New Blackfriars

DOI:10.1111/nbfr.12765

Which naturalism?

John Cottingham

Abstract

The 'naturalizing' agenda in contemporary secularist philosophy is often presented in opposition to traditional theism. But looking at the history of the terms 'nature' and 'natural' reveals a discontinuity between how these terms are currently understood and how they were understood in the past. The modern 'naturalist', in insisting that all phenomena should be brought within the domain of the natural, is advancing a thesis that many classical, medieval and early-modern philosophers and theologians would have regarded as fairly self-evident. What has changed is not that there is a new determination to include within the natural domain what was previously excluded from it, but rather that there is a radical shift in how the natural domain is to be understood. This paper argues that the philosophically interesting question is not whether or not we should be naturalists, but which of two naturalisms we should adopt: secular naturalism, with its neutralist conception of nature in general and of human nature in particular, or theistic naturalism, according to which the natural world and our own nature bear the stamp of the divine. It turns out the former (secularist) view is vulnerable to serious difficulties, on both the epistemic and the moral fronts.

Keywords

nature, scientism, secularism, natural light, theism

The shifting concept of the natural

Naturalism is a notoriously slippery concept, which can cover a multitude of different positions. What Brian Leiter has enthusiastically hailed as the 'naturalistic revolution' in philosophy[1] is driven by an uncompromisingly secular and materialist worldview. But materialism

[1] Brian Leiter (ed), *The Future for Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), Introduction.

© 2022 The Authors. *New Blackfriars* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers.

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12765 Published online by Cambridge University Press

comes in many varieties and need not be crudely reductionistic in character. John Dupré, for example, has recently pointed out that 'reductionism has been almost entirely rejected by [materialist] philosophers actually engaged with the physical and biological sciences'. Dupré seems right in so far as few contemporary philosophers would maintain that all true statements about the world can be translated without remainder into statements about material entities or their interactions; but the dominant naturalist paradigm does nevertheless seem committed to the metaphysical doctrine that, ontologically speaking, there is nothing apart from the material world described by physics. Anything else, as Dupré himself insists, must be outlawed from acceptable philosophical discourse as 'spooky'; and, crucially, only what is, as Dupré puts it, '*empirically grounded*' can escape being so outlawed.[2]

But this just shifts the problem of defining naturalism onto a concept that is equally problematic, that of the empirical. As the logical positivists soon discovered, now nearly a century ago (and many of the debates over naturalism can sometimes seem uncannily like replays of the arguments over positivism), it is very difficult to formulate a criterion for being empirically supported, or confirmed by experience, in a way that is liberal enough to accommodate blue-chip scientific theories (where the link to what is directly experienced can often be quite tenuous), yet stringent enough to rule out, for example, religious assertions, whose defenders can reasonably point to experiences in the life of the believer that go at least some way to supporting their claims.

So if the naturalist is simply someone whose worldview is supported by experience, then the term is not going to be much use in separating out different types of worldview. And this in turn prompts the thought that the interesting question in this area is not whether your view of the natural world is supported by experience, but rather *how you conceive of nature and the natural world in the first place*. If you are a naturalist, *which* naturalism do you espouse?

It is clear that Aristotle, the Stoics, Aquinas, Spinoza, and even Descartes, all construed *nature* in far richer terms than the modern secularist. So far from being A. E. Housman's 'heartless, witless nature', a brute concatenation of contingent structures that is, in the immortal words of Bertrand Russell, 'just there',[3] nature was, for all these earlier writers, something that partakes of the divine, or even (as in the case of Spinoza) is *itself* divine. Going back to Aristotle, talk of nature (*physis*) belongs in a metaphysical framework where nature, as

[2] John Dupré, Review of Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos* (Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews, 2012).

[3] In a 1948 debate on BBC Radio with Frederick Copleston; reprinted in Russell, *Why I am Not a Christian* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1957), Ch. 13.

© 2022 The Authors. *New Blackfriars* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers.
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12765 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Aristotle puts it, 'does nothing in vain';[4] the natural world is configured teleologically, so that each natural thing tends towards the goal wherein its good consists. Or to take another example from the ancient world, in Stoicism we are told to 'live *in accordance with nature'* (*vivere secundum naturam*);[5] and here, so far from being an evaluatively neutral notion, 'nature' refers to an objective rational order, and 'living in accordance with nature' means living in accordance with the same rational and normative principles that govern the cosmos as a whole. Coming down to the early-modern period, we find Descartes saying (in the Sixth Meditation, though this is seldom picked up by commentators) that by 'nature' he means 'nothing other than *God himself*, or the ordered system of created things established by God'.[6] And as far as human nature is concerned, which he defines as the 'totality of things bestowed on me by God', Descartes makes it clear, taking his cue from Aquinas, that a vital part of our human endowment consists of the '*natural* light' – a highly normative notion denoting the light of reason which gives us access to what is objectively good and true. All this puts into a slightly different perspective the 'naturalizing' agenda of many of our contemporary secularist philosophers . For in insisting that the human world and all its products have to be brought within the domain of the natural, they are advancing a thesis that many classical medieval and early-modern philosophers and theologians would have regarded as pretty much self-evident. What has changed is not that there is a new determination to include within the natural domain what was previous excluded from it, but rather that there has been a radical shift in how the natural domain is to be understood – a shift, if you like, in the metaphysical construal of the concept of nature.

