

Naturalism and music scholarship

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 term that refers to, among other things, the belief that everything falls under the rule of natural laws. Nothing beyond natural laws exists, so existence is comprised of the universe and nothing else. If something can be said to exist within this frame, it must be explainable with methodologies investigating natural laws, namely the natural sciences. If it is unexplainable, then it is a fiction; the likes of unicorns, miracles, God – anything *supernatural* is either rightfully excluded, or problematically so. Natural laws are a means of explaining totality according to one set of rules, and so naturalism assumes a monistic view of existence – there is nothing truly supernatural, because nothing transcends nature.

In the field of musicology, and music scholarship in general, naturalism shapes a handful of discourses and influences others. As an object of scholarly investigation, the materiality of music has been central to recent discourse in musicology. In some cases, scholars who are preoccupied with examining music in its material aspects are prone to expressing a materialist view of music. Lately, materialism has become fashionable in some circles, fueled by ideas about reality, objectivity, and existence in the contemporary world. Although materialism and naturalism differ, the former falls under the umbrella of the latter, and is predominant in my field, whereas naturalism is less explicitly referenced. For this reason, I will now exclusively consider the influence of materialism.

Materialism, that is, the family of ideas broadly expressing that matter is all that exists and all that exists is the result of matter's interactions, has gone in and out of vogue but has spread its roots particularly in Western societies. Whether or not scholars consider themselves materialists, they may choose to look at an object through a materialist lens. In the field of musicology, research into the concept of music as matter and the implications therefrom is challenging the notion that music has meaning beyond its material form. In recent years, scholars Salomé Voegelin and Nina Sun Eidsheim have been turning to the workings of vibration that is fundamental to sound to explain musicking and music's significance for humanity. Musicking here refers to any activity related to or involving music. This idea, with one particularly popular manifestation called sonic materialism, attempts to explain everything about music – why it can have such a strong emotional impact on us, how it creates bonds between people and communities, why we like some music over another. Why does listening to the second movement of Dvořák's Symphony "From The New World" bring me to tears and transport me elsewhere? I would say there are a few reasons: the yearning timbre of the English horn solo, the memory and associated feelings of playing a piano arrangement of this piece at my grandfather's funeral, a beauty that stirs something within me that I won't attempt to describe. Sonic materialism doesn't completely deny these reasons but assumes that these reasons are all grounded in an underlying materialist rationality. Sonic materialism claims that the vibration of matter – nuanced by the relationality of sound and context such as what is vibrating, where and when, and the social and historical context also viewed in a materialist lens – explains my reaction and any musicking, and additionally would surely try to describe the indescribable feeling I referred to.

This is not to say that we cannot derive meanings from music through means external to physical measurement, but rather that all of the meanings we derive

from music are explainable through the materialist perspective that sees sound as the vibration of matter.

This way of thinking about music has made its way outside of academia and has trickled into pop culture, for example through a meme that became quite popular in musical social circles, which states that “music is just wiggly air”. This not-so-scientifically-accurate characterization of sound waves reflects the materialist desire to reduce music, to limit its normally grandiose and spiritualized status to simply “wiggly air”. The snappy example is actually not so far from how some materialist musicologists see music. Music is conceived as the form it takes as matter; the form that transmits its musical content to the human ear. The musical content in this case is totally contingent on form, or rather *is itself* matter.

Consequent to understanding music as matter is the idea that music can be measured and analysed using objective methods. The recent turn to materiality has significant implications in the discourse on music listening. Subjective experience and internality are related back to sensory engagement with music. Naturalism only includes knowledge that is in principle derived from the senses, so focus is increasingly on listening to music as sensory experience. Additionally, along with the development of cognitive science that attributes much of what has previously been seen as spiritual to the working of the human brain, modern music cognition developed in the 1960s and continues to introduce scientific (whether naturalist or not) perspectives on musical experience and behaviour.

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

One of the attractive features of naturalism is that it appears to avoid the difficulty of choosing what you believe in. Naturalism gives the impression that there's no need to question anything, because everything to know is there to discover, and we have the capacity and means to do so. Adopting a naturalist worldview gives the semblance of not choosing to have faith in anything, but rather seeing things as they are by looking at nature through the natural sciences.

Naturalism does not recognize that it is based on an article of faith, that article of faith being the ontological statement that nothing exists beyond the 'natural' world. According to naturalism, everything must be found within nature; contradictorily, that statement itself is not found in nature or attained through the natural sciences. To take naturalism as true, one must assert that truth doesn't only come from the natural sciences – this assertion then obviously negates the premise of naturalism. The reason this does not become a barrier to accepting naturalism is because naturalism itself seems to be adopted as an assumption, often unquestioned, and usually implicit. Outside of philosophical circles or some academic settings at least, one rarely finds self-declared naturalists.

