

Origins and challenges of naturalism

1. What do you take naturalism to mean?

I take naturalism to mean the philosophical view that reality consists of nature and its processes, and that nothing supernatural exists in addition. More stringent naturalists maintain that all realms, including the biological and the mental, can be explained in physicalist terms, and particularly in terms of the arrangements of physical entities. This is their ontological claim. Their methodological claim is that the best way to investigate these realms is through the scientific method.

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

The attractiveness of naturalism is understandable to me for at least three reasons. In the first place, it has set itself up as a viable alternative to religion, especially as religion has grown to appear increasingly problematic from a number of angles. In the second place, a strong case could be made that the rise of naturalism is historically justified. The lessons of history in the West, especially since the 1300s, if not before, seem to vindicate its current epistemological hegemony. In the third place, scientific naturalism arguably offers the most convincing approach to understanding and grappling with reality. Like no other worldview, the argument goes, it actually works, and it works repeatedly.

In terms of the first reason, it is difficult to deny that religion can appear bankrupt and even deleterious to the human condition. The evidence includes the seeming inability of religion to address the moral issues of the day; the apparent mismatch between the teachings of sacred texts and emergent social

realities; the enduring antagonism between religious communities, notwithstanding the plea for tolerance; the unethical conduct of religious leaders and their followers; and the horrific violence spurred on by fundamentalist ideologies. Given this evidence alone (there is much more to consider, as discussed below), it is hard not to sympathize with the turn to secularism and naturalism.

Regarding the historical justification of naturalism, we can begin with the Renaissance which was ignited in Italy by the rediscovery of classic texts of Greek and Roman philosophy and literature. This reengagement with the likes of Plato and Cicero led to the rebirth of humanism, which glorified the dignity of the human being and emphasized his or her intellectual distinction from the animal realm. God remained an integral part of the Renaissance worldview, but more than that, His own incarnation into the Person of Jesus was held to justify the specific rise of humanism and the related veneration of the human form itself.

Overlapping with the latter stages of the Renaissance was the Protestant Reformation instigated by Martin Luther in the 1500s. Notably, while repudiating the Catholic Church and specifically what he viewed as its bloated sacraments, doctrinal abuses, moral laxity, corruption, and cynical indulgences, Luther also rejected much of what humanism stood for. For him, salvation came through faith; human beings were nothing before God and were wholly reliant upon His grace. But he also rejected the role of the clergy and insisted that every individual should have direct access to the Word of God and be able to discover divine truth for him or herself. Luther thus translated the Bible into the common tongue (in his case, German), making it accessible to the laity. The recent invention of the printing press, moreover, made his translation widely available. This development had a twofold effect relevant to the rise of naturalism. First, it

reinforced the independent investigation of truth that was so central to humanism. Second, it fomented conflicting interpretations of the Bible giving rise to rampant sectarianism that resulted basically overnight in three decades of war throughout much of Europe (recognizing the war was invariably fought for multiple reasons). Both developments played a vital role in opening certain minds to the idea that there must be better ways of understanding and getting on in the world. (And this is to say nothing of the impact that the Protestant ethic, and particularly Calvinism, had, as Max Weber argues, on the development of capitalism and its evolving affinity with materialism.)

What gradually emerged was a dual emphasis on empirical observation and reason. These were not new ways of grappling with reality, but in the wake of the humanism and the individualism inspired by the Renaissance and the Reformation, they took on a new measure of importance. Some, like Rene Descartes, stressed the role of reason independent of sense experience, while others, like John Locke, highlighted the role of empirical observation. Yet both rationalism and empiricism contributed their fair share to the rise of the Scientific Revolution and to the period of the Enlightenment that followed closely on its heels. Inspired by the seminal findings of thinkers like Nicolaus Copernicus, Galileo Galilei, Johannes Kepler, and Isaac Newton, the French *philosophes* and other Enlightenment philosophers confidently asserted the capacity of science, and reason in the broad sense of the term, to propel humanity towards greater levels of both individual and collective flourishing.

Enlightenment thinkers also started to openly question the place of God and religion. Locke and others had previously advocated religious tolerance as one way to get past the conflict. But, for many, the findings of science, and most notably Newton's system, implied there was little room for God in the world. Since the workings of the world could be explained by enduring mechanical

laws, what role did God really play in practice? Perhaps He had simply set the world in motion, like the ticking of a watch, and then stepped away. Some leaned into this deistic view. Others, like Denis Diderot and Voltaire, took the logic even further, essentially arguing that there was no need to posit the existence of God. Perhaps the laws of nature could be explained on their own terms. Even more, in light of all the evil and suffering in the world, one could reasonably ask if the existence of God was even morally cogent. They insisted it wasn't. What did make sense, however, was putting faith in the power of reason to get humanity past its many woes.