[4] μηθὲν μάτην ποιεῖ ἡ φύσις. ἕνεκά του γὰρ πάντα ὑπάρχει τὰ φύσει [*mēthen matēn poiei hē physis; heneka tou gar panta hyparchei ta physei*] ('Nature does nothing in vain, for everything furnished by nature is for the sake of something.'. Aristotle, *De Anima* [*c.* 325 BC], Bk III, Ch. 12, 434a33. See also Aristotle, *de Caelo* I, 4; *de Partibus Animalium* II, 13.

[5] ὁμολογουμένως τῇ φύσει ζῆν (*homologoumenōs tē physei zēn*) was the formula of Stoicism's founder, Zeno of Citium (335-263 BCE), as quoted by Diogenes Laertius 7,87. For the equivalent Latin maxim, *vivere secundum naturam*, see Seneca, *Epistulae Morales* [*c.* AD 64], V, 4; see also XVI, and compare Cicero, *De Finibus* [45 BC], III, 59.

[6] *per naturam enim, generaliter spectatam, nihil nunc aliud quam vel Deum ipsum, vel rerum creatarum coordinationem a Deo institutam intelligo; nec aliud per naturam meam in particulari, quam complexionem eorum omnium quae mihi a Deo sunt tributa.* René Descartes, *Meditations* [*Meditationes de prima philosophia,* 1641], Sixth Meditation (AT VII 80: CSM II 56). In this paper, 'AT' refers to C. Adam & P. Tannery (eds), *Œuvres de Descartes* (12 vols, revised edn, Paris: Vrin/CNRS, 1964-76); 'CSM' refers to J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch (eds), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vols I and II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), and 'CSMK' to vol. III, The Correspondence, by the same translators and A. Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, l991).

© 2022 The Authors. *New Blackfriars* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers.
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12765 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Nature and the supernatural

Following up this latter thought, let us bring a more explicitly metaphysical dimension to the discussion. Contemporary naturalists often tend to characterize their outlook not so much in terms of what they mean by 'the natural', as in terms of their rejection of its supposed opposite, the supernatural. Thus, one of the main planks in the platform of the philosopher Julian Baggini's atheism is his opposition to what he takes to be the weird idea of any supernatural or non-natural reality. In a recent book he declares 'I don't believe in spooky, non-natural forces', and goes on to equate the real with what is 'fully part of the natural world'.[7]

The aversion to supernatural or 'spooky' forces and entities turns out to be one of the main drivers of contemporary secular naturalism. A common complaint here is that the idea of the supernatural *explains nothing*. As Richard Dawkins puts it:

> To claim a supernatural explanation of something is not to explain it at all, even worse, to rule out any possibility of its ever being explained … Anything 'supernatural' must by definition be beyond the reach of a natural explanation. It must be beyond the reach of science and the well-established, tried and tested scientific method. To say that something happened supernaturally is not just to say 'We don't understand it' but to say 'We will never understand it, so don't even try'. … The whole history of science shows us that things once thought to be the result of the supernatural – caused by the gods (both happy and angry), demons, witches, spirits, curses, and spells – actually do have natural explanations: explanations that we can understand and test and have confidence in. There is absolutely no reason to believe that those things for which science does not yet have natural explanations will turn out to be of supernatural origin.[8]

There is evidently a good deal of truth in Dawkins' claim about the advance of science and its success in explaining phenomena once thought to be of supernatural origin. And it may seem a reasonable extrapolation from this to see recourse to the category of the supernatural as dependent on the resources available within the scientific framework of any given epoch. Thus in the seventeenth-century Cartesian conception of physics, matter was construed as simply 'extended stuff' (*res extensa*) – whatever could be characterised geometrically in terms of the size and shape of the particles making it up. So from this perspective, energy, motive power, was in a certain sense 'supernatural', at least in the sense that it was anomalous, extraneous to matter as then conceived. And hence, for the followers of Descartes, since it could not

[7] Julian Baggini, *The Godless Gospel* (London: Granta, 2020), Ch. 10.
[8] Richard Dawkins, *The Magic of Reality* (London: Random House, 2011), p. 21.

