

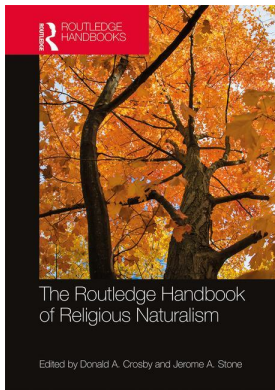
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RELIGIOUS NATURALISM AND
ITS NEAR NEIGHBORS

Some live options

Willem B. Drees

I have sympathy for religious naturalism, but prefer not to identify as a follower (Drees 2006: 121). Why this reservation? As I will discuss here, I think that there are credible philosophical alternatives to naturalism and interesting religious alternatives to religious naturalism. Before considering these, let me offer two minor considerations: the American character of religious naturalism as a movement, and a professional reservation about being labelled, and thereby constrained.

Geographically, articulations of “religious naturalism” are mostly American; see the list of highly respected colleagues contributing to this volume. In the Netherlands and elsewhere in Western Europe, there does not seem to be a demand for this label, nor for new organizational structures when one no longer identifies with a religious position or denomination. As Robert Putnam and David Campbell showed in *American Grace*, religious life in the USA is mostly congregational. Many of those who do not to join a church, still desire to have a congregational home or at least a recognizable label, while in Europe most “nones” do without a congregational home or recognizable label.

As the group of “religious nones” is increasing, Putnam and Campbell conclude “that there is a potential constituency for a new form of religion within the contemporary United States” (2010: 163). So far, we have had good books, many by contributors to this volume, and websites (see Goodenough in this volume). In 2014, a community of intellectuals advocating religious naturalism formed the Religious Naturalist Association. Personally—and this may reflect my European bias—I have no interest in joining such a community, even though I find the issues discussed in those books genuinely interesting.

My individualism aligns well with a professional consideration. I am a philosopher, who served previously in a department for the academic study of religions. Professionally, the primary stance is to study ideas and practices, whether one agrees with them or not. Ideas one has sympathy for, still need to be studied with critical academic distance. Identifying with a substantial label might be premature. Unlike membership in professional societies, I find membership in a society advocating a particular position in my field of study makes me uneasy, professionally, and so too for adopting a particular label.

Let us return to the main line of this chapter. I will take my point of departure in the sciences, especially the natural sciences, as our main source of knowledge about the world we live in. After presenting “science-inspired naturalism” in the first section, we will turn to “philosophical

naturalism” and “religious naturalism” in the next two sections, and hence to philosophical and religious alternatives to religious naturalism.

Science-inspired naturalism

In our time, any form of naturalism worthy of serious consideration involves, at least, that one accepts the scientific approach to reality as informative about the way things are. Naturalism is, at least, *naturalism about the world*. There are no exceptions; “no supernatural or spiritual realm distinct from the natural world shows up *within* our natural world, not even in the mental life of humans,” as I wrote in *Religion, Science and Naturalism* (Drees 1996: 12).

All entities in the world seem to be made up of the same constituents, and these are best described by physics—atoms, and these consist of quarks, electrons, and other ingredients of the standard models of weak and strong interactions, and beyond those the ingredients of a deeper underlying theory. If exceptions seem to arise (e.g., the current search for “dark matter” and “dark energy” in cosmology), we may need a further development of physics; the basic assumption that physics is about the fundamental elements remains the same.

When we come to “higher” phenomena, we may need concepts that do not belong to the vocabulary of fundamental physics (emergence), even though these phenomena are based in physics (reduction). For living beings, evolutionary biology offers the best, functional explanations for the emergence of various traits in particular contexts.

