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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Beyond Physicalism? Quine's Open-Ended Naturalism and the Possibility of the "Supernatural"

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Abstract

This paper argues that W. V. Quine, often seen as scientific naturalism's foremost champion, advances an expansive ontology that leaves room for so-called supernatural phenomena—telepathy or clairvoyance—if they satisfy appropriate empirical tests. Contrary to the image of a rigid physicalist, Quine's methodological continuity and fallibilism permit provisional inclusion of any entity, "physical" or not, when theoretically and empirically fruitful. His resolve to start "in the middle" and treat philosophy as continuous with science contrasts with stricter naturalisms that categorically dismiss paranormal claims. Simultaneously, Quine rejects a priori philosophical pronouncements, denying autonomous or irreducible normativity beyond empirical science. Distinguishing Quine's "soft" naturalism from reductive physicalism and liberal naturalist views, the paper shows his position as inclusive regarding empirically testable phenomena yet methodologically monistic in privileging science as ultimate arbiter of ontological disputes. Quine's openness to unconventional hypotheses underscores that naturalism need not be metaphysically dogmatic but must remain anchored in empirical inquiry.

KEYWORDS

fallibilism, methodological continuity, naturalism, paranormal phenomena, philosophy of science, physicalism, telepathy, W. V. Quine

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Scientific naturalism is often treated as a staunchly physicalist stance that summarily dismisses the possibility of "supernatural" phenomena. In many people's eyes, accepting naturalism means categorically rejecting entities like gods and spirits, telepathy, or clairvoyance. Yet W. V. Quine—widely celebrated as the champion of scientific naturalism—presents a more nuanced picture. Even though he famously endorses a "desert landscape" ontology, one populated by physical objects and sets, he resists the idea that anything described as "supernatural" must be ruled out a priori. Instead, Quine insists that our ontological commitments hinge on empirical adequacy: if telepathy, clairvoyance, or spirits were backed by sufficiently compelling data, then a thoroughly revised scientific framework should accommodate them.

In what follows, I show why Quine's openness to seemingly nonphysical phenomena is neither a casual aside nor a betrayal of naturalism. First, I highlight the core features of Quinean naturalism—methodological continuity between philosophy and science, holism, and radical fallibilism—to clarify why Quine does not simply equate naturalism with current physicalist theories. Next, I explore his lesser-known comments on parapsychology, psi experiences, and other "anomalous" claims, demonstrating that his receptivity is a direct outgrowth of his broader epistemological commitments. In doing so, I contrast Quine's "soft" naturalism with the stricter forms typically championed by other scientific naturalists, who often dismiss paranormal research on principle.

I then consider how this distinctive Quinean stance intersects with alternative movements in contemporary philosophy, particularly those promoting liberal or pluralistic versions of naturalism. While Quine is methodologically stricter than liberal naturalists who entertain diverse sources of knowledge, he is nonetheless more ontologically inclusive in principle than many of his scientific peers. By examining both philosophical and experimental work on psi phenomena, I show how Quine's naturalism remains empirical at its core yet does not dogmatically foreclose surprising lines of inquiry.

Finally, I address several objections: some commentators argue that Quine's extreme fallibilism licenses confusion between naturalism and supernaturalism, while others see his openness as potentially undermining physicalism. In response, I clarify how Quine's approach maintains rigorous empiricism without conceding ground to untestable speculation. Rather than endorsing the supernatural, Quine simply upholds the possibility that extraordinary phenomena might, one day, yield to scientific explanation. This perspective, I conclude, powerfully illustrates why Quine's naturalism—contrary to standard portrayals—can be both scientifically robust and surprisingly expansive in its ontological horizons.