This atheistic mindset had received impetus earlier on from key figures such as Baruch Spinoza, who claimed that the Bible was a human construction and that theology had little to do with true spirituality, and Hume, who argued that miracles are empirically unjustifiable and that proofs arguing for the existence of God appealing to the order of the universe are misplaced. Later thinkers provided even more fuel for the atheistic fire. Ludwig Feuerbach, for example, maintained that God was simply an anthropomorphic projection of what human beings valued most about themselves, while David Strauss questioned the divinity of Jesus. Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and others similarly propounded materialist philosophies, but most directly relevant to the naturalist worldview was undoubtedly Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. Like Newton's *Principia*, Darwin's achievement was seismic. Not only did he explain how species evolve through the process of natural selection; he also seemingly laid the groundwork for explaining the human condition itself in naturalistic terms. With the rise of genetics, neuroscience, and other related fields, many would argue that this premise is being born out.

There have been many other developments, even paradigm shifts, in science – Einstein's special and general theories of relativity and quantum mechanics, for

instance – but underpinning them all is a basic commitment to naturalism. And, in many respects, this commitment seems to be paying off, which is the third reason for the attractiveness of naturalism. One can certainly debate whether or not the various branches of science are getting at reality as it is in itself (as a realist would contend), or if they are instead simply adept at explaining and predicting phenomena (as an instrumentalist would contend). But it is hard to argue with their success at explaining vast dimensions of reality – from the subatomic level to the body, to nature, to the universe, and to much more in between. The sciences can also lead to wonder, both at what exists (as when the Andromeda galaxy is viewed through a powerful telescope) and at what could be (as when considering how technology can potentially improve the human condition). Ironically, even those who like to repudiate science these days rely on it to get their message out – no science equals no internet, no social media, and hence far less capacity to circulate distorted, or anti-scientific, truths.

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

Because I have attempted to make a strong case for scientific naturalism in the previous section, I will not dwell on its merits here. It has obviously advanced knowledge, enabling humanity to grapple with the material realm in ways that are both unprecedented and abundantly fruitful. One of the central figures of the Bahá'í Faith, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, highlights this fact in no uncertain terms, stating that science “ever tends to the illumination of the world of humanity” and that it is “a mirror wherein the images of the mysteries of outer phenomena are reflected.” These outer phenomena include the laws of biology, our genetic makeup, our neurological configurations, the powers we share with the animal kingdom, and the patterns we have developed owing in many ways to the evolutionary

processes we have undergone as a species. All these phenomena are relevant to our understanding of human nature.

With that said, I would suggest that the greatest difficulty with naturalism is that, untempered, it falls into the same trap that 'neo-atheists' maintain religion falls into – namely, fundamentalism. The term often used here is 'scientism', which is the ideology that science will invariably explain everything there is to explain about reality, thus rendering irrelevant, in any given instance, extra-scientific explanations. There are reasons this stance is problematic. The first is that it is ironically anti-scientific if we have learned anything from David Hume or Karl Popper. Extrapolating from Hume's problem of induction, the fact that a naturalistic explanation has worked in cases A, B, C...K, and L, does not mean it will necessarily work in case M. Nothing about its having worked in the past, notwithstanding the range of circumstances in which it has worked, guarantees that it will adequately work in the future. Arguably, what David Chalmers refers to as the hard problem of consciousness (accounting for why and how individuals have phenomenal experiences unique to them), makes this point. There is little evidence that the naturalistic approach is getting anywhere close to solving this problem, even while acknowledging the increasingly successful forays science has made into the workings of the brain.

Pure naturalism is also unscientific from a Popperian perspective. For a theory to be scientific, according to Popper, it has to be falsifiable – that is, amenable to being tested and conceivably proven false. There are many problems with this criterion in practice. For example, maybe the falsifying evidence has nothing to do with the adequacy of the theory itself, but rather with the secondary assumptions that informed how the experiment meant to test it was set up. But the spirit behind the criterion is nevertheless important. This spirit is one of humility and includes the courage to rigorously test a theory and reassess its

merits if it comes up short. While naturalism generates many such theories, as a worldview itself, it is unfalsifiable. Notwithstanding the strength of the evidence against it, the naturalist can always explain the evidence away and assert that the phenomenon in question will eventually be elucidated by science. And he or she may be right. But it may alternatively be true that science itself is simply not up to the task of satisfactorily explaining the phenomenon, and that it never will be. The scientific spirit of humility and courage entails this possibility.