We, humans, are no exception to the natural world—a world that includes cities, and other products of culture as well. It is as with mountains, in an image taken from John Dewey (1934: 3): “Mountain peaks do not flow unsupported; they do not even rest upon the earth. They *are* the earth in one of its manifest operations.” Thus, our mental and cultural life, made possible by our brains and social environments, reveals possibilities of the natural world. This insight does not downgrade us; it shows the great potential of material existence—matter, properly organized, can be Isaac Newton or Albert Einstein, Henrik Ibsen, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart or Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, Siddhārtha Gautama, Jesus of Nazareth, or Muḥammad ibn ‘Abdullāh, or any other human who contributed, significantly or modestly, to our intellectual, cultural, and religious history. Epithets such as the Buddha, the Christ, or the Prophet are understood as honorific titles, given by humans, and not as terms that set them apart from the natural, human community.

Non-naturalists may reject the prominent role of physics and chemistry in understanding the material world, for instance by including additional forces, auras, angels, or spirits in the inventory of the world. Among the non-naturalists are also those who reject the evolutionary view of the biological world, whether straightforward (e.g., young earth creationism) or partially, by adding interventions to natural processes (e.g., “intelligent design” advocates, though the additional interventions they claim imply that the initial design was not that intelligent after all). And it includes those thinkers who add a non-physical “soul” as an additional pseudo-material ingredient to human nature or in some other way exempt humans from material, biological existence. (Of course, speaking of a “soul” to speak of important characteristics of a person, is not excluded at all.) Among the non-naturalists may be some who emphasize “alternative realities,” a tradition going back to alchemy, alongside some religious believers who take it that their religious faith must be at odds with scientific knowledge, understood in this more encompassing naturalistic way.

Disagreements between science-inspired naturalists and non-naturalists may be about substantial issues— how we see the world—but they may also relate to sources of knowledge.

For a science-inspired naturalism, reliable knowledge arises via experimentation, modelling and the like, and is discussed and evaluated by scientific colleagues; “the scientific forum.” Intuitions may be heuristically of interest, but are not by themselves authoritative. So too for claims about special divine revelation or other appeals to authority, bypassing public justification. “Revelation” may be an affirmative title of honor, but it is not a short cut to knowledge.

Does a science-inspired naturalism, as sketched briefly here, imply philosophical naturalism and religious naturalism? Those two questions will be central to the next two sections.

Philosophical naturalism

If one accepts the science-inspired naturalism outlined previously, there are further questions and concerns that go beyond science, such as questions about assumptions and criteria involved in such a naturalistic project. Whether one should be a naturalist on those issues or whether a different philosophical approach is preferable, is debated by philosophers. I will present here my own line of thought, rather than review the extensive philosophical literature. I see two major issues for a science-inspired naturalism: issues about interpretations in science and the development of science, and questions that seem to be outside the scope of science.

Scientific theories are open to multiple interpretations. Quantum physics is an extremely successful theory, with very precise mathematical formulations. Its predictions have been confirmed with great accuracy. Technology shows the adequacy of such physics. However, how to interpret this theory as an informative theory about reality remains disputed. Various interpretations challenge common sense understandings of causality and reality. Quantum physics has a bewildering plurality of interpretations. Hence, even if the theory is accepted as true, we would not understand what reality is like. The theory under-determines our worldview. Other fundamental theories are also open to multiple interpretations. Einstein’s theories of relativity raise issues about the understanding of time; should we understand our reality as evolving in time or as a four dimensional block of space-time, existing all at once?

Not only do current theories allow for multiple interpretations, but future theories may offer us radically different ways of understanding of reality. For instance, while Newtonian physics treated gravity as a force, working at a distance, Einstein’s General Relativity Theory treated the same phenomena as consequences of the curvature of space-time; the force at a distance has disappeared. At a practical level, Newton’s formulas are still useful for systems with modest velocity and mass, but these can no longer be taken to describe reality. And Einstein’s theory need not be the final word on reality either. Einstein’s theory and quantum physics are both extremely successful, but they cannot be combined in a coherent understanding of reality without making some changes to at least one of these theories. Some physicists have developed theories that treat matter as vibrating strings in a space with additional dimensions; this has resulted in complex mathematics, but not yet in a successful theory. More recently, the Dutch physicist Erik Verlinde (2016) has proposed to work with the concept of information in a holographic universe as fundamental, thus moving beyond Einstein’s theory, and, in passing, doing away with the need for “dark matter” to explain current observations.

