

A Metaphysics of Naturalized Epistemology

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Before we discuss naturalized epistemology, I think we should first consider what we actually mean by the term *nature*. Now, that may sound silly at first; but what exactly does the term *nature* refer to? Or perhaps more importantly, what exactly *doesn't* it refer to? An accountant from a twenty-story office building might express her desire for "getting back to nature," meaning some peace and quiet away from the hustle and bustle of the city. Ask an astronomer, however, and his idea of nature will no doubt *include* twenty-story skyscrapers and cities as just another piece of the (much) larger puzzle.

Sometimes what we mean by nature is *essence*, or *character*. If crocodiles are truly wild and dangerous creatures, then when we observe a crocodile acting wild and dangerously, we describe its behavior as natural, that is, according to its character. If human beings are rational creatures, then perhaps it is natural for men and women to behave according to reason.

There are probably dozens of other ways to use nature in a sentence, but I submit that these are the two primary senses of the term. In the first, nature is used to differentiate between, for example, creation and Creator, or between what is controlled by humans and what is not. For the purposes of this discussion, I will refer to this as the *worldview* sense of the term nature, and to the second as its *character* sense.

THE NATURE OF REALITY

Now, with these distinctions in hand, we're ready to tackle some questions about the nature of reality... or is it, the reality of nature? Let's back up and return to our original question about what we mean by the term nature, moving toward our context of science and epistemology.

What does it mean to say that someone is studying nature? Nature, as opposed to what - *non-nature*? If by nature we mean simply *what is real*, then, what else is there? Could there be such a thing as a non-natural dimension of nature?

Ultimately speaking, our *worldview* use of the term nature leads us to one of two conclusions: Either nature is *merely* reality, or it denotes some category *within* reality.

THE NATURE OF SCIENCE

What, then, makes *natural science* natural? Here we find *natural* being used in its *character* sense, to describe the character of scientific enquiry. The backbone of natural science is the collection and study of data, which in turn serves to support or undermine a given hypothesis. This empirical aspect is what distinguishes *natural science* from *theoretical* or 'armchair' endeavors like mathematics, but is also perhaps that which tempts some to think that *all* science must be empirical, or that something isn't scientific unless it's empirical.

Some philosophers have decided that the prevailing worldview of today's scientific community is a sort of *metaphysical naturalism*. Central to this position is the first of our *worldview* alternatives, namely, that what we mean by nature is simply *the whole of reality*. However, one must be careful at this point not to confuse this philosophical position with the natural sciences; while it is possible to marry them, it is by no means necessary. It is entirely possible for a natural scientist to reject the tenets of metaphysical naturalism.

The goal of this discussion is to evaluate the notion of naturalized epistemology; it is at this point, then, that we must decide which sort of naturalization we will apply to our theory of knowledge.

SENSE AND SENSIBILITY

Right off the bat we're faced with a dilemma: in which sense do we wish to naturalize epistemology - in the *worldview* sense, or the *character* sense? Or perhaps both? Let's take a look at the character sense first.

What's so innovative about empirical study and research? Well, this is epistemology, after all. It's not as if you can measure beliefs with a slide rule, or add them up with a calculator. You can't really quantify knowledge in a laboratory - can you?

As I hinted at before, some people get carried away with the scientific method, to the point of claiming that only those facts empirically verified by science are true. If it can't be proved by the scientific method, then it's not true, it's not real. *Reality*, it seems, is reduced to merely *what can be empirically proved*.

This has already led, I'm afraid, to the growing popularity of *cognitive science*, a mixed breed of psychology and cyber-philosophy, a brave new discipline that leaps tall outmoded worldviews in a single bound. In a nutshell, cognitive science attempts to boil everything down to quantitative neurochemical physiology. Forget everything you've been taught for thousands of years: consciousness is nothing but brain states.

By now we've completely blurred the line between worldview and character naturalism. Cognitive science (and its various cousins - *physicalism*, *materialism*, *scientism*) has its humble beginnings in the scientific method, by asking questions and gathering data and drawing conclusions - but then suddenly runs amok, asserting that nothing is real unless it's empirically quantifiable. This character naturalism suddenly transmogrifies into a worldview naturalism, in which reality is defined solely in terms of the empirical.

NATURAL DISASTERS

What normally follows from all of this *physicalism* is that there is nothing about reality which isn't simply the unfolding of cosmic evolution and the principles of physics. *Matter is reality*, ultimately speaking. Thus, we should do *natural science* (in the *character* sense) simply because *nature* (in the *worldview* sense) is all that there is: there is no reality beyond what the natural sciences explain.

It is at this point, however, that the physicalist saws off the branch he's sitting upon. For if human consciousness is nothing but the product of purely physical (thus cosmic and expansionary) forces, then who are we to say what reality is like, and what it's not? We're just another random part of the whole big mess, right? It would be as if a bag of marbles was thrown onto the floor, and one of the marbles tried to explain to the others why HE is the real expert on how to solve life's problems! If human beings are just a chance instance of matter in some random corner of the universe, how could it be possible for us to 'step back' and analyze the situation we're in? What is there to 'step back' from?

THE MYSTERY OF PERSONS

This is one of the chief inconsistencies about worldview naturalism, namely, the problem of persons. Physicalists and the like try to paint a certain picture of what matter/reality is like, and go so far as to say that people are no different. But this simply cannot be the case, for persons simply cannot be boiled down to brain states.

Say, for example, that you have a headache. The cognitive scientist may claim that you are merely experiencing BS 192 (the BS stands for 'brain state,' at least for now!), and that there's no such thing as 'pain,' except for certain neurons firing in certain parts of the brain.

This is all well and good, but notice how the cognitive scientist phrased his so-called wisdom: 'you' are experiencing BS 192. Sure, there's brain states involved, but what's that got to do with anything else in the

universe? Brain states are only significant because they're a part of *us*! That is, they're inextricably a part of what *we* are: persons. It may be that pain is completely reducible to particular brain states; but what does that show? Only that our bodies are an intimate part of who we are. In fact, we're in all kinds of brain states *every second of our lives*, which only furthers my point. What makes the 'pain' states different from the 'normal' brain states, but for the fact that they 'hurt' us persons? Simple as that.

THE MYSTERY OF BELIEF

There may be a useful analogy to be drawn here. Just as it is persons who feel pain, it is believers who have beliefs. Blind bundles of neurons don't have beliefs (or feel pain). Think back to the marbles thrown onto the floor. What have they to 'step back' from, to analyze their predicament?

In a way, human beings are a kind of category, and, as I pointed out earlier, we sometimes make this distinction when speaking of 'nature' as opposed to city streets and skyscrapers. But if this distinction is valid, and human beings are but a category of reality, and the physical world that we know of is but another - then what? What larger set could contain these two smaller subsets?

Despite the prevalence of *metaphysical naturalism* and all its variations, I really don't believe that it's a coherent worldview; the same goes for cognitive science. I really can't imagine someone honestly trying to say, on the one hand, that 'persons' are just random bundles of molecules, and on the other, that some of these random bundles of molecules (say, the ones with PhDs) are in a better position to enlighten the rest of how we're all just simply these random bundles of molecules. That really sounds to me like an empty endeavor.