

UNPUBLISHED WORKING PAPER

The Two Worlds of Science and Metaphysics

Omar Alsayad

January 2026

MA Philosophy of Religion and Ethics
University of Birmingham

Written during postgraduate study for the MA in Philosophy of Religion and Ethics at the University of Birmingham. Submitted as assessed coursework and marked by faculty tutors.

Awarded a merit.

In this paper, I aim to show that science should not, by virtue of its limited scope, make any claims or inferences pertaining to the existence of a supernatural. By extension, this calls for science's use to be contained in the domain of its disciplinary competence and avoid being used outside the boundaries that it set for itself.

What I am also suggesting in this paper is certainly relevant to evolution being used as an argument for atheistic claims. But I shall not try to show if evolution, specifically, could be used as a tool for the atheistic endeavor or not. My stance in this paper could be considered as defensive to the idea that science must not make claims about the metaphysical. But also, I shall not completely assume a defensive stance, the arguments I set forth could also be thought of as critiques to positions such as the "continuity" objection by John Dewey that aim to unify natural studies (science) and metaphysics. In short, all I hope to demonstrate involves the irrational use of science in the metaphysical realm, it can be read as a defense of that claim or an attack on John Dewey's call for unification of science and metaphysics and whoever else shares his core position. I seek to establish that by presenting two arguments and, an evaluation or perspective without conclusion. (1) Understanding the scientific method and showing that it is unequipped to answer questions about the metaphysical. (2) Showing the logical flaw that one falls into when using science to make metaphysical claims and how doing so is mistakenly allocating them both to the same category; I aim to show here the category error that one commits when doing so. (3) Here, I aim to describe how using science for understanding the metaphysical and existential questions is what I call an "appeal to familiarity" – I will give an educated reasoning why science is sometimes used to answer questions it is unequipped for and show that the scientific enterprise is not the one at fault, but the wielders of science (such as Richard Dawkins, Lawrence Krauss and others, that share their views) in theological, philosophical or religious discussions. In short, I will focus on the reasons behind why that occurs without any inferences, probes or conclusions. In section (I), I will express argument (1), present methodological naturalism and argue for science's limited capacity and scope and illustrate that it does not follow to use science in metaphysical inquiries. In section (II), I will express argument (2) and hope to make clear the logical inconsistency featuring the category error and how using scientific knowledge to make sense of the metaphysical, answer existential questions or make inferences about theology renders any

claims through said method, void and null; given that such claims betray fundamental logical principles. In section (III), I will express evaluation (3), this critique could be more accurately described as genealogical, I aim to portray certain internal biases, unconscious assumptions, logical inconsistencies, and how we can interpret the insistence of science “wielders” outside of its scope. In section (IV), I will argue against the claim that science and metaphysics overlap; it may also be viewed as an extension of the argument discussed and presented in section (II).

Section (I) – The Scientific Method: Methodological Naturalism

There are many types of naturalism but as far as this section is concerned, only two types are relevant to the scope, and they are philosophical and methodological naturalism. Methodological naturalism is defined as: “The view that religious commitments have no relevance within science: natural science itself requires no specific attitude to religion, and can be practised just as well by adherents of religious faiths as by atheists or agnostics” Simply put, it is an epistemological approach that dictates the means of how knowledge is pursued. For information to qualify as knowledge from the methodological naturalist perspective, it would have to be acquired through natural, empirical and testable explanations without any appeal to a supernatural power. This precondition is featured in the scientific method. Science is the study of natural phenomena using explanations that are limited to natural processes only. Given this fringe pursuit of knowledge that science is concerned with, it cannot by virtue of its limitations make any inferences on the metaphysical.

Ontological (or philosophical) naturalism is a metaphysical position that claims an exclusive existence of natural things. It eliminates any explanations or justifications that feature a supernatural. Most atheists, philosophers and agnostics adopt this view; however, it is a different commitment from the scientific method.

One could be a theist and still be a methodological naturalist since it is a guideline to how one could interrogate reality; it only, for the sake of the inquiry, suspends belief in a supernatural to maintain the status of the inquiry empirical. However, one cannot be a theist if they adopt ontological

naturalism since that is a statement about excluding the supernatural completely – the stance comes with a truth claim about reality. The difference is that one is a temporary and procedural stance that is equipped during an investigation, and the other is a truth claim about reality.

Ontological naturalists require justifications for their positive claim that a supernatural does not exist. Usually, it is understood that the use of science to that effect has layers of problems that will be further discussed in this paper, but in this section, I submit that it is circular to conclude the ontological naturalist position using methodological naturalism. Using science for arguments of such purposes has the following structure:

P1 Science explains natural phenomena using only natural processes

P2 Science is a successful tool for explaining things using only natural processes (C) Therefore, it can be concluded that only natural exists

It is already a procedural condition in science, through the scientific method, featuring methodological naturalism that only and exclusively natural exists. The argument is not only circular but also begs the question because the conclusion is already assumed in the premises. It is akin to excluding red from this paper and then using the color's inexistence to conclude that red does not exist (just because it is not in this paper).