© 2022 The Authors. *New Blackfriars* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers.
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12765 Published online by Cambridge University Press

be derived from the properties of mere extension, it ultimately had to be imparted to matter by God.

Yet as science developed, the idea of energy as something extraneous to matter in its 'default' state becomes progressively eroded; and from Einstein onwards, with the discovery of the intimate relation between mass and energy, matter starts to be considered as inherently energetic. The boundaries of what is explicable in 'natural' terms, where 'natural' has the thin sense of 'intrinsic to matter', have dramatically expanded. Moving down to very recent times, the increasingly well-attested phenomenon of quantum entanglement is in a certain sense 'weird' and 'spooky' by reference to the framework of Einsteinian physics, since it seems to involve the transmission of information faster than the speed of light. But we can certainly agree, in the spirit of Dawkins's remarks, that dubbing this phenomenon 'supernatural' would solve nothing. Indeed, it is hardly imaginable that any scientist would nowadays invoke the deity as the cause of quantum entanglement, in the way in which Descartes, in his 1644 *Principia,* invoked the deity as the cause of motion.[9] To be sure, the phenomenon of entanglement is anomalous with respect to certain parts of the current scientific framework; but this is taken to be something that further scientific theorizing and experimentation will eventually resolve, rather than something that requires us to posit anything supernatural.

So far so good, and so far so consistent with Dawkins's analysis. But it is easy to slide from the plausible truth about the explanatory redundancy of supernatural explanations in physics to a much more questionable claim, that the methods and procedures of natural science are in principle equipped to explain the whole of reality. Yet the problem with this more ambitious thesis, equating the limits of science with the limits of reality, is there are plainly many parts and aspects of reality that simply do not figure in the world as investigated and described by natural science. To be human is to have access to a whole rich world of meaning and value, mediated through a complex interlocking network of practices and discourses. Art, music, literature, philosophy, and indeed scientific inquiry itself – all such work, its products and its characteristic activities, its discourse and its subject matter, form part of the reality we inhabit. And the multifarious phenomena in question cannot even begin to be explained or described in the abstract, quantitative or mechanistic terms of physics or the terminology of the other natural sciences. The reasons for this have been widely discussed in the literature, including a recent paper by David Macarthur, who puts one of the key points very incisively when he observes that there are 'truths

[9] René Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy* [*Principia philosophiae*, 1644], Part II, art. 36.

© 2022 The Authors. *New Blackfriars* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers.
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12765 Published online by Cambridge University Press

about mind, meaning and morals that, being rationally normative, constitutively depend upon non-scientific forms of understanding'.[10]

It will not do for the modern scientistic naturalist to say, as Dawkins does in the work just mentioned, and I quote: 'Yes, these things are real, but they depend for their existence on human brains'.[11] To be sure, all the complex phenomena just mentioned could not be conceived or apprehended if there were not beings like humans with complex brains and nervous systems. But while the cognitive faculties we possess as biological creatures may allow us *access* to this rich web of meaning and value, they do not in themselves *create* it or *invent* it; rather they allow us to perceive it and to respond to it. Our biologically grounded and culturally shaped sensibilities, to borrow a phrase from John McDowell, *bring into view* genuine aspects of reality that 'are there in any case whether or not we are responsive to them.'[12]

So if we take *nature* as the totality of the real world, comprising all of the reality that we apprehend, including the phenomena just referred to, how do we frame our conception of nature so as to do justice to its richness? We have seen that much richer conceptions of nature were available in the classical and early-modern periods, and although there may be aspects of these older systems that are no longer tenable, it still seems that we need an enriched or 'expansive' naturalism (to use a term coined by Fiona Ellis in her groundbreaking *God, Value and Nature*),[13] which allows us to count as real the value-laden, meaning-saturated aspects of the world we inhabit. This need not be a matter of introducing 'spooky' forces, or Cartesian ghosts, into our ontology. It is not that there is the natural world, and then, *in addition*, there are weird spooky entities. Rather, the thought is that we need some way of accommodating the fact that the natural world, the world we human beings inhabit, the world we refer to in our daily discourse, is *already* replete with value.

[10] 'Scientific naturalism, when thought through, is committed to the existence of truths about mind, meaning and morals that, being rationally normative, constitutively depend upon non-scientific forms of understanding. In other words, scientific naturalism is committed to an enlarged scientific image (one that involves a good deal of the manifest image) that conflicts with its own methodological tenet: the claim that the only legitimate forms of knowledge or understanding are those concerning the objects of scientific inquiry'. David Macarthur, 'Liberal Naturalism and the Scientific Image of the World', *Inquiry*, vol. 62 (2018), pp. 13-14.

