

Naturalism among the philosophers

I'd like to preface my response by saying that it reflects my current thinking, which is rapidly evolving. There are no doubt different ways of approaching the questions below which would yield more fruitful insights. I have much to learn with regard to this topic.

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

I understand naturalism as the thesis that a complete explanation of reality can be provided from entirely within the natural world, without appealing to anything 'supernatural' such as spiritual forces, the soul, or God. I study philosophy, and naturalism covers much of my field. The website *PhilPapers*—which hosts profiles for professional philosophers and indexes philosophy papers—surveyed just under a thousand philosophers about their philosophical leanings and published the following results regarding naturalism:

Metaphilosophy: naturalism or non-naturalism?

Accept or lean toward: naturalism	464 / 931 (49.8%)
Accept or lean toward: non-naturalism	241 / 931 (25.9%)
Other	226 / 931 (24.3%)

As you can see, the majority of professional philosophers either accept or lean toward naturalism.

One way of trying to make sense of what falls under the 'naturalist' moniker is to draw a spectrum that spans from highly reductive views at one end to less reductive views at the other. The less reductive views are those that stop short

of a metaphysics of the soul, or God, or anything 'supernatural'. The most reductive position would be philosophical materialism of the kind held by Thomas Hobbes – the view that all that exists is matter. I'm not aware of anyone who holds this view today. Slightly less reductive than materialism is physicalism, the view that all sciences can ultimately be reduced to physics. This is less reductive because physics includes properties that are not obviously made of matter, such as charges and forces. This is still a popular view within philosophy, although it encountered some compelling resistance in the 1980s. Another view at this end of the naturalist spectrum is eliminativism, the thesis that as we advance in our scientific understanding, for example in neuroscience, the explanatory need for certain concepts is eliminated. For example, as chemistry matured, the concept of 'phlogiston', a substance that was believed to be necessary for combustion, was eliminated, because our understanding of oxygen could explain combustion without appealing to phlogiston. Some philosophers today advocate for the view that neuroscience will eliminate the concepts of so-called 'folk psychology', along with concepts such as free will and consciousness, arguing that we will eventually be able to explain phenomenal experience in purely neuronal terms.

The views on this reductive end of the spectrum have not gone unquestioned within the academy, however. In the 1970s and 80s, thinkers such as Thomas Nagel, Frank Jackson, and David Chalmers constructed provoking thought experiments – or "intuition pumps" as Daniel Dennett (Alter et al., 2007) calls them – to call attention to an anomaly that continued to resist explanation within the physicalist paradigm – 'qualia', most often explained by appeal to primitive sensory experiences such as 'what it's like to see red'. For instance, Nagel (Nagel, 1974) famously argued that no matter how much we learn about the cognitive systems of bats, we will never know what it's like to *be* a bat, because the physical sciences do not have the conceptual resources to

characterize such an experience or feeling. As Philip Goff likes to say, physics tells us about what matter *does*, but not about what it *is*. In other words, physics can explain the extrinsic nature of matter, but not its intrinsic nature. Nagel concluded that if the physical sciences couldn't characterize the 'what it's like to be' aspect of being a bat, it meant there must be a problem with our current physical sciences – they must be leaving something out. Along similar lines, Jackson (Jackson, 1982) argued that if a fictional colour scientist, Mary, was born into a black and white room and kept from ever seeing colour (including her own skin) but had access to all the possible physical information about colour, that there would still be something she wouldn't know about colour. She still wouldn't know *what it's like* to see red. Thus, Jackson concluded, physicalism leaves something out, *ergo* physicalism is false. Much ink has been spilled over these thought experiments (enough for Jackson to later reverse his position, embracing physicalism).

One of the consequences of physicalism for how philosophers think about human nature is that it has led many to reject free will and embrace determinism. The rationale is that if physicalism is true, then everything must be determined by the initial conditions of the universe and the laws of nature, because that's all there is, and therefore we cannot have free will; we just have the illusion of being able to make choices. This is a rather shocking conclusion, but I certainly agree that it is logically entailed by physicalism.

