

Limitations of naturalistic inquiry

1. What do you take naturalism to mean? How does it influence the discourse in your field, particularly its conception(s) of human nature?

In philosophy, the term *naturalism* refers to the broad view that all of reality consists of 'natural phenomena'. In this context, 'natural phenomena' generally refers to phenomena that can be empirically observed, detected, or inferred using the methods of scientific observation, induction, and so forth. According to this view, there is nothing beyond 'the world of nature.' There is no Divine Essence, First Cause, Creator – no God – that willed the natural world into existence and gave it meaning, purpose, or direction. Likewise, according to naturalism, there are no transcendent moral truths; there is no eternal human soul; and there is no spiritual dimension of reality that lies beyond the investigative methods of science. By extension, there can be no real knowledge beyond scientifically produced knowledge, and no real ways of knowing beyond scientific ways.

In this sense, *naturalism* is broadly synonymous with, and grew out of, the term *materialism*. But some philosophers prefer the term naturalism over materialism because the world of nature is not reducible only to 'matter' (as in *material-ism*). For instance, various forms of energy, and non-material forces such as gravity, are clearly part of 'nature.' Also, the term materialism has a popular usage – often associated with consumerism, or with the inordinate value some people place on material pleasure and the acquisition of material things – which can muddy the term.

Naturalism is also broadly synonymous with the term *physicalism*. The latter also grew out of the term *materialism* but, again, physicalism is sometimes

considered more precise, because it encompasses the existence of non-material phenomena that can be empirically investigated by physics or other derivative natural sciences such as chemistry and biology. Such phenomena include, for instance, the 'laws of physics.' Hence, *physicalism*.

Philosophers continue to debate the precise definitions and relative value of these terms, and different philosophers prefer one over the other. But for the purpose at hand, I will use them in an interchangeable manner, as they all allude broadly to the same ontological and epistemological assumptions that nothing exists beyond the material/physical/natural, and that all potential knowledge is therefore encompassed by science as a system of knowledge. It is important to note that these premises have not, and cannot, be empirically verified or proven. They are articles of faith. As articles of faith, they are equivalent to the contrasting premises that reality has a transcendent/spiritual dimension, and that this dimension lies beyond the investigative methods of the natural sciences. Though naturalism is a dominant view among contemporary philosophers, there are still many who operate from the latter, equivalent, premises – or who remain agnostic in this regard.

Though philosophers (and some natural scientists) are inclined to make explicit where they stand on these kinds of ontological and epistemological questions, this tends not to be the case in the social sciences. On the contrary, the contemporary social sciences tend to avoid deep ontological questions. Nonetheless, one can often infer the implicit presence of materialist assumptions, which trace back in part to the thought of founding figures of the social sciences. Marx's "historical materialism" is one such example. More broadly, "the secularization thesis" that came to dominate much social scientific thinking over the past century and a half – through the influence of people like Marx, Durkheim, and Weber – tended to foster materialist thinking. According to this

thesis, modernity would see the gradual decline of religion due to the ascendancy of science as a superior system of knowledge. Today, however, in light of the ongoing significance of religion in the modern world (for better or worse), many social scientists and philosophers are acknowledging the failure of the secularization thesis. Nonetheless, within the social sciences, religion continues to be widely conceptualized as a socially constructed phenomenon with no basis in a transcendent reality – a conception that arises from underlying materialist premises.

Based on these (often implicit) materialist premises, many social scientists today conceptualize human nature in essentially material terms. That is, human beings are frequently understood as nothing more than intelligent and sophisticated animals, driven largely by instincts, appetites, and interests shaped over millennia by processes of natural selection, which are now mediated by the process of socialization, enculturation, and education. Such views implicitly inform economic models such as *homo economicus*, political science concepts such as *interest group competition*, sociological theories regarding *the functions of social conflict*, critical theory tenants such as *the will to power*, and many other similar constructs. Of course, all of these constructs have a basis in aspects of human nature. The problem is that they tend to reduce human nature to such aspects by reifying them. In other words, they present a caricature of human nature. In the process, they obscure other aspects of human nature, including latent potentialities of the human spirit.

