Religion and naturalism

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 to mean a way of seeing reality as consisting solely in that which can be explained through the language of the physical sciences or, more generally, in terms of physical things. Naturalism carries with it an admiration for the natural world, a belief that physical reality is the only form of existence, and a conception of human beings as belonging to and being determined by nature. While it is often mistakenly equated with science or being scientific, it is rather a collection of assumptions about the nature of reality which excludes the possibility that there is anything beyond physical phenomena, however the term 'physical' is conceived. This perspective implies a strong belief that questions concerning the meaning and purpose of life or the nature of consciousness can ultimately be explained in purely physical terms. It also implies a sort of faith that concepts such as 'human society', 'religion', and 'history', can and will ultimately be defined in terms of physical causation or eventually replaced with concepts from the physical sciences that supposedly offer a better account of whatever phenomena these terms are referring to. A purely naturalist vision of reality would thus maintain that the language of physical science is the only adequate language for describing reality 'as it is' and that other forms of expression such as religious or poetic language do not carry the same potential for objective descriptions of reality and may ultimately prove deceiving.

In religious studies, naturalism exerts a sort of ideological influence on the field and has led to accounts of religious history that seek to explain religion in purely social or physical terms. Because naturalism has become so strongly associated

with the physical sciences, some arguments against naturalism tend to lump science and naturalism together as a sort of foil against which to define religious worldviews or any other perspective open to a non-physical dimension of reality. While many of these arguments offer strong reasons for accepting a vision of reality that extends beyond the physical, the equation of naturalism with physical science has the unfortunate effect of strengthening a dichotomous conception of the relationship between science and religion.

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

One of the draws of naturalism seems to be its claim to be free of the superstitions of the past. If reality is only physical, then studying reality from a naturalist perspective will clear away a lot of unnecessary beliefs that have held us back from gaining an accurate understanding of our world. In this sense, naturalism claims to represent a position which aspires to speak about reality 'as it is' beyond subjective inclinations and desires and maintains that we can gradually move towards a more accurate understanding of reality relative to humanity's past systems of belief. In this sense, the ideals of progress and truth seem to be part of the promise that naturalism offers. However, it becomes difficult to describe or to justify the idea of progress and truth in purely naturalist terms. If we are ultimately the products of blind evolutionary forces, who can say whether the change we experience is progress? And what place would an abstract concept like 'truth' have in a purely physical account of reality?

Another reason why naturalism might be attractive to many is that it offers a way of seeing human beings as having a deep kinship with the rest of the natural world. If we are part of nature, on par with other animals (though perhaps more

complex), then we should feel more sympathy with nature given that we have no privileged position from which to justify its exploitation. This particular appeal seems to have become stronger with growing awareness of the global climate crisis. Related to this is the idea that naturalism avoids the problem of a 'break' between physical and non-physical reality. Instead, there is only the physical and thus only one reality to understand. Some are attracted to naturalism because of their attraction to the order and perfection they see in the physical world and a desire to see that same order applied to all that is considered social or human reality, albeit with a conception of order that only admits description in physical terms.

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

Naturalism seems to bring into focus the relationship that human beings have with the natural world, emphasizing that we share a lot in common with animals and we do not live entirely outside of the laws of nature. Reflecting on our kinship with the rest of creation and our sense of awe when contemplating the natural world does seem to move us to greater concern for protecting the environment. However, naturalism's restrictive view of reality makes it extremely difficult to imagine and theorize how human beings might transcend the more vicious and competitive traits that animals display and commit to the kind of cooperation and sacrifice needed to address issues such as climate change and other threats to the environment. While it could be argued that being able to cooperate and consume less is ultimately to our evolutionary advantage, the question of how to foster such a disposition towards cooperation and sacrifice seems to be difficult to address from a naturalist perspective. This seems in part due to the limited language a naturalist framework offers to explore our basic experience of morality and value, as well as a tendency to treat more intrinsic

forms of motivation with suspicion and instead focus on observable changes in behaviour.