The concern for human flourishing also entails this possibility. As observed by many influential thinkers like Max Weber and Charles Taylor, scientism and secularism have stripped the world of mystery. By disenchanting reality, moreover, such 'isms' have effectively, albeit invertedly, stifled our capacity to thrive. This is partly because the scientific mindset has focused on the efficient cause of things (A causes B) at the expense of the teleological cause of things (A becomes B because it is A's inherent destiny to become B). By doing so, it has overemphasized means/end thinking, which in turn has led to the objectification and conceptual mechanization of both nature and human beings. Consequently, and because of the pervasiveness of this mindset, life, as we know it, has become fragmented, hollow, devoid of purpose. As such, it has become demotivating. The passion to flourish and achieve excellence has largely given way to lethargy and disaffection – except, perhaps, in certain cases of severe crisis.

On a related note, many also argue that it necessarily follows from the naturalistic mindset that everything is determined, this notwithstanding our strong intuition that we have freedom of choice. But then, the natural rejoinder is, if we are truly not free in any consequential sense, what is the point of living moral lives? What, indeed, is morality? Or the point of life itself? This was Fyodor Dostoevsky's Underground Man's fundamental quandary, and it is a quandary

that preoccupies many thinkers in this day – secularists and religionists alike – especially in view of the global crises, consumerism, polarization, factionalism, and identity politics that have taken over so much of our lives and thrown us into what many consider to be a collective state of existential turmoil.

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

There are many thinkers to choose from. There are those, like Thomas Nagel, who maintain that the physicalism of science compels it to ignore whatever cannot be rationalized in physicalist terms. Given phenomena such as consciousness, Nagel argues against such forms of reductionism in favour of an expanded conception of reality. Others agree that reality has to be understood in an expanded sense, offering suggestions as to how to gain knowledge of it while not discounting the value of science. Baruch Spinoza, Immanuel Kant, and Henri Bergson, for example, argue that there is one reality, but that this reality can be known in two different ways.

According to Spinoza, there is one substance – which he refers to as either God or Nature – that has an infinity of attributes. Only two of these attributes, however, are perceptible to humans – body and mind, or extension and thought. These attributes, while ontologically grounded in the same eternal substance, are cognitively distinct. It is therefore only natural that we should interact with these two attributes differently.

Kant also adopts a dualistic approach to knowing. He reasons that when we try to understand the world, it necessarily appears to us framed by the intuitions of time and space and as a network of causes and effects. Yet, we also engage with the world through practical reason. Thus, from the perspective of the

understanding of science, everything is determined, while from the perspective of practical reason and ethical thought, humans are by nature free and morally responsible for their actions. Neither perspective, moreover, can subsume or replace the other. Both are valid given our nature as human beings.

Focusing specifically on the concept of time, Bergson also advocates a form of dualism. For him, the scientific approach is valid, but on its own, it reduces reality to fragments. It consequently cannot do justice to the underlying continuity of reality and the humanly lived experience of time, which, he argues, has the quality of duration. This quality, moreover, can only be accessed through intuition. It may be putting words into Bergson's mouth, but one could conclude that science and intuition are complementary approaches to understanding reality.

In recent years, Roger Scruton has argued compellingly for cognitive dualism along similar lines. To make his case, he gives the example of the painting of a face. From one point of view, the painting can be analyzed by examining the blobs of paint and how they have been arranged on the canvas. Such an analysis produces one order of explanation. But when we stand back, we can also see the face itself, which, through our interaction with it, conveys meaning of a wholly different order – an order of understanding, moreover, that natural science is unequipped to furnish. Another example is a beautiful piece of music. Again, the sequence of notes can be analyzed, but the melody that emerges from the sequence when played well has its own existence which calls for interpretation and potentially induces emotion in the listener.

This phenomenon of emergence applies to the concept of personhood, and to what Scruton refers to as the "I-to-You" encounter. Certainly, there are biological explanations for why we behave in specific ways, but such explanations are

inadequate when it comes to understanding encounters between persons – particularly between those who look into each other’s eyes – where concepts such as accountability and choice come to the fore. As Scruton states, “The human world, ordered by first-person awareness, emerges from the order of nature, while remaining incommensurable with it.” This world, moreover, can only be understood “through concepts of functional, moral, and aesthetic kinds, through the interests that unite and divide us, and in terms that are open at every point to the ideas of ‘I,’ ‘you,’ and ‘why?’” It is an emergent, teleological, yet objectively existing (albeit, not an ontologically separate) world – one in which, as Simone Weil asserts, each person has an obligation towards every person for the sole reason that he or she is a human being. As such, it can only be understood through a cognitive lens that is complementary to – but also distinct from – naturalism.

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

So far, I have drawn attention to the benefits of adopting cognitive dualism when it comes to illuminating our understanding of human nature. The scientific approach, grounded in naturalism, is helpful, but it only gets us so far. In order to account for the human condition in all its complexity, a second, interpretive, lens is required.

