson (1934, p. 83), for example, wrote that scientism was blocking the way of metaphysics and that science had “to remain scientific” without becoming an “unaware metaphysics, which is presented to the ignorant under the mask of science”. For Bergson and the other spiritualists, metaphysics (that is, philosophy) and science had to be sharply separated. Metaphysics – different from the natural sciences – had nothing to say about the natural world. Therefore, besides being anti-scientistic, Bergson’s philosophy was also anti-naturalistic; and the same happened, and still happens with many other philosophies opposing the ideal of continuity between philosophy and science.

For this reason, at the turn of twentieth century, two armies marshaled at the extremities of the philosophical field. On one side, there were the positivists, who identified philosophical naturalism with scientism – since they conceived of the natural sciences as the only way to know reality (the most extreme among them also thought that the natural sciences could give us all the truths). On the other side, the spiritualists reacted to positivism by conjugating anti-scientism with anti-naturalism. Fortunately, the scientism of the positivists and the antinaturalism of the spiritualists were not the only conceptions on the philosophical market. In particular, pragmatism, although a minority view, developed an alternative to both of these conceptions. In defining his naturalism, for example, Dewey (1944, p. 2) made it clear how broad its scope was when he wrote, “a naturalist is one who has respect for the conclusions of natural science”. This implies a disbelief in supernaturalism, but also a non-scientistic attitude.

However, sometimes pragmatism is presented, especially by continental philosophers, as if it was just another version of scientism. This is a fair characterization — it is maintained — since both Peirce and Dewey explicitly stated that the methods of the natural sciences should be used in every area of inquiry. But before accusing pragmatism of being scientistic, one should consider what the pragmatists meant with the term “experimental method”. As convincingly argued by Hilary Putnam, the pragmatists did not mean that
the natural sciences exhaust, even potentially, the space of knowledge, but only that, in general, a fallibilistic and experimental method should always be followed when pursuing knowledge.\(^2\)

Still, some may reply that even so defined the pragmatist point of view is a scientistic one; not so much because of its appeal to fallibilism (which only meant that the goal of certainty, sought by the traditional epistemologists, was unreachable), but because of its idea that an experimental method is necessary to reach knowledge. However, the pragmatists used the term “experimental” in a very broad (and certainly not scientistic) sense.\(^3\) When Peirce, for example, said that also mathematical inquiries had to be experimental, he peculiarly intended that a mathematician had to evaluate the inner experience of considering imagined diagrams.\(^4\) As to the possibility of philosophical knowledge, the reference to the experimental method only meant that one should reject the traditional method of the unrevisable a priori analysis; this did not imply the illegitimacy of revisable conceptual analyses.\(^5\) According to the founders of pragmatism, then, besides the common need of being fallibilistic and non-aprioristic, philosophy should not adopt the methods of the natural sciences.\(^6\) In this view, philosophy could not be reduced to the natural sciences nor eliminated by them, not even potentially. Unfortunately, this is a lesson that, as we will see, only some contemporary naturalists (the more liberal ones) keep in mind.

3. The features of scientific naturalism

As we have seen, in its most common the term “scientism” refers to the belief that any knowable truth can be accessed by the natural sciences. This thesis still characterizes contemporary scientific naturalism (but not some of the more liberal forms of contemporary naturalism). Now, in order to prove this point, we have first to consider the general features of scientific naturalism.

The first thing to be noticed is that scientific naturalism is a global metaphilosophical view, since its scope is philosophy in its entirety. Notwithstanding this ambition, however, few of its many advocates have bothered to define it precisely. A (partial) exception has been W. V. Quine (1986, pp. 430-431), who in a eulogy for scientific naturalism (which he called simply “naturalism”) for example wrote,

I admit to naturalism and even glory in it. This means banishing the dream of a first philosophy and pursuing philosophy rather as a part of one’s system of the world, continuous with the rest of science.