It is quite easy to say, for example, that altruistic actions are merely a means of survival and do not actually reflect any pure or inherent goodness in human nature. You can get away with that without tracing this statement back to the assumption that there is nothing outside of nature that could also have a bearing on who we are as humans. We don't challenge these statements because they are not wholly false but merely incomplete. What we forget is that two things can be true at the same time. Altruism can both help societies subsist (naturalism) and can also reflect the spiritual capacity to sacrifice for the good of others (one of many alternatives to naturalism).

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

I have already mentioned that naturalism precludes the possibility of true altruism because it assumes that human action is effected out of the drive for survival, and thus is ultimately self-interested. Naturalism doesn't grant humans any metaphysical purpose regardless of whether people assume one for themselves. One result of this way of thinking is the assertion that humans aren't inherently different from animals, that is, their differences can be explained completely by the natural sciences. Asserting the exalted status of humans has been a strong preoccupation of philosophy and theology and is also reflected in culture and the humanities. This status is often attributed to the existence of the immortal soul and consequently human life is valued above other life. In contrast, if there is no such distinction drawn to elevate the status of humans above animals, then anti-speciesism is reinforced and often adopted as an ethical stance. Anti-speciesism is particularly valuable in ecological terms, because animal and plant life are not sacrificed for human needs and wants, but rather all existence should equally be honoured and safeguarded (or otherwise, undisturbed). Many have started using the terms 'human animals' and 'non-human animals' to reflect the view of the animal status of humans and the more subtle distinction between the two.

That humans are no different from animals is often accompanied by the statement that ultimately we, like animals, act according to our biological needs. Our motivations for doing anything can be traced back to the continuation of our species. For example, birds are often admired for their singing, which in biological terms, is a mode of communication, for example to warn other birds of approaching danger. Birdsong appears to be fully explainable by the natural

sciences, since its function as a cry for help or to attract a mate are directly attributable to the survival of the species. If we transpose this way of thinking onto human music, then music serves some biological need that aids in perpetuating the human species. While reducing it to the same basic purposes would be too crass, a naturalist could indeed justify human musicking as a force for social cohesion, or as a tool for mental and physical health and well-being that improves the viability of human life, just as birdsong serves the viability of bird life.

In this way, our motivations can all be interpreted through a naturalist lens that sees human nature as one directed by the need to survive.

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

My exposure to naturalism is primarily in my own fields of study, musicology and music education. As such, they do not directly address the issues of naturalism and human nature, but rather express naturalist and materialist tendencies. Aside from Salomé Voegelin, it is rare that they explicitly draw attention to their orientation. Voegelin, however, takes Meillasoux's "new materialism" and extends it into sonic materialism, which I described above. David Jackson's scholarship describes a darker perspective on human nature that can come to the fore when a materialist lens is used. Sophia Roosth has an article arguing that the sound (or "screaming") of yeast should be considered musical composition; this line of thinking questions intentionality as a requisite for music and art and thus challenges what art means for humans. Finally, Nina Sun Eidsheim uses the idea of resonance and vibration as the underlying reason for musicking, precluding the need for any transcendental explanation of music.

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

Religion, when understood as a system of knowledge that enables the investigation of the spiritual world, is a divinely revealed path to truth, difficult though truth may be to attain and ascertain. Just as natural laws are there for us to discover in the physical universe, religion tells us that there are spiritual laws that underlie our spiritual reality. Because they are indeed *supernatural*, they cannot be explained with natural laws, although they do remain coherent with them. We do have to adopt an historical position because science and religion are both constantly evolving, and what may appear contradictory may later be discovered to be reasonable. At the same time we have to be wary that religion doesn't turn into superstition, which can be avoided when science and religion are coherent. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, one of the central figures of the Bahá'í Faith, calls attention to the harmony of religion and science, describing them as "two wings upon which man's intelligence can soar into the heights, with which the human soul can progress." Without the wing of religion, man would fall prey to superstition, and "with the wing of science alone he would also make no progress, but fall into the despairing slough of materialism."

Certain religious understandings of human nature serve to add a dimension rather than disregard scientific views of human beings. Recognizing that there is more than the natural world, religion may give a more complete picture of human nature. According to the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of the Bahá'í Faith, every person is, while in our current plane of existence, simultaneously spiritual and material. Human beings are viewed as noble creatures with the latent potential to develop and express spiritual virtues, virtues that transcend what natural laws dictate for us. Religion helps us to

understand that our nature as human beings goes beyond these laws, and it seeks to develop in us what we might call our 'higher' or our spiritual nature.

Further, it is in the application of religious teachings that we see evidence that human nature is indeed distinct from animal nature. Religion endows our life with purpose and direction and calls us to a higher standard of being and doing. A central purpose of religion is to direct our efforts to the betterment of the world through selfless service to humanity. That we respond to this call and sacrifice our own comfort for such a purpose demonstrates the force that religion awakens in us to orient ourselves to our higher nature and points to its existence.

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