[11] Dawkins, *Magic of Reality*, Ch 1, p. 18.

[12] John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), Lecture IV, p. 82.

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

© 2022 The Authors. *New Blackfriars* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers.
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12765 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Enframing

If we accept the result just arrived at, the next step that suggests itself is that in order to understand the value we find in the world, we will need recourse to some kind of interpretative framework. Here I think we can fruitfully borrow, or perhaps I had better say, adapt, the Heideggerian concept of *Gestell* or 'enframing'. As set out by Heidegger in his 1954 essay *The Question Concerning Technology*[14] this notion is initially deployed in the context of warning us of the dangers posed by the technological revolution: the enframing constituted by the grip of technology transforms the world into a totalizing network of resources lined up for exploitation, where everything is assessed in terms of its instrumental value. But Heidegger also indicates (citing a famous poem of Hölderlin) that where there is danger there is also the hope of salvation.[15] And this gives some support to Federico Campagna's more positive interpretation of enframing:

> Anything that appears to us as a true element of the world (that is, anything whose truthfulness, *alētheia*, consists in the removal of the veil that hid it from us, and its emergence as an object of our experience) does so within a certain frame.[16]

So as well as the kind of technological enframing that alienates us from the world, there might be alternative frameworks that are more benign, and indeed which enable us to perceive what is hidden.

This appears to be what Heidegger is suggesting in a celebrated essay on the origin of the work of art, where he emphasises the power of art to disclose reality. Here is a different kind of enframing, where a work of art becomes *die schaffende Bewahrung der Wahrheit*, the 'creative custodianship of the truth'.[17] Artistic creation is not a mere projection of our own wishes onto reality, but rather that which allows reality to manifest itself. In a later essay, 'Das Ding' ('The Thing'), Heidegger produces a variation on this theme, where, through the eyes of poetic imagination, even an ordinary object such as a jug (or pitcher) is seen as a *vehicle of gift*, through the pouring out of a drink:

> The giving of the outpouring can be a drink. The outpouring gives water, it gives wine to drink. The spring stays on in the water of the gift. In the

[14] Martin Heidegger, *The Question concerning Technology* [*Die Frage nach der Technik*, 1954], tr. W. Lovitt (New York: Garland, 1977), pp. 3-35.

[15] Nah ist/ Und schwer zu fassen der Gott./ Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst/ Das Rettende auch. ['Close by/and hard to grasp is God./ Yet where there is danger/ salvation also doth grow.'] Friedrich Hölderlin, *Patmos* (1803).

[16] Federico Campagna, *Technic and Magic: The Reconstruction of Reality* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), p. 24.

[17] Heidegger, 'Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes' (1935-6); cited in George Steiner, *Heidegger* (London: Routledge, 2nd edn 1992), p. 136.

© 2022 The Authors. *New Blackfriars* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers.
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12765 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> spring the rock dwells, and in the rock dwells the dark slumber of the earth, which receives the rain and dew of the sky…[18]

In the original, the highly charged poetic language continues in an almost ecstatic vein, celebrating nature and the natural world as something with which we are intimately involved and united, in a process of giving and receiving.[19] But without unpacking all the subtleties of Heidegger's essay, the relatively straightforward idea we can take away from this passage for present purposes is that the very idea of nature and the natural world cannot be understood as an unproblematic given, to be characterised in colourlessly neutral terms. Its reality is something we strive to understand and interpret, and this very attempt presupposes that we come to nature already armed with frameworks of interpretation: scientific, technological, artistic, poetical; but, equally importantly, in our interpretations we also strive to be true to the phenomena, so as to allow that which is real to be disclosed to us. And so far as one can see at this stage of the inquiry (I'll come back to this), there seems to be no decisive reason for privileging any one framework, or saying that it provides an exclusive or exhaustive route to disclosing the true character of the natural world or reality as it is in itself.

With this in mind, consider the following description, by a Benedictine monk and theologian, of how a certain kind of enframing, in this case a theistic one, pervasively conditions the way in which the daily rhythms of the natural world are understood and perceived:

> Liturgical activity transforms cosmic, historical and biological rhythms into salvation history: the night becomes a time of waiting for the Lord; the rising of the sun the time to celebrate creation; the succession of daily hours an ascent to the heavenly Jerusalem; the end of the day a celebration of redemption; sleep an act of abandonment in God's hands. In this way, the monk constantly remembers that he is not the creator

[18] 'Das Ding' [1950], in *Vortrage und Aufsatze* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1954); English version in Heidegger, *Poetry Language and Thought,* transl. A. Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 172-3. Cited in G. Pattison, *The Later Heidegger* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 102.