This can be generalized to the notion that we need both the language of science and the language of religion in order to penetrate into the workings of reality to the extent humanly possible. Drawing on the compelling argument for complementarity by Farzam Arbab – a physicist and educator – one could say that these languages ‘supplement’ – i.e., add to, compensate for, make up for the limitations of – each other in that together they provide a fuller picture of reality

and its intricacies and possibilities in all their richness. Science focuses on natural, psychological, and social phenomena, and seeks to uncover the laws, patterns, principles, or conditions governing, underlying, or contributing to their behaviour. Religion investigates spiritual verities; moral archetypes; the nature of the individual's relationship to his or her Creator, fellow human beings, and the rest of creation; and the evolving laws, ordinances, and ethical provisions required for humanity to advance towards realizing its inherent oneness. Both seek to translate, where possible, their respective findings into tangible, useful realities – to apply them for human betterment. In an expanded sense, both can be thought of as languages of 'science'. The first is the language of material science, and the second is the language of what 'Abdu'l-Bahá calls "divine science". Again, neither is sufficient on its own. Divorced from the other, each falls into reductionism and dogmatism.

More specifically, there are a number of ways in which religion can contribute to science and to our understanding of human nature. Here, I will highlight what I understand to be two of them. The first is that religion can help science avoid some of the pitfalls of the naturalistic mindset by furnishing it with certain ontological assumptions. These include the beliefs that humanity is essentially one, that human beings are inherently noble, and that women and men are equal. Without these convictions, science can go awry, constructing, for example, 'diseases' like 'hysteria' and 'drapetomania' to explain the supposedly erratic and irrational behaviour of women and slaves, respectively. In fact, in both instances, their behaviour can be explained by the oppressive social conditions they were forced to endure. In other words, had a different set of assumptions about human nature been in place, these 'diseases' would never have been 'discovered'.

Second, religion can help to reattune science to the importance of thinking teleologically. On this point, I think it is fair to say, given what was shared above, that in order for science to have flourished the way it has, it had to be de-shackled from the dogmas that religion had fallen into. But as also discussed, naturalistic science can become dogmatic in its own right when left to its own devices. And a major factor contributing to this dogmatism is the primacy that naturalism grants to the efficient cause at the expense of what Aristotle refers to as the final cause. Without keeping the final cause in full view, as we have seen, science tends to objectify both nature and the human subject, the world becomes disenchanting and hollow, and we lose our sense of purpose. What ultimately compensates for this deficiency is religion rejuvenated by revelation. Such religion progressively attunes us to what is possible for us to achieve both as persons and as a kind. As such, it also provides the teleological context within which science can go about its work, which includes identifying the best means for overcoming obstacles to growth and further releasing our potential to thrive.

Much more could be said about how religion contributes to science (and vice versa) and our understanding of human nature, but there is one last point that I feel is especially pressing. While I believe the concept of cognitive or language dualism is helpful, I don't believe it is sufficient. The main issue is that it sets up an either/or dynamic while concurrently stressing the need for both languages. Roger Scruton admits as much, indicating that the two cognitive lenses are incommensurable – that is, utterly distinct lenses through which to understand wholly different elements of human nature. The paradigmatic case of incommensurability is the duck/rabbit picture: either you see the duck, or you see the rabbit, but you can't see (cognitively attend to) both at the same time.

I don't think the relationship between the languages of science and religion should be understood in this way. While they are certainly different, they are

also in many respects commensurable. Both, for example, are concerned with the interconnection of all things; both, in the last analysis, rely on faith (as Hume's problem of induction makes clear); both rely on reason (as 'Abdu'l-Bahá makes clear); both rely on metaphors of the sensible to express the material or intelligible realities they investigate; and both, at their best, embrace a mode of learning that values such virtues as humility, consideration, courage, and ingenuity, and that stresses the independent investigation of truth coupled with the social generation of knowledge (as highlighted by thinkers such as Helen Longino and Naomi Oreskes). One could also posit that the concept of love is an essential feature of both languages in their ideal forms. Regarding the language of religion: love, through intimate conversations, "open[s] minds to moral persuasion" (Universal House of Justice, 2020). Regarding the language of science: 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that "Love is the most great law that ruleth this mighty and heavenly cycle, the unique power that bindeth together the divers elements of this material world, the supreme magnetic force that directeth the movements of the spheres in the celestial realms." The list could go on, but I will end by suggesting that the philosophies of F.W.J. Schelling and G.W.F. Hegel may be of assistance in coming to further terms with the overlapping interplay between these two fundamental ways of investigating reality in all of its complexity.

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