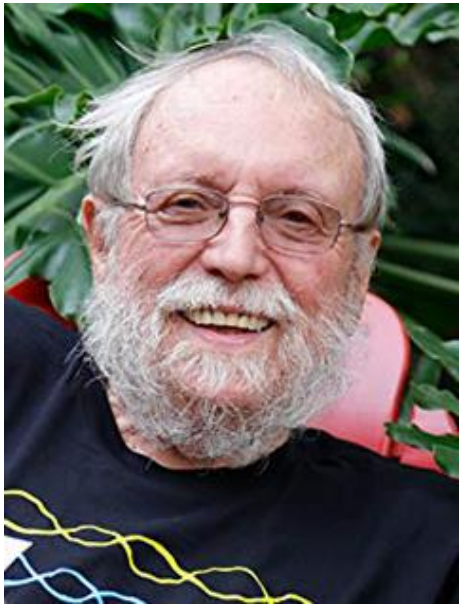
Michael Peterson



Michael Ruse

Naturalism vs. theism

Which is the best explanation *overall*?

Inference to the best explanation

- "The dispute between theism and atheism is fundamentally a clash between two opposing explanations of reality." (Peterson, p. 438)

- IBE says that one should believe the hypothesis that offers the best explanation of the total available data.

- The two main hypotheses proposed (by analytic philosophers) are naturalism and theism. (Though Peterson claims that theism has less explanatory power than Christianity.)

- N.B. Applying IBE in this way is an ‘evidentialist’ approach to the question of whether theism or naturalism is the more rational view.

- (Recall that, according to Plantinga, the rationality of belief in God does not stand or fall with such arguments.)

What is ‘naturalism’?

- Naturalism is often defined as the view that only natural objects exist – there is nothing supernatural (no gods, angels, demons, spirits, immortal souls, ghosts, etc.)

What is ‘naturalism’?

- Michael Ruse:

…we have “metaphysical naturalism” claiming that there is nothing beyond this natural world. No gods or such things.

(p. 427)

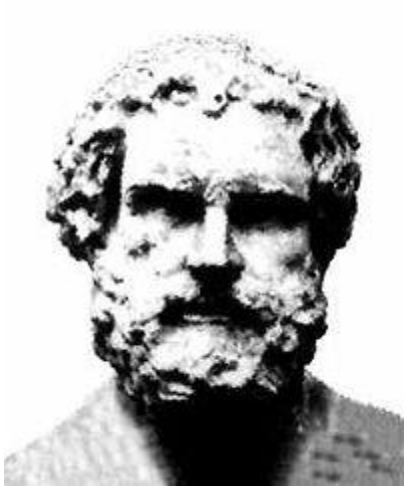
What is ‘naturalism’?

- It is hard to define ‘natural’ objects very precisely, but the rough idea is that they:
  - are made of matter,
  - can be described and understood (completely) using standard physics and chemistry.

- Naturalism is thus closely related to *physicalism*, the view that everything is physical.

The Origins of Naturalism

- The ancient **atomists** (e.g. Leucippus and Democritus, 5th century BC) were naturalists, believing that the whole world (including human minds) was made of tiny, unbreakable lumps of matter (like Lego blocks). Hence no gods! ☺



Medieval Philosophy

- Medieval philosophy was based on the works of Plato and Aristotle, who rejected atomism and argued for design in the natural world.
- Medieval philosophers were all *theists*. Mostly Christian (e.g. Augustine, Aquinas, Duns Scotus) but also Muslim (e.g. Avicenna, Alhazen, Averroes) and Jewish (e.g. Maimonides). Not naturalists!

The Origins of Naturalism

- Nevertheless, in the late Middle Ages, natural philosophers such as Buridan and Oresme were dismissive of appeals to supernatural causes to explain everyday events.
- In *On the Causes of Marvels* (1370), Oresme aimed:

"to show the causes of some effects which seem to be marvels and to **show that the effects occur naturally**, as do others at which we do not marvel. ...

...there is no reason to take recourse to the heavens, **the last refuge of the weak**, or demons, or to our glorious God as if He would produce these effects directly, more so than those effects whose causes we believe are well known to us."

Primary and Secondary Causation

- Medieval scholars believed that God was the ultimate cause of everything, but they distinguished between ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ divine causation:
  - **Primary**: God caused the event *directly*. (Supernatural causation)
  - **Secondary**: God caused the event *indirectly*, via creating natural objects with their own causal powers, that then caused the event. (Natural causation)

‘Methodological Naturalism’

- Now Buridan and Oresme were Catholic priests, who therefore believed in God, as well as angels, demons and human souls. They were not naturalists as such.
- They supported however (what is now called) *methodological naturalism*. This is the view that science should appeal only to secondary (natural) causes in explaining phenomena.
  - Supernatural explanations in science are “the last refuge of the weak”.