[19] 'In the water of the spring dwells the marriage of sky and earth. It stays in the wine given by the fruit of the vine, the fruit in which the earth's nourishment and the sky's sun are betrothed to one another. In the gift of water, in the gift of wine, sky and earth dwell. But the gift of the outpouring is what makes the jug a jug. In the jugness of the jug, sky and earth dwell. The gift of the pouring out is drink for mortals. It quenches their thirst. It refreshes their leisure. It enlivens their conviviality. But the jug's gift is at times also given for consecration. If the pouring is for consecration, then it does not still a thirst. It stills and elevates the celebration of the feast. The gift of the pouring now is neither given in an inn nor is the poured gift a drink for mortals. The outpouring is the libation poured out for the immortal gods. The gift of the outpouring as libation is the authentic gift. In giving the consecrated libation, the pouring jug occurs as the giving gift'. Heidegger, *loc. cit.* (previous footnote).

© 2022 The Authors. *New Blackfriars* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers.
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12765 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> and saviour of himself, but that he is a creature; that in God's presence he does not exist as a 'self' but as a 'thou'.[20]

The sense of calm and peace that seems to invest the natural diurnal cycle of sunrise and sunset reminds one of Wittgenstein's description of the religious outlook as involving a feeling of absolute safety: 'nothing can injure me, whatever happens'.[21] This may tempt us to characterize the difference between the theistic view of nature – what we could call 'theistic naturalism' – and its antithesis, the typical contemporary scientistic naturalism, by saying that the former involves an essentially benign view of nature, while the latter sees nature as at best neutral, or (to put it in the more rhetorical fashion of Richard Dawkins) as involving 'blind pitiless indifference'.[22] This way of contrasting the two naturalisms tends to set things up for the brusque dismissal of theistic naturalism as a self-deluding refusal to look facts in the face: how can the benign view of nature possibly be sustained in a world devasted by the Covid virus, which may loom large for us, but is in fact just one item in the unending catalogue of earthquakes, tsunamis, plagues, wildfires, and famines that have marked the history of our planet?

But the problem with portraying the theistic conception of nature as a refusal to face reality is that it involves a serious distortion of the view of the natural world actually found in the theistic tradition. If we go back to Wittgenstein, who described himself as having a strong sympathy for the religious outlook even though he was himself unable to embrace it, in the passage where he talks of the 'feeling of absolute safety', he goes on to stress that this is obviously different from a feeling of safety about some ordinary matter such as feeling secure that you can't get whooping cough because you've had it once already. To ordinary common sense ways of thinking, you might well be safe from whooping cough, but there are obviously other diseases you could get, so to say you are safe 'whatever happens' is in a literal sense nonsense. But this, he argued, should not lead us to dismiss such language out of hand, since it is inevitable that thinking about religion will sooner or later 'run up against the boundaries of language'. Such thinking, according to Wittgenstein, springs from a tendency in the human mind that demands 'deep respect', even though it might not add to our factual knowledge.[23]

But in any case, if we look at the attitude to nature actually found in the theistic tradition, we quickly find that it is very far from asserting a comfortable and cosy natural world where all the forces of nature

[20] Luigi Gioia,'Ascetical Practices for a Secular Age', typescript, p.3. Cited in J. Cottingham, *How to Believe* (London: Continuum, 2015), p. 66.

[21] Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'A Lecture on Ethics' [1929], in *Philosophical Review* (1965), p. 8.

[22] Richard Dawkins, *Rivers Out of Eden* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), p. 133.

[23] Wittgenstein, 'A Lecture on Ethics' p. 8.

© 2022 The Authors. *New Blackfriars* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers.
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12765 Published online by Cambridge University Press

conduce to human wellbeing. The long catalogue of plagues and pestilences is certainly not airbrushed out of the story in the Hebrew Bible – quite the reverse. And the descriptions of nature found there acknowledge and, indeed, often underline the threatening wildness and power of nature: the 'lions roaring after their prey', the 'fire and hail, snow and vapours, wind and storm', the gales that 'strip the forest bare', while all cry *kavod* – glory![24] The natural world is *awful* in the literal sense, inspiring fear, and yet also filling us with a fearful wonder and a strange delight. It's notable that these are precisely the emotions that Richard Dawkins celebrates in his book entitled *The Magic of Reality* – a purely *natural* magic, he is at pains to stress, yet something that fills us, as he puts it, with 'awe and delight'.[25] So just as the Psalmist stresses the utter puniness of humankind set against the backdrop of the starry heavens, so Dawkins declares that our local galaxy, the 'mysterious streak of milky white' across the night sky which 'we can never see in its full glory', should, when you realize what it is, 'strike you dumb with awe'. Yes, the atheist is adamant in rejecting the theistic enframing of the natural world; but the sheer beauty and glory of nature that the theist celebrates by calling it divine, or 'charged with the grandeur of God' (in Gerard Manley Hopkins' phrase),[26] is precisely that which calls forth the awe and wonder of those who abrogate religious language. What we have here, in short, is a remarkable *convergenc*e in our natural human responses to the natural world – a convergence that could perhaps deserve more attention from philosophers than the largely fruitless attempts to rule in or to rule out the supernatural which we find in so many of the contemporary debates in this area.