Whether it will be superstrings, information, or something else, such proposals should make us aware that current science does not deliver the fundamental ontology of reality. It is very successful, but also open to further development. From the perspective of future theories our current theories will remain as good approximations at the appropriate level of description, but future theories will lead to different possible views of the nature of reality. With a metaphor

from *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* of Karl Popper (1992: 94), the building of knowledge rests on pillars driven into a swamp:

Science does not rest upon solid bedrock. The bold structure of its theories rises, as it were, above a swamp. It is like a building erected on piles. The piles are driven down from above into the swamp, but not down to any natural or 'given' base; and if we stop driving the piles deeper, it is not because we have reached firm ground. We simply stop when we are satisfied that the piles are firm enough to carry the structure, at least for the time being.

We can build, and we can drive the pillars deeper, but there is no absolute foundation. Nonetheless, as the city of Amsterdam shows, one can have a great city built on soft foundations. In fundamental physics, we are driving for deeper fundamental theories, while at the same time in other branches of physics and in the life sciences, colleagues are developing insights drawing on regular chemistry, as current theories are good enough for their work.

Given the multitude of interpretations and the possibility of future theories that are continuous with current knowledge in practice but not in ontology, a problem for a science-inspired naturalist might be that we do not really know what nature is like, deep down, even though we have very secure knowledge at more mundane levels of existence.

Not only does a science-inspired naturalism fail to deliver answers to questions about the ultimate structure of reality, but it also seems unable to address certain important facets of existence. I'll consider three that I find interesting and important: mathematics, values, and ultimate origins.

Mathematics is odd, if one comes at it with an empiricist mind set. Within a science-inspired naturalistic ontology, pure circles, triangles, cubes and the like do not exist, nor do imaginary numbers, Lie groups, or Bessel functions. Nonetheless, we can make claims about their properties. We can even make mathematical existence claims such as that there is (or that there is not) an even integer greater than 2 that is not the sum of two primes (Goldbach's conjecture). The fact that we currently do not know whether there is such a number does not undermine the conviction that either there might be a smallest even number that is not the sum of two primes or not one. The existence of this number does not depend upon our preferences.

One interpretation of this feature of mathematics has been "Platonism" (used here without regard for historical accuracy), the view that mathematical realities exist "out there" in an objective but immaterial world. If so, mathematical truth can be understood as correspondence between our propositions and mathematical reality. Mathematicians make discoveries. Roger Penrose (1989) is a modern advocate of such a view. As an ontology this "Platonic" reality is so distinct from material reality that it is hard to envisage where it might be. If one dismisses this as a non-problem, given the categorical difference between material reality and this Platonic reality, a second problem arises: how do we material beings have access to those non-material lands? "Mathematical intuition," the possibility to make "observations" in this Platonic realm, would be a remarkable addition to the experiential, causally mediated repertoire we are supposed to have. Such an ontology of mathematics seems too remote to fit the epistemic challenge of how mathematical knowledge is acquired and developed (e.g., Kitcher 1984: 102). A different but somewhat related problem is how it might be possible that mathematics as an axiomatic-deductive system is useful for the physical world, if it deals with abstract entities rather than with material objects and natural processes.

A quite different view of the nature of mathematics is constructivist in kind. Mathematical objects are human creations, a conceptual world that is “up to us.” But if it is just a construction, why do we not see much more variation? Why do mathematicians agree on mathematical insights, across cultural, linguistic, and ideological differences? One approach might take inspiration from Immanuel Kant, by treating mathematics not just as a construction, but as the construction that abstracts from human practices such as counting and measuring certain necessary, “transcendental” features of human reasoning.

