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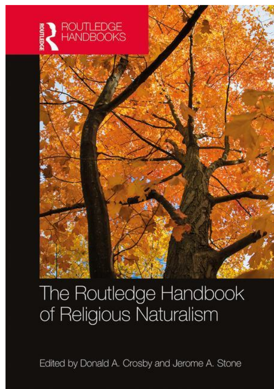

The Routledge Handbook of Religious Naturalism

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Defining and Defending Religious Naturalism

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1
DEFINING AND DEFENDING RELIGIOUS NATURALISM

Jerome A. Stone

As a preliminary description, religious naturalism may be said to be a movement that asserts the possibility and desirability of a robust religious/spiritual life without recourse to the supernatural, whether deity, soul, or heaven. A number of people discussing naturalism have stressed that proponents of naturalism need to emphasize what naturalism stands *for*, rather than *against.* In line with that, naturalism "affirms that attention should be focused on the events and processes of this world to provide what degree of explanation and meaning are possible to this life" (Stone 2008: 1). However, many recent supernaturalists make a similar affirmation; hence the negative assertion of a denial of the supernatural seems appropriate.

Not all religious naturalists use that term to describe themselves, and sometimes there are boundary issues or vacillation. To go into these in detail would take us beyond the scope of an introductory essay. There is no central organization, institutional basis, or organ to disseminate the ideas and practices of religious naturalism, although there are a number of bonds of cohesion, some of which are described in the selection by Goodenough, et al.

The application of the term "religious naturalism" is something like the term "Impressionism" to describe certain French painters of the nineteenth century. The latter term was coined by a journalist to describe the paintings in the first exhibition organized by Impressionist artists and has been found useful by art historians and critics. The term "religious naturalism" was used frequently among some theological writers in America in the 1940s and 1950s, especially at the University of Chicago's Divinity School and its *Journal of Religion.* (Many issues in the present essay are treated more fully in Stone 2008.) Thus religious naturalism is a not a clearly delineated natural kind, like a solar system, nor a purely fictive construction, like a stellar constellation. It is much like a galaxy with loosely defined borders or perhaps like an ecosystem.

Naturalists have different views of nature. Contrast Spinoza (pro) and Crosby (con) on causal determinism. Many follow a variety of emergentist approaches. One may question whether religious naturalism is really religious at all. The justification for the term "religious" is that attitudes and beliefs among religious naturalists are sufficiently analogous to attitudes and beliefs among the paradigm cases of religion that they may be called religious. This approach creates a difficulty, since the choice of paradigm cases of religion will vary depending on the socio-historical context (see Stone 1992: 21–27).

Is religious naturalism a distraction from more pressing issues? Is it only for people who can afford it? Is religious naturalism for the elite? There are a number of replies to these questions.

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(1) Religious naturalism can help sensitize people to the importance of the environment. Earth is the home, the life-support system of everyone. (2) Religious naturalism can help attune the victims of injustice to the healing and renewing resources of the non-human world. (3) Religious naturalism helps remove the oppressive aspects of some traditional theisms. Furthermore, it fosters a religious or spiritual approach that can be at least as fulfilling and liberating as much traditional theism. (4) Since religious naturalism is compatible with the methods and results of scientific inquiry, it is useful for challenging many conservative social and political movements. (5) Many religious naturalists have been especially focused on social justice and human empowerment. Finally (6), religious naturalism can motivate care for the non-human world as I try to show in *Sacred Nature* (Stone 2017).

The meanings of "naturalism"

There is no single, agreed-upon meaning of "naturalism." Religious naturalists espouse a variety of meanings of the term, most of which would satisfy all but the upholders of the strictest definition of it. The *Oxford English Dictionary* makes the suggestion that the philosophical meaning of the term goes back to the eighteenth century and meant a view of the world in which "only the operation of natural (as opposed to supernatural or spiritual) laws and forces is admitted or assumed" (Volume X: 245). The term is also said to mean the view that moral concepts are to be analyzed by means of concepts applicable to natural phenomena. This later meaning is not normally the focus in discussions of religious naturalism.