This is a helpful quotation, since it clearly states two of the fundamental claims of scientific naturalism, which can be called the Antifoundational Thesis and the Continuity Thesis. These claims state, respectively, that there is no first philosophy and that philosophy should be continuous with science. Quine’s quotation, however, is interesting also because it significantly omits mentioning another, even more basic naturalistic claim according to which nothing exists beyond nature (this claim can be called the Constitutive Thesis). Plausibly, Quine considered this thesis too obvious even to mention it. Here, on the contrary, it is useful to state it explicitly for several reasons. First, many anti-naturalist philosophers would not consider that claim obvious at all; then, not all naturalists would interpret it in the same way; and, finally, it is the most basic claim of naturalism.\(^7\) Let us consider the three claims of scientific naturalism in turn, then, starting with the last one.

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\(^2\) This point has been repeatedly stressed by Putnam (for example, 2002, pp. 101-106).

\(^3\) Ibid.

\(^4\) Cf. Hookway (1985), ch. 6; see also pp. 51-58, for a clear explanation of why Peirce's philosophy, even if very respectful of science (particularly psychology), was not a form of scientism.

\(^5\) For a contemporary defence of this view, see Jackson (1998).

\(^6\) It is very interesting, in this respect, to consider the indelible role played in Peirce’s system by logic, ethics, and aesthetics (the so-called “normative sciences”, which clearly covered most of philosophy): see Hookway (1985), passim.

\(^7\) Notice that the Constitutive Thesis is independent from the other two claims of scientific naturalism, because one can deny the foundational role of philosophy and think that philosophy is continuous with science, but still maintain that
i. The Constitutive Thesis states that philosophy does not admit any supernatural entities, properties, events or explanations. Most naturalistic views, including all the most common ones nowadays (not just the scientific naturalist ones, but also the more liberal ones) accept this thesis. Its exact meaning, however, is controversial. As long as at it amounts to denying the philosophical legitimacy of appealing to things like ghosts, souls, immaterial minds, and prime movers unmoved, this thesis will appear obvious to most contemporary philosophers: this thesis simply means that there is no supernatural “gulf between nature and man”, as John Dewey (1927, p. 58) put it. Nevertheless, the constitutive thesis becomes controversial as soon as we consider more difficult cases, such as those of irreducible values, abstract entities, or non-supervenient mental states. Are such items natural or supernatural?

The answer to this question is, of course, very controversial, even if one remains within the naturalistic field. While a scientific naturalist would answer that items that cannot be reduced, even in principle, to the conceptual apparatus of the natural sciences are supernatural (and therefore should be discharged), a more liberal naturalist would tend to say that at least some of these items might be natural even if that reduction is not possible. The crucial point here is that the extension of the category of the supernatural depends on how one defines the complementary category of the natural; and this is exactly what is at stake in the debate between the advocates of the various versions of naturalism.

For example, Hartry Field, a very radical scientific naturalist, is very strict with regard to what should be considered natural: only that which, in principle, is reducible to physics, he says. Here is a quote by Field (1992, p. 271).

> When faced with a body of doctrine … that we are convinced can have no physical foundation, we tend to reject that body of doctrine.

From this point of view, the only ontological commitments we have are the ones that derive from physics. Only physics, and what can be reduced to it, is able to describe reality. In this spirit, Field states that mathematical entities are fictions, in the very same sense in which literary characters, such as Oliver Twist, are fictions. Less radical scientific naturalists are more open-minded, however, and would accept the body of doctrines, and the ontological commitments, of all the natural sciences as legitimate – may these bodies of doctrine be in principle reducible to physics or not. In addition, liberal naturalists are even more tolerant, since they may accept the legitimacy, and the ontological commitments, of other forms of inquiry, such the social sciences, common sense or the arts.