Human nature

Having pointed to some striking convergences between theistic and atheistic conceptions of nature, let me now briefly turn to a particular sub-domain of nature, namely human nature, where things are not so simple. I earlier referred to Descartes's conception of nature as 'nothing other than God himself, or the ordered system of created things established by God'. The passage continues as follows: 'and by my own nature in particular I understand nothing other than the totality of things bestowed on me by God'.[27]

As we saw earlier, the rich and value-laden notion of nature common in the classical, medieval, and early modern periods very much extended to the conception of *human* nature, which was conceived as

[24] Psalms, 104, 148, 29.
[25] Dawkins, *Magic of Reality*, Ch. 1.
[26] Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'God's Grandeur' (1877).
[27] Quoted above, footnote 6.

© 2022 The Authors. *New Blackfriars* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers.
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12765 Published online by Cambridge University Press

partaking of the divine in at least two important respects. The first of these was the '*natural* light', the *lumen naturale* or *lux rationis*, in virtue of which humans are endowed with the divinely bestowed power of rational intuition, enabling us (to use Cartesian terminology) to 'clearly and distinctly perceive' the basic truths of logic and mathematics.[28] The second is the natural light of conscience, which in the words of Joseph Butler in the eighteenth century is the '*natural* guide … assigned us by the author of our nature', whereby we know the basic principles of morality.[29]

When we compare these traditional theistically based views of our natural endowment as human beings with modern secular naturalism, we find, perhaps not surprisingly, striking divergences. Theistic naturalism, despite the doctrine of original sin according to which, as Augustine and Aquinas declare, we are clouded in our intellect and enfeebled in our will,[30] nevertheless firmly insists on a view of human nature according to which it bears the stamp or image of the divine.

Since we are unable to follow the poet John Milton and check the metaphysical credentials of our origins by eavesdropping on the creation of human beings,[31] let us for present purposes take a leaf from the pragmatists' book, bypass the metaphysics, and ask what is the cash value or practical implication of this traditional doctrine of the *imago Dei.* I suggest there are two principal aspects to it. First, though humans are evidently prone to error in manifold ways, the doctrine of the natural light of reason consistently asserts, from Aquinas through to Descartes and beyond, that humans, at least with respect to their most basic and fundamental logical intuitions, are equipped to discern the truth. As Descartes puts it:

> In the case of our clearest and most careful judgements … if such judgements were false they could not be corrected by any clearer judgement or by means of any other natural faculty. In such cases, I simply assert that it is impossible for us to be deceived.[32]

At the most fundamental level, then, our nature is, on this picture, inherently responsive to the true. And the second implication of the

[28] Descartes's notion of the *lux rationis* or 'the light of reason', found in the *Rules for the Direction of Our Native Intelligence* [*Regulae ad directionem ingenii*, *c*. 1628] (AT X 368: CSM I 14), becomes, in the *Meditations*, the *lumen naturale* , 'the natural light' (e.g. AT VII 40: CSM II 28).

[29] Joseph Butler, *Fifteen Sermons* [1726], Sermon III, 5.

[30] Augustine *De natura et gratia* [415], III, iii; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [1266-73] IaIIae, Qu 85, art. 3.

[31] Milton (drawing on Genesis) presents the angel Raphael as narrating to Adam the exact sequence of events that gave rise to his existence: … he formd thee, *Adam,* thee O Man,/ Dust of the ground, and in thy nostrils breath'd/ The breath of Life; in his own Image hee/ Created thee, in the Image of God. John Milton, *Paradise Lost* [1667], Book VII, lines 524-8.

[32] Descartes, *Meditations,* Second Replies, AT VII 144: CSM II 103.

© 2022 The Authors. *New Blackfriars* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers.
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12765 Published online by Cambridge University Press

divine stamp on our nature is that we are inherently responsive to the *good* (this is in a sense not distinct from the first point since on the traditional theistic picture the good and the true are interconvertible). So in the view of Aquinas, for example, someone who eagerly pursues an evil end (for example, bullying another human being) will nevertheless retain, in spite of him or herself, some residual pull in the opposite direction. As Eleonore Stump has underlined in several of her recent writings, Aquinas is committed to the idea of an objective standard of goodness to which at least in its rudiments, no human being can be indifferent. And a striking conclusion follows, namely that 'no one can be wholehearted in evil'. For (to quote Stump) 'a person who lacks one or another degree of integration in goodness will hide some part of his mind from himself [and will be] alienated from some of his own desires.'[33] In short, theistic naturalism gives us a picture of our human nature that is strongly *teleological*: we have a destination that is laid down for us and which we are equipped, at least in principle, to discern and to pursue, so that there is something we are meant to be, or a way we are meant to be. We are, as it were, *configured towards the good*.