Owen Flanagan, in his article in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science*, asserts that "the terms 'naturalism' and 'naturalist' lack a single determinate meaning" (Flanagan 2006: 432). Indeed Flanagan specifies 15 meanings or implications of the term naturalism and asserts that there are more (Flanagan 2006: 430–431). However, he notes that there is a common core to all the varieties of naturalism:

> Anti-supernaturalism forms the common core, the common tenet, of "naturalism" insofar as "naturalism" is anything like a coherent philosophical doctrine spanning the last four centuries... . [T]he objectionable form of "supernaturalism" is one according to which (i) there exists a "supernatural being or beings" or "power(s)" outside the natural world; (ii) this "being" or "power" has causal commerce with this world; (iii) the grounds for belief in *both* the "supernatural being" *and* its causal commerce with this world cannot be seen, discovered, or inferred by way of any known and reliable epistemic methods.
>
> (Flanagan 2006: 433)

In my characterization of religious naturalism I include the notion that it denies or at least does not employ the notion of an ontologically distinct and superior reality. See my comments on David Griffin under "Neighboring movements." In my judgment, Griffin is not a naturalist, although he aspires to be. Flanagan would have a harder time excluding Griffin from the fold. I apologize for the exclusivist language here, but some distinction needs to be made.

Flanagan goes on to make a familiar distinction between naturalism as a strong ontological claim about "what there is" and a weaker epistemological claim (often called a methodological claim) about what can be used in explaining things. Religious naturalists take a variety of positions on this distinction. Flanagan also makes a distinction between what he calls "imperialistic ontological naturalism" and a "non-imperialistic ontological naturalism." The former makes a strong claim that the supernatural does not exist, the latter a more modest claim that "*for all we*

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know and can know, what there is, and all there is, is the natural world" (Flanagan 2006: 437). Again, religious naturalists take a variety of positions on this distinction.

Arthur C. Danto, in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, asserts that "naturalism is polemically defined as repudiating the view that there exists or could exist any entities or events which lie, in principle, beyond the scope of scientific explanation" (Danto 1967: 448). Alan Lacey in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* takes a similar position (Lacey 1995: 604). The necessity of scientific explanation in the *explicans* of naturalism is a common narrowing of the term. Again, religious naturalists take a variety of positions on this necessity.

Mario De Caro and David Macarthur have published two collections of essays, *Naturalism in Question* and *Naturalism and Normativity* (De Caro and Macarthur 2004; De Caro and Macarthur 2010). They define "scientific naturalism" as committed to an exclusively scientific conception of nature and conceive of philosophical inquiry as continuous with science (De Caro and Macarthur 2004: 1–6). Instead they nurture a "liberal" or "pluralistic" naturalism that challenges this viewpoint. According to them, liberal naturalism asserts that the claims of scientific naturalism extend beyond the limited scope of scientific assertions and also explores the weakness of scientific naturalism in dealing with the topics of mind, agency, and normativity, especially ethical and aesthetic normativity. Liberal or pluralistic naturalists share four features: (1) a shift in focus from nonhuman to human nature, conceived as a historically conditioned product of contingent forces, (2) a nonreductive attitude to normativity, (3) a view of philosophy as in some respects autonomous from scientific method, and (4) a pluralistic conception of the sciences, rejecting the ideal of the unity of the sciences as unrealizable and conceding that there is no clear demarcation of science from non-science. Religious naturalists are generally, though not necessarily, in sympathy with the liberal or pluralistic naturalism depicted by these authors. They tend to sidestep the concerns of "scientific naturalism" as described here, since religion or spirituality is a different way of engaging the world than science.

Neighboring movements

There are a number of movements related to or overlapping with religious naturalism. It is helpful to clarify their relationships. One such view is materialism or physicalism. As naturalists, most religious naturalists are materialists. However, the two positions are logically independent. It is possible to reject any supernatural realm and yet to hold that the world is not material but something else, perhaps mental or spiritual. Furthermore, the materialism of most religious naturalists is a generous materialism, often emergentist, which allows for the reality of much of what we call mind or values. Loyal Rue put this idea in picturesque language when he said we need to replace the "grunge" theory of matter with a "glitz" theory (Rue 2011: 52–53). When we realize what the material world has produced, we need not deprecate it, but appreciate its creativity. We need not think of matter as lifeless and inert. Some of it is, but some of it is animate, even capable of thinking. (For a vigorous exposition of religious naturalism in physicalist terms see Hardwick 1996.)