2. Why has naturalism become so widespread, particularly in the West? What is so attractive about it?

It seems that naturalism has become fairly widespread in some Western intellectual circles for a number of reasons. First, naturalism is an entirely

understandable response to the dogmatism, corruptions, violence, and abuses committed in recent centuries in the name of religion – from the persecution of Renaissance scientists by the Catholic Church, to the European wars of religion following the Protestant Reformation, to the justification of slavery and racism and patriarchy through biblical hermeneutics, to assaults on evolutionary biology in public education, to fundamentalist terrorism, to the alliance of some contemporary churches with regressive partisan politics and science-denial. If this is all one knows of the role of religion in human affairs, it is quite rational to reject the ontological and epistemological assumptions that tend to underlie religious thought.

In addition, the awesome productivity of the natural sciences over the past two centuries appears to suggest the validity of naturalistic premises about reality. On closer inspection, however, it is merely axiomatic to note that naturalistic premises are fruitful for investigating natural phenomena. Careful investigation of any phenomena requires drawing boundaries around the domain of investigation and developing methods appropriate to each domain – because all aspects of reality cannot be investigated simultaneously or through the same methods. This is merely good epistemological practice. Yet the fruitfulness of drawing boundaries around the domain of ‘natural phenomena’ does not support the conclusion that nothing exists outside those boundaries – or the conclusion that other means do not exist to investigate other kinds of phenomena.

Yet another reason naturalism may be attractive is that it offers a simplified view of reality, which is easier to grasp than a more complex ontology. In this regard, reality, according to a naturalistic worldview, can be likened to a two-dimensional plane. But reality, according to a transcendent worldview, can be likened to a three-dimensional volume because it has an additional dimension – a spiritual dimension. Navigating, and making sense of, the world becomes much

simpler if one ignores that additional dimension. On a related note, a naturalistic worldview may also be attractive because it can place fewer demands on its adherents – moral or spiritual demands – than a transcendent worldview. This is not to suggest that naturalistic thinkers are inherently lacking in moral commitments, or that all religious thinkers abide by their moral commitments. But the nature and breadth of one’s moral framework can vary significantly depending on one’s ontological assumptions.

3. What contributions and/or difficulties does naturalism bring to the thinking around human nature?

Naturalism has been a very productive framework for understanding purely physical or biological aspects of human nature. For instance, it has enabled us to develop vaccines that prevent many illnesses, along with many other medical interventions and treatments that save lives or increase our physical quality of life. Naturalism has also been a very productive framework for predicting the outcomes when people act purely on their base animal instincts – as some models in economics and political science do. In these respects, it will be productive to continue studying various aspects of humanity’s animal nature within the boundaries set by naturalistic inquiry.

On the other hand, if all systematic inquiry is limited by those same boundaries, this would prevent us from generating knowledge about many of the latent potentialities of individuals, institutions, and communities – and about how to foster their realization. In this regard, I am reminded of a statement by the Universal House of Justice, the international governing council of the Bahá’í Faith, which identifies many of the most pressing questions facing humanity today:

Numerous, of course, are the questions that the process of learning, now under way in all regions of the world, must address: how to bring people of different backgrounds together in an environment which, devoid of the constant threat of conflict and distinguished by its devotional character, encourages them to put aside the divisive ways of a partisan mindset, fosters higher degrees of unity of thought and action, and elicits wholehearted participation; how to administer the affairs of a community in which there is no ruling class with priestly functions that can lay claim to distinction or privilege; how to enable contingents of men and women to break free from the confines of passivity and the chains of oppression in order to engage in activities conducive to their spiritual, social and intellectual development; how to help youth navigate through a crucial stage of their lives and become empowered to direct their energies towards the advancement of civilization; how to create dynamics within the family unit that lead to material and spiritual prosperity without instilling in the rising generations feelings of estrangement towards an illusory “other” or nurturing any instinct to exploit those relegated to this category; how to make it possible for decision making to benefit from a diversity of perspectives through a consultative process which, understood as the collective investigation of reality, promotes detachment from personal views, gives due importance to valid empirical information, does not raise mere opinion to the status of fact or define truth as the compromise between opposing interest groups. To explore questions such as these and the many others certain to arise, the Bahá’í community has adopted a mode of operation characterized by action, reflection, consultation and study—study which involves not only constant reference to the writings of the Faith but also the scientific analysis of patterns unfolding. Indeed, how to maintain such a mode of learning in action, how to ensure that growing numbers participate in the generation

and application of relevant knowledge, and how to devise structures for the systemization of an expanding worldwide experience and for the equitable distribution of the lessons learned—these are, themselves, the object of regular examination. (The Universal House of Justice, 2013)