To summarize, all naturalists accept the Constitutive Thesis. They disagree, though, about its content – that is, on how permissive one should be in defining “the natural” (and “the supernatural”).

ii. The second premise of scientific naturalism is the Antifoundationalist Thesis. With regard to it, the (direct and indirect) debts of contemporary naturalism to the masters of pragmatists – especially Peirce – are so obvious that there is no need to insist on it. As Quine (who explicitly recognized his pragmatist inspiration in this respect) puts it in the above-mentioned statement, naturalists have to banish “the dream of a first philosophy” (1986, pp. 430-431), that is, they have to abandon “the goal of a first Philosophy prior to the natural science” (1981, p. 67). There is not such a thing as a foundational philosophy, then. Philosophy cannot be asked any longer to determine the legitimacy of the sciences – as Descartes and Kant had claimed – by assuming a foundational role for them. Thus stated, the Antifoundationalist Thesis is defended by all contemporary naturalists. However, as we will see below, what was once philosophy’s role as a foundational discipline often seems to be substituted with the natural sciences by scientific naturalists (to be distinguished from liberal naturalists), and this is a very controversial move.

there exist some supernatural entities or properties (this could be done, for example, by broadening the scope of knowledge, as Medieval philosophers use to do).

8 One exception to this rule is R.M. Adams, who defends a view called “theological ethical naturalism” (but in this context the term “naturalism” is used in the peculiar way suggested by G.E. Moore).

iii. Let’s consider now the last and most controversial premise of scientific naturalism – the *Continuity Thesis* – which most clearly distinguishes this view from the more liberal forms of contemporary naturalism. For the scientific naturalists, philosophy as such is a part of science. As Quine puts it in the above-mentioned quotation, scientific philosophers pursue “philosophy rather as a part of one’s system of the world, continuous with the rest of science”\textsuperscript{10} – where, again, the word “science” means merely “natural science”, and possibly only physics.

Quine (1969, p. 26) writes, “Knowledge, mind, and meaning are part of the same world that they have to do with, and that they are to be studied in the same empirical spirit that animates natural science”. Assuming this thesis, one can easily infer that philosophy (as long as it covers the study of knowledge, mind and meaning) *has to* merge with the sciences. This is a consequence that Quine himself seemed happy to draw. Thus, about epistemology, for example, in Quine (1969, p. 82) one can read that “it simply falls into place as a chapter of psychology. It studies a natural phenomenon, viz., a physical human subject”. Once naturalized, epistemology is just psychology (which potentially is neurophysiology, which potentially is physics). Of course a traditional epistemologist could still ask the question to the scientific naturalist, “How can you account for the normative character of epistemology, for its being connected with the notion of “good” and “bad” justifications?” Quine (1998\textsuperscript{2}, p. 664) had an answer to this question, and a bold one indeed, “Normative epistemology is a branch of engineering”. This, of course, means that, in fact, epistemology is not normative at all!

Daniel Dennett’s naturalistic perspective is more moderate, but it does not leave a much bigger space for philosophy anyway. Dennett (2003, p. 14) defines naturalism as “the idea that philosophical investigations are not superior to, or prior to, investigations in the natural sciences”, and that they have to act “in partnership with those truth-seeking enterprises”. This partnership, however, seems one-sided, since philosophers “cannot claim to be doing their professional duty unless they pay careful attention to the thinking of psychologists…, economists…, biologists” (pp. 306-307), whereas the reverse does not seem required. Indeed, in Dennett’s perspective, the goal of philosophy is conceptually subordinated to the results of scientific investigation, since philosophy has “to clarify and unify the often warring perspectives [of the sciences] into a single vision of the universe” (p. 15). Considering this opinion, one could perhaps conclude that systematic philosophy is back – but only in the restrictive sense that philosophers are supposed to systematize the scattered scientific views. In this perspective, philosophy does not seem to be credited with any peculiar method, besides the generic capacity of harmonizing the results of science. This is not surprising, however, since many scientific naturalists – most vigorously, Philip Kitcher (1992) – explicitly deny the legitimacy of the most traditional methodological tool of philosophy, conceptual analysis, because of its alleged dependence on the possibility of making analytic judgments (a possibility that was denied by Quine half a century ago). As said earlier, however, even granting Quine’s denial of analytic judgments, the possibility of *revisable conceptual analyses* is still worth considering. If making such analyses were possible, philosophy would still be methodologically autonomous from science.

