

# Taking a broader view

## **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 the assumption that only the forces of the natural world exist. It blinds us from considering the effects and reality of the spiritual world, or even observing social reality accurately. In academia, naturalism is the assumption on the basis of which exploration of and conclusions about the world are largely based, with few exceptions. This blindness can collapse understanding to inaccurate or simplistic notions about how the world is organized and what drives motivation.

In the field of economics, the notion that we are compelled by a fight for survival, in the same ways as animals, has reduced human motivation to economic self-interest. This has led in practice to an ethos of profit by any means. How often has a business model built itself off of the exploitation of the earth and its workers? Such a business, rather than being shamed, is perceived as making good financial decisions, while consumers appreciate the ease and savings gained. It should be noted that the original impulse of this model included the assumption that as individuals pursued their own well-being, economic justice would follow. However, in practice it has been demonstrated that the notion that “a rising tide will lift all boats” does not hold weight. In reality, a small portion of humanity gains at the expense of others. This distribution does not correspond to rewarding those who work hardest and caring for those who take a less demanding path.

Anyone who has given up a level of financial security for the good of someone else can recognize that the naturalistic assumption that human beings are motivated only by personal profit falls short of explaining the daily decisions of ordinary people. Unfortunately, such behavior is treated as an anomaly, superficially attributed to the behavior of lazy or foolish individuals or groups, or, more often than not, ignored completely. Anyone who has been supported by their family or community has also benefited from behavior that is at odds with the assumption that profit maximization is the primary motive of all. This kind of behavior is explained away as a type of generosity that arises after the giver's finances are secure. Such explanations for these 'anomalies' are not based on rigorous consideration and observation. Ignoring the possibility that such motivation and behavior could falsify the dominant assumptions about human nature suggests a certain dogmatic position towards prevalent economic theory that the fair-minded cannot blindly accept.

## **2. Why has naturalism become so widespread, particularly in the West?**

### **What is so attractive about it?**

Studying the forces of the natural world as a means of understanding how things operate has increased our explanatory powers, giving rise to the ability of humans to more effectively harness these forces for material and technological advancement. One might say that an adolescent-like excitement infused many generations with the thrill of understanding and using these forces. With this enthusiasm, the assumption that everything can be explained through the natural world became over-extended.

Perhaps this assumption that there is only one source of knowledge is a carry-over from our attitudes toward religion throughout human history. For centuries, religious authority was seen as the primary authority for all questions and decisions faced by people and rulers. Knowledge had a single, fixed center. As a portion of the world adopted naturalism, the superstitions and limitations of what was understood on the basis of religion were exposed, weakening the faith of many in religion's authority. At the same time, faith in naturalism's explanatory power for the exploration of other phenomena grew. Where religious leaders have pushed against acceptance of some of the useful insights provided through naturalism, the assumption that there is a dichotomy between science and religion has caused generations to feel compelled to choose between science and religion as a source of truth. When science is chosen, naturalism is often adopted.

If religion is perceived as a collection of static beliefs that have come down to us in the past, it is understandable that when the West turned to those beliefs, they were unable to find clear answers to the new questions that the Enlightenment had raised. Alternatively, Bahá'ís view religious truth as constituted by a long series of revelations from a single author (God), who guides humanity according to the evolving needs of its collective social and spiritual progress. It may be argued that the West has suffered oppression in that large segments of the population have been deprived of access to religion as a system of knowledge and practice. If we assume that religion is a static set of beliefs from the past, and we do not recognize the unfolding and unified nature of religion, its insights about social and spiritual reality go untapped.

There is something more that should be said about the appeal of naturalism. Another reason people are attracted to it is because of its unified conception of reality, which may be more appealing than a fragmented picture with disconnected dimensions, such as the physical, social, and spiritual. In this latter picture, it becomes difficult to explain how the different dimensions interact with one another. Naturalism solves this problem by retaining only a single dimension – the physical – and shaving off the others. However, this seems to leave out a great deal. One can agree with the naturalist that reality is one, but simultaneously make a case for including these other dimensions rather than setting them aside. If we reflect deeply, in fact, we might see that the different dimensions of reality are closely interrelated. For example, study of the natural world yields insights that can sometimes shed light on social and spiritual reality. The law of magnetism, for instance, is derived from observing the natural world, but it can also help us better understand certain spiritual concepts, such as kindness. In fact, the Bahá'í writings explain that a kindly tongue acts like a magnet, attracting the hearts of others. Language, then, appears to cut across the different dimensions of a single reality – but one that is more extended than naturalism maintains.

