

Some Doubts about Naturalism

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In a number of recent works¹ of epistemology, Alvin Plantinga has expressed doubts about *metaphysical naturalism*. Specifically, Plantinga wonders if it is possible for *belief* in naturalism to be rational *if* our belief-forming faculties are what naturalism says they are. In other words: *Is naturalism self-defeating?*

Unfortunately, it is a complex argument which involves Bayesian probability theory and much philosophy of science in general. But Plantinga's insights are not completely new, and represent more or less an extension of earlier and (fortunately) much simpler ideas. It is these previous ideas I wish to explore.

NATURALISM DEFINED

In this paper, *metaphysical naturalism* refers to the view that *reality is identical to the natural world*. The *natural world* is simply the *material, physical universe* which the sciences explore. "Reality consists of nothing but a single, all-embracing spatio-temporal system,"² as one writer puts it. This system was born 15-20 billion years ago when an infinitely hot and dense mass exploded in a cosmic big bang. The expansionary effects of this event comprise the entirety of nature; ultimately speaking, the history of the world is the history of the evolution of matter.

Now, this is perhaps not an uncontroversial definition; but I believe it is a fair one, one that is consistent with contemporary philosophy and cosmology. Generally speaking, the natural sciences involve a *methodological naturalism*, which states that the sciences cannot range beyond the domain of the physical world. *Metaphysical naturalism*, however, pushes this methodology significantly further when it insists that *what the sciences explore is the full extent of our world*.

METAPHYSICS NATURALIZED

Whether or not science depends upon some form of naturalism is not the purpose of this paper; what we are concerned about is the rationality of metaphysical naturalism (hereinafter simply *naturalism*) as a comprehensive *worldview*. Specifically, what I aim to show is that the nature of our belief-forming faculties should give us reason to doubt the truth of naturalism.

DESCARTES' DOUBT

According to contemporary evolutionary theory, life progresses in small, unguided steps from the simple to the complex according to two mechanisms: *blind variation* and *natural selection*. This process explains not only the *development* of life, but also the *creation* of life in "an earlier era of purely chemical evolution, in which the molecular elements of life were themselves pieced together."³ Quite literally, the world (up to and including human consciousness) is simply a function of the evolution of matter.

Remarkably, Descartes anticipates this idea in the first of his six *Meditations*. Perhaps I am the creation of a good God, says Descartes, who has designed my belief-forming faculties to be reliable. But it is clear enough that my faculties are *not always* reliable, for I am oftentimes mistaken about this or that. So, I might not have been created by God at all, but something else:

According to [this] supposition, then, I have arrived at my present state by fate or chance or a continuous chain of events, or by some other means; yet since deception and error seem to be

imperfections, the less powerful they make my original cause, the more likely it is that I am so imperfect as to be deceived all the time.⁴

If human consciousness is the product of "fate or chance or a continuous chain of events" (e.g. blind, expansionary forces), and not perfection, this would constitute grounds for Descartes to doubt the integrity of his belief-forming faculties. If I am the product of imperfection, *how much more imperfect, then, am I?*

THE PARADOX OF THE STONE

Let's explore another example, this one from recent history, proposed by Richard Taylor in his small but important *Metaphysics*. Taylor asks us to imagine a stone that's just been dug out of the ground, and covered by peculiar markings. You suppose that these markings are accidental, and simply the result of millions of years of erosion, until a friend of yours who happens to be a professor of ancient languages arrives upon the scene and promptly

renders a translation of [the marks] as follows: HERE KIMON FELL LEADING A BAND OF ATHENIANS AGAINST THE FORCES OF XERXES. Now one can, to be sure, still maintain that the marks are accidental, that they are only scratches left by volcanic activity, and that it is only a singular coincidence that they resemble ... some intelligible message. Nature sometimes produces effects hardly less interesting and arresting as this. The point ... however, is this: if anyone having a knowledge of this stone concludes, solely on the basis of it, that there was someone named Kimon who died in battle near where this stone was found, then he cannot, rationally, suppose that the marks on the stone are the result of the chance or purposeless operations of the forces of nature. He must, on the contrary, assume that they were inscribed there by someone whose purpose was to record an historical fact.⁵