Any materialistic view should include the notion that information, relationships, and perhaps possibilities are part of the universe and are to be included among the fundamental aspects of the world. Patterns can be replicated in different times and places. Nevertheless, they seem always to have a physical basis when they are so replicated.

Another position overlapping with religious naturalism is humanism, especially religious humanism. I am referring to such clergy, starting in the 1920s, as John Dietrich, Cutis Reese, and Charles Francis Potter, and also to the signers of the various *Humanist Manifestos.* These humanists are clearly naturalists in that they focus on this world and reject such notions as God, soul,

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and heaven. They could also be called religious naturalists, especially those that call themselves religious humanists. This is because their devotion to human betterment and the value they place on the search for truth is analogous to the devotion of people we usually call religious. Indeed many of what William Murry calls the newer humanists have an openness "*to wonder and mystery and transcendence in a naturalistic framework*" (Murry 2006: 84). Thus, many humanists today belong even more clearly to the religious naturalists than the humanists of the 1920s and 1930s.

Another related movement is process theology. Many process thinkers refer to themselves as naturalists. However, there is an important difference between most of them and the religious naturalists treated in this *Handbook*. They refer to themselves as naturalists because their panentheism permits them to speak of God as immanent in the world and thus refer to themselves as naturalists. Robert Mesle developed "process naturalism" in Chapter 17 of his *Process Theology: A Basic Introduction* (Mesle 1993: 127–133). To add to the confusion, John Cobb, in a chapter written for Mesle's book, says that he sometimes calls himself a "naturalistic theist" or a "theistic naturalist" (Cobb 1993: 134).

For the process thinkers close to Charles Hartshorne there is one entity that is unique in being surpassable by no other entity except itself in a future state. This entity is supremely related and compassionate and often is thought of as conserving value. These characteristics make this one entity so ontologically distinct and supreme that it is a form of the supernatural. An entity surpassable by none except itself is not naturalist—immanentist yes, naturalist, no.

The process thinker David Griffin, in *Religion and Scientific Naturalism*, develops a "naturalistic theism" which does not belong with the religious naturalists. "Variable constitutive divine influences would be understood as *part* of the normal pattern of causes and effects, *not* an interruption of this pattern" (Griffin 2000: 40). Such a position, Griffin claims, is a form of naturalism because it rejects any supernatural interruptions. God so conceived is a supreme power, the only entity involved in the origination of every other event and giving to each of them its ideal aim. This God is ontologically distinct and supreme, and thus not really an aspect of naturalism as I am characterizing it.

Wesley J. Wildman has grouped a number of philosophical theologies together (e.g., Plato, Plotinus, Thomas Aquinas [in his God as Being Itself and Pure Act moments], G. W. Hegel, Paul Tillich, Robert Neville, and himself) under the heading of ground-of-being theologies (Wildman 2006). This group is characterized by "two important negations: they *deny that ultimate reality is a determinate entity*, and they *deny that the universe is ontologically self-explanatory*" (Wildman 2006: 612). This is an important family of theological writers, often overlooked by those outside of theological circles, and is to be contrasted with personalistic theism and process theology. Because they deny that ultimate reality is a determinate entity, both their theoretical formulations and their general outlook are often close to religious naturalism. However, the other negation, that the universe is ontologically self-explanatory, separates them from religious naturalists. [I find Wildman's claim that some positive formulations of ground-of-being theologies "are indistinguishable from religious naturalism" to be an overstatement (Wildman 2006: 612).]