2 | THE CENTRAL IDEA OF QUINEAN NATURALISM: THE CONTINUITY THESIS

Quine (1951, 42) embraces the continuity of philosophy, common sense, and science. Philosophy is continuous with the rest of science, and science itself is a refinement and continuation of common sense: "[S]cience is itself a continuation of commonsense. The scientist is indistinguishable from the common man in his sense of evidence, except that the scientist is more careful. This increased care is not a revision of evidential standards, but only the more patient and systematic collection and use of what anyone would deem to be evidence" (Quine 1957, 5–6). The relationship between the scientific and the manifest image is conceived in a nonpolarized continuum, but not in a scientistic manner that would result in scientific imperialism: "Our word 'science" comes from a Latin word for knowledge. Much that we know does not count as science, but this is often less due to its subject matter than to its arrangement. For nearly any body of knowledge that is sufficiently organized to

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exhibit appropriate evidential relationships among its constituent claims has at least some call to be seen as scientific. What makes for science is system, whatever the subject. And what makes for system is the judicious application of logic. Science is thus a fruit of rational investigation" (Quine and Ullian 1978, 3). The continuum notion is not part of an "irenic realist view" (see Christias 2019, 512–513). Nevertheless, it might leave room for autonomy at its best—semi-independent and partially self-governing: "But we can appreciate this degree of integration and still appreciate how unrealistic it would be to extend a Duhemian holism to the whole of science, taking all science as the unit that is responsible to observation. Science is neither discontinuous nor monolithic. It is variously jointed, and loose in the joints in varying degrees" (Quine 1975, 314; see Verhaegh 2017b, 15). Incommensurability between scientific and manifest images is compatible with Quinean continuity between science and common sense in that the notion of incommensurability only implies the absence of full commensurability (see Kuhn 1982, 670–671).

For Quine, science is the theory of world, of whatever exists. It is not confined to the natural sciences (Quine 1995, 252). The continuity thesis was never meant to be a version of the unity of science thesis (see Quine 1995, 260). Quine sees the unity of science thesis as a dream of logical positivism. True, he endorses the idea that the traditional borders between philosophy (or even metaphysics) and science (or even natural science) should be blurred (Quine 1951, 20). But he never intends to defend the idea that they blend into a single inquiry, which would have yielded an identity thesis or an eliminativist outlook (see Hahn and Schilpp 1998, 620). Quine sees science as a considerably integrated system of the world, though one that is loose at the joints (Quine 1975, 314; see quotation above). There could be real and important differences between philosophy and science, or between common sense and science, but these differences do not force a dichotomy. The negation of unity is not discontinuity, against which Quine argues (see Hahn and Schilpp 1998, 620).

Quine tends not to believe in the unity of science, but he embraces the continuity of science, philosophy, and common sense. Inasmuch as we see the principle of *starting from the middle* as the core of his naturalism, his continuity thesis becomes much more intelligible (see Verhaegh 2018). This principle has nothing to do with the radical idea that science and philosophy, or science and common sense, do or should utilize the same method or have the same level of systematicity (see Quine 1957, 5). It just says that there is no vantage point, no cosmic exile from which to get sound knowledge (Quine 1960, 275); the philosopher has nowhere to start from other than where the layperson or the scientist stands (276). The thesis also implies that the roots of scientific inquiry could be found in laypeople's general way of thinking, despite their much simpler way of reasoning and measuring instruments (Quine 1957, 2). The scientist, the layperson, and the philosopher all inherit the existing web of belief, upon which they modify their webs like Neurath's sailor, who has to reconstruct her ship on the ocean but has no chance to start afresh from the bottom (Quine 2004b, 306).

This would make Quine a truly liberal naturalist (see Haack 2012, 71–73, and Macarthur 2008, 7–14). Consequently, Quine's naturalism is liberal in that it refuses to impose a priori constraints on either the domain of inquiry or the admissible forms of evidence. It recasts philosophy's task as the continuous critical refinement of our evolving scientific world picture rather than the provision of an Archimedean standpoint outside it. This stance leaves Quinean naturalism perpetually open to conceptual innovation, methodological pluralism, and revision—even of its own guiding principles—whenever the growth of empirical knowledge so demands.