Here, Taylor is not claiming that nature is the result of purposeful design, or requires a designer. It is entirely possible for the rock to have accumulated various and peculiar markings during vast periods of time, and that these markings are purely accidental and not purposefully inscribed. However, it would be a grave mistake, says Taylor, to *also* believe that these markings "reveal some truth with respect to something other than themselves"⁶ about the world. In other words, the markings cannot be *both* the result of chance forces *and* indicative of any truth beyond the mere fact that there happen to be peculiar markings upon a certain stone.

COSMIC IMPLICATIONS

Taylor discusses this example within the general context of human rationality: *how is human consciousness any different from the accumulation of accidental markings upon a stone?* Perhaps, given enough time, nature is bound to evolve something as marvelous and astonishing as human consciousness. *But we cannot have it both ways*, says Taylor. We simply cannot consistently claim that human consciousness is *both* the chance outcome of blind, accidental causes *and* a reliable belief-forming apparatus by which we discern truths about the world.

Now, one could mend this dilemma by saying that none of our beliefs is ever reliable or true. But notice that the truth of this previous statement *entails* that at least one of our beliefs is true, namely, *that none of our beliefs is ever reliable or true*, which is apparently self-contradictory. Perhaps one might choose the other horn of the dilemma, and abandon the naturalistic view of a blind, purposeless world altogether.

CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE CAVE

Bertrand Russell once said, "Man is a part of nature, not something contrasted with nature. His thoughts and his bodily movements follow the same laws that describe the motions of stars and atoms."⁷ If this is true, then there can hardly be any grounds for distinction between the blind, accidental forces of nature, and human consciousness. If our belief-forming faculties are simply a function of blind, accidental nature, it

would certainly follow that the deliverances of our belief-forming processes are just as blind and accidental.

Yet, how could we ever come to *know* (via accidentally-caused belief-forming faculties) that our belief-forming faculties are the result of blind, accidental causes? This also appears to be self-contradictory. *Knowledge* implies a certainty about *the way things are* that is not blind or accidental. In order to achieve this certainty, it seems human consciousness would require the ability to "step outside" or otherwise transcend the blind, accidental nature of the system in order to objectively evaluate that system. But this is just what naturalism denies: *nothing transcends the system*.

Why not simply allow for the possibility that human consciousness is not exclusively the result of blind, accidental causes? If consciousness is a part of nature, and consciousness is not blind -- could it just be possible that not all of nature is blind accident?

WHY I AM NOT A NATURALIST

Although I believe the arguments I have just developed are intuitive, they are not very strict. But what I have hoped to show is that it is not obviously clear that naturalism makes for a coherent worldview. If reality is just cosmic, expansionary forces, what about things like *numbers*, or ideals like *justice*? It is not clear how these could be a contingent, expansionary function of matter; but yet the naturalist must somehow maintain that they are. Wouldn't it just be better to admit that some features of the world do not seem to be subject to change or the result of blind, accidental causes? Quite frankly, there doesn't seem to be anything *foundational* enough within the landscape of naturalism upon which to establish the *unchangeableness* of things like *number*, or *justice*. For, according to evolutionary theory, everything is subject to change, to progress -- except for, apparently, the doctrine of naturalism itself.

WORKS CITED

¹See, for example, chapters 11-12 of *Warrant and Proper Function*. New York: OUP, 1993, and "An Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism." *Logos* 12 (1991): 27-49.

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³Churchland, Paul M. *Matter and Consciousness*. Rev. ed. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988. (pg. 21)

⁴Descartes, Rene. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. In *Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings*, trans. Cottingham, Stoothoff, Murdoch. Cambridge: CUP, 1988. (pg. 78)

⁵Taylor, Richard. *Metaphysics*. 2nd ed. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1974. (pg. 115-16)

⁶Taylor, 118.

⁷Russell, Bertrand. "What I Believe." In *Why I Am Not a Christian and other essays*. ed. Paul Edwards. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957. (pg 48)