4. The scientistic character of scientific naturalism

As said earlier, scientific naturalism (like other contemporary forms of naturalism) maintains that philosophy has no foundational role to play. That does not mean, however, that scientific naturalism holds that no discipline can play the foundational role that used to be attributed to philosophy. In fact, this role is generally attributed to the natural sciences, and often to physics alone. *Philosophia Prima* has thus become *Scientia Prima*. As Quine (1981, p. 21) wrote, “It is within science itself, and not in some prior philosophy, that reality is to be identified and described”. Also, as Wilfrid Sellars (1963, p. 173) brilliantly put it, paraphrasing the famous Protagorean motto, “in the dimension of describing and explaining the world, science is the measure of all things, of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not.” This is a clear

\textsuperscript{10} My italics.
expression of scientism (as defined above) – which, by the way, in Quine’s case is at odds with his original holism, since from this point of view no other discipline would be able to limit the natural sciences. They alone would delimit the space of knowledge and, with their ontological commitments, the space of reality.

Unsurprisingly, the scientistic thesis of the continuity between philosophy and the natural sciences, which characterizes scientific naturalism, has produced a remarkable number of naturalization projects, and these concern virtually every philosophically relevant concept. Roughly speaking, naturalizing a concept implies that one can either reduce it to naturalistically kosher concepts or prove that the concept in question can be eliminated altogether. As we have seen, Quine, followed by Goldman and many others, attempted the naturalization of the epistemological concepts of justification and knowledge.11 Fodor (1987, 1990), Millikan (1984), Dretske (1981) and legions of other evolutionary theorists, cognitive scientists and information theorists endeavor to naturalize intentionality, while Lycan (1987), Dennett (1992), and many others try with consciousness. Moral concepts have been naturalistically stripped by Railton, Harman, Lewis, Boyd, Gibbard, and Blackburn.12 Numbers and other mathematical concepts underwent naturalistic treatments by Field (1980) and Maddy (1990). Also free will and moral responsibility have been naturalistically attacked by Dennett (2003), Wegner (2002), and many others. Even the naturalization of aesthetic and religious concepts is on the agenda of a number of contemporary philosophers.13 Nor should one fail to notice the hyper-ambitious attempts at showing that, from an ontological point of view, everything can be reduced to the microphysical level (on the web one can even find a Credo of the so-called “Canberra Plan”, which explicitly states, “We look for inter-theoretic reductions, and the supervenience of all on the microphysical”).14 One could wonder what would remain for philosophy if these naturalization projects worked. It would seem to be not much, really, besides, perhaps, Patricia Churchland’s Neurophilosophy (1986).

So many attempts at naturalizing philosophical concepts clearly suggest that Putnam and Papineau are correct in stating that scientific naturalism is now the orthodox view – at least in the Anglo-American world. Scientism is back.

5. Some criticisms of scientific naturalism.

Scientific naturalism is a very common view today. However, it is also highly controversial. There are indeed many reasons for suspecting that the current enthusiasm for scientific naturalism is misplaced. Here I can only mention few of them, without entering in the details.15 First, as John Dupré and others have convincingly argued, scientific naturalists unduly idealize contemporary science, when they describe it as ontologically and methodologically unitary. As Dupré shows, if one looks at the contemporary natural sciences as they really are developed, one finds out that the monistic ideas of the “Unity of Science” and the “Completeness of Physics” (which are very common among scientific naturalists nowadays) are mere philosophical myths, and actually supernatural myths – since there is no empirical evidence at all that these kinds of Unity and Completeness are present in the natural world! Therefore, paradoxically, scientific naturalism contradicts its own Constitutive Thesis, according to which no reference to the supernatural is acceptable.