By so construing Quinean naturalism, we render it both a descriptive and a normative statement at once (Gibson 1998, 669; Quine 1995, 258): a call for analytic philosophers to shun foundationalist projects (Quine 2004a) and align themselves better with the general features of contemporary science, such as pragmatism. This is the role that naturalism plays in theoretical philosophy.

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3 | TELEPATHY, CLAIRVOYANCE, AND KNOWLEDGE FROM DREAMS

Thus, the claim I am defending in this paper is not that nonscientific naturalism is mistaken when it claims that our conception of science should be broad or continuous with other empirical ways of understanding the world, but rather that their intended expansionist revision of naturalism is conservative and narrow. This must be so, given that the champion of scientific naturalism stated the following: "If I saw indirect explanatory benefit in positing sensibilia, possibilia, spirits, a Creator, I would joyfully accord them scientific status too, on a par with such avowedly scientific posits as quarks and black holes" (Quine 1995, 252).

This attitude may represent an openness to any ontology, even if it is merely hypothetical. Quinean ontology would not exclude any sort of entities, were they indispensable to our best theories. We need to find compelling evidence for such kinds of seemingly supernatural entities in order to consider them as part of our ontology. This openness is not categorical but conditional upon empirical and theoretical justification. Quine's naturalistic stance ties ontology to science. What this shows is that Quinean naturalism is not metaphysical but only methodological. Of course, this much is not original. Certain philosophers have already defended the view that Quine's naturalism was methodological rather than metaphysical (e.g., Kemp [2012]).

In principle, at least, Quine seems to allow some supernatural entities, commonly so-called, into a decent ontology (see Christias 2019, 515, n. 5). Readers should not think that these sentences are the products of Quine's overactive imagination, which entertains even the wildest of possibilities. His openness to such extravagancies is very Quinean, an integral part of the thoroughgoing fallibilism that characterizes his naturalism. At a slightly more modest level, he does not see a commitment to the physical, or to physicalism, as integral to naturalism: "The science game is not committed to the physical, whatever that means. … Even telepathy and clairvoyance are scientific options, however moribund" (Quine 1992, 20–21; see Kemp 2023, 149–150). Quine's hypothetical acceptance of paranormal phenomena is not merely rhetorical but a substantive philosophical commitment to methodological openness (see Quine 1974, 2). His ontological commitments are guided by the explanatory power of theories, not by a prior commitment to physicalism.[1] This pragmatic approach allows for a more inclusive ontology, accommodating entities that are not strictly physical but are necessary for understanding the world.[2]

For a thoroughgoing empiricist, it is astounding that Quine concedes that science is not committed to the physical. This even rings a dualistic bell, almost allowing violations of physical closure and opening the door to miracles. Nevertheless, we might think that here Quine is talking about specific conceptions of the physical. Thus his consideration of the idea that physicalism could turn out to be wrong, while naturalism still holds, might seem harmless to his empiricism. If this seems unusual to some other scientific naturalists, then his remarks suggesting that even empiricism is fallible and subject to revision may come across as quite extreme: "It would take some extraordinary evidence to enliven them, but, if that were to happen, then empiricism itself—the crowning norm, we saw, of naturalized epistemology—would go by the board. For remember that norm, and naturalized epistemology

[1]As *a Metaphilosophy* referee rightly noted, careful readers of Quine see that neither empiricism nor naturalism commits him to physicalism, and any physicalism he embraces is merely contingent. This point, however, is often lost on more superficial readings.

[2]I do not want to risk conflating Quine's methodological openness with an ontological acceptance of spirits, except insofar as they become indispensable for scientific explanation. Yes, Quine is open to accepting spirits into his ontology if those conditions are met. While Quine's naturalism excludes supernatural explanations as currently unjustified, he does not categorically dismiss them as impossible within a future scientific framework. But whether spirits would retain supernatural status or be naturalized via scientific explanation remains to be seen.