Yet another term closely allied with religious naturalism is pantheism. It is probably best to think of these as intersecting concepts. Many pantheists are religious naturalists. However, some pantheists might have an animistic outlook, which places them outside of naturalism. And there are many religious naturalists who identify God with only part of the universe, such as the American philosopher of religion Henry Nelson Wieman, for whom God is the integrative process within the world. [See also Gordon Kaufman's *In Face of Mystery* and his smaller *In the Beginning … Creativity*; also *Dancing with the Sacred* by Karl Peters (Kaufman 1993; Kaufman 2004; Peters 2002).] Such religious naturalists are not pantheists.

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While the meaning of the term "pantheism" is contestable, usually it refers to an identification of God (or the Divine) with the whole universe. It might be argued that for Spinoza God and Nature are interchangeable terms insofar as the universe is considered as a logically interconnected system. For Samuel Alexander, the early twentieth-century British metaphysician, the focus of religious sentiment is not towards the universe as a present whole, but to the universe insofar as it is growing towards a new and higher level. Edward Scribner Ames, an early twentieth-century psychologist of religion and theologian at Chicago, referred to God as the world in certain aspects and functions; namely, orderliness, love, and intelligence or order, beauty, and expansion (Ames 1929: 154, 157). A similar comment could be made about Chicago theologians George Burman Foster and Bernard Loomer. For Foster "God" designates "the universe in its ideal-achieving capacity" (Foster 1909: 108–110; Peden and Stone 1996, Volume I: 52). Loomer, in his rich essay *The Size of God*, asserts that "God as a wholeness can be identified with the concrete, interconnected totality of this struggling, imperfect, unfinished, and evolving societal web." By "societal" he is referring to the interconnected nature of the universe (Loomer 1987: 42). Paul Harrison, founder and president of the World Pantheist Movement, says that to say that the universe as a whole is divine does not mean that oil slicks, bits of chewing gum on the pavement, nuclear weapons, smokestacks, or mass murderers are divine (Harrison 1999: 71). Many recent naturalists distinguish between *natura naturans* (nature as creating) and *natura naturata* (the totality of the myriad created things) and think of the former as the appropriate object of religious orientation.

Perhaps the Roman Catholic distinction between worship (*latreia*) and veneration *(dulia)* might be of help here. In this tradition only God is worthy of worship, while the saints can be objects of veneration without committing idolatry. Analogously for a naturalist, the entire universe might be the proper object of reverence (divested of personalist overtones), while various things, events, and systems might be objects of something akin to veneration. These analogies might not be helpful, especially for religious naturalists who have a strong antipathy to the connotations of "worshiping" nature.

Many people think that pantheism involves absorption into the infinite ocean of being as the goal of the spiritual journey or as a prospect after death. However, Charles Milligan suggests that in the past century or so pantheists stress independence and autonomy of the human self (Milligan 1987). Perhaps a better way of speaking is to stress the interdependence of the human self with its total ecological nexus, physical, biological, historical, and familial.

There is also some similarity between the Gaia movement and those naturalists who refer to the entire universe in religious terms. It may be said that these naturalists usually use religious language of the entire universe(s) rather than just the planet Earth, as the Gaia movement usually does. The term "Gaia" is also sometimes used in an interesting but debatable scientific hypothesis about the self-corrective nature of the Earth's planetary processes. A helpful study of some types of naturalism is to be found in Bron Taylor's *Dark Green Religion*. However, this book covers several viewpoints that move beyond naturalism (Taylor 2010).

A case for religious naturalism

No conclusive argument or rigorous proof can be made for religious naturalism. A case can be made for it, but in the end it is a conjecture or insight that makes sense to its adherents. It should be noted that it is not a scientific theory or an empirical generalization, although it is a scientifically informed surmise. It is a philosophical position and way of living. Therefore it cannot be dismissed on the ground that it goes beyond the empirical evidence.

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Part of the case for religious naturalism is that arguments for the existence or reality of a God conceived of as an ontological ultimate fail to be convincing. A complete critique of the arguments for a maximally conceived deity (as distinct from some varieties of a naturalistically conceived God) is not possible here. However, the ontological arguments and the one based on rejection of an infinite regress deserve brief mention.