Another point worth discussing is the “puritanical attitude” of scientific naturalism (as Stephen Stich’s calls it) with regard to many of the fundamental concepts – not just of philosophy, but of life in general. That is, with their naturalization projects, naturalist philosophers aim at reducing or eliminating talk concerning intentionality, normativity, consciousness, freedom, and justification. From their point of view, this is understandable, since scientific naturalists have to think that all these concepts are “queer”, to use John

15 De Caro - Macarthur (eds.) (1994).
Mackie’s famous wording, and because of their queerness, they should be replaced by naturalistically kosher concepts or eliminated altogether. This attitude makes scientific naturalists very optimistic about the potentiality of these reductions or eliminations, and, as we have seen, they have proposed a lot of them. Too bad then, as Putnam (2004, p. 62) has ironically written, “none of these ontological reduction gets believed by anyone except the proponent of the account and one or two of his friends and/or students.” Moreover, in his splendid essay “The Charm of Naturalism”, Barry Stroud (1996) has offered an excellent reason to think that these failures are not contingent. He convincingly argued that attempts to eliminate or reduce talk about values, colors, and meaning do inexorably fail, since these attempts require that – prior to any reduction or elimination – one makes sense of the content of our beliefs about values, colors and meaning. This is something that cannot be done with the very meager conceptual resources of scientific naturalism.

That most of the attempted reductions or eliminations of the “queer” concepts by the scientific naturalists do not, and cannot, really work is a crucial point that has been noticed even by the most consistent, and boldest, of the scientific naturalists themselves. In the purest spirit of scientific naturalism, for example, Colin McGinn (2002, p. 207) wrote,

> Nature is a system of derived entities, the basic going to construct the less basic; and understanding nature is figuring out how the derivation goes... Find the atoms and laws of combination and evolution, and then derive the myriad of complex objects you find in nature.

Predictably, this bold view is not without philosophical consequences. In fact, as McGinn (2002, p. 209) starts to think about the “queer concepts”, concepts such as consciousness, the self, free will, meaning and knowledge, he recognizes that

> There are yawning gaps between these phenomena and the more basic phenomena they proceed from, so that we cannot apply the [scientific] format to bring sense to what we observe. The essence of a philosophical problem is the unexplained leap.

McGinn’s (2002, 210) honest, but striking conclusion is that consciousness, the self, free will, meaning and knowledge are and will always remain “mysteries”. According to him, this proves that philosophy, which by definition has the ambition to study such concepts, is “futile”.

This point is enlightening. McGinn recognizes that consciousness, the self, free will, meaning and knowledge cannot be explained by the natural sciences, and this implies that they cannot be reduced to scientifically kosher concepts. They cannot be eliminated either however, since they, of course, are too fundamental for our manifest image of the world (to use Sellars’s phrase) or for our forms of life (to use Wittgenstein’s). Thus, they become unsolvable “mysteries”!

In my view, McGinn is right in honestly drawing the consequences of scientific naturalism; however, he also makes two mistakes. First, he says that, once scientific naturalism is accepted as the correct philosophical view, consciousness, free will and so on are seen as “mysteries” that we will never be able to solve. This, however, over indulges scientific naturalism. Normally, when we talk of a “mystery”, we talk of something that is intrinsically difficult, perhaps impossible, to explain, but at least we can conceive some potential solutions, even if we cannot prove that they are correct. For example, the mystery of the origins of the Ebola virus would be explained if we found out that it was created as a bacteriological weapon; the mystery of Golbach’s conjecture would be solved by a proof based on mathematical induction; the mystery of whom Jack the Ripper was would be solved if we found a written confession by the Prince of Wales. However, as McGinn recognizes, once scientific naturalism is assumed, we do not have a clue how we would go about explaining consciousness, free will or meaning. From this point of view, a solution to these questions does not look conceivable at all, at least for us. Thus, assuming scientific naturalism, we have to conclude that these things, more than “mysteries”, are absurdities.

The second mistake by McGinn is more relevant. Once one realizes that scientific naturalism makes our dearest concepts (freedom, meaning, knowledge and so on) mysteries or absurdities, it becomes unclear how one should not take this as a reductio ad absurdum of scientific naturalism. A philosophical conception that cannot accept many of our most relevant concepts, but cannot reduce or eliminate them either, has to be
judged as radically misguided. However, if this is so, which of the premises of scientific naturalism should be given up?

6 The premises of scientific naturalism again

The first premise is, as we have seen, the refusal of the supernatural. This is a thesis that nowadays most philosophers would accept; its exact meaning, however, is controversial, since it depends on how one defines the concept of the “supernatural” (and the complementary concept of the “natural”). Be as it may, good reasons suggest that the scientific naturalists’ interpretation of these two concepts is too narrow.

