TRUE NATURALISM, GOODNESS, AND GOD

Fiona Ellis

I defend a form of naturalism which has much in common with Iris Murdoch's 'true naturalism', but I argue that it can accommodate God. I consider what it could mean for naturalism to be theistic in this sense, and respond to the charge that it leaves no room for the transcendent.

Introduction

In my book *God, Value, and Nature* I defend a form of naturalism.[1] This is no big deal from the point of view of contemporary analytic philosophy, for naturalism is the dominant approach, and we are encouraged to suppose that the opposing non-naturalist or supernaturalist picture is too problematic to be taken seriously. After all, it involves commitment to things that no intellectually respectable person could take seriously – things like souls, Platonic forms, and divine beings. The naturalist protests that there is no way of explaining how such things relate to our ordinary familiar world, that there is an equal mystery of how we gain knowledge of them, and that we can explain what needs to be explained without making this problematic metaphysical detour. Naturalism is a form of anti-supernaturalism in this respect: the natural world is the only world there is, and there is nothing beyond it – no God, no Platonic form of Goodness, no heaven, above us only sky.

I defend a form of naturalism that promises to accommodate God. That is to say that, on my position, it makes sense to say that the natural world is God-involving. This is

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highly unorthodox and problematic from the point of view of typical naturalistic philosophy, for most naturalists (and many theists too) take naturalism and theism to be logically incompatible.[2] By contrast, I want to say that they can both be true – that one can be a naturalist and a theist. The naturalism at issue here takes us beyond the scientistic paradigm which has defined the position until more recently. That is to say, it involves a rejection of the eminently contestable and deeply problematic idea that there is no more to the natural world than what the scientist can comprehend. It counts as an *expansive* form of naturalism in this respect, and it promises to make sense of the idea that the natural world is a value-involving world. Iris Murdoch describes such a position as *true* naturalism, expressing a similar antipathy to scientism (false naturalism as she understands it).

Murdoch is not a theist, and she does not consider the possibility that true naturalism could be comprehended in such terms. I shall argue that her resistance to this possibility comes from a contestable conception of God, and that most of what she says about Goodness invites a theistic interpretation. This much casts doubt upon some prevalent assumptions among naturalists and atheists, but theists – at least those who are philosophers of religion rather than theologians – object to the idea that there could be a theistic form of naturalism, and I want to argue that they are wrong on this score. My friend and colleague John Cottingham has expressed objections along these lines, his worry being that if any form of naturalism is true, then there is nothing outside the natural world, and therefore nothing transcendent. He refers to the 'radical immanentism' of my supposedly theistic naturalism, distinguishing it from his own commitment to a kind of 'divine externality'. I shall argue that my position does indeed involve a kind of radical immanentism, but that, properly understood, it offers the best prospects for accommodating God.

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Expansive naturalism

The naturalist denies that there is anything beyond nature, and it is a common enough refrain among naturalists that this world is the only world there is, and that there is absolutely no need to postulate a second, supernatural, realm. There is a question of how the world – the only world there is – is to be understood in this context, and a standard move has been to characterize it in exclusively scientific terms. The implication here is that there is no more to reality than what can be comprehended by science. I have suggested already that such a position is itself deeply problematic, the most obvious objection being that there is no good argument for insisting that the limits of nature are to be circumscribed by science alone. As John McDowell puts it, 'scientism is a superstition', and we should 'discourag[e] this dazzlement by science' which leads us to suppose that 'genuine truth is restricted to what can be validated by their methods'.[3] It should go without saying that this is *not* a rejection of science.

McDowell defends a form of naturalism which takes us beyond scientism, and he is indebted, as am I, to Murdoch's *true* naturalism. The true naturalist, she claims, is one 'who *believes* that as moral beings we are immersed in a reality which transcends us and that moral progress consists in awareness of this reality and submission to its purposes'.[4] So the true naturalist is a moral realist, and there is a commitment here to the idea that there is an external source of value, that the relevant values make normative demands upon us, and that we are capable of responding to these demands by acting accordingly. This is not to deny that there will be error and ignorance, and Murdoch talks of the slowness of moral change and achievement, and of the 'infinite difficulty of the task of apprehending a magnetic but inexhaustible reality'.[5] Another contemporary expansive naturalist – Mark Platts – puts the point in even starker terms when he distinguishes between 'tawdry, finite moral epistemic beings' like