The philosophy of mathematics is a scholarly profession in itself, which I will not delve into here. However, a Platonic view of mathematics is problematical for a naturalist, as it introduces a transcendent realm of its own. A constructivist view that involves transcendental arguments avoids such major ontological assumptions, but it moves beyond the repertoire of science-inspired naturalistic approaches to reality.

A similar argument might be made for *values* that have their origins in human social practices but at the same time are supposed to be valid for all. Upon a naturalistic perspective, pro-social behavior has its roots in enlightened self-interest, whether of the individual or of the “selfish” genes. Biologists and others have come up with evolutionary explanations for support given to children, nieces, nephews, and other kin (same genes); support given to one’s partners (a shared project, though if one can mobilize the other and nonetheless do less, even better—cheating co-evolves with sociality); support given to neighbors (direct reciprocity); and to the larger community (indirect reciprocity, group selection). It all seems ultimately to come down to enlightened self-interest, unconsciously pursued. What about values in such a world of self-interest? Is there any place for reason in such a world where proximate causes (mechanisms that guide behavior) are selected according to “ultimate” evolutionary success? A naturalist who is a relativist about values might find this view enough. Morality evolved, and that seems intelligible; there is no further issue of validity or justification. However, if one takes values more seriously, perhaps one might argue as follows.

Evolution has delivered more than was ordered. Fingers did not evolve to play a piano, but they can be used to play the piano. Intelligence and communication, brains and language may have evolved because they were useful for the four Fs that are essential for survival as individuals and as a species: feeding, fighting, fleeing, and reproducing. Once intelligence and language evolved, our communicative and intellectual abilities may have been used in other tasks as well. This “more” that was delivered allows morality to be genuinely moral, for our intelligence allowed us to reconsider our own behavior. We may discover that we are “naturally” inclined to treat men and women differently. However, by becoming aware of this we can also act against that which comes “naturally.” Communication may also contribute. Imagine that once an offended hominid asked a fellow hominid: “Why do you behave thus?” In the presence of others he or she was challenged to justify the behavior in question with arguments that would be recognizable and acceptable to the others, and thus, to formulate general principles justifying his or her behavior. In many incidents of this kind, natural behavior guided by enlightened self-interest may have become reconsidered, intentional behavior. The social context of our lives may have pushed towards universality and accountability, hallmarks of morality, and towards law rather than individual preference.

We are occasionally open to reasons, to argument. Since ideas spread faster than genes, culture may develop enormously. There is no reason to assume that the biological basis would always overrule the effects of culture. Thanks to the emergence of culture as a second type of heritage, alongside the genetic one, and thanks to the capacity for reflection and to the impulse to public justification, we are not victims of our evolutionary heritage. We are

biological beings, but as these particular biological beings we have a moderate amount of freedom with respect to our genetic drives. We therefore also have responsibility.

We are practical beings, who measure and count, evaluate and judge. In doing so, we reach beyond the practical, and discover or create values and ideas that seem to be universal and timeless, transcendent relative to the world of facts. A strict science-inspired naturalist might have a problem here. Within such a naturalism, one can understand the emergence of a human *practice* of making normative evaluations, judging others to behave well or not. The emergence of moral discourse can be understood as a feature of our history, as presented by Philip Kitcher in the work *The Ethical Project*, and many others. To understand such moral discourse as having a higher standing, as appealing to universally valid norms, as justified, may be problematical for a science-inspired naturalist. Of course, one might opt for relativism; the norms are socially created, but have no further standing; they have no place in the fundamental inventory of reality. An alternative option is a transcendental constructivism, also with respect to morality. A recent defense by Sem de Maagt (2017) used a transcendental argument that roots the justification of values in conditions for agency, engaging the work of Alan Gewirth and Christine Korsgaard.

When one considers the interpretation of science and non-things such as mathematical objects and moral values, one cannot just turn to science. More is needed—a question is whether that “more” still falls within the category of “naturalism.”