But all this is only one side of the naturalist spectrum, albeit the side where we are likely to find the majority of philosophers. On the less reductive side, in contrast to the austere halls of physicalism, all kinds of things are thought to exist. For example, some acknowledge the property of emergence – phenomena that transcend the sum of their parts. They argue that for this reason biology cannot meaningfully be reduced to chemistry, or chemistry to physics. Many

naturalists are in pursuit of explanations of consciousness. In the last decade, panpsychism has become an employable view for professional philosophers to hold – the view that consciousness is a fundamental constituent of reality, just like charge or mass, and that every atom possesses at least some extremely simple form of consciousness.

Another less reductive naturalist paradigm can be found in cognitive science. Embodied cognition, emerging in the 1980s and 90s, has become a flourishing although small research program. Embodied cognition is the view that neural activity in the brain contributes to cognition but is not constitutive of it. Embodied theorists seek explanations for cognition and experience in the coupling of our sensory and motor systems, and in our active engagement with our environments, both physical and social. Many philosophers within this paradigm have turned to traditions outside of analytic philosophy, drawing heavily on the continental tradition of phenomenology, as well as Eastern philosophies or religions, such as Buddhism. The result is a growing interest in ‘neurophenomenology’ which combines the methods of neuroscience with the phenomenological approach of first-person introspection to investigate the structure of experience. This is of course anathema to eliminativism, and far outside the bounds of physicalism.

These are just a few of the views that can be found within philosophy of mind under the label of naturalism. All this being said, according to the same survey from *PhilPapers*, there is a high correlation between naturalism and physicalism, at least in the surveyed population. This suggests that while there may be less reductive naturalist views emerging, they are still a relatively small minority:

Mind: physicalism or non-physicalism?

Accept or lean toward: physicalism

526 / 931 (56.5%)

Accept or lean toward: non-physicalism	252 / 931 (27.1%)
Other	153 / 931 (16.4%)

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

No doubt, there are a host of converging factors that have contributed to the rise of naturalism in the West. I'll offer my thoughts on a cultural tendency that I think may be just one among those factors, namely, the strong affinity within philosophy for Occam's razor – deference to the simplest possible answer. This affinity can be traced all the way back, past the 14th century William of Occam, to the pre-Socratics. Many pre-Socratic philosophers were suspicious of the jealous and warring gods of the Ancient Greeks, and thus adopted the principle of reduction: if they could explain a phenomenon using natural philosophy that was previously explained by appeal to the gods, then the natural philosophy explanation should be preferred. For example, if they could use geometry to predict the motion of the sun, they could abandon the sun god, Helios (who might get blocked out by Zeus and cause a solar eclipse). I think this philosophical inclination persists today, and for good reason. We should be suspicious of religious claims that are inconsistent with science. But this way of thinking can also lead to challenges if it is overextended. The pre-Socratics encountered a problem that persists for naturalists today: how to provide physical answers to metaphysical questions. It's one thing to answer questions about physics and astronomy with natural philosophy, but it's quite another to answer ethical and social questions using the same methods. We might say that this is a category mistake. Naturalism simply does not have the right resources to answer questions that, by definition, transcend the natural domain. The category mistake is asking questions about things in the *supernatural* category and trying to provide answers from the natural category.

Some naturalists, such as Wittgenstein in his early work, acknowledged this problem, and to maintain logical consistency, concluded that we simply can't say anything about these metaphysical questions because entities such as God and the soul are outside the logical limits of language, and therefore we can't meaningfully speak of them. This is an interesting line of thinking when you break it down. It looks something like this:

- 1) The answers to all questions can be provided in natural terms
- 2) We can't answer certain kinds of questions in natural terms, or even in the ideal, logical language of science
- 3a) Therefore, we shouldn't speak about those things
- 3b) Therefore, anything that can't be explained in natural terms doesn't exist

Some philosophers have gone with 3a, while others have gone with 3b. This logic for both of these conclusions seems flawed to me, however, as it leads from a normative statement (1) to an observation that contradicts that normative statement (2), to an ad hoc normative conclusion that adjusts (1) to account for (2). We might equally reason that if (2) is true then (1) must be false. It's hard to see how you could shore up (1) without begging the question (arguing in a circle). You would instead need to demonstrate why (2) is false, which has yet to be done. Accepting the truth of (2) and rejecting the falsity of (1) we could thus propose:

- 3c) Therefore, there are some things that cannot be expressed in natural terms

This is essentially the logic found in papers like Thomas Nagel's *What is it like to be a bat?* (1974) and Frank Jackson's *Epiphenomenal Qualia* (1982), which were mentioned above. But why have most philosophers chosen either 3a or 3b instead of 3c? I don't think there is any simple answer to this question. I suspect it's in part due to sociological circumstances, our current point in history, and a consequence of what is viewed as the decline of religion. But I wonder if a contributing factor might be an affinity for Occam's razor. 3a and 3b are simpler than 3c, which requires an additional element of faith. I think considering this, we must ask ourselves, what exactly is Occam's razor? It's not a logical principle. It's a normative principle. And it seems to be based primarily on belief, or faith, that answers will take a particular form. But does clinging to this belief perhaps blind us to good evidence that sometimes answers might not take this form?

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

It seems to me that there are two primary ways in which naturalist theories can contribute to our understanding of human nature. One is metaphorical, and the other direct. I'll start with an example of the latter. I recently read Michael Tomasello's *A Natural History of Human Thinking*. Tomasello is an evolutionary psychologist and he argues that the human capacity for understanding the intentions of other people, and the capacity to simulate how others will perceive our actions, are at the core of what has made the development of human cognition, as we know it, possible. In other words, humans are biologically programmed for cooperation, and it is because of this tendency towards cooperation that we have been able to develop such sophisticated forms of communication and cognition. And because primates lack this capacity, and operate in a competitive mode, they have not developed the same linguistic and cognitive capacities that humans have. I find this hypothesis, and the supporting

empirical research on primates and prelinguistic infants, quite helpful in thinking about human nature. As you can imagine, there are all kinds of consequences for a theory of this nature, such as the role that social activity plays in our thinking, learning, and development of language. Space does not allow me to explore these consequences here, but I share this as a brief example of the direct sense in which I think naturalist research can help us understand human nature.

The second way I think naturalism can help us understand human nature is through metaphor. If we accept the premise that the natural world is educational in character – a premise that many religions and philosophies have maintained – it follows that advancing in our understanding of the natural world should provide us with concepts that aid in comprehending spiritual reality. For example, as our understanding of the biology of the human body advances, the concepts available to us to understand the nature of organic oneness and unity also expand (if applied).

It seems to me then that a naturalist investigation of the functioning of the brain, our perceptual systems, the nature of our experience, how our experience shapes our concepts which in turn shape our understanding, and how our relationship to our environment and others influence our cognitive capacities, all also have the potential to enhance our spiritual education, both in our literal understanding of human nature, but also in the metaphorical resources that these new discoveries offer us.

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

Two scholars come to mind, one is Thomas Nagel, and the other is Philip Goff. I think both would consider themselves to still be naturalists, in some form, even

if it's pushing the boundaries of the most liberal end of the naturalist spectrum. Their critique is more of reductive forms of naturalism, such as physicalism. Their approach has helped me to think about the primitive aspects of human nature – our basic subjective experiences – that are excluded from the physicalist paradigm. I'll briefly summarize some of Goff's points in this regard, which share some parallels with Nagel's arguments, which I mentioned earlier.

In his book *Consciousness and Fundamental Reality* (Goff, 2017), Philip Goff makes the argument that if we are realists about phenomenal consciousness – meaning we think consciousness exists and is not just an illusion – then we should take it as a fundamental datum that we cannot ignore. He thinks that the reason empirical science has been so successful is precisely because it was designed to exclude consciousness, and with it all subjective dimensions of reality. He traces this problem back to Galileo, the father of modern science, who expressly banished smells, colours, the experience of seeing and smelling a rose, etc., from the domain of science. For Galileo, the aim of science was to explain reality in the purely quantitative, geometrical language of mathematics. This thinking allowed for the scientific revolution, and it has been extremely successful in bringing modern science to where it is today. But problems appear when we start to make the inductive argument that because it has been so successful, we just need to do more science and eventually it will explain everything, like an algorithm that just needs more time to compute all the permutations. This ignores the fundamental verity that science wasn't designed to explain everything, and thus simply doesn't have the conceptual resources to do so, and just doing more of it isn't going to change that. Think of baseball: just because I practice my batting day in and day out, and get extremely good at batting, this gives me no reason to think that I'll be any good at running, throwing, or catching a baseball, unless I practice those things too. *Ergo* the

success of 'view from nowhere' science has no bearing on its ability to explain the subjective dimensions of reality.