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itself, are integral to science, and science is fallible and corrigible" (Quine 1992, 21; see Hylton 2007, 90–91, and Kemp 2010, 284). Quine, who is almost universally thought to trade in scientific naturalism, makes wild claims such as "telepathy and clairvoyance are scientific options." Everything, including empiricism and naturalistic epistemology themselves, is fallible and corrigible. If this is not naturalism in its most inclusive sense, then what else could it be?

For Quine, anomalous phenomena like telepathy and clairvoyance are unlikely to turn out to be true. Indeed, the fact that he regards them as unlikely might be the key to understanding his surprising openness to such claims. He thinks of them in terms of the debate over the nature and structure of observed or alleged anomalies and wild claims (see Quine 1987, 5–8). Although established anomalies, surprising claims of physics, and wild claims such as those concerning paranormal events should not be treated the same, since there is—at least for many scientists across the world—some statistical evidence in favor of such phenomena (see Cardeña 2014 for references), of which we have not yet made sense, Quine feels that he should explain why he does not give serious, full attention to such claims. Unexpectedly, his reasons for this have nothing to do with the usual suspects, like the hidden agendas of the proponents of such claims, their incompatibility with physicalism, their undermining empiricism, or their being unscientific. Quine instead prioritizes time accounting and resource allocation rationales, as I demonstrate shortly, with an unequivocal quote from Quine himself (for surprisingly similar treatment, see Feigl 1967 and 1981, 314).

One caveat about Quine's terminology. He also refers to these studies of the paranormal as "parascience." Many people, I suspect, would reserve this word for clearly nonscientific activities. This is not the case here, however. For Quine, the word retains its dictionary definition: "the study of subjects that are outside the scope of traditional science because they cannot be explained by accepted scientific theory or tested by conventional scientific methods" (Merriam-Webster's). Accordingly, those scientists who are not part of mainstream science still count as scientists, not as crazy people or villains with hidden political or religious agendas. Thus, here I talk only about empirical studies conducted in universities or other research institutes (Macarthur 2008; Rao and Palmer 1987).

Let us call these phenomena "nonordinary mental expressions," following the usage of researchers who study them while remaining neutral about their genuineness. (Another expression is "anomalous experiences.") In short, these claims might be true or not; and if they are true, the source of the phenomena might be physical but of a highly unfamiliar type, or something radically distinct that could be called nonphysical (Rao and Palmer 1987). Not all paranormal researchers are radical, and not all paranormal claims are wild. There is a broad spectrum that connects them in a long continuum (also see Blackmore n.d.).

There are also essential differences between the wild claims, concerning how mainstream scientists treat them. For decades, governments have allocated enormous funds to the search for signs of intelligent life. The genuinely fantastic claims of science do not include those of extraterrestrial life or the existence of UFOs. These are not radical challenges to what we currently know. The telepathy issue is a whole other piece of business for many scientific naturalists. Interestingly, given the most common definition of "telepathy," it is not straightforward how this could even challenge today's physics: the direct communication of thought from a sender to a percipient without using any known physical sensory channels of transmission (Alcock 1987). This is a form of extrasensory perception (ESP): the apparent ability to receive information that is shielded from the senses (see Scriven 1959).

Most naturalists and many philosophers take ESP to be paranormal or supernatural (e.g., Churchland [1987]). Close attention to the standard definition of telepathy, however, reveals a striking fact. The definition does not at all assume that the channel of communication must be nonphysical or nonsensory. The qualifier "known" instead implies that there might be some unknown physical or nonphysical, yet sensory, ways of transferring of thought (see Rao and