The ontological arguments for the existence of God, which allegedly prove that since God is by definition a being that must necessarily exist, are frequently considered unconvincing. However, Charles Hartshorne and Schubert Ogden have made vigorous defenses of these arguments based on what is known as modal logic, thus allegedly invalidating religious naturalism. Using a criticism similar to that of John Hick, I have elsewhere challenged Hartshorne and Ogden by differentiating between the necessity of a proposition and the alleged necessary existence of an entity (Stone 1992: 170–181).

The cosmological arguments for the existence of God are given classic expression by Thomas Aquinas. In his arguments, he moves from the existence of the universe or an aspect of it to the existence of a cause for the universe or aspect. He makes three assumptions. First, that all finite beings are dependent upon other beings for their motion or existence. Second, an infinite regress in the chain of dependence is inexplicable if not supported by something non-contingent. Third, the anchor of this chain, the first cause or necessary being, is the proper object of religious devotion. Although there is some controversy about the third assumption, current discussion has centered on the second. Briefly put, naturalists question the tenability of the second assumption because for them the existence of the universe needs no explanation.

A more positive case can be made for accepting religious naturalism as a surmise. A naturalist can avoid many of the disadvantages of traditional theistic viewpoints. She does not have to wonder why God is allowing bad things to happen to her. She does not have to puzzle over many of the conflicts between religion and science. She does not have to go through the intellectual gymnastics of the standard theodicies. She can avoid the acute sense of guilt and outmoded ideas that often accompany traditional religions. She does not fan the flames of bigotry and religious wars. Naturalists need not fight against the sorrier aspects of organized religion as many liberal theists do. Further, living as a *religious* naturalist means that she does not live in a totally alien world. Although nature as a whole is indifferent to her, although the earthquake does not ask about her religion, nor does God help her to score a goal or her team to win, even so the universe has set the stage for the physical, biological, and historical evolutions that have produced her. Even more, living as a religious naturalist means that she can have many of the positive values of a religious or spiritual life, as many of the chapters in this *Handbook* illustrate.

There is an admitted downside to any of the varieties of religious naturalism. One does not have the solace and comfort of a governing super mind, of divine intervention, of ultimate redemption or immortality. There is no cosmic companion who understands, although many of us have close neighbors and friends. When an earthquake destroys Lisbon, when hurricane Katrina strikes, or when the depth of human evil is revealed in genocide, child abuse, or the horrors of slave ships, there is no God to cling to. We cannot invoke a deity to make sense of it all or to save us. It is our responsibility to strengthen the levees or restore the wetlands. It is our job to prepare for emergencies, to comfort the grief-stricken, to resist genocide, and to remember those who have perished. And surely God is not responsible for those who are not spared, as if their guilt was stronger or their faith or prayers not as effective as in the cases of those who are spared.

To live without God or the hope of immortality may require some mourning. However, mourning is a part of maturation. This does not mean that non-naturalists are immature, but that moving into a naturalistic framework may take some grief work.

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Critics of religious naturalism (especially of my own version of it)

Some critics of naturalism use the term in an outmoded sense, are unaware of it, or have not taken seriously the possibility of a religious naturalism. Rudolf Otto, for example, thought of two types of naturalism: an enthusiastic, obscurantist type, typified by Goethe, which eventually ended in nature worship, and strict naturalism, to which he devoted his polemic (Otto 1907: 20). Otto characterized this latter type as cold and indifferent, seeking to simplify and reduce everything (Otto 1907: 30). He found three key areas where the religious and the strict naturalist outlooks conflict. Strict naturalism (1) denies purpose in the universe and thus rejects teleological explanations, (2) asserts that the cosmos is self-sufficing and self-governing, and (3) seeks to have everything clear and intelligible, rejecting mystery. Most naturalists of a religious variety agree with (2). However, some assert that there are aspects of purpose and meaning in the universe, and they vary concerning the place of mystery.

