SOME REFLECTIONS ON NATURALISM

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In this article I argue that we do not need a strict definition of naturalism, but can satisfactorily describe the naturalistic stance or attitude in terms of hostility to seeing human beings as subject to powers or forces or laws of nature that go beyond those governing the rest of the empirical world. We are to be explained as the evolutionary products of natural processes. I argue that we should see our concepts as well in this light, and explore some examples of the way this attitude can illuminate questions of meaning.

The Naturalistic Attitude

It would be orthodox to start with a precise definition of naturalism, as a doctrine maintaining one thing or another. But I fear that like many or most other terms, naturalism resists any kind of analysis into component parts that fit together to make up its precise meaning. It may also have different connotations for different philosophers. One way of putting this is to say that under the one umbrella concept, different conceptions are possible. But I doubt whether it is helpful to look for this one umbrella concept, and I do not think this difficulty hampers us in locating what we are talking about, and sketching its attractions and its importance.

So rather than seeing naturalism as a concept delimiting a precise doctrine, I propose seeing it as an orientation or attitude to human beings, the world, and our place in it: mind and its place in nature, as the philosopher C. D. Broad christened one of his books. The orientation is primarily

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one of embracing the universality of the natural. And this in turn implies seeing the human being, mind and all, as explicable only in ways that can also explain the behaviour of other parts of nature. It may indeed be the case, as various writers have argued, that we cannot claim to have a full inventory of what those explanations might be, nor of the reservoir of natural particles and forces and fields that they draw upon. Science may develop in ways we can scarcely envisage. No matter; for in whatever ways these things – the building blocks of physics, chemistry, and biology – expand to give complexities that surprise and even baffle us, the naturalistic attitude is comfortable provided that they only apply in the same way to human beings as to anything else in the natural world. The attitude only hits the rocks if there exists anything new and inexplicable, a leap beyond the boundaries of the rest of nature, in the human animal and its doings.

Seen this way the naturalistic attitude is a refusal to rest content with anything that smacks of human exceptionalism. Whatever we describe about human beings and their minds, the naturalist hopes, there have to be ways that it comes about or ways that it happens, where the ways are ones in which other things also come about, or also happen.

It should be noticed that naturalism in this sense is just an extension of the scientific approach to elements that do not involve human beings, but just parts of physical nature. So, for example, in the late eighteenth century the Scottish geologist James Hutton first deployed what became known as the uniformitarian principle in geology, and thereby gave the methodological bedrock of that science. According to the principle the ways rocks, fossils, and land masses formed and changed were no different from more familiar operations of nature, but extended over immense tracts of time. The contrast was with 'catastrophism' or the view that the natural world exhibited the operation of currently absent forces, biblical deluges, or miraculous changes. Hutton argued that we should look instead at known forces of heat, pressure, sedimentation, crystallization, decay, erosion,

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and so on, all of which could be seen around us, albeit massively magnified and extended in the case of the earth itself. Later, of course, the same attitude had its greatest triumph not only in Darwin's theory of natural selection, but in his insistence on seeing human beings and especially our emotions as just one part of the great chain of animal life.

The naturalistic attitude is not to be rejected because there are obvious ways in which human beings are indeed exceptional. After all there are obvious ways in which some geological events are unlike others (and in fact the uniformitarian principle only became completely believable when geology embraced plate tectonics, in the middle of the twentieth century, describing a credible origin of the pressures that crumple rocks and build great mountain chains). Human beings are exceptional in being the only animals that cultivate crops, build cities, invent machines, or speak complex languages. The naturalistic attitude approaches this by turning to see if these behaviours and abilities can be seen as natural continuations of the complex behaviours illustrated in other parts of nature. Other animals select what they eat, travel where it is easier to find food, build nests, form communities, and even use tools and have their own signalling systems. We are more complicated, but that does not show that the complications demanded a special discontinuity, putting us forever on the other side of an unbridgeable divide from the rest of nature. Any non-naturalist, trying to show that it does, would be flying in the face of the evolutionary history which, we also believe, ensures the absence of anything unnatural, or supernatural or miraculous about the course that got us to where we are.

Ways we Think

This reliance on evolution should also embrace our approach to concepts and meanings. I am going to

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concentrate on two related topics. One is the nature of moral thought, and the other the nature of scientific thought. They are linked by the fact that each deals in necessities. Morality deals in things like obligations, or what you *must* do. Science deals with causation and laws of nature, or the way events *must* fall out. These concepts too have a history, and even if their evolution is partly a matter of speculation, still, it is often enough for a naturalistic purpose to see how they *could* have come about, without having a detailed history of how they *did* come about. The possibility is itself enough to sideline any sense that it was a mystery, dependent upon special powers in our minds and ourselves. For on the face of it, we would be pretty extraordinary if we had a special faculty for detecting or intuiting these 'musts'. Our senses tell us what does happen, but not why it must happen. They also tell us how people do behave, but not how they ought to behave, or must behave. So why do we have any use at all for these necessities? Why do we think in terms of them, and what is involved in such thinking?