How does this twofold affirmation of theistic naturalism – the conception of human nature as fundamentally oriented towards the good and towards the true – compare with the picture presented by contemporary secular naturalism? Perhaps the most prominent tenet of the secular naturalist framework is that our human nature is shaped and configured by the engine of evolution, via the mechanisms of random mutation and natural selection. This in turn suggests the general principle that our human faculties will be configured in terms of *functional utility for survival*. Yet as several philosophers have pointed out, this does not of itself entail or even make it probable that the faculties in question will be configured toward the true. Alvin Plantinga has put the point as follows, focusing on the neural structures associated with a given belief content (for example that there is a predator in the vicinity):

> As a result of having that neuronal event … the creature in whom this event is to be found also believes a certain proposition. But what reason is there to think that proposition is *true*? Granted, the structure in question helps cause adaptive behaviour. But that doesn't so much as slyly suggest that the content that gets associated with the structure is true. As far as its causing the right kind of behaviour is concerned, it simply doesn't matter whether the content, that associated proposition, is true or false. At this point, as far as the truth or falsehood of the content that arises, natural selection just has to take potluck.[34]

[33] Eleonore Stump *Atonement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 126.

[34] Alvin Plantinga and Michael Tooley, *Knowledge of God* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), p. 40.

© 2022 The Authors. *New Blackfriars* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers.
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12765 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The broad lesson to emerge from Plantinga's argument is that on the typical secular conception of our human nature there is no systematic and principled linkage between our possession of equipment that has turned out to be beneficial in the evolutionary struggle for survival and our supposed capacity to track the truth with respect to the most evident intuitions of our intellects.

A precisely parallel problem arises, for the secular naturalist, with respect to the moral domain, where the question is how the contingent mix of survival pressures could deliver a species equipped with the capacity to discern and respond to the good. The problem is explored by Bernard Williams in his *Making Sense of Humanity,* where he somewhat ruefully reminds us of how the Darwinian framework presents human nature as a kind of ragbag, a disparate amalgam of genetically determined and culturally inherited propensities and dispositions, which there is no principled reason to suppose will converge on a satisfactory vision of the good for humankind:

> [The] most plausible stories now available about [human] evolution, including its very recent date and also certain considerations about the physical characteristics of the species, suggest that human beings are to some degree a mess, and that the rapid and immense development of symbolic and cultural capacities has left humans as beings for which no form of life is likely to prove entirely satisfactory, either individually or socially.[35]

The pessimism that is apparent here is a direct consequence of Williams's determination to accept what he called the 'first and hardest lesson' to be learned from the eclipse of theism and the rise of Darwinism – namely that we must abandon the 'deeply teleological outlook … according to which there is inherent in each natural kind of thing an appropriate way for things of that kind to behave … and it must be the deepest desire … of human beings to live in the way that is in the objective sense appropriate to them'.[36] This raises all sorts of questions that cannot be settled here about where theism can be reconciled with what is now known about the origin our species. But Williams's position at any rate is clear: the framework of secular naturalism is such as to make very *im*plausible any idea that human nature is fundamentally oriented towards the good.

[35] Bernard Williams, Making Sense of Humanity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 109, emphasis added. This passage is insightfully discussed in David McPherson in his *Virtue and Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), Ch. 4.

[36] Williams, *Making Sense of Humanity*, pp. 109-10.

© 2022 The Authors. *New Blackfriars* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers.
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12765 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Conclusion: so which naturalism?

So, as we draw to a conclusion, the philosophically interesting question turns out to be not whether or not we should be naturalists, but which of the two naturalisms we should adopt: secular naturalism, with its neutral or blank conception of the domain of nature as a whole and of our own human nature in particular, along with its arguably pessimistic implications for how we see ourselves; or the theistic conception, according to which both the natural world and our own nature bear the stamp of the divine.[37] One could of course attempt to validate the latter conception in the manner of Aquinas or Descartes, by constructing an independent metaphysical argument for God's existence and the divinely created status of the cosmos, including ourselves. But the Enlightenment critique of metaphysics has sufficient force, in my view, to show that there is little scope for constructing a metaphysical bridge to the transcendent starting from the meagre resources available to these 'feeble worms of the earth', as Pascal called us.[38]