One more issue seems to push us beyond a science-inspired naturalism: questions about *ultimate origins*. Why is there something rather than nothing? Why is the world the way it is? Any scientific explanation involves assumptions about that which exists and about the relevant laws. To predict the weather for tomorrow, we need to know the weather today as well as atmospheric physics. The Big Bang theory is a very successful theory about the evolution of the universe after an initial hot dense state, but it does not explain that state nor the laws of physics. A further theory is needed, a “quantum cosmology.” However, even if a quantum cosmology would be successful by embedding Big Bang cosmology in a larger framework that integrates all known physics in a coherent and consistent whole, there would still be the contingency of existence, and hence the cosmological question: “Why is there something rather than nothing?”

Even if our current questions are answered by future theories, new questions will emerge in the context of those future theories. For instance, the inflationary model in cosmology solved many questions regarding the universe as observed, but it cannot explain why the universe is such that inflation happens; some assumptions are always made. The reach of explanation is impressive, but again and again, questions emerge at the limits of scientific understanding. They may be resolved, but the deeper understanding will trigger further questions, on elements assumed rather than explained.

Questions will remain even if one day physics and cosmology were to agree on a theory explaining all known phenomena in a unified, coherent way. Imagine, a single article, a single formula answering all our questions. But the article is on a piece of paper; the formula consists of symbols. Thus, there is no answer to the question: Why does reality behave as described here? It is as with a drawing of the Belgian artist René Magritte, a careful drawing of a pipe, as used for smoking tobacco. Underneath it, he has written “Ceçi n’est pas une pipe”—“This is not a pipe.” And he is right. One cannot fill the image with tobacco. There is a difference between an image, how accurate it may be, and reality. This is also the case for a good scientific theory. However accurate the theory, the question remains why reality behaves as described in the theory. Even if the question is not about a first cause in a temporal sequence, there is a genuine philosophical question, namely why the reality described by the theories is actual. A theistic answer could be envisaged—but that too isn’t much of an answer, as the same question might be posed with respect to God. The physicist

Charles Misner (1977: 97) expressed this well: “Saying that God created the universe does not explain either God or the Universe, but it keeps our consciousness alive to mysteries of awesome majesty that we might otherwise ignore, and that deserve our respect.” Misner, a Roman Catholic, uses theistic language, but similar issues arise for a naturalist. The naturalist too has no answer to questions such as: Why is there a universe? Why is the universe as it is? We cannot escape the limitations of our concepts and ideas, except by relying on other concepts and ideas, and the limitations of our existence. We never see the universe “from outside,” from the perspective of eternity, but always from within. This is the case for a theist, who speaks of something more, from within the universe. It is also a problem for a naturalist: we operate within natural reality, without resources to explain that reality itself.

The more we know, the more we may become aware of the limitations of our knowledge. *De docta ignorantia* (About learned ignorance) was the title of a book of Nicolas of Cusa, a cardinal in Europe in the fifteenth century. The scientific road to knowledge has shown itself to be very successful; we have learned more than Nicolas of Cusa and his contemporaries might ever have expected. But we are also confronted with fundamental questions concerning the nature and ground of our reality. Thunder is no longer a voice of the gods, nor a mystery. But that does not exclude wonder regarding the reality of which both we and the thunderstorms are part. In the end existence remains a mystery. This can inspire a naturalist, with awe and humility. But it also shows that as an intellectual project, a science-inspired naturalism is incomplete. If one accepts the science-inspired naturalism of the previous section, one need not be a philosophical naturalist in a more encompassing sense. Kantian constructivism and other philosophical approaches might be serious options.

We now turn towards “religious naturalism.” If one accepts a science-inspired naturalism as the basic orientation with respect to science and knowledge, is “*religious naturalism*” the only “live option?” What is it that makes it “religious?”

