Missing dimensions of reality

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

Naturalism is a view that all of reality can be described and explained by natural science, and that reality itself is physical or natural, and certainly not supernatural or spiritual. This can be understood in two ways. One is epistemological, or how we know, understand, describe and explain reality. That version of naturalism means that all we can know must rely on the description and explanation of causes, entities, and forces existing in the physical and natural world. The other is ontological naturalism, a weaker form of naturalism that allows for kinds of knowledge and reasons that cannot be explained by physical and natural science in terms that are merely descriptive and explanatory, and yet holds to the idea that reality – all reality – is nonetheless natural and physical. In other words, this form of naturalism maintains that our knowledge of that physical and natural reality has limitations when it comes to explanation of such a reality, perhaps especially so with regard to the meaning, values, and norms of human life where we rely on other forms of knowledge that involves reasons and justifications but not natural scientific explanation.

A contrary view to naturalism is one that accepts the idea that some features, aspects, or dimensions of reality are both beyond natural scientific explanation as well as beyond placement within what we understand as the natural and physical world.

There is, then, a spectrum of conceptions of naturalism. On one end of the spectrum, there is what some refer to as “bald naturalism” or “strong naturalism”,

in which all knowledge is explicable by natural science in terms of the causes, entities, and forces of an object world that can even explain the working of the human mind, and the nature of ethics and values by way of natural causation and evolution. Moving along the spectrum, there is a more moderate version of naturalism, a 'soft' or 'weak naturalism', which recognizes that natural science cannot explain, among other things, the mind and human reality itself in any complete way, however advanced neuroscience may become. There are features of culture, language, and ways of human reasoning that are not ways of knowing that depend on causal explanations nor are they representations of spatially extended relationships of forces and entities in the physical, object world. There is an inner world of consciousness, thought, and feeling that lies outside the terms of physical and natural scientific explanation. This form of 'weak naturalism' still understands human reality to be a part of nature, but that the evolution and development of culture, ethical forms of life, language, and reasoning cannot be explained in the vocabulary of physical and natural science.

The pragmatism of John Dewey is an example of this weaker form of naturalism as is the philosophy of John McDowell, Robert Pippin, Robert Brandom, and many others. McDowell views as "second nature" the reality of the domain of reason and thought, values, and virtues, which depends on upbringing and culture. This "second nature" is contrasted with the causal and descriptive factors that empirical science relies on to explain the physical and natural world. Jürgen Habermas likewise holds to a 'weak naturalism' that distinguishes the natural or physical evolution of plants and animals from cultural evolution and social "learning processes", while still understanding the latter processes by analogy with the physical processes of evolution. Cultural developments and collective learning processes, he maintains, allow human beings to constitute forms of knowledge from the participant perspective, distinct from the observer's perspective that is necessary for science. However, the forms of reasoning that

have to do with justifying and constituting different forms of life, ethical and moral values, and political and social reality, interact with scientific knowledge by way of processes of intelligent problem-solving and reasonable justifications, since human reality has to do with actions and discursive justifications that constitute human life as much as it does with a representational knowledge of the world.

Habermas notes, for instance, that "in the spatial dimension", knowledge is the result of working through a representational or designative view of the object world that provides both practical and scientific understanding of the constraints and risks of that world, while "in the social dimension", knowledge is the result of justifications we provide one another in our mutual reasoning together as we work through ways of cooperating and the social reproduction of culture, norms, values, and ways of life. Such a 'weak' or 'soft' form of naturalism nonetheless holds to the ontological idea that all reality is of a natural kind, even though it may be beyond the resources of an instrumental, empirical, or natural scientific form of knowledge.

What is missing from naturalism is a recognition of a spiritual or supernatural dimension to reality. This dimension can be understood either as a discontinuous realm of reality, or, in a more nuanced and sophisticated version that converges with an understanding inspired by the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, as a 'level of reality'. In the latter case, the physical, natural, or material level is merely one dimension or aspect of a reality that is, if more accurately understood, an extended reality, one that has 'super-natural' aspects, or aspects that are beyond

nature. Together, these latter aspects constitute what we might call the 'spiritual' level of reality.