This does not imply, however, that one has to swallow anti-naturalism. With regard to this, the lesson of the pragmatists helps us again, since they defended forms of naturalism distant from both scientism and anti-naturalism. The pragmatists believed, in fact, that philosophy should consider the lesson of the natural sciences without drowning in them. For example, as argued by Nathan Houser in the talk at the conference from which this book is derived, the pragmatists clearly recognized that mentality is a product of evolution (Peirce, in particular, insisted that in a sense human belief is continuous with animal expectation.). They, however, were very far from thinking that the sciences of nature could, in principle, account for all features of mentality.

Today, many contemporary scientific naturalists keep asserting that the concept of the “natural” has to be limited by the findings of the natural sciences. Some liberal naturalists, clearly influenced by the pragmatists, defend the opposite view that the “space of reasons” – to which the concepts of knowing and thinking belong – cannot be subsumed under scientific laws; that is, they cannot be subsumed under the space of the natural as defined by the natural sciences (the failure of all attempts to naturalize the concepts that belong to the space of reasons offers a strong confirmation of this thesis).16 At the same time, liberal naturalists – repeating a point that the greatest pragmatists unremittingly stressed – strongly deny that the space of reasons should be viewed as unnatural or supernatural because of its irreducibility to the space of laws. As McDowell (1994) argues, what we should think is that, as animals, we are part of nature, but in sharing a culture with other human beings (in participating in the space of reasons), we also acquire a “second nature”. And a second nature is still nature!

As to the second premise of scientific naturalism – the Antifoundationalist Thesis that denies the existence of a “First philosophy” – it is no news, even if it is acceptable, because it was forcefully advocated by Peirce and the other pragmatists. What is highly doubtful, however, is the implicit proviso that many scientific naturalists add to this thesis, which states that the natural sciences (and perhaps only physics) can replace philosophy in its foundational function. Bad consequences derive from this proviso, as seen above, and it cuts off too much of what is important to us.

As to the third premise of scientific naturalism, the Continuity Thesis, it seems even more erroneous than the others. I do not want to deny that there are cases in which the results and findings of science can, and should, “provide the impetus to philosophical reflection” or even that “they help to undermine one’s philosophical conclusions”.17 The compatibility of a philosophical view with the best scientific theories, when relevant, is a reasonable requirement for all liberal naturalists (Putnam, for example, advocates “a modest nonmetaphysical realism squarely in touch with the results of science”).18 This is why the Intelligent Design argument and the Cartesian solution of the mind-body problem are as unbearable to liberal naturalists as they are to scientific naturalists. However, this does not amount to saying that philosophy should not be autonomous in content, purpose and method from the natural sciences or that its unique goal should be that of systematizing the scattered results of the sciences. As to this, one should notice that scientific naturalism has a very narrow view of the forms that legitimate explanations could assume. We have seen this in the case of one of the most consistent of them, Colin McGinn, whose consistent application of the scientific format of

16 McDowell (2004).
explanation to philosophical questions renders them mysteries (or absurdities). In this respect, as usual, the pragmatists were much more open-minded than contemporary scientific naturalists. Peirce, for example, listed 64 different ways of knowing. From this perspective, understanding reality is not just figuring out “how the basic goes to construct the less basic” – as many scientific naturalists instead think.

Finally, another of the Pragmatists’ great merits can only be mentioned. I am referring to their insistence that values and facts are hardly detachable from each other. This is something that scientific naturalists, who seem to have a “horror of the normative”, strongly, if unreasonably, deny (remember Quine’s idea that epistemology is just a branch of engineering). As Peirce, Dewey, and the others taught us, one of philosophy’s main tasks is to investigate the role that normativity plays in the space of reasons. This is a lesson that a naturalism that aims at being purged of its ruinous scientistic components should not forget.

Bibliography


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19 This remark was made by Nathan Houser during the debate at the conference from which this book derives.
20 Ibid. p. 70.
22 I thank Nathan Houser for his useful comments on a previous version of this paper.