Religious naturalism

Is naturalism not, by definition, excluding what is typical of a religious view? The answer depends not only on the understanding of naturalism, but also on one’s concept of religion and the particular variety of religious or non-religious naturalism one espouses (see, for instance, Gregersen and Stenmark 2016; Stenmark 2016). If one accepts naturalism, under what conditions could one qualify it as religious? How does religious naturalism stand compared with naturalistic varieties of theism? And what about atheism? We’ll begin at the theistic end of the spectrum and gradually come to more purely naturalistic positions. Before considering various positions, let me briefly consider what might make a philosophical or metaphysical position religious.

To approach the concept of religion, let us consider two dimensions of theism (Drees 2016: 196). First, in theism God is understood to be the creator of all that exists, a necessary being who is not dependent upon anything else for existence. To count as religious, we might ask of any alternative view whether it offers a frame to speak of the ultimate metaphysical question regarding *existence*.

Second, in theistic discourse God is the ultimate judge. From this image, I take on our exploration the ultimate “moral” question about the possibility of evaluating our behavior from an impartial perspective that *transcends* all human interests and biases. A religious view seems to offer language to speak of the axiological dimension of existence.

Last but not least, a key issue is whether these two dimensions—the cosmological and the axiological one—can be combined. I consider this combination of the two dimensions crucial for a vision to be worthy of being considered religious (rather than just metaphysical or

meta-ethical). This is in line with Clifford Geertz's anthropological definition of religions as systems of symbols that shape moods and motivations (the axiological side of things) by presenting us with an understanding of reality (the cosmological dimension) that is taken as true, thus supporting those moods and motivations (Geertz 1966: 3; Drees 2010: 68, 76–82, 136–139; Drees 2016: 196)—thus, religions intertwine models of the world and models for the world. Let me give a theistic example: speaking of God as creator might integrate an idea about the source of existence with an attitude of gratitude, humility, and respect for fellow creatures.

We will now consider religious naturalism and some alternatives, beginning with *naturalistic theism* (Drees 2006: 116). There is a traditional way to articulate theism that avoids a confrontation with the natural sciences, and that is to emphasize the uniqueness of God's mode of being and activity (e.g., Stoeger 1995; Kaufman 1972; Wiles 1986). This is articulated in the notion of *creatio ex nihilo*, which does not apply to any natural causality. God creates and sustains all things as their primary cause; all natural causes are real, just as are all entities and events, but they are so because they have been created by God. Such real natural causes are "secondary causes." This distinction between primary and secondary causality was developed in the European Middle Ages, for instance by Thomas Aquinas, but its roots can be traced back at least to Augustine (Hebblethwaite and Henderson 1990; McMullin 1985, 1988; Burrell 1993). God creates everything—past, present, and future events—and God creates them not as an amorphous bag of events but with their temporal, spatial, and causal relations. The distinction between God and God's activity on the one hand, and creatures and creaturely activity on the other, often is articulated also as a difference with respect to time: creatures are temporal, whereas God, as conceived in this view, is not temporal. God's eternity is not everlastingness but timelessness. Accepting the whole natural world as the creation of a timeless transcendent God may be consistent with a naturalistic view of the world, since it accepts the world as understood by the natural sciences as God's creation. There is no need for particular gaps within the world.

A naturalistically-minded theist might argue that the sciences are explanatory within the world, but not explanatory of the world as such. This, in my opinion, is consistent with a science-inspired naturalism. Science offers explanations, but every explanation assumes an initial state and laws. Thus, science explains within a framework, but does not explain the framework as such; limit questions are persistent (Drees 1996: 266–269).

Responses to limit questions may be quite different for theists and naturalists. If naturalism is defined as including the assumption "that nature is necessary in the sense of requiring no sufficient reason beyond itself to account either for its origin or ontological ground" (Hardwick 1996: 5–6), such a naturalist by definition excludes a transcendent ground of reality. In my opinion, however, science-inspired naturalism need not imply the dismissal of a theistic response to limit questions regarding the existence, structure, and intelligibility of the world. I find *naturalistic theism* a genuine and attractive possible point of view.

Naturalistic theism has one major problem, as I see it. Once one accepts a naturalist understanding of created reality, "since there are no real 'gaps' to fill, we may be left without an argument for God's existence of the kind that would convince a science-minded generation" (McMullin 1988: 74).