Those that hold to a 'weak naturalism' are critical of the idea that knowledge can be reduced to one, basic vocabulary, whether one that involves observational and empirical sentences as fundamental, or causal and probabilistic explanations of entities, forces, and dynamics that may be functional (and to that extent a moderate form of teleological explanation) as in the biological or life sciences. A 'weak naturalism' understands that science itself lies on a continuum from physics (and the sub-fields of physics), to chemistry (and its sub-fields), both of which can be usefully called 'physical science'. However, when we move to biology, or the 'life sciences' (medicine, and the sub-fields of biology, ecology, paleontology, zoology, etc.), we might use the more general term 'natural science' which takes in physics, chemistry, and biology and where the domain of phenomena that any one field of science purports to describe and explain may be different than what another science tries to understand. And there are different vocabularies, entities, forces, and causal explanations from one field of science to the other. So, it is likely that there is no single, seamless garment of explanation that is natural science, even though some versions of naturalism assume that science can eventually reduce all explanations to one vocabulary. Functionalism is itself one of the forms of naturalism, perhaps a more sophisticated form than brute materialism, but both functionalism and materialism do claim reductive ways of describing and explaining reality.

The emergence of the social sciences, such as sociology, political science, and so forth, while using methods that are at least analogical with methods used in

natural science, represents a further extension of the range of scientific understanding.

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

The philosopher Charles Taylor seems to think naturalism has become a default position in the modern era for several reasons. It represents, he argues, a reaction against religion and dogma, but also against inequality and the idea of hierarchy in levels of reality that was part of medieval European thought. An embrace of nature goes along with this, as does an embrace of the ordinary life of production and reproduction in society. The affirmation of ordinary life constitutes a social imaginary that distrusts hierarchies in society, that embraces an immanent world, eclipsing a sense of a transcendent world, or a world beyond this plane of existence, and where the business of ordinary life, individual and personal expression, whether in the arts or in one's own determined way of life, have a central position in modernity. These are all factors that have contributed to the emergence of naturalism as an assumption about reality, a way of responding to the world. It can be held as a sophisticated view of physical and material reality or as a brute materialism and consumerism that preoccupies so many.

Bringing the human being down to the level of nature, as part of nature and nothing more, or as a species able to forge its own norms and values, are modern reactions to accounts of our nature that would put our species beyond nature and somehow 'higher' in value than the natural world. Thus, there are mixed motivations at work in taking up naturalism as a background worldview in the modern age. Some of these motivations are positive in that they constitute a justified reaction against older status stratifications. Other motivations seek to

embrace freedom and a form of human maturity that may well be a mirage in a supposedly enlightened age. Others are attracted to naturalism simply because they have a negative response to the idea of the human being as a unique species, and something beyond the physical and beyond nature.

Without a deeper appreciation of an evolved, more sophisticated, and compelling vision of spirituality, the nature of the divine, the sacred, the holy and the numinous, the appeal of the immanent, the secular, and the material has overtaken intellectual circles with a level of confidence, ambition, and optimism that has only lately begun to recede. Today, naturalism is competing with forces that wish to see a return to a traditional and often regressive way of life that harkens to previous times, or with new forms of nationalism and privilege that care little for those in the human family that do not enjoy the good luck of where and in what circumstance they were born.

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

Even under the sway of naturalism, the natural sciences can still prove helpful in myriad areas, for example, in the study of animal rationality or in the neuroscientific study of the brain. Such studies, however, are not sufficient to provide a full account of the nature of the mind and consciousness, nor the spiritual reality of the human species. That there are correlations between happenings in the brain and in consciousness is a certainty. But while a range of phenomena in certain areas of the brain may bear a relationship to a range of phenomena in consciousness – whether thoughts, feelings, and emotions, or spikes and valleys in attentiveness and the like – given the plasticity of the brain, which neuroscience itself has identified, it is unlikely that any neural patterns of

activity can causally predict events and happenings in consciousness that follow natural or physical laws.