Methodological naturalism (MN)

- Ruse mentions early chemist Robert Boyle, and contemporary geneticist Francis Collins as scientists who accept *methodological* naturalism, despite being Christians.

"Far from being uncomfortable with methodological naturalism, such believers welcome it as a tool ultimately provided by God." (Ruse, p. 428)

MN is usually *limited* for theists

- For theists, MN means an extreme reluctance to appeal to supernatural (primary) causes, especially for everyday phenomena like the motions of the planets.

- Most theists who are MN will believe in a few miracles, such as the creation of the world itself, the miracles of Jesus, the resurrection of Jesus, etc. It isn't absolute.

MN and the origin of species

- From the time of Democritus to that of Darwin, the origin of complex life seemed an insuperable problem for MN.

- Ruse sees Darwin's theory of natural selection as having largely solved the problem, however.
  - (The problem of the origin of the first cells remains, but Ruse is hopeful of future success.)
  - Ruse is dismissive of arguments (e.g. Behe's) that natural selection is inadequate. (He refers to Miller's argument about the T3SS.)

- Peterson appears to be willing to accept any biological theory of origins that the data support.
- "Empirical details about how we arose from lower forms, up through higher primates, are for science to continue to discover." (p. 448)

- Peterson also argues that the appeal to chance in scientific theories (e.g. mutation, fixation by drift) isn't inconsistent with Christian theology. (He compares it to human free will.)

Can naturalism explain *humans*?

- The existence of humans raises special challenges for naturalism:
  - Free will
  - Consciousness
  - Morality
  - Mathematics and logic
  - Human rationality, science
  - The existence of persons
  - Truth

- Peterson alleges that naturalism has great difficulty explaining these.

- "[Naturalism] is hopelessly reductionistic, downgrading important realities to something they are not and thus distorting them." (pp. 448-9)

- In some cases, **naturalists say that these features of human experience are illusions**. (Procrustean?)

Free will

- Ruse endorses “compatibilism”, the claim that even causally-determined beings can have free will.

- On this view, acting freely means performing actions that are directly caused by one’s own choices, rather than by external constraints.

- Compatibilists claim that having beliefs and desires, making choices, etc. is logically consistent with naturalism and even causal determinism.

Richard Taylor's *control box* argument against compatibilism

Strong desire to do A → Decision to do A → Do A

He did A of his own free will!

"We can suppose that an ingenious physiologist can induce in me any volition he pleases, simply by pushing various buttons on an instrument … By pushing one button, he evokes in me the volition to raise my hand; and my hand, being unimpeded, rises in response to that volition." Richard Taylor, *Metaphysics*, p. 45.

Is compatibilism just a verbal trick?

"This is a wretched subterfuge with which some persons still let themselves be put off, and so think they have solved, with a petty word-jugglery, that difficult problem, at the solution of which centuries have laboured in vain, and which can therefore scarcely be found so completely on the surface."

(Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 1788.)

compatibilism is a "quagmire of evasion", a "mere word-grabbing game played by the soft determinists."

(William James, "The Dilemma of Determinism", 1884)

Jerry Coyne on Free Will

"… this sort of free will is ruled out, simply and decisively, by the laws of physics. Your brain and body, the vehicles that make "choices," are composed of molecules, and the arrangement of those molecules is entirely determined by your genes and your environment. ... (It's possible, though improbable, that the indeterminacy of quantum physics may tweak behavior a bit, but such random effects can't be part of free will.)"

Jerry Coyne, "You Don't Have Free Will", March 18, 2012.

Argument for consistency?

- Also, compatibilists have given no argument that making conscious choices is logically consistent with physicalism (which is a presupposition of determinism). It is simply asserted.

- Non-physicalists like Nagel, Chalmers, BonJour etc. argue that physicalism cannot account for consciousness or intentionality, which are essential for free will (even according to compatibilists).

The problem of consciousness

- Ruse refers to the fact that consciousness, or subjective experience (the fact that there is *something that it is like* to be a human) presently has no scientific explanation.
- "Sentience seems to be more than brain waves" (p. 430)
- Ruse is referring to arguments from Nagel, Jackson and Chalmers that conscious experiences (such as the smell of coffee, or the colour of a lilac) cannot, even in principle, be described in physical terms.