For Shailer Mathews there are two "logically tenable" worldviews: "the materialistic or naturalistic" and "the religious" (Mathews 1924: 4). According to him, in its older form naturalism involved a "dead matter" of which thought and emotion are outcomes. Mind and matter were regarded as opposites, the second alone being finally real. Although the recent naturalists regarded mind as an expression of matter as energy, he "asserts that the uniformity of nature is hostile to any freedom of personality," that "there is no evidence of purpose in the universe," and that "there is no form of existence other than those 'envisaged by physics and chemistry'." Further, "the materialist minimizes the human activities we call personal and reduces all knowledge to sensation. This is not science; it is philosophy or ... metaphysics" (Mathews 1924: 5). Thus Mathews ignored or was not aware of the "emergentist naturalists" such as Samuel Alexander and Jan Christian Smuts who sought to find a place for thought and personality with a naturalistic framework, even though Mathews's colleague at the University of Chicago's Divinity School, G. B. Smith, was touting their significance.

An astute criticism of my version of religious naturalism is Langdon Gilkey's essay "Response to Stone's 'The Viability of Religious Naturalism'" (Gilkey 1993: 42–48). This was a reply to my "The Viability of Religious Naturalism" (Stone 1993: 35–42). Gilkey had been my dissertation adviser at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago when I wrote on secular experiences of transcendence as seen by Bernard Meland, H. Richard Niebuhr, and Paul Tillich.

Gilkey's main point is that I, in representing religious naturalism, (a) have too much confidence in the presence of healing forces in life, (b) ignore the question of the relationship of these forces to ideals, and (c) ignore the question of the source of the ideal as a permanent, universal character to existence (Gilkey 1993: 48). According to him, I am too serene and too confident that these healing forces will always be there. At its center, according to Gilkey, religion is more about the question of whether these resources are actually there than about the confidence that they are there (Gilkey 1993: 43, 46).

In addition to these three points Gilkey affirms that naturalists such as myself and John Dewey are wrong to affirm that language about transcendence is dangerous, while the language about naturalism is benign. He claims that I have swallowed too much of Dewey here, that naturalists can be quite as dogmatic and dangerous as theists.

In "Concluding Reply by Stone" (Stone 1993: 49–50), my main point is that Gilkey's criticisms miss their mark. He finds naturalism incapable of seeing ambiguity. However, he does not take Wieman or Loomer seriously on this score. Probably he is so critical of the pretensions of modernity that he fails to discern the critical and prophetic power of religious naturalism. He finds only two options open to modern humans: overconfidence or despair. He may find me inconsistent because of the limits of his dichotomous categories.

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Gilkey and I agree that transcendent resources and norms sometimes appear as overwhelming and seem "disclosed" rather than humanly created. However, I do not see that the overwhelming character of such experiences—which we both recognize—evinces a non-natural Ultimate. Also, Gilkey challenged my optimism that ideals and healing are always present. But by "continually" challenging ideals, I do not mean "constant" but "never-ending." Similarly I assert that healing resources are occasional and often sporadic. The healing herb, for example, is not always available. Hence the need for renunciation and grief work. I would say that religion concerns the absence as well as the presence of transcendence, but this absence is known only in contrast to its sporadic presence. As for the issue of the relationship between the healing resources and challenging norms, these experiences are often intertwined. But they are also often separate, and we should not speak too quickly of their unity. I agree with Gilkey when I say, "Modernism can be dogmatic. That is why I attack its closure and lack of a sense of ambiguity. On the other hand, Gilkey does not address my arguments for ontological restraint and avoids my challenge to his arguments" (Stone 1993: 50).

John Cobb spends little time in polemics with process naturalists. He prefers collaborative efforts on what both theistic and naturalistic process thinkers can contribute to public issues such as economic and environmental policy. However, he directly discusses the differences between theistic and naturalistic process thinking (Cobb 1993: 134–147). Although his tone is remarkably tentative and modest in this essay, it amounts to a sympathetic critique of religious naturalism.

Cobb starts by noting that conscious beliefs make some, albeit small, difference. For example, those who deny human freedom are less likely to accept responsibility for their own decisions as time goes on. Similarly, when conscious belief in God fades, there is a tendency to believe that life has no meaning or importance. Cobb's personal judgement is that process naturalism does not provide for a ground of meaning. God, when properly conceived, provides such a ground and also provides a sense of forgiveness and companionship.