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

As we have seen, understanding the operations of the natural world offers very powerful explanatory resources, as long as we don't confine our view of reality to nature. Unfortunately, naturalism limits all of existence to what can be observed in the natural world and does not allow for the possibility of there being various levels of reality, connected in different ways. A sort of narrow-

mindedness arises where a zealous belief in naturalism's powers of explanation has caused people to miss over and over again instances in which naturalism has fallen short in representing the powers of unity, stewardship, and reverence, among many other human attributes. How many are there who explore reality systematically and scientifically and find that they are expected to ignore any explanations beyond those allowed by naturalism?

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

While bell hooks may not speak explicitly about naturalism, she is able to address questions faced in the social sciences with a spiritual lens that is largely accepted and respected in academia and social justice circles. She brings this perspective to her writing, lectures and interviews on the subjects of overcoming racism and sexism, improving education, and the need for community. By doing so, she takes away naturalism's power to limit our insights about reality. She brings realities such as love and community to the fore, and offers them as worthy of consideration; these are not fluffy ideals or utilitarian tools, but relevant concepts for social change and humanity's progress.

In hooks' work, one can see that when naturalism is accepted as the sole explanation of human motivation, a hierarchy of the strong over the weak becomes justified as the norm and shapes relationships at every level, ranging from the family to the social order. Speaking in the American context, she is concerned about the family and intimate relationships as spaces directly influenced by and influencing the wider society. But she does not accept the culture of 'power over' as an inevitable organizing principle. Rather, she sees this ordering of society and self as something people are dissatisfied with. They are

instead longing for an order that is guided by the human being's innate transcendent nature. She recognizes religion's role in reaching true motivation and states that "All the great religious traditions share the belief that love is our reason for being". She adds:

When lecturing on ending domination around the world, listening to the despair and hopelessness, I asked individuals who were hopeful to talk about what force in their life pushed them to make a profound transformation, moving them from a will to dominate toward a will to be compassionate. The stories I heard were all about love. That sense of love as a transformative power was also present in the narratives of individuals working to create loving personal relationships.

She points out that when she started to write and lecture about love, few pushed back, suggesting an intuitive recognition of this truth even among those who may not address love in their own explanations of human nature and notions of social change. The trouble, she suggests, has been practice – we long for actionable love in our personal life and contribution to society but are influenced by our context and training and left unclear how to enact love in our life. Communities centered on love then, are not utopian ideals; rather, they are spaces for the necessary transformation of society to occur. "Imagine all that would change for the better if every community in our nation had a center (a sangha) that would focus on the practice of love, of loving-kindness."

The deep plausibility of hooks' contributions as well as the general respect she is afforded in the social sciences illustrates a way of engaging in the pursuit of knowledge that acknowledges the role of naturalism in our social affairs, without

accepting all of its claims about the human being and society. By doing so, a space to draw from religion and spirituality is opened up.

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

Science, even under the sway of naturalism, can tell us something about the natural world, how it is ordered and operates. This may provide some insights into how society is currently ordered and operates, since naturalism's influence has shaped our assumptions about how to organize ourselves. But it cannot tell us what more is possible or illuminate what is possible when we draw individually and collectively on our highest nature. For example, religion teaches that wealth is praiseworthy, provided that it is acquired through hard work and the grace of God, and that no one in the population is suffering materially. Under naturalism's influence, dominant economic theory has been unable to combine the principles of love, justice, and oneness effectively, and has remained confused about true motivation, as it has lacked these insights from religion.

Religion tells us what we can be, who we actually long to be and what principles and motivation to draw on in the building of a society that reflects our noblest aspirations. Religion opens for us the mysteries of the soul's influence on the intellect and on action. It points to the transcendent elements of human beings, which naturalism is paralyzed from acknowledging. Religion sets for us standards by which we can determine the value and direction of our endeavors. Without ignoring nature's forces, religion frees us from the belief that we are ultimately confined by the natural world. Religion can take us further than we have gone before by accurately acknowledging who we truly are.

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## **References**

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