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ourselves and the 'moral reality of perhaps infinite moral complexity' that we struggle to comprehend.[6] Murdoch refers in this context to the clear vision which comes from imagination, effort, and attention – a vision in which the will becomes a matter of 'obedience', and reality is revealed 'to the patient eye of love'.[7] Her aim is to articulate a moral philosophy in which 'the concept of love . . . can once again be made central', and she talks of an 'ideal limit of love or knowledge which always recedes'.[8]

It is easy to think that this is way too spooky for contemporary naturalistic sensibilities. For even if we concede that there is more to the natural world than what can be comprehended by science, it seems deeply problematic to describe moral reality as magnetic and inexhaustible. What is more, Murdoch herself is a card-carrying Platonist, and it was made clear at the start that Platonism is a paradigm example of *super*naturalism. These worries are not as devastating as might first appear. The idea that moral reality is magnetic is just a fancy way of saying that it attracts us, and to object that there could be nothing inherently attractive in reality is to revert to the contested conception of nature – one according to which it is to be comprehended in value-denuded, scientistic terms. As for the worry that we are in the territory of Platonism, there is a serious question of what such a position really amounts to, and whether some of the imagery – forms up there in some second, supernatural, realm – is not just a picturesque way of insisting that there is an external source of value.

But how are the limits of such naturalism to be understood? Murdoch and Plato insist that the truths at issue here lie at the blurry limits of our capacity to comprehend, the implication being that the question of naturalism's own limits must be analogously unclear. McDowell uses the imagery of darkness to refer to that which exceeds his own expansive conception of nature, insisting that 'natural' as he understands it is 'not supernatural (not occult, not magical)'. He adds that:

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> There is no need for me to take a stand on whether *everything* is natural in that sense (thereby, among other things, giving needless offence to people who think respect for modern science is compatible with a kind of religious belief that preserves room for the supernatural).[9]

Religion has entered the scene, but we are encouraged to suppose that any such dimension is to be set apart from nature and relegated to the realm of the mysterious supernatural, which latter is to be comprehended in familiar pejorative terms. It is, after all, 'occult' and 'magical' and seemingly distinct from anything to which we could be receptive by virtue of our natural human capacities, which are operative when we make moral distinctions and act accordingly.

So there is nothing intrinsically mysterious about moral reality, and the moral is to be distinguished from the religious. This takes us some distance from Murdoch's naturalism, for Murdoch takes morality to involve an irreducibly mysterious dimension – it is infinite in its mystery and depth – and she claims to be defining an authentic form of religion in this context – religion without God as she sees it.[10] The significant capitulation comes with her insistence that moral philosophy should attempt to retain a central concept which has all of the characteristics traditionally associated with God, where God 'was (or is) a *single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessarily real object of attention*'.[11] We are returned to the aforementioned magnetic but inexhaustible reality, and Murdoch distinguishes her position from theism by insisting that there is no reference to supernatural phenomena (like God and heaven),[12] and no pandering to our egoistic desires (being good for the sake of heavenly rewards).[13] This is a clear reason for distinguishing morality from theism, assuming that theism introduces a suspect supernaturalism, and that it is motivated by egoism. I want to argue now that theism, properly understood, is not egoistic, that it is compatible with an expansive naturalist

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framework, and that Murdoch fails to show that a properly moral life must dispense with God.

Rethinking God

Murdoch's true naturalism poses a challenge to morally deficient forms of religion and theism, and we can agree that the conception of God as a supernatural being raises difficulties, and that such a God seems to lapse into significance when set against the intra-worldly loving relations which are so obviously central to a properly human life. The dialectic is familiar from the atheist, and it has been taken seriously by many theologians, one such figure being John Robinson in his famous 1963 book *Honest to God*.[14] Robinson offers an accessible and eminently readable version of a position which had been defined with some complexity and depth by a range of German theologians, all of whom seek to transcend the kind of framework in which God and the world are to be dualistically opposed, and it is assumed that suspect supernaturalism (in this sense) and scientific naturalism are the only available options. Supernaturalism thus understood demands naturalistic critique, but it no longer follows that atheism is true, for God cannot be comprehended in these suspect terms, and it is idolatry to insist upon them. The implication here is that there is an alternative to the offending dualistic framework, and that our understanding of God and world must be modified accordingly. Robinson's take on the matter is that we have a challenge to the naturalist's insistence that God is simply a redundant name for nature or for humanity,[15] and an infinitely more satisfactory way of modelling God's transcendence. He borrows from Paul Tillich at this point, citing his claim that:

> To call God transcendent in this sense does not mean that one must establish a 'superworld' of divine objects. It does mean that, within itself, the

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> finite world points beyond itself. In other words, it is self-transcendent.[16]

Robinson takes this to be Tillich's 'great contribution to theology', namely:

> the reinterpretation of transcendence in a way which preserves its reality while detaching it from the projection of supranaturalism [Robinson's label for suspect supernaturalism]. 'The Divine', as he sees it, does not inhabit a transcendent world *above nature*; it is to be found in the 'ecstatic' character of *this* world, as its transcendent Depth and Ground. Indeed, as a recent commentator has observed, supranaturalism for Tillich actually represents 'a loss of transcendence'.[17]

This position calls to mind Murdoch's true naturalism, and Robinson likewise gives centre stage to the concept of love, taking as his starting point Ludwig Feuerbach's claim that the true atheist 'is not the man who denies God, the subject; it is the man for whom the attributes of divinity, such as love, wisdom, and justice, are nothing'.[18] He grants that this is very near to his own position in so far as his aim is to interpret theological statements as assertions about human life. However, this is not to be interpreted as a concession to atheism, for the relevant attributes of divinity have their origin in God, God being the 'beyond' in the midst rather than in some second, supernatural, realm.[19] As for the worry that this picture involves a *denial* of God's transcendence, the proper response is to point out – with Tillich – that it is the opposing dualistic picture which carries this implication. It does so by putting God on a level with any other thing, the only difference being that this thing happens to inhabit a second, supernatural, realm.

We have rejected the idea that God and the world are to be modelled on two externally related items between which there is an insurmountable divide, but what does it really mean for there to be a 'beyond' in our midst? It means for a

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start that we are capable of relating to God, but what kind of relation? Love is central to our protagonists, and Murdoch dreams of a time when its significance to moral philosophy will once more be acknowledged (as it was when Plato's influence was manifest). Murdoch is concerned with our relation to the Good, and it is central to her position that we are eminently capable in this regard, albeit weighed down by our more tawdry aspects. She talks in this context of the patient eye of love, and of an ideal limit of love and knowledge which always recedes. I have suggested already that the picture is amenable to theistic interpretation.

I am gesturing towards a position which requires extensive thought and elucidation, but what little I have said suggests that its structure offers a way of avoiding a conjunctive conception of the God/world relation, and that it has much in common with Murdoch's true naturalism. According to this position, we are immersed in a reality which transcends us, love is central to this framework, and love is that by virtue of which we relate – however falteringly – to this infinite reality. The issue here concerns how we are to comprehend the nature and limits of love, and there is an advantage to setting up the issue in *these* terms, namely, that the reality and significance of love is granted by all sides. The question of *God's* reality is taken rather less seriously in our times – hence the preference for a framework in which the question of *love* is primary – although if Robinson is right this is because we have internalized an erroneous projection of God's reality – one which makes it irrelevant to all that matters, and way beyond anything to which we could relate as natural human beings. The idea of God as love provides an important corrective to this error.

Transcendence, Again

We are in a position now to tackle Cottingham's worry that the naturalist has to deny that there is anything

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'external' or 'transcendent', and that she is left – or I am left – with a 'radical immanentism' which is equivalent to atheism. It should be clear that naturalism in my sense is to be distinguished from radical immanentism as Cottingham understands it, for he takes radical immanentism to be a form of atheism, whereas the natural world as I understand it involves God. Furthermore, it involves God in a sense that should be acceptable to Cottingham, for I agree with him that there are intimations or traces of God to be found in the natural world, and that they are manifest, for example, 'in the compelling power of our moral sensibilities'.[20] Cottingham objects that I've got to deny that there is anything 'external' or 'transcendent', whereas he wants to say that 'even after discarding silly ideas of "another place" or a destination where we will be issued with harps (or pitchforks), we still need a kind of divine externality'. So he agrees that God is not externally related to the world in the way that things within the world are spatially related, but he thinks that a naturalist picture cannot accommodate *divine* externality. That is to say, Cottingham thinks that on my position God is *reducible* to the world.

