CrossMark

COMMENT FOR *THINK* ON NATURALISM VERSUS THEISM

Brenda Watson

The search for common ground is hugely important and it depends on understanding in as fair a way as possible how words are being used by opponents in debate – in this case naturalism and theism.

In the *Think* issue on Naturalism (vol. 19, no. 56, Autumn 2020) there were many interesting articles, but the ones that resonated most with me were those acknowledging problems of definition. Nothing important philosophically can be said if it is not clear what we are talking about.

Stephen Law's article on 'Naturalism versus Theism Is a False Dilemma' is a case in point (Law 2020). I welcome the fact that he is seeking to avoid hardline either/ors. To work towards a common mind is far more constructive than digging in yet deeper trenches separating people. Divisions regarded as inalienable are at the root of so many political problems. Writing this at the time of the American presidential election when democracy itself appears to be on trial, we can see the huge damage caused by wrapping up everything in opposing camps. Why do Republicans and Democrats not realize that they hold a huge amount in common, as the political theorist Ronald Dworkin pointed out in his book *Is Democracy Possible Here?* Education should be developing an awareness of those common values for all children and students, so that differences of opinion on particular practical matters can have some hope of resolution.

I have long argued for an approach to diversity and relationships which I term 'critical affirmation'. The main advantage of this approach is that it treats other people with respect, even though they may hold opinions with which

doi:10.1017/S1477175621000518 © The Author(s), 2022. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The Royal Institute of Philosophy
Think 61, Vol. 21 (Summer 2022)

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175621000518 Published online by Cambridge University Press

one strongly disagrees. Moreover, by giving them an *initial* benefit of the doubt, in other words refraining from treating them as simply absurd, foolish or deceitful, one enables them to state their position fairly. Without immediate judgementalism their position is more likely to be understood. So many disputes end up as dead-ends because, as Tillich used to argue, they are like ships at night passing each other and never making contact – the one attacks what the other is not defending. Understanding does not come easily. It requires an initial feeling of sympathy or at least empathy with the other. Then on the basis of such understanding fruitful dialogue can occur.

How is this relevant to the naturalism versus theism debate? Law notes that naturalism is far from being a well-defined term and that it faces serious problems regarding the 'Four Ms'. Keith Ward's brief article on 'Naturalism' also drew attention to the difficulty of knowing what the word *natural* covers. 'If anyone says "I only believe in what is natural", science has a long way to go before it can definitively say just what that excludes' (Ward 2020: 85). He then cites six examples of difficulties which make naturalism into 'a faith that the sort of problematic issues I have mentioned can all one day be resolved by improved scientific methods'. So he asks why do philosophers try to force 'the complexity and diversity of our understandings of the world … into one Procrustean grand narrative?'

Theism is an equally difficult term to define. Here I believe Law moves from his carefully balanced discussion of naturalism into an unreasoning unwillingness to play fair to theism. To start by blaming theists for attempting to make a case for theism is not auspicious. Isn't all philosophy about trying to make a case for particular views and understandings and finding fatal flaws in opponents' arguments? There is no need to undermine that proper philosophical activity by insinuating that it is for propaganda purposes 'popular among religious apologists' and felling theists with the statement that they are guilty of a logical fallacy. This is assuming, ahead of argument for it, that naturalism versus theism

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175621000518 Published online by Cambridge University Press

is a false dilemma. Moreover, it is not starting the enquiry on a fair footing; one party is seemingly disabled.

The crucial point is that, just as naturalism can be seen to have different meanings, so can theism. These meanings need to be discussed in calm terms. To imply that theism is to do with 'belief in gods, angels, fairies, goblins' – what can be termed 'woo' – and later to refer to the 'supernatural' as *spooky* is imposing a meaning easy to refute – setting up virtually a paper tiger.

Aside from the question of how many scientists who are religious believers believe in such ghosts, goblins and angels, such an approach ignores the long debates in theology over the centuries as to the understanding of God which should command our attention. In other words, it is presuming that all theists are cognitive asses with whom it is not worth arguing. Where does the view of 'God' understood by Paul of Tarsus, Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhart, Pascal, Kierkegaard, and right up to the present day, people like Teilhard de Chardin, Rowan Williams and Jonathan Sacks (who has sadly just died) feature in this?

Fiona Ellis in her article 'True Naturalism, Goodness and God' attempts to find a way for theism to coexist with naturalism. What she argues for is in fact close to what many thoughtful religious believers hold. She mentions Tillich indeed. He tried to communicate his conception of God in the phrase 'Ground of our Being', clearly seeking to get away from the simplistic dualist notion of God and the world being separate entities. He saw himself as 'an ecstatic naturalist … insisting … that God is to be found in the "ecstatic" character of *this* world' (Ellis 2020: 119). Ellis sees nature as 'God-involving': 'God's spirit pervades the world, albeit with no implication that this exhausts God's reality' (Ellis 2020: 109, 118).

She is right that much committed atheism 'is premised upon a contestable and highly problematic conception of God – one which most theologians would be anxious to reject'. Talk of *supernatural* implies a dualism between nature and something else. This is a mistaken

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175621000518 Published online by Cambridge University Press

understanding of the doctrine of creation, which sees God as some kind of thing-like entity creating the world as wholly distinct. Rather, the relationship between God and the world in advanced religious thought is as both immanent and transcendent. God acting within and by means of nature as well as being distinct from nature.

Philosophers are entitled to challenge such concepts of God, but what will not do is to ignore them and instead lumber theism with only caricatures, as did A. C. Grayling when he dismissed belief in God as believing in fairies at the bottom of the garden. No intelligent rational debate can take place in such an atmosphere weighting the debate so heavily on one side, with naturalism standing for scientific rationalism and theism for childish superstition.

It is of course all too easy not to understand a far more nuanced approach and settle for a straightforward dualism between nature and spirit – a clearcut either/or again. But that cannot claim to be rational.

It is hugely important that theists enter the arena for philosophical debate on such an issue as naturalism versus theism. It must, however, be on a level playing field, not one tilted towards one side.

Brenda Watson is a retired education consultant, author of several books including Education and Belief *(1987) and just published* Making Education Fit for Democracy *(2020). Her forthcoming book* The Jesus Puzzle: Challenging Intellectual Uncertainty about Jesus *is to be published by John Hunt Publishing.* bgwatson@waitrose.com

References

Ellis, F. (2020) 'True Naturalism, Goodness, and God', *Think* 19.56: 109–20.

Law, S. (2020) 'Naturalism versus Theism Is a False Dilemma', *Think* 19.56: 103–7.

Ward, K. (2020) 'Naturalism', *Think* 20.56: 85–8.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175621000518 Published online by Cambridge University Press