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Palmer 1987). The former possibility is a less wild claim. Of course, there might be unknown physical channels for thought transmission. Although discovering one such hitherto unknown channel would be a breathtaking development in the physical sciences, it would not require any revolution in our web of science. "Any occult phenomenon—any clear case of telepathy, teleportation, or clairvoyance, a ghost, a flying saucer—any of these would delight the scientific mind. Scientists would withdraw in droves and glee to their drawing boards and linear accelerators. The mechanisms of the occult phenomena would cry out for investigation, and a basic revolution in physics would be on the way" (Quine 1987, 7). As Quine says, however, scientists typically dedicate minimal time and effort to keeping up with statistical studies of telepathy. These studies rarely produce scores significantly above chance. He thinks that the current opposition of the vast majority of scientists to these studies is perfectly rational because "[t]ime being in such short supply and the parascience buffs so prodigal with their purported prodigies, the scientist is bound to make short shrift of shoals of parascientific claims. None warrants examination unless it bears promise of unimpeachable documentation" (Quine 1987, 7).

This treatment of the problem is a paradigmatic example of resource accounting rationality. It shows no sign of being strict, narrow, oppressive, or eliminative. These are some of the critical remarks of some writers in the nonscientific naturalist movement: *narrower*, *strict*, *reductive*, or *hard naturalism* (Strawson [1985]); *eliminative*, *oppressive*, or *extreme naturalism* (Macarthur [2008]); *bad* or *scientistic naturalism* (Haack [2010]). Quine does not *narrowly* decide what is natural as a foregone conclusion, and he has no *strict* conception of nature; he does not attempt to *suppress* even apparently nonnatural entities, such as spirits, and nonempirical ways of knowing, such as telepathy. He instead leaves room for them to be included in a future but proper scientific ontology. "Fallibilism is the watchword" (Quine 1981, 34). That every belief is subject to revision is one of the pillars of Quine's naturalism. We do not currently see these apparent nonnatural entities as scientific posits, but this might well change.

The word "nonnatural" may not be entirely appropriate in this context. In any case, Quine talks about possible, future scientific evidence for bizarre happenings. If something is scientifically supported, then how could we call it nonnatural? In such a radical future, I have no idea whether we will use the word "nonnatural" for those entities or ways of knowing. Nevertheless, my hunch is that we will stop using that word for those phenomena. Science is the study of nature. Something that is amenable to scientific study should not be named "supernatural." With the establishment of highly alien entities or processes, the word "nonnatural" might remain in use in the future. Pragmatic elements will probably be weighed in the process. Alternatively, perhaps the expression I mentioned above will have currency: "non-ordinary mental expressions."

Where does all this leave us concerning physicalism, empiricism, and naturalism? As we saw in the previous section, physicalism and naturalism are dissociable for Quine, although they are naturally associated with each other. The destiny of empiricism, as the crowning norm of naturalistic epistemology, is much more complicated. Usually, ESP should be regarded as undermining empiricism, at least in the thick conception of empiricism that Quine himself adopts. By its very name, ESP seems to violate the foundation of empiricism. There is nothing in the intellect that is not first in the senses, the so-called guiding principle of empiricism. Given that the standard definition of telepathy involves the possibility that "there might be some unknown sensory channels," I do not believe that all ESP claims are necessarily in conflict even with classical empiricism, despite what the name "extrasensory perception" implies. Thus Quine's famous warning against telepathy and soothsayers is only relevant to a particular, narrow conception of empiricism (Quine 1981, 19).

Empiricism is the guiding norm of naturalism (Quine 1992, 19). When narrowly understood, however, it could be refuted by some future scientific developments such as the establishment of ESP. Thus, we can safely say that classical empiricism is dissociable from Quinean naturalism. In a more liberal sense, "Quinean empiricism" can be understood as the repudiation of a priori methods. I acknowledge the difficulties with defining a priori methods. We know,

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however, that naturalism is a broader stance for Quine, who frequently defines it as the repudiation of a priori philosophy. Quine sees very few things as a priori activities or ideas (see Quine 1992, 21; 1996, 163; 2008, 328).