Less dualistic is *theistic naturalism*, a label I use for the position of those who speak of God as Ground of Being (Wildman 2016; Drees 2006: 117). A major figure in the articulation of such a theological position has been Paul Tillich. This view has come to be formulated in pan-en-theistic terms—understanding the world to be in God, even though God surpasses the world (Clayton and Peacocke 2003). I found a most inspiring poetic expression among aphorisms in *The Aristos* of John Fowles (1980: 27): "The white paper that contains a drawing; the space that contains a building; the silence that contains a sonata; the passage of time that prevents a sensation or object continuing forever; all these are 'God.'"

Whatever the precise formulation, this position has more deeply ingrained naturalistic presuppositions by seeking to avoid the dualism of a transcendent God and the natural world, even though it maintains a concept of God as surpassing the world—and thus I still consider it a species of theism.

Most contributions in this handbook of religious naturalism develop or assume positions further removed from theism, as they do not understand God as an entity or as the all-encompassing reality, but at most use the term as a symbol to speak of our existence and the world we live in. Some such naturalists might prefer to speak of “the sacred” rather than of God. Are such positions still religious? Stone describes religious naturalism as

a variety of naturalism whose beliefs and attitudes assume there are religious aspects of this world that can be appreciated within a naturalistic framework. Occasions within our experience elicit responses that are analogous enough to the paradigm cases of religion that they can appropriately be called religious.

(Stone 2003: 89)

Speaking of *religious* naturalism may thus be justified if the attitudes and responses are sufficiently analogous. Stone’s book offers various proposals. Let me briefly introduce a few varieties of such forms of religious naturalism, to illustrate some of the diversity within this sphere (Drees 2006: 117f.).

Gordon Kaufman interprets the Christian symbolism of God as a figure of speech to speak of an overwhelmingly significant characteristic of processes in the universe, namely their serendipitous creativity (1993, 2003). He connects such aspects with traditional understandings of God as creator and the moral call and vision as understood in the Christian tradition.

Charley Hardwick gives up on ontology, relating theological content to valuational aspects of our existence. “Although *God* does not refer (any more than rights, duties, values, or point masses need have ontological references), *God* or *God exists* can serve as a complex meta-expression for a form of life that is expressed as theistic seeing-as” (1996: 114). In his book *Events of Grace*, Hardwick reconstructs classical Christian conceptions, such as sin and grace. This is not accidental, but part of his understanding of the religious naturalistic agenda. He does not seek a religious Esperanto without roots in a particular tradition: “I am constantly reminded here of Santayana’s dictum that ‘the attempt to speak without speaking any particular language is not more hopeless than the attempt to have a religion that shall be no religion in particular’” (2003: 115).

Other religious naturalists are less engaged with a particular tradition. Perhaps “the evolutionary epic” might become *Everybody’s Story* (Loyal Rue 1999). Such more universal inspirations also come from scientists with humanistic interests, such as Ursula Goodenough’s *Sacred Depths of Nature* (1998).

Some religious naturalists dismiss all God-language. Donald Crosby speaks in this context of *naturism*:

to distinguish it from conceptions of religious naturalism that make fundamental appeal to some idea of deity, deities, or the divine, however immanent, functional, non-ontological, or purely valuational or existential such notions may be claimed to be. The focus of naturism is on nature itself as both metaphysically and religiously ultimate.

(Crosby 2003: 117)

Each of these positions intertwines cosmological and axiological interests, or, to draw on Clifford Geertz again, models *of* the world and models *for* the world. Thus, they can all be considered religious, whether explicitly drawing on a tradition or not.

Such positions also share a fundamental philosophical problem with religions. When the key issue of religion is that facts and values, worldviews and ethos, are intertwined, one is at odds with the categorical distinction between values and facts, the is-ought distinction. This is not merely a philosophical issue; the “is-ought” distinction alerts us also against unjustified inferences that dismiss certain forms of behaviour as “unnatural” as if thereby they must be “immoral.” The power *and* the danger of religious stories and visions, whether theistic or naturalistic, is in this combination of worldviews and values, of what is and what ought to be.