Many of these questions arise, and become possible to systematically investigate, only within a framework that recognizes the dynamic coherence of the material and spiritual dimensions of human existence. Within a purely materialist framework, social learning tends toward purely pragmatic questions pursued in a vacuum of moral relativism. This gives rise to narrowly proceduralist approaches to the governance of human affairs in almost every domain. Such procedures tend, in turn, to become agonistic to varying degrees, based on the assumption that self-interested competition is an insurmountable characteristic of human nature. According to this logic, the best we can do is develop procedures that channel our selfish energy toward the greatest common good. When procedures of this kind are institutionalized, they inevitably reproduce unjust social relations. In response, the same underlying materialist framework tends to prescribe agonistic strategies of movement organizing for social change. Thus, within this materialist framework, the questions that arise as objects of social learning are very different from the questions that arise within a framework that recognizes both the material and spiritual dimensions of human existence.

4. What scholar has offered you insight into the relationship between human nature and naturalism? What points have they raised?

The late T. K. Seung is a brilliant but widely overlooked philosopher from whom I have drawn much insight and inspiration. In particular, his book *Intuition and*

Social Construction: The Foundation of Normative Theory, offers a nuanced critique of naturalism (which he refers to as physicalism or scientific materialism).

In short, Seung notes (as others have before him), that physicalism led to a fact/value dichotomy that has elevated empirical 'facts' while rejecting the possibility of transcendent normative truths. Based on this rejection, many modern thinkers have attempted to construct purely procedural approaches to the construction of more just societies. John Rawls' work ranks among the most influential of such efforts. Seung demonstrates, however, that all such efforts implicitly rely on an intuitive conception of justice – or an underlying sense of justice. Seung also demonstrates that, ultimately, such intuitions can only be justified through appeals to transcendent normative truths – or to some transcendent principle of justice. Yet authors such as Rawls reject the existence of such truths. This incoherence (along with other incoherent aspects of modern thought Seung notes) can only be resolved by positing the existence of transcendent normative truths along with a corresponding human capacity of intuition that can be trained to discern and apply such truths to the betterment of the social world. Unless human reason is guided by such premises, Seung concludes, it "is but an uncharted flight into the darkness of nihilism."

Though Seung's *Intuition and Social Construction* does not situate itself explicitly within a discourse on human nature, his argument is directly relevant because it compels us to take seriously a dimension of human nature, and of reality, that transcends the purely physical. Moreover, it compels us to consider that we cannot, ultimately, construct a more just social order without this expanded conception of reality.

5. Are there any insights from religion that could illumine our understanding of naturalism and human nature?

In the same way that natural scientists assume that truths about the material world can be discovered by studying nature, many religious people assume that normative truths – or spiritual principles – can be discovered by studying the revelations that have given birth to the world’s great religious systems. Revelation, in this sense, can be understood as a mystical process by which human consciousness becomes informed of latent spiritual potentialities – from the potentialities of the human soul to the potentialities of human civilization. The founders of the world’s great religious systems all intimated these truths to varying degrees through a process often referred to as revelation. Revelation can, in this sense, be understood as the process by which humanity learns about our latent spiritual potentialities – or glimpses the ultimate expression of our true nature.

One way to grasp this is by considering the analogy of the fruit that is latent in the seed of the fruit tree. We can cut open the seed and see no sign of the tree and its fruit. But the tree and its fruit are latent phenomena within the seed. With this analogy in mind, we can imagine a time, before agriculture, when humans did not fully grasp the nature of a seed. Only with the subsequent understanding of a seed’s nature did agriculture become possible. We can thus imagine a person from a pre-agricultural society picking up a seed and, thinking it worthless, tossing it away. But then imagine a second person, who understands the nature of a seed, explaining to the first person that if the seed is planted in the right soil and carefully tended for many years, it will develop into a tree that will yield a wonderful fruit. The second person could not, in that moment, prove this proposition. The first person could only accept it as an article of faith. Only by cultivating the seed, over a span of many years, could the proposition be tested, and the fruit become manifest.

Human nature can be understood in an analogous way – as a latent spiritual reality in need of cultivation. This is true not only of our individual nature, but also of human civilization as a whole. However, such a conception is not possible within a naturalistic framework. It requires an expanded conception of reality.

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