Ruse's replies

1. Consciousness could be a natural phenomenon that is simply beyond the ability of humans to fathom.
   - "It is just that evolution has not given the mental apparatus to solve such problems …"

     (This is the "mysterianism" of Colin McGinn)

2. The mind seems to follow laws, and be closely tied to the physical brain. E.g. Phineas Gage was 'a different person' after part of his brain was destroyed by an iron rod thrust through his head.

Phineas Gage

"The equilibrium or balance, so to speak, between his intellectual faculties and animal propensities, seems to have been destroyed. He is fitful, irreverent, indulging at times in the grossest profanity (which was not previously his custom), manifesting but little deference for his fellows…"

John Harlow (1868)

The problem of morality

- Hume (a naturalist) said that moral statements are merely **expressions of emotions** like approval and disgust. (They aren't true or false.) "Emotivism"
  - This seems to trivialize morality, and make it subjective.

- A Darwinian approach to morality tries to understand moral feelings and behaviour in terms of natural selection. "Basically those of us who are nice tend to get more out of life than those of us who are nasty."
  - But this doesn't account for moral *truths*, just moral *beliefs* and *behaviour*.

Ruse's solution – morality is an illusion

- "… if we did not think that morality was objective, before long it would break down as we began cheating. If rape isn't really wrong, then why stay back when others move forward? So the entirely natural case is that morality—the objectivity of morality that is—is **an illusion put in place by our biology to make us social animals**, because social animals are selected over non-social animals." (pp. 431-2)

- Is this an acceptable view?

natural = good?

- We saw that, for theistic ethics (especially Thomistic versions such as Bill Craig's) human nature results from God's will, and is "God's plan" for human life.

- From an evolutionary perspective, human nature isn't seen as morally good.
  - Aggression, violence (esp. in males) was adaptive
  - Rape may have been adaptive
  - Infanticide would be adaptive in some cases.
  - Disgust (e.g. toward non-procreative sexuality) may have been adaptive.

Is naturalism self-defeating?

- Can naturalism account for the power of the human mind to find scientific truth?
  - If not, then naturalism undermines itself.

- There are many arguments of this form:
  i. Physical structures cannot have original intentionality (understanding)
  ii. Naturalism cannot account for the *a priori* knowledge needed for science
  iii. Naturalism cannot account for the reliability of our cognitive mechanisms generally. (e.g. Plantinga)
  iv. Naturalism cannot account for facts, and other objective states of affairs.

E.g. John Polkinghorne on intentionality

- “It [materialism] also destroys rationality. Thought is replaced by electro-chemical neural events. Two such events cannot confront each other in rational discourse. They are neither right nor wrong. They simply happen.... The very assertions of the reductionist himself are nothing but blips in the neural network of his brain. The world of rational discourse dissolves into the absurd chatter of firing synapses. …”

Philosophers on intentionality

- Leibniz argued that thought cannot be explained as a product of material processes. (*Monadology* (1714), Section 17)

  One is obliged to admit that *perception* and what depends upon it is *inexplicable on mechanical principles*, that is, by figures and motions. In imagining that there is a machine whose construction would enable it to think, to sense, and to have perception, one could conceive it enlarged while retaining the same proportions, so that one could enter into it, just like into a windmill. Supposing this, one should, when visiting within it, find only parts pushing one another, and never anything by which to explain a perception. Thus it is in the simple substance, and not in the composite or in the machine, that one must look for perception.

Philosophers on intentionality

- Searle argued in his famous “Chinese Room” paper in 1980 that merely running the right “chatbot” computer program isn’t sufficient for a computer to have intentionality.

- (Of course arguments of this sort have been strongly criticised by materialists.)

Naturalism and the problem of induction

- If naturalism is true, then all human knowledge ultimately derives from experience (our own, and possibly some inherited brain structures that were moulded by the experiences of our ancestors).
- As Hume showed, experience is not logically sufficient to make any scientific hypothesis (or any claim that goes beyond experience) even probable. *A priori* knowledge is needed.
- Hence naturalism apparently cannot account for scientific knowledge.

- There appears to be **no hope of refuting Hume's argument that induction cannot be justified by appeal to experience**. Though a few recent philosophers have made attempts in this direction, the circular or question-begging character of such a justification seems too clear to be denied. **Thus any defense of induction will apparently have to be independent of experience—that is, a priori**.

- Laurence Bonjour, *Epistemology*, 2010, p. 64

Ruse's solution to the problem of induction

- Ruse quotes Hume's *Treatise*, Book I, Section 7.