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

In his book about the historical development of secularism and its influence on Western culture titled *A Secular Age*, the philosopher Charles Taylor makes some helpful observations about the growing appeal of naturalism in the modern period. Rather than rational or scientific proofs, he finds that naturalism's appeal was primarily an 'ethical' one linked to a certain image of maturity and adulthood:

> A religious outlook may easily be painted as one which offers greater comfort, which shields us from the truth of an indifferent universe [...] Religion is afraid to face the fact that we are alone in the universe, and without cosmic support. As children, we do indeed find this hard to face, but growing up is becoming ready to look reality in the face. (Taylor, 2007)

He further observes that this appeal was strengthened by a sense of what it means to be courageous as well as by the emphasis placed on the alleged virtue of 'manliness' in modern Europe. Both courage and 'manliness' were seen to be exemplified in an ability to face the cold hard facts of a purposeless universe, thus contributing to the sense that a religious worldview ultimately amounted to a form of denial or childhood regression. Taylor rightly observes that this kind of appeal is not necessarily felt by those with a more profound conception of faith, which "involves in its own way growing beyond and letting go of more childish images of God". However, if our conception of faith remains at an immature level, then it is easy to see how adopting a naturalist outlook which does away

with literalistic images of God could be seen as the more 'mature' option: "The superiority is an ethical one, and of course, is heavily influenced by the person's own sense of his/her own childhood faith, which may well have remained a childish one." For this reason, Taylor argues that it was ultimately our "attachment to inessential doctrines which can be refuted" that left the door open to the ethical appeal of naturalism as the epistemological stance of courage and maturity.

The philosopher Akeel Bilgrami has also provided some helpful reflections regarding the conceptual background from which naturalism has emerged. He discusses how the concept of 'nature' was gradually equated with "that which the physical sciences can study" through shifts in philosophical and religious thought in 17th century Europe (Bilgrami, 2021). He describes this as a process of "desacralization" which involves something he calls the "deracination of God from nature", whereby nature is no longer seen as having any sacred or divine quality. Bilgrami links these developments to commercial and political interests in modern Europe which sought to justify the exploitation of the natural world – if there is no longer anything particularly sacred or morally valuable about nature, if it is finally nothing but inert matter, then there is little to stop human beings from exploiting its resources however we see fit. Bilgrami's observation is interesting given that many are now drawn to naturalism out of concern for the environment and as a rejection of allegedly 'religious' worldviews where human beings are seen as being given free reign to exploit nature's resources.

While Bilgrami notes that the desacralization of nature was seen by some as a step forward beyond traditional beliefs which saw God as part of nature along with other non-physical entities such as spirits, he argues that it also "had the effect of evacuating nature of all *value* properties as well" . While this view of nature was initially common amongst religious leaders who sought to locate

God entirely outside the 'natural' order (as opposed to popular forms of religious belief that held a more 'enchanted' view of nature), he argues that it eventually gave rise to exclusively secular conceptions of reality where a vision of nature as solely physical was seen to make up the entirety of reality. While Bilgrami does not go so far as to advocate for a return to a sacralized conception of nature, he finds it to have been an "illicit extrapolation" to deny the possibility that values could be included as properties of the natural world. Rather, he argues that an account of nature as containing value properties offers a much better explanation for our practical moral agency than the idea that values arise independently within ourselves as "self-standing states of mind" which are then projected onto a valueless world. If the world were truly empty of value, then our mental states would have to arise independently within ourselves without any outside influence, but when we are asked about whether we desire something like justice we don't scan the inside of our mind to look for that desire but actually think about the *desirability* of justice itself. For this reason, Bilgrami argues that it is almost impossible to talk about real moral desires without positing the existence of things that are morally desirable and which make normative demands on us as somehow forming part of the world in which we live.

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

Religion offers a language with which to describe reality that can complement the language of physical science. Without another form of discourse that interacts with science, we seem to be at risk of trying to fit things into the language of physics, chemistry, and biology, even when it seems awkward and perhaps rationally untenable. The interaction between religion and science may help us address these difficulties by allowing for a more expansive language to

describe moral or other abstract phenomena which do not fit the language of natural science but which nevertheless seem to be fundamental to our everyday experience as human beings.

Unfortunately, such potential complementarity between religion and science is hindered by unreflective attachment to forms of religiosity that cannot be reconciled with well-established scientific findings. In this context, the relationship that Charles Taylor identifies between an attachment to immature forms of religious belief and the ethical appeal of naturalism suggests the importance of developing approaches to religion that can be reconciled with well-established scientific consensus. Being able to distinguish between attachment to inessential doctrines and more mature approaches to religious faith seems to be essential to overcoming the dichotomy between religion and science that sustains naturalism's ethical appeal. In this regard, the Bahá'í writings offer some helpful insights into the attitude religion should adopt towards science:

> There is no contradiction between true religion and science. When a religion is opposed to science it becomes mere superstition: that which is contrary to knowledge is ignorance.
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> Religion and science are the two wings upon which man's intelligence can soar into the heights, with which the human soul can progress. It is not possible to fly with one wing alone! Should a man try to fly with the wing of religion alone he would quickly fall into the quagmire of superstition, whilst on the other hand, with the wing of science alone he would also make no progress, but fall into the despairing slough of materialism... ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*)

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References

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