Section (II): Category Differences of Science and Metaphysical Domains

The scientific enterprise studies natural phenomena and explains said phenomena through experimentation, falsification, observation and measurement, its scope is confined to an epistemic one. It is also a study of mechanisms. For instance, science is a perfectly competent tool to understand how a car functions, the components involved, how they all work together to achieve the desired result and any mechanical explanation one wishes to acquire. However, science cannot make any inferences about why the universe is stable enough to be able to drive that car; it can just state that the universe is stable. Questions about the “why” are ones of metaphysical nature, science could only answer the “how”. Expecting science to answer the questions of “why” is similar to asking an accountant to relocate a dislocated shoulder.

The study of metaphysical domains such as theology, philosophy and religions in general are enterprises that concern themselves with the questions of “why”. They do not make any inferences or claims about mechanisms of a car for instance. It would be absurd to do that in a philosophy paper, book or study. Same ought to be true when science, a study that excludes the target (metaphysical), is used to make claims about said target.

Section (III) – Genealogical critique: Appeals to Familiarity

While the Enlightenment legacy and institutional incentives help explain why science is often treated as capable of addressing metaphysical questions, though relevant, they focus on how the habit is culturally and historically contingent. However, my focus here is on the personal side of that habit, which is more pressing to consider since, modernly, the scientific enterprise seems to be in harmony with the metaphysical the same way it is in harmony with accounting or economics. It is individuals who approach science with a presupposed atheistic stance, which is a personal and individual mistake. As Camus notes in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the question of purpose is inevitable for conscious beings. People respond to it in various ways, some respond emotionally, rationally, or through conformity. But scientists differ in that, their work revolves around a method believed to yield objective truth. When confronted with the “why,” they naturally appeal to the familiar, applying this method beyond its competent and rightful domain in an effort to process the existential question and address their “why”.

Section (IV) – Continuity Objection of Science and Metaphysics

It could be argued that there are some overlapping common areas of interest between science and the metaphysical that warrant and even encourage their unification. Beyond the arguments presented thus far, I will additionally show the inconsistency of this idea by means of some illustrations.

Suppose someone signs up to attend a talk about the "Biography of Lewis Hamilton". Said attendee, interested in a detailed biography of Lewis Hamilton outlining his inspirations, his history, how he came to be where he is and more, enters the hall where the talk is being held and is surprised to see the speaker (a mechanical engineer specialized in motorsport) giving a detailed working mechanism run down of an F1 car.

Would it not be reasonable for the attendee to be surprised and, for it to be deduced, that the organizers completely missed the target in using a speaker specialized in car mechanisms to give a talk about sports psychology?

The similitude of this analogy could be applied to science, metaphysics and those who use science for metaphysical answers. Let science be the "working mechanisms of an F1 car", let the attendee be a metaphysical truth seeker, and let the organizers be the ones who use science to answer metaphysical questions. Ultimately resulting in a talk like the speaker gave in the aforementioned analogy.

Science focuses on the "how," while metaphysics addresses the "why." Each has its own domain, and it's unrealistic to expect expertise across both without specialization. Although there is some overlap, they are fundamentally distinct, much like comparing a car and a driver in F1 racing. That is not to say that they categorically do not overlap, they certainly do. However, the overlapping does not grant their unification and admission under the same category.

To that effect, Venn diagrams are used in math as a method to separate categories while also marking exactly where they overlap, showing their logical relations. It is possible to show the discussed example diagrammatically:

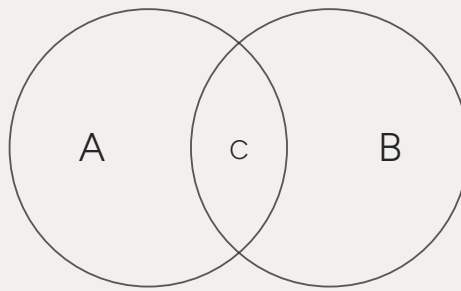


Figure 1

Example Application:

A = F1 car mechanics

B = F1 Driver

C = F1

In conclusion, I have argued that (1) science is defined by its method which is methodological naturalism, and appealing to it to defend philosophical naturalism is circular. (2) Using science for metaphysical questions commits a category mistake. (3) A genealogical perspective shows that the overreach in question stems from cultural, historical and personal developments rather than logical ones. (4) Lastly, in addressing John Dewey's "continuation" objection, unifying science and metaphysics is incoherent since they belong to different categories despite their broad overlapping; science is defined by its method, for science to qualify to answer metaphysical questions, it would have to abandon said method and by that, it would cease to be science.

NOTES

Lee, Angela. (2001). The Mere Exposure Effect: An Uncertainty Reduction Explanation Revisited. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. 27. 1255-1266. 10.1177/01461672012710002.

Radell ML, Myers CE, Beck KD, Moustafa AA, Allen MT. The Personality Trait of Intolerance to Uncertainty Affects Behavior in a Novel Computer-Based Conditioned Place Preference Task. *Front Psychol*. 2016 Aug 9;7:1175. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01175. PMID: 27555829; PMCID: PMC4977360.

Draper, P., 2005, "God, Science, and Naturalism", in W. Wainwright (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Camus, A. (2005) *The myth of Sisyphus* / Albert Camus. London: Penguin Books
(Great ideas ; 39).

Dewey, J. (1958) *Experience and nature* / John Dewey. New York: Dover Publications.