A priori knowledge is usually thought to be something independent from experience. From this, it follows that "empiricism" in the broader sense may refer to the idea that all knowledge starts with experience, but here experience is not confined to the known channels of sensation. There might be some ESP. In such a scenario, Quinean naturalism and Quinean empiricism converge, because both reduce ultimately to the methodological standards of our evolving best science. Any putative miracle that cannot be integrated into that evolving web of explanation—however remote the prospects—would therefore remain problematic for both positions.

By understanding "empiricist" and "naturalist" in this broader way, these terms seem synonymous with the term "scientific." For Quine, naturalist philosophy is scientific philosophy.

4 | NATURALISM, EMPIRICISM, AND QUANTUM MECHANICS AND ITS MENTALISTIC RING

The vast majority of naturalists dismiss telepathy and clairvoyance, because these commentators are physicalists and believe these claims to be in deep tension with the basic tenets of physicalism (see Scriven 1959). Astoundingly, Quine is not one of those philosophers. Unexpectedly, the champion of scientific philosophy finds his favorite example, which potentially undermines physicalism, in current fundamental physics at its best. Far from what other defenders of scientific naturalism would anticipate, Quine (1995, 257) recognizes the potential of real physics itself to challenge physicalism, at least in its philosophical outlook. Here it should be clear that Quine does not conceive physicalism as directly derivative from current science, which would make it an empty idea. Careful readers may object that Quine talks only about particular interpretations of quantum mechanics, not quantum mechanics as a whole. And that is quite correct. Such scenarios, however, are not limited to just some parts of cutting-edge physics.

Quine also talks about acquiring knowledge from dreams (Mehranshargh 2016). With its first cousin, clairvoyance, this last possibility truly challenges even the broader outline of our web of knowledge (Quine 1981, 22). Quine's brief but most sustained discussion appears in *Pursuit of Truth* (1992, 19–21). Unfortunately, he says little about the possibility and potential implications of discovering that we can acquire knowledge from a dream. For knowledge by dreaming and clairvoyance to get even an initial screening by the best scientists, we would need ironclad evidence in their favor. These two alleged ways of knowing are way beyond telepathy on the scale of wild ideas.

Given the possible natural history of animal communication, Quine entertains the possibility of telepathy not as a mere possibility but as a live one. Taking into account the evolutionary development of ape communication, and comparing it with our own, makes this imaginative possibility all the more vivid and serious, according to Quine (Mehranshargh 2016; see 1:20:38–1:23:09).[3]

Given the quote about spirits and possibilia, Quine seems less naturalistic than nonscientific naturalists, at least on ontological grounds. He is not a hard naturalist but a soft one, in Strawson's terms. Quine's take on naturalism is grounded in the belief that philosophy and science are deeply connected, but it is not as strict as some might assume. Think of it as a "softer" kind of naturalism—one that welcomes ideas and methods stretching beyond just the physical

[3]Quine discusses the evolutionary development of ape communication—regarding it as the evolutionary precursor of human communication and language—in several passages, including Quine 1998, 20–22; 1995, 251; and 2008, 185.

world or what we typically label as "science." This is not about splitting hairs over technicalities. Instead, it is a flexible, pragmatic approach. Quine cares less about boxing everything into rigid scientific categories and more about asking, "Does this explanation actually help us make sense of things?" and "Does it hold up when tested against reality?" It is not just about drawing a line between science and philosophy but about building bridges where they make the most sense.

5 | OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

One potential objection arises from Quine's signature claim that any element of our web of belief, including logic or pure mathematics, remains open to revision. Some may interpret this radical fallibilism as granting undue license to frameworks that accommodate supernatural entities. Strict metaphysical naturalists, in particular, might argue that such openness dilutes Quine's commitment to naturalism, because it seemingly fails to exclude "supernatural" claims right from the start. Indeed, from their viewpoint, rejecting the supernatural a priori is integral to upholding a full-fledged naturalist worldview.