An example of the difference that process theism makes to public policy concerns the issue of species extinction. There is a deep, spontaneous revulsion to this catastrophe by many people. In nontheistic circles this revulsion is expressed and justified by practical considerations concerning the medicinal or ecological value of these species. But many lost species, Cobb argues, have no medicinal value and the damage to the biosphere from the loss of most of these species is trivial. This revulsion, Cobb claims, comes from a sense that whether or not humans can appreciate the difference these species make, it makes a difference to reality as a whole. But that means "that reality as a whole is the sort of thing that can be impoverished—that is, that it has subjective qualities. Panentheism grounds and explains this judgment. For God, the variety of creatures provides the contrasts that enrich the divine experience" (Cobb 1993: 143). Cobb finally asserts that naturalism cannot provide a comparable vision.

A second implication of process theism for public policy, according to Cobb, concerns the role of the Pareto optimality principle when economists offer guidance on public policy. Employing this principle, economists offer no sense of minimal sufficiency. That is, economics as usually understood offers no guidance in the distribution of wealth. On the other hand, process theism

> affirms that there is the One who includes, and can, therefore, compare, the feelings of loss or gain of diverse peoples. God experiences the benefits to the poor as greater than the loss to the rich, and we, believing in this God, can propose appropriate policies.
> (Cobb 1993: 144)

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A different type of criticism is to be found in Wentzel Van Huyssteen's sympathetic and careful treatment of this writer's *The Minimalist Vision of Transcendence* (Van Huyssteen 1999: 202–213; Stone 1992). Van Huyssteen accurately sketches the main positions in the book, including the phenomenology of concrete religious experiences, the transactional realism, and the fact that the outlook is presented as "a metaphysical position, that needs whatever justification a metaphysical position can get" (Stone 1992: 7). He then makes what, on my reading, are three major and three lesser criticisms. The first is that some of my "epistemic decisions and value judgments, because they are essentially shaped by [my] prior choice for naturalism, are made in advance" (Van Huyssteen 1999: 205). This criticism puzzles me, because he had already acknowledged that my naturalism is a philosophic system. I may not have made a case for it, but it seems hardly to the point to say that it is a prior philosophical commitment. His second point is that my minimal model of transcendence results in a "fairly innocuous, inoffensive, generic notion of the divine," naturalistically conceived of course (Van Huyssteen 1999: 206). This certainly may appear to be so, but the continuing challenges of the ideal aspect of the naturalistically conceived transcendent have revolutionary potential in the right context. I do not consider Chapter 3 of *The Minimalist Vision*, "The Ethics of Openness" to be innocuous but quite demanding. His third point is that the minimalist vision is not rooted in a living tradition, that it lacks historical and social context, and that it is remote and empty, "intellectually esoteric" and for "a selected intellectual few" (Van Huyssteen 1999: 206–207). When I first read this critique I felt that it had some bite. However, since then I have found a spiritual home in a religious community with a living historical context and where many people of seemingly wide divergence of intellectual ability find my ideas helpful and even inspiring on occasion. Thus I no longer take this third point so seriously.

Van Huyssteen has three other points he makes in passing. First, he questions whether my minimalist model of transcendence can be distinguished from psychological self-actualization (Van Huyssteen 1999: 206). I suspect that the boundary between my minimalist vision and self-actualization may be vague, but this is because there is a type of naturalistic (hence minimal) transcendence in self-actualization. Second, he suggests that belief in "the inadequacy of natural explanations to account for all our experiences may even be more invariant across cultures than the belief in any specific God" (Van Huyssteen 1999: 206). This hardly seems to be a significant criticism, since many beliefs once invariant across cultures, such as a belief in a flat earth, are left behind when there are reasons to challenge them. Finally he suggests that I do "not really show why maximalist theistic views fail, but only why highly restricted—and already problematical—arguments for maximalist positions of theism fail" (Van Huyssteen 1999: 207). I grant that my criticisms of the theistic arguments (see my earlier comments on the ontological and cosmological arguments) may seem irrelevant or unconvincing to many believers. However, I have found it necessary to develop these counter-arguments because a number of my critics have felt that they had triumphed because I had no adequate response to their theistic arguments!