There are other alternatives to “religious naturalism,” certainly if one includes approaches inspired by non-Western philosophical and religious traditions. However, let me consider one more within the Western context: *atheism*. Atheism seems to be the default alternative for theism. If one does not believe in God, one is an atheist. Of course, in a linguistic sense, this is trivial. However, the religious naturalist seeks to bring more nuance to the table—even if one does not refer to God as an entity “out there,” there may be features of reality that deserve to be considered “sacred or holy.” But how does atheism do on the key issues raised in this section: ultimate ontology and the way values and worldview are intertwined?

In *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, Erik J. Wielenberg considers the perspectives for morality in the context of atheism. His conclusion is that “whether there are objective moral truths is independent of the existence or nonexistence of God” (2013: 89). He argues that theories that anchor morality in theism fail, basically because of a dilemma that goes back to Plato’s dialogue *Euthyphro*: either God is beyond morality, and what is moral is decreed by God—a theological voluntarism that undermines morality—or God follows morality, but that would undermine God’s primacy. Anyhow, without God, one has the discussion touched upon in the previous section, on philosophical strategies to envisage the justification of values.

Another question might be whether atheism has a motivating narrative, linking the worldview and the values. That might be a challenge, though a particular atheist might have a historical narrative that argues for modern values, rooted in the Enlightenment. Science might be valued, for instance as a resource to counter superstition, as Carl Sagan showed with his book *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark*.

Atheism, as a position that accepts science as the main source of knowledge, could thus formally allow for a “religious” variant, in the terminology used here, by incorporating a value dimension (e.g., “scientism”) and motivating historical Enlightenment narrative, but labelling “atheism” as religious seems to push the Geertzian use of this terminology too far. It seems to me more appropriate to consider the variety of *religious naturalisms* the “religious” position at this end of the spectrum, and understand atheism as a negative position, denying both a religious ontology and any religious narrative intertwining facts and values.

Religious naturalism and its near neighbors: does one need to choose?

There is more between heaven and earth than theism and atheism. Among those seem to be variants that are consistent with a science-inspired naturalism about the world. This seems to be a minimal requirement for someone who takes the sciences seriously, which I consider the appropriate stance in our time. This does not imply that science is the only source of knowledge. There is common sense knowledge—I know the names of my children—but I would also speak of knowledge in the context of mathematics, but that would not be scientific knowledge about the world. The section on philosophical naturalism considered some of the issues that go beyond science—mathematics, values, limit questions—that are genuine issues even though they are beyond the scope of science. Both with respect to scientific insights, which are open to multiple

interpretations, and with respect to more encompassing philosophical issues, there is a multitude of worldviews possible. I appreciate positively this multitude of possible positions; reality and the conceptual universe are both so rich that none of our models is exclusive and final.

With respect to religious naturalisms, my main concern is that these tend to root values in “nature,” the “nature” that is studied by science or experienced personally. Of course, functional human values are rooted in our biological and cultural existence, and thus in nature, but whether those values should be valued, seems to me to be a question that highlights the categorically distinct character of values—their actuality in our natural and cultural reality is not by itself enough evidence. Too often, humans have criticized others with an appeal to what is natural (white and male dominance), or what is counter-natural (same sex relationships), while later generations challenged those value judgements. In the end, I consider us to be as agnostic on ultimate values as we are on the ground of existence, though perhaps the other contributions in this handbook show me mistaken. As I see it, for all practical purposes one might take a science-inspired naturalistic stance in daily life (e.g., when needing medical assistance), consider Kantian constructivism an attractive strategy when it comes to philosophical justification of values, appreciate the motivating power of narratives that integrate ethos and worldview, while considering oneself an agnostic on matters of ultimate explanations and values.

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