In reply, it is crucial to note that Quine's willingness to revise does not undermine his reliance on empirical science. Far from endorsing the supernatural outright, he merely refuses to impose philosophical restrictions that would rule out any class of entities in principle. His focus is on scientific efficacy and explanatory power, not on metaphysical dogma. Consequently, Quine suggests that if purportedly supernatural claims—telepathy, clairvoyance, or others—were to show true explanatory necessity and empirical support, then science should evolve to account for them. This stance highlights Quine's pragmatism and is not tantamount to embracing postmodernist or supernatural positions; rather, it exemplifies his insistence on letting evidence, rather than presupposition, dictate what we admit as real.

Another objection might be that the argument presented here merely reiterates the oft-cited view that Quine's naturalism is more accommodating than standard accounts indicate. Scholars such as Macarthur (2008), Haack (2010), Hylton (2007), Kemp (2023), and Verhaegh (2017a) have indeed emphasized Quine's flexibility. My approach differs, however, by using parapsychology as a concrete test case for Quine's holistic epistemology (see Weir 2014, 125–127). In contrast to sets or numbers—which are abstract yet broadly accepted in scientific discourse—psi phenomena are allegedly empirical yet remain highly contested. By focusing on telepathy, precognition, and other "anomalous" experiences, I underscore an area where Quine's openness becomes especially pertinent. Psi research tests the limits of scientific acceptability in a way that purely abstract entities do not, thereby casting new light on Quine's principle of thoroughgoing revisability.

A further concern might be that very few commentators discuss psi or parapsychology in connection with Quine. It may be dismissed as an insignificant detail, mere rhetorical flourish on Quine's part. Yet Quine's references to topics like ape communication evolving into telepathy signal a broader commitment to empirical possibility, even if the likelihood seems remote (see Mehranshargh 2016). These remarks, far from being peripheral, illustrate Quine's abiding principle that empirical inquiry alone—rather than philosophical argument—should decide whether or not we admit a phenomenon into our ontology.

Lastly, one might argue that while Quine is inclusive when it comes to parapsychology, he is not equally inclusive of irreducible normativity or a priori approaches. Here, it is important to note that Quine's stance on method is indeed stricter than that of "liberal naturalists," who tolerate forms of conceptual analysis or autonomy in normative discourse. Quine's naturalism remains resolutely empirical: there are no special philosophical or conceptual methods that stand apart from the broader scientific enterprise. In this sense, he is "less inclusive" regarding multiple knowledge sources but "more inclusive" about what might ultimately be recognized

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as real within the scientific web of belief. In other words, while Quine denies any irreducibly normative or a priori realm, he also refuses to draw a hard line excluding unusual empirical phenomena. He is less dogmatic about physicalism than many assume, while remaining methodologically monistic—science is the final arbiter of ontological claims.[4]

Taken together, these objections and replies underscore how Quine's extreme fallibilism neither trivializes naturalism nor lapses into a metaphysical free-for-all. Instead, it preserves science as the core standard of credibility while acknowledging that even its boundaries could shift if confronted with compelling new evidence. This approach highlights Quine's philosophical rigor: his naturalism is not a rigid commitment to a particular theory of the physical but a commitment to the evolving project of science itself.

6 | CONCLUSION

In sum, Quine's open-ended naturalism challenges the assumption that scientific naturalism must be synonymous with a rigid physicalism. Far from endorsing the supernatural, Quine simply insists that empirical success—and not a priori exclusion—should guide our ontological commitments. This stance preserves the rigor of science while keeping its frontiers genuinely open: unlikely as telepathy and clairvoyance might seem, they remain possibilities should compelling evidence ever arise. Far from diluting naturalism, Quine's thoroughgoing fallibilism enriches it, revealing that genuine scientific inquiry is never closed off in advance but must always remain answerable to the evolving contours of evidence and explanation.

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[4]I thank the referee for pressing me on properties and possible worlds. These topics deserve a study of their own; it must suffice to note that Quine treats both as eliminable (see Quine 1963, 1986, and 1994). Given the explanatory focus articulated in the last two paragraphs, it is therefore more expedient to set these issues aside here.

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