Another prominent critic of naturalism is John Haught in his book *Is Nature Enough?* (Haught 2006). Haught argues that naturalism lacks both the intellectual and the spiritual resources to satisfy human longings. He has been answered extensively by Loyal Rue (Rue 2011: 116–122). Haught's argument for the intellectual deficiency of naturalism is based on his assertion that naturalists cannot give an adequate explanation for: (a) the existence of the natural order or for (b) the teleological or "anticipatory aspect" ("openness to new possibilities") of the world manifest in the goal-directed behavior of all living organisms, most clearly evident in the intentional quality of human experience and finally in the universe as a whole (Haught 2006: 179).

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Rue's response is that many naturalists would challenge this last assertion that the universe itself is purposeful. As for the more localized teleological phenomena, the emergentist view is that "radically new systematic properties of nature can arise spontaneously from the modifications and amplifications of component relationships" (Rue 2011: 119). In other words, the emergentist view is that teleological or anticipatory phenomena within the cosmos (rather than the cosmos itself) can be explained naturalistically. Put simply "purposeful behavior can emerge spontaneously within a purposeless universe" (Rue 2016: 119). Rue asserts that Haught has no answer for the emergentist view. To put it in his colorful language, Haught is stuck with a "grunge" view of matter.

Haught also charges naturalism with conceptual incoherence. His argument starts with the notion that humans have a high regard for truth and their ability to pursue it (Haught 2006: 35). This is true certainly for naturalists, he goes on, for regard for the truth is the foundation of scientific inquiry. However, naturalism cannot account for this inherent regard for truth. Human abilities are only evolved to achieve *adaptive* beliefs, not *true* ones. In addition, the naturalistic account of human knowledge stresses the vulnerability of our cognitive systems to error and deception. Thus naturalism disposes us to doubt the imperatives of our mind.

> So if adaptive evolution, or accidents of nature, or social conditioning ... constitute the *ultimate* explanation of your own mental functioning, then why are you not suspicious right now that you may be deceiving me and yourself by claiming that naturalism is true?
>
> (Haught 2006: 115)

Rue's reply is that normally we trust the results of our cognitive endeavors, but that "we are well served by periodic moments of self-doubt. Belief and doubt are equally adaptive" (Rue 2011: 121).

Haught also argues that naturalism is spiritually deficient. Religion "is a *conscious appreciation of and response to the mystery that grounds, embraces and transcends both nature and ourselves*" (Haught 2006: 22). Thus, Haught can say that religious naturalism is a logical contradiction. Rue's response is that Haught's definition of religion amounts to condemning it to be a delusion, since we cannot get beyond nature.

Haught refers to religious naturalists as "sunny naturalists" who hold that there is enough in nature for spiritual contentment—enough beauty, exhilaration, and human love. He contrasts these sunny naturalists with the "sober naturalists" who affirm that nature is devoid of meaning and cannot satisfy our deepest longings. Sober naturalists are hopelessly tragic, but at least they are honest about the implications of naturalism, whereas the groundless optimism of religious naturalists is cowardly and deluded (Haught 2006: 194). Rue comments that we seem to be at an impasse, where both sides "hurl accusations of spiritual delusion" (Rue 2011: 122). My final comment goes back to my earlier point that the case for religious naturalism will be an inconclusive yet hopefully persuasive argument for it as a scientifically informed surmise.

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Further reading

Stone, J. (2008) *Religious Naturalism Today: The Rebirth of a Forgotten Alternative.* Albany, NY: State University of New York Press. (Analyzes several dozen major philosophical and theological writings of religious naturalists starting with Samuel Alexander, George Santayana, John Dewey, and some Chicago theologians.)

——. (2017) *Sacred Nature: The Environmental Potential of Religious Naturalism.* London: Routledge. (Treats philosophical and religious topics including perception, theistic naturalism, relations to American Indians, and public theology.)

Taylor, B. (2010) *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. (Covers several recent religious and quasi-religious movements, including non-naturalist ones.)