"Most fortunately it happens, that **since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices** to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras. **I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends**; and when after three or four hours' amusement, I would return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strained, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther."

Physicalism and the existence of persons

- It also appears that physicalism is incompatible with the existence of persons, considered as entities that persist through time.
- The physical description of a 'person' includes nothing stable that persists from birth to death. Personal identity is an illusion, or just a legal fiction.
- "The line of reasoning that has so successfully explained the identity of plants and animals, of ships and houses, and of all changing complex things—natural and artificial—must be applied to personal identity too. The identity that we ascribe to the mind of man is fictitious" (David Hume)

Mathematics and Logic

- God is understood to be a thinking, rational being, so that math and logic can be understood by theists to concern the “architecture of God’s mind”.

- Is there an understanding of math and logic that is available within naturalism?
  - Or should the supposed objectivity of math and logic be regarded as an illusion?
  - (If moral normativity is an illusion, as Ruse says, then why not other kinds of norms?)

Truth

- Truth is correspondence to “reality”.

- More precisely, truth is a property of (some) beliefs, the ones that correspond to reality.
- But how do beliefs correspond to reality? What aspect of reality do they correspond to?
- The usual answer is that true beliefs correspond to *facts*, i.e. actual states of affairs.

States of affairs are “beliefs in the sky”?

- For example, my *belief* that the moon has no atmosphere is made true by the *fact* that the moon has no atmosphere.
- In addition to my (subjective) beliefs, there are (objective) possible states of affairs. Some of these, the ones called ‘facts’, are said to ‘obtain’, or be ‘actual’ states of affairs.
- (In some interesting cases, distinct beliefs may express the same possible state of affairs. E.g. “Hesperus has three moons” and “Phosphorus has three moons”.)

- An easy objection to this realist view is that “possible states of affairs” look very much like beliefs, and “actual states of affairs”, or “facts”, look very much like true beliefs.
- Surely all we’re doing here is (as Kant said) projecting the structure of our minds onto the world. States of affairs are “beliefs in the sky”.
- (Rather like the way that God, according to some, is just an imaginary Daddy in the sky.)

- A similar criticism can be made of Plato's Forms. These things are supposed to be objective, not creatures of the mind.
- Yet they sure look like *mental concepts*. (The Good, Square, Seven, Straight Line, etc.)
- Aren't the Forms just some of Plato's own ideas, projected onto the heavens (and grossly enlarged in the process)?
- "The Ideas are certain archetypal forms or stable and immutable essences of things, which have not themselves been formed but, existing eternally and without change, are contained in the divine intelligence. They neither arise nor pass away, but whatever arises and passes away is formed according to them." (Augustine, *De Ideis* 2)

- “the nature of a circle, and the fact that two and three make five, have eternity in the mind of God”
- (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia, q. 16, a. 7, obj. 1 and reply).

Propositions

- Propositions, such as *that Mars has two moons* are the basic units of meaning. They are what logic studies.
- Propositions stand in logical relations, such as logical consequence and consistency.
- Propositions can be operated on by such "logical operators" as conjunction ("…and…"), disjunction ("…or…"), negation ("it is not the case that…") and conditionals ("if … then …").

Propositions

- Belief-contents and possible states of affairs are both propositions, in this sense.
- (States of affairs, like belief contents, can entail other states of affairs, be negated, etc.)
- If possible states of affairs really exist, in the world, then we can say that *the world itself has a propositional structure*.
- Is there any way that the world could have some sort of *objective* mental structure?

Thomas Aquinas and divine intellect

"Even if there were no human intellects, there could be truths because of their relation to the divine intellect. But if, *per impossible*, there were no intellects at *all*, but things continued to exist, then there would be no such reality as truth."

(*De Veritate* Q. 1, A.6 Respondeo).

- Objective states of affairs are God's beliefs? Truth isn't the "view from nowhere", but rather the *view from God*?

Objective and subjective probability

- The Thomist view of truth also makes sense of the fact that there are objective as well as subjective probabilities, that follow the same laws.
  - N.B. Subjective probabilities are rational *degrees of belief*.
- Subjective probabilities ought to conform to objective probabilities (when known), just as subjective truths ought to conform to objective truth.

Overall

- Naturalism faces a substantial challenge: that it is explanatorily inadequate.

- What about theism?
  - the problem of evil
  - cannot be reconciled with evolution
  - Ockham's Razor.
  - the whole concept of God is incoherent.