What is more, the difficulty of arriving at any natural laws regarding the mind in its conceptual nature that are able to include such immaterial realities as thoughts, feelings, attitudes, norms and standards, values and purposes, and intentions, is a challenge that, in principle, cannot be overcome. That the mind operates on multiple levels, in language and in thought, feeling and purpose; that it combines syntactical, logical, and semantic structures, each different in kind; and that it blends cognition as well as affective and purposeful reasoning – all of this suggests that it is impossible to produce an exhaustive account of the nature of the mind using a simple descriptive or fundamental vocabulary – a vocabulary of merely physical extension or functionality of the brain's components. Attempts to model the mind using artificial intelligence have proven to be an intractable wiring problem of computers because of the complexity generated by the number of neurons, synapses, and multiple pathways of the brain. Not to mention the complexity of consciousness itself, which remains utterly distinct from anything physical or natural.

The fact that some scientists now realize that there can be no total explanation of physical reality by way of natural or causal laws casts doubt, as well, on the possibility of any similar account being available for the mind, a reality that is unmistakably beyond the natural. The mind and consciousness are features of reality that provide perhaps the most telling example of an aspect of reality that lies outside the explanatory and descriptive terms of natural science. Moreover, some contemporary philosophers also hold a view that the nature of consciousness, mind, language, and human action points to a spiritual or supernatural quality of human reality that anticipates or signals a more extensive reality than current conceptions of the natural world assume. Certainly, our

thoughts, feelings, and much of the way we understand the nature of institutions, language, norms, values, and purposes, as well as meanings in our lives, have to do with entirely immaterial and ideal abstractions, thus outside the range of natural scientific explanation certainly, and perhaps outside the realm of prevalent views of what the object or natural world are. Human beings can create social practices, build institutions, and hold each other to account; these activities demonstrate a level of complexity not sufficiently explained by reference to the natural properties of human beings.

There is, too, the fact that we have our own understandings of who we are, and that we are free to take this or that kind of action, on the basis of *reasons*. Reasons are not 'causes' in the sense in which causes provide explanation in the natural or material world. Candidates for reasons include preferences and desires, relative to emotions and feelings, as well as concepts regarding norms and standards of acceptable behavior, along with ethical choices and moral principles. Reasons allow us to override our preferences, our desires, and our emotions within a latitude of freedom and aspiration, hope and yearning, that surpasses the biological. We understand ourselves as free in the sense of following the reasons that are the most persuasive for how we think, what we say, and how we act. And genuine religion provides us with a language that assists us in overcoming our preferences and desires in ways that even as secular a philosopher as Habermas has noted: "Philosophy, even in its postmetaphysical form, will be able neither to replace nor to repress religion as long as religious language is the bearer of a semantic content that is inspiring and even indispensable, for this content eludes (for the time being?) the explanatory force

of philosophical language and continues to resist translation into reasoning discourses" (*Postmetaphysical Thinking)*.

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

While there is much debate in philosophy about the merits of a strong versus a weak naturalism, there is a much less vigorous conversation about the possibility of a picture of reality that would include a spiritual or supernatural level that is beyond the natural world. Charles Taylor seems to be one philosopher who does take the view that there are dimensions of reality beyond the natural. Markus Gabriel, Rainer Forst, Thomas Nagel, and others (even including Habermas) at least retain as a viable option among the language games that involve the moral and ethical the idea of a religious conception of reality as a position deserving respect, even while not holding to such a position themselves. There are also philosophers such as Hilary Putnam, who argue that there are "many faces of realism", or many aspects to reality, from the very abstract and immaterial to the physical or material. Putnam also writes of the importance of a "moral image" that, while an image, is also a reality of striking importance to human beings.

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

The Bahá'í teachings offer a coherent ensemble of principles, concepts, laws, and sound counsels that provide for a form of human life on earth that one can see will surely allow for peace, prosperity, and justice to reign in the world. These teachings acknowledge the spiritual, or the supernatural, in ways that best takes account of an "extended reality" (using Thomas Nagel's term) that we will not

fully understand. This account is persuasive and convincing, and, in contemplating these teachings, I find myself echoing Wittgenstein: "I have reached bedrock and this is where my spade is turned" (Philosophical Investigations).

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