But as the arch atheist David Hume was fond of pointing out, where reason gives out, nature must take over.[39] To respond to the natural world with awe and wonder is a deeply ingrained human impulse, and as we have seen it is one that is found in atheists as well as theists. The language of theism vividly expresses this wonder, telling us for example that 'the heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament showeth his handiwork'.[40] We cannot deny the power and resonance of such language, though of course this will not prevent the secularist from dismissing it as a mere projection of

[37] I myself happen to believe that these are the only two coherent choices: there is no viable halfway house between these two diametrically opposed naturalisms; but that is a subject for another paper. So called 'liberal naturalism' attempts to do justice to the 'practical indispensability of the essentially normative concepts of mind, meaning and morals' (see Macarthur, 'Liberal Naturalism and the Scientific Image of the World', cited above at footnote 10). But it seems to me that it fails to provide a worldview in which these concepts are *validated.* The appeal to culture and practice, McDowell's 'second nature' (op. cit. at footnote 12, above), may serve to explain how the relevant normative principles and values are fostered, but does not show how they are grounded, or how their normative force can arise out of the ragbag of heterogeneous propensities that is our (biological and physical) first nature.

[38] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* [*c.* 1660], ed. L. Lafuma (Paris: Seuil, 1962), no. 131. By the 'Enlightenment critique of metaphysics', I have principally in mind Immanuel Kant's famous analysis of the problems that arise once we leave the phenomenal world, *Das Land der Wahrheit* ('the land of truth'), an 'island, surrounded by a wide and stormy ocean, the native home of illusion, where many a fog bank and many a swiftly melting iceberg give the deceptive appearance of farther shores, deluding the adventurous seafarer ever anew with empty hopes and engaging him in enterprises which he can never abandon and yet is unable to carry to completion'. *Critique of Pure Reason* [*Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, 1781/1787], A235/B294.

[39] See David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* [1748], Sectn XII, part 2, final paragraph: 'Nature is always too strong for principle'.

[40] Psalm 19 [18].

© 2022 The Authors. *New Blackfriars* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers.
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12765 Published online by Cambridge University Press

anthropomorphic characteristics onto an impersonal cosmos. The result as far as this goes is a standoff (I have argued elsewhere there may be resources available to tip the scales, but they are beyond the scope of the present paper).[41]

But when we turn from the nature of the cosmos as a whole to our own *human* nature, things seem rather different. Theistic language, with its talk of human nature as bearing the stamp of the divine, may have become deeply uncongenial to contemporary secular philosophy, but nevertheless the conception of human nature as fundamentally configured towards the good and the true is one that we may be unable to give up on pain of self-stultification. For our very sense of our selves as philosophical or scientific inquirers, able to critically sift and evaluate our beliefs, able to discern which goals are worthy of pursuit, and to pursue them with coherence and purpose – all this seems to presuppose at some fundamental level that the human mind is what Thomas Nagel has called an 'instrument of transcendence, able to discern objective reality and objective value'.[42]

In other words, whatever long and tortuous evolutionary process may have spawned us, our human endowment includes a faculty which in principle is capable of pointing us towards an objective domain of truth and goodness – where 'objective' refers to something beyond our own contingent inclinations and preferences, which constrains and guides our choices. This does not of course mean we have a hotline to the truth, or a guaranteed route to goodness – our manifest and multiple human failures rule that out. But it does mean that in our view of ourselves we are obliged, on pain of cognitive and moral paralysis, to have faith in the truth of something like what I am calling theistic naturalism. If there is not within humankind something of what has traditionally been called the divine, something akin to what the canonical theistic philosophers call the 'natural light', then we would have to accept that there is no principled reason to hope that our intellectual and moral projects have a chance of success, or even that they can be coherently

[41] See John Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), Ch.2, and *Philosophy of Religion: towards a more humane approach* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014), Ch. 2.

[42] Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 85.

© 2022 The Authors. *New Blackfriars* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers.
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12765 Published online by Cambridge University Press

formulated in the first place. And these are hopes we could not abandon without ceasing to be human.[43]

John Cottingham
University of Reading, UK

jgcottingham@mac.com

[43] I am most grateful for helpful comments received when I presented earlier versions of this paper at the international seminar series on *Agency and the World* organized by Università Roma Tre/ University of Roehampton, and at the online seminar series for the Research Project on the *Metaphysics of Teleology* at the Centre for Religious Studies, Central European University, Budapest. I also owe special thanks to Simon Oliver for his detailed and most insightful reflections on the paper, and to Clare Carlisle, Fiona Ellis, Karen Kilby, and Mark Wynn for helpful comments.

© 2022 The Authors. *New Blackfriars* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers.
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12765 Published online by Cambridge University Press