Goff calls this view methodological naturalism: "[t]he lesson we should draw from the success of natural science is that we should look to, and only to, the third-person scientific method (i.e., rigorous empirical investigation of what is publicly observable) to tell us what reality is like" (5). And this faith in the scientific method, which some call scientism, leads to "neuro-fundamentalism: the view that the only way to make progress on explaining consciousness is to do more neuroscience" (7). But this is a *non-sequitur* fallacy – the conclusion doesn't follow from the premises. Thus, this belief can only be attributed to faith in the future power of science to transform itself and explain things that there is currently no good reason to expect it to explain. In a sense, it's hoping for a miracle.

This is a superficial summary of the complexity of the arguments that Goff mounts against the Galilean picture of science. But I hope it gives a sense of the problems associated with a paradigm predicated on a "physical conception of objectivity" (14), as Nagel (Nagel, 1986) calls it. I think these arguments, along with those of many others who have pointed out the limitations of reductive naturalism in explaining the transcendent qualities of the human mind, help open a logical space for us to begin a conversation about the role of religion in helping us understand human nature, and to draw on religion as a normative source of knowledge that can ground and give direction to a new science of the mind that does not ignore the data of conscious experience.

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

I think that naturalist explanations are incomplete, and that religion can offer important insights that can extend these explanations. I'm not currently clear in my thinking about whether this is true of all domains; for example, I'm not sure what insight religion might offer to the field of pure mathematics, beyond its social dimensions and applications. I'm also not sure how this would extend to other areas of science, say physics, or even chemistry and biology. But I'm not qualified to comment on those, so I'll stick to my area of study, which is the human mind. Because the mind lies at the intersection of the spiritual and material dimensions of human nature, religion plays a particularly important role in furnishing the sciences of the mind with ontological principles that focus and give direction to scientific inquiry. This harkens back to what I said earlier about the challenges the pre-Socratics faced in trying to answer metaphysical questions with natural philosophy – it's not possible because the domain of questions and the method of finding answers fall into two disparate categories. There's an incommensurability between the natural and metaphysical categories, unless you have the resources to bridge them. I think religion has an important role to play in providing some of these resources.

We can see this, for instance, in the study of consciousness. The current state of philosophy and the sciences of the mind suggest that we are nowhere near being able to explain consciousness in physical terms; it remains a persistent anomaly in the naturalist program. I think that religion provides us with certain principles that can guide or give structure to the kinds of questions that scientists of the mind can and should ask. In this way, religion constitutes a normative influence on science. For example, in the Bahá'í writings, it is understood that there is an intricate relationship between the body and the soul. This is not a dualistic relationship, as proposed by Descartes, but is rather monistic: there is only one thing. The soul is primary, and the body is secondary, the soul is the substance, and the body an accidental or contingent property of

the soul. This ontology lends initial direction to studying the mind. For example, it suggests that psychology cannot be reduced to neuroscience; that there are larger forces at play that also shape our consciousness; and that humans have free will and are not wholly determined by their physical nature. But at the same time, this doesn't mean that cognitive neuroscience should be dismissed. Certain chemical imbalances in the brain can lead to challenges that need chemical treatments. I think it's safe to say that at this stage our collective knowledge of the relationship between the spiritual and the material in the dynamics of the human mind is quite nascent. But religion can at least give us some guidelines for the direction in which our inquiry should proceed, and what kinds of explanations are inconsistent with religious ontological principles. For example, several current theories of mind might be ruled out after consulting the ontological principles offered by Bahá'í teachings.

This line of thinking will be anathema to some among the scientifically-minded and may be seen as an attack on knowledge. I tend to think, however, that it's quite the opposite: it's the protection of knowledge. The claim that I am making is not that the normative influence of religion should interfere with the practice of science, or that it in any way should override the findings of contemporary science. The claim is rather that science on its own cannot produce certain axiomatic principles, such as those pertaining to the fundamentals of human nature, including the question of our purpose. And even naturalist metaphysics needs first principles; without these principles we are wandering in the dark. We can use reason to prove anything. The only thing that can ground this kind of inquiry, and not interfere but provide a purpose, is knowledge derived from religion – a source of knowledge that transcends the natural world.

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