I have explicitly denied that God is reducible to the world, and have argued that the proposed framework offers the prospects for *safeguarding* God's transcendence rather than eliminating it. It does so by guaranteeing that God is irreducible to any finite measure, and allowing that God's infinite reality has depths which exceed our powers of love and knowledge. We are immersed in a reality which has an ever-receding limit in this respect, and, being so immersed, we must give up on the idea that the relation between God and the world is a conjunctive relation – as if God and the world add up to two, as Herbert McCabe once put it.[21] Cottingham describes my position as a 'radical immanentism', and I'm happy to embrace such a label. However, it can be variously interpreted, and Cottingham interprets it to mean that nature is self-sufficient in an atheistic sense. I reject immanentism in this sense, for nature, as I understand it, is God-involving, and God is not reducible to

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nature. If I am an immanentist at all then, I am one who thinks that God's spirit pervades the world, albeit with no implication that this exhausts God's reality. Immanentism in this second sense presupposes reference to the transcendent rather than excluding it, and it corresponds to the position which, for Tillich, delivers a more authentic conception of transcendence. This, I contend, is what it means to be an immanentist in a truly radical sense.

Conclusions

I have defended a conception of naturalism which is inspired by Murdoch's true naturalism, and which invites a theistic interpretation. I am not suggesting that this interpretation is mandatory, and I myself am unclear whether it should be accepted. Understandably so, given that we are operating at the blurry limits of our capacity to comprehend. However, the position is worth taking seriously, and I have shown that some standard objections to it are misconceived. Why describe it as a form of naturalism? Murdoch throws the question back at one who protests in this manner by challenging the assumption that naturalism is invariably scientistic, protesting on the contrary that a true naturalism must exceed these parameters. A significant number of recent philosophers have followed her in this regard, and although the typical expansive naturalist is an atheist, this attitude is premised upon a contestable and highly problematic conception of God – one which most theologians would be anxious to reject. Such theologians would not, I think, take issue with the structure and content of my position, and if they deny its status as a form of naturalism this is most plausibly explained through a commitment on their part to a scientistic conception of naturalism – understandably so given its prevalence in the contemporary academy and given the widespread assumption that this captures naturalism's true meaning. Tillich is no hostage to such ideology, and he identifies explicitly as a

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naturalist – an ecstatic naturalist as he puts it, insisting as he does that God is to be found in the 'ecstatic' character of *this* world, as its transcendent depth and ground. I hope to have illustrated that there is a knife-edge between this position and Murdoch's true naturalism, that they both deserve to be taken seriously, and that the real question is how, if at all, they are to be distinguished.

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Notes

[1] F. Ellis, *God, Value, and Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[2] See, for example, A. Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[3] J. McDowell, 'Responses', in Nicholas H. Smith (ed.) *Reading McDowell on Mind and World* (London: Routledge, 2002), 295.

[4] R. W. Hepburn and I. Murdoch, 'Vision and Choice in Morality', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society,* Supplementary Volumes 30: Dreams and Self-knowledge (1956), 32–58.

[5] I. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1970), 42.

[6] M. Platts, 'Moral Reality and the End of Desire', in *Reference, Truth, and Reality* (London: Routledge, 1980), 70.

[7] Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 37–40.

[8] Ibid. 28.

[9] J. McDowell, 'Reply to Fink', in Jakob Lindgaard (ed.) *John McDowell: Experience, Norm, and Nature* (Oxford: Blackwell), 218.

[10] See, for example, I. Murdoch, 'The Ontological Proof', in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992), 419–25.

[11] Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 55.

[12] Murdoch, 'The Ontological Proof'.

[13] Ibid. 426.

[14] J. Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: SCM Press, 1963).

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[15] Ibid. 32.

[16] P. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol II, 8., in Robinson, *Honest to God*, 34.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid. 30.

[19] Ibid. 32.

[20] See J. Cottingham, 'Transcending Science: Humane Models of Religious Understanding', in F. Ellis (ed.) *New Models of Religious Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 39.

[21] H. McCabe, 'Creation', in *God Matters* (London: Continuum Press, 1987), 6.

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