In the 'genealogical' approach I recommend, we start with something we can readily imagine our ancestors having had to cope with. We then try to see how, without the benefit of one of our ways of thought, a solution might have come about, and then, as a kind of flower on the top of the solution, we become clearer about why we have a vocabulary enabling our ancestors to communicate, reflect upon, contest, and perhaps enforce the solution.

In connection with morality the classic example of this approach is Hume's account in Book III of his *Treatise* of the emergence of a concept of justice and its associated place in our practical reasonings. Hume imagines a bare landscape, in which human beings have no such concept, but do have needs, including a need to avoid conflict, and other needs that demand various fairly minimal kinds of cooperation. They also have a sense of their own interests, and are capable of seeing that often these can only be met through cooperative arrangements with each other. After

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sketching examples of how arrangements along the lines of 'you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours' (or 'you mind my back and I'll mind yours') would naturally grow in such soil, Hume says that we need 'a form of words which express a resolution of performing one's part in such an arrangement' and this is what is involved in giving and accepting promises. And for promises to work there must be a penalty for failing to perform what was promised without a good excuse. Hence a person 'by making use of this form of words subjects himself to the penalty of never being trusted again in case of failure'. This might mean being driven out of the tribe, or denied any of the fruits of cooperative endeavours. This is the genealogy behind the institution of giving and taking promises, and hence derives the meaning of promising, and thence obligation. We could say if we wish that these are social constructions, but it may be misleading, because the feeling of having to do something can be sufficiently weighty or burdensome that a conventional origin might seem insufficient to generate it. But it is we who give it that weight. The need for trustworthiness is sufficiently important to be endlessly ingrained by force of example and education. It becomes what is sometimes called second nature to us, and we find it difficult to think of it as our own creation (but then human beings often find it difficult to think of their Gods as their own creation, although they almost certainly are).

Hume suggested a similar genealogy for our idea of causation, and allied notions such as that of a law of nature. The original position is that as agents in the world we need to select those uniformities in the way events happen that we can rely upon. We need a system with which to meet the future and to mould it.

Dignifying a regularity so that on the occurrence of one event we can anticipate the other with certainty gives us the methods we need to use, and calling the one kind of event a cause and the other an effect enables us to pass on the method to each other. The input is just that of a pattern of events, but the vocabulary does not merely

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describe the pattern, but results from a change in mind whereby, as he puts in in Section 7 of his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 'we make no longer any scruple of foretelling one upon the appearance of the other'.

The naturalistic spirit is here satisfied because the explanations do away with any special faculty for detecting necessities. We experience only things that happen, but our practical needs go beyond merely recounting those. We also criticize them in morals, and dignify them as reliable, in science.

Another similar case is provided by the notion of the chance of something happening. It is difficult to conceive of chances as mysterious forces that are somehow sufficient to make events happen with reliable frequencies. So the question is, what can be meant by chance, and why do we think in terms of it? Here the sketch goes like this. The type of situation from which we started is the need to invest cost and effort in the hope of some gain. Investing money to buy seed, and investing time and effort sowing it, is in effect gambling on a good enough harvest. Should we do this? It depends, obviously, on the ratio of cost to benefit, but also on the confidence we have in the favourable outcome. Some such combinations are much better than others, and since we often need to coordinate and cooperate in the light of these variables, we need to have some language to communicate and discuss them. People will have had rough measures of cost and benefit from time immemorial (there are very few if any societies without some kind of monetary system). And with enough experience they learned ratios of numbers of occasions on which the endeavour paid off, and the number when it didn't. They learned where and when hunts are successful or not, and where and when harvests tend to flourish or fail. So evolved an arithmetical measure of the degree of confidence, or what is sometimes called credence, to gamble on things like a successful hunt or harvest: probabilities or chances, in short. These give our degrees of confidence the measures of the calculus of probabilities. So we can

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now say that to assert a probability is to express (communicate or recommend) a betting rate. It gives the assertion of a probability the appearance, the same 'grammar', as other assertions. It also gives us the space to talk about unknown probabilities, when we do not know enough to defend one degree of confidence against others. It also gives us objectivity, or at least all the objectivity we need, since confidence divorced from evidence derived from frequencies is irrational and rightly ignored. It should therefore be no surprise that chances figure in physical theory. They can be calculated, and sometimes their values can be entered in tables of physical constants, as the half-lives of isotopes and radioactive elements are. They can be assessed as the same as or different from finite frequencies, since even events supposedly crafted to have some fixed and unalterable chance of happening (such as the tosses of a fair coin) display untoward sequences of results. Again though, we do not end up saying 'what chances are'. We only end up saying how we think in terms of the notion, and why we do so.

We also explain things by citing chances. Is this compatible with the pragmatic/genealogical approach, or is it according them a real metaphysical status? Well, we often explain events (perhaps to someone innocent and surprised) by assuring them that it is the kind of thing that happens (Q. Why is the train late? A. It's always/usually late). When we are confident that one degree of confidence, and one only, can be defended, as in the case of half-lives, we insist, and the insistence can take on many of the trappings of truth and fact. It can sound like a new item in the world, even although it is not.

Hume was not alone in pioneering this kind of genealogical approach to some of the ways we think. Other writers who have clear affinities with it include Hobbes (who applied it to our thinking, or failing to think, about the nature of God), Berkeley (who applied it to the scientific concept of force), Nietzsche (who expanded on Hume's genealogy of justice), Wittgenstein (who advised to look at

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the use of words if you want to know their meaning), and many others. It is a key component of pragmatism, which shares the naturalistic attitude, and develops it by concentrating on the utility of particular modes of thinking. But notice that pragmatism refuses to say 'what justice is' or more generally 'what values and obligations *are*, or what they *consist in*' and refuses to say what laws of nature are, or what causal necessities or chances consist in. It bypasses any such issue.

This puts it at odds with some other approaches to such matters. Indeed, the dominant semantic/metaphysical approach is directed to these constitutive questions, and argues that the issues pragmatism skirts are issues that simply have to be addressed. But myself I doubt whether this quest has any particular successes to its name. Its regimental history contains no great examples of battles fought and won. There is a good reason for this. In its dealings with causation and morality it has been condemned to answering its own questions of meaning and metaphysics either by attempting 'naturalistic reductions' by saying what the relevant vocabulary means in terms from outside the family, or by staying inside a close family of cognate terms, all of which exhibit just the same problems as had excited inquiry in the first place. The first approach only distorts the relevant concepts, for instance by giving us psychological descriptions instead of ethical commitments. In the case of causation, when we try to unravel our understanding of the reason why one event *must* of necessity happen once its cause has happened, we find terms from the same family: 'efficacy, agency, power, force, energy, necessity, connexion, and productive quality' which are all nearly synonymous, and as Hume had promised 'therefore it is an absurdity to employ any of them in defining the rest'.

The pragmatic and genealogical approach to things hopes to issue in an insightful understanding of the mentality behind deploying a vocabulary of justice, causation, or chance and therefore an account of the meaning of the sayings. It can give us what Wittgenstein called a

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'perspicuous view' of otherwise puzzling features of our language, and our lives. Seeing a causal vocabulary as expressive of a system with which to meet the future is analysing, or at least describing with this increased clarity, the state of mind behind deployment of a causal vocabulary. But the analysis is not directed at a metaphysically problematic notion of necessity or morality, but at the use of the vocabulary and the history that could have brought it to its present shape. Metaphysics is not invited.

We human beings seem especially attracted to thinking of ourselves as special and exceptional. The immortality of the soul, the possibility of life without a body to sustain it, Cartesian or dualist accounts of consciousness, telepathy or the transfer of information without energy, and some versions of human freedom, all trade on our being unlike other things in nature.

Hume chipped away at many of these. In particular he argued that the way he approaches our understanding of causation helps to solve another thorny problem for the naturalistic attitude, that of free will. Here a view of ourselves as natural beings whose doings are mere happenings in the unfolding course of nature appears to conflict with our personal and moral practices and attitudes. The conflict pits an objective, detached, scientific view which tells us truly all that there is to human beings, against a richer, more humanistic position which insists that unlike other parts of nature, including other animals, we are free and responsible and can take control over our own doings.

The pragmatic and genealogical approach conforms to naturalism in the sense that I have given it. It removes any appearance that it took some special gift, perhaps a mysterious faculty called 'intuition' or the perception of some non-natural property, in order for us to end up talking and thinking as we do. But we, who do have these needs, have the language in which to convey the solutions we find to meeting them.

There is a lot more detail needed to transport this kind of approach to all the cases that might trouble naturalists.

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One of the perennial problems is that of free will. Is it just an illusion? Or can some notion of free will be reconciled with the naturalistic picture of ourselves as subject to exactly the same processes and forces as everything else in nature, as philosophers called compatibilists suppose? In section 8 of his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume argued that his own attitude to causation solved or dissolved this problem. I am not so sure that it did, for our everyday thought does entangle issues of responsibility and issues of causation. We would, for instance, excuse someone for some deterioration in their emotional behaviours if we found that it was the natural consequence of a tumour in the prefrontal cortex. We would suppress resentment, and they would become a patient, and an object of sympathy. But then the thought that 'there is always *something* like that going on' has us legitimately wondering whether there is that kind of excuse, whether we know it or not, in every case.

The full story is too rich and detailed to enter here, but it also affords an entry into the so-called 'hard problem' of consciousness. No pragmatist or naturalist can be a great fan of the hard problem of consciousness, for it deals in an 'inner theatre' or inner realm, invisible to neurophysiology, but characteristic of people, and perhaps some animals. Wittgenstein's private language argument tried to topple this image, and my own belief is that a sympathetic revisit is long overdue. But there are going to remain hard problems, even if we can convince ourselves that this is not one of them.

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