

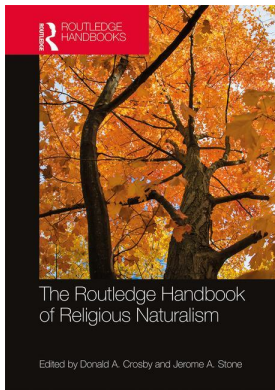
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Donald A. Crosby, Jerome A. Stone

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Michael L. Raposa

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HOLY NOSTALGIA

Toward a sympathetic critique of religious
naturalism*Michael L. Raposa***Introduction**

This essay presupposes that “religious naturalism” is the meaningful label for a broad range of philosophical and theological perspectives, despite their diversity all defending the claims that (1) there is no reality above or beyond “nature,” (2) that the scientific method, broadly conceived, is the most reliable source of knowledge about nature, and (3) that what we can know about nature supports belief in the propriety of certain values and attitudes that might be labeled “religious.” My critique pursues no single line of analysis but embodies instead a multi-faceted approach to the topic of religious naturalism. I first explore the logic of vagueness that governs the use of some key terms frequently appearing in the articulation of such perspectives, notably, “nature,” “religious,” “God,” “supernaturalism” and “science.” In doing so, I argue that the rejection of a sharp nature/culture distinction may be more crucial for the purposes of religious naturalism than the more commonly discussed rejection of the natural/supernatural dichotomy. While agreeing that an awareness of the problem of evil represents the best reason for embracing atheism, I worry out loud about certain varieties of religious naturalism that appear to be primarily motivated by issues of theodicy. Whether they use the word “God” metaphorically or defend a process theism or claim to represent some type of “atheistic religion,” I probe the hypothesis that these are all forms of “halting atheism,” perhaps not entirely consistent in their naturalism to the extent that they embody a kind of nostalgia for the idea of the holy. I conclude with a sketch of some of Charles Peirce’s arguments: his “neglected argument” that belief in God is instinctive and so natural, along with his preference for God-talk over certain philosophical substitutes, more generally, his curious defense of anthropomorphism, not only in the language of theology, but also in scientific discourse.

The fuzzy logic of religious naturalism

The concept of “nature” with which religious naturalists are typically preoccupied is formulated in a great variety of different ways, ranging from very broad and capacious conceptualizations to those that are significantly more narrow and limited. Even assuming an agreement among these thinkers that nature is to be understood as embracing all that there is—so that there is nothing “beyond” or “outside of” nature—nevertheless, there are competing views about how

to understand the whole of reality. Despite the ties that otherwise bind them, for example, individuals who portray nature in “ecstatic” terms (Corrington 1992, 1994, 2000) need to be distinguished from those who regard it from a rigorously materialist or physicalist point of view (Hardwick 1996). Spinoza and Emerson developed now classical views of nature that may contrast in certain respects with those of contemporary philosophers whose thinking has been more directly shaped by developments in the natural sciences (Spinoza 1985; Emerson 2009). Correspondingly, different ways of thinking about nature result in alternative strategies for evaluating its potentially religious significance. Any given thinker will be relatively more or less precise about the use of such terms. But if “religious naturalism” is considered as a general phenomenon, both the “religion” to which religious naturalists adhere and the “nature” to which they attend must be recognized as ideas that are typically quite vague.

To be sure, in the process of “losing their religion” (more on this below), many naturalists would opt also to eschew the concept itself, following John Dewey in preferring to speak in terms of a “religious” quality or aspect of experience, rather than talk about religion in substantive terms (Dewey 1934). The noun is problematic insofar as it refers to specific traditions and institutions that many naturalists will no longer regard as viable, or to the belief in a supernatural, personal deity, which most naturalists will reject as implausible. (Hedging a bit with “most” seems prudent here, because while naturalists would be strongly inclined to deny the existence of the supernatural on principle, some of them—William James and certain process theists, for example—will leave open the possibility of a finite, personal deity.) Interestingly, Dewey defended the lingering utility of “God talk,” albeit only if properly understood as descriptive of something neither personal nor supernatural, instead, possessing the power and the reality of an *ideal* (Dewey 1934: 42–54). Other religious naturalists talk about “God” for reasons different from the ones that Dewey articulated. For a pantheist like Spinoza, God and Nature are simply synonymous (Spinoza 1985: 420); but since such an idea of God will have been drained of its anthropomorphism, moreover, since there is nothing like a separate supernatural reality posited beyond nature for Spinoza, the logic governing his usage of the word differs dramatically from that shaping its employment among orthodox theists. Equally unorthodox is the claim—one defended by certain ecstatic naturalists—that the “gods” as we know and worship them do not transcend or produce nature, but rather, emerge from its own creative depths (Corrington 1992: 163–65).

It needs to be observed that the distinction between naturalists who continue to make some sense out of talk about “God” and those who clearly profess to be atheists does not entail the conclusion that all religious naturalists are of the former type. In many cases where discourse about a God or gods has been banished, there continues to be reference to some idea of the “sacred” or of “spirit” (Corrington 2009; Goodenough 1999), and even where supernaturalism has been expunged, some lingering appeal to the concept of “transcendence” (Stone 1992). In instances where faith in a Creator God who possesses a determinate nature and personal agency has been ruled out, the belief in a divine “creative act” is still permissible (Neville 1968). In other cases, it is an account of nature’s own creative depths, of “nature maturing” (*natura naturans*) that appears to serve many of the same purposes that the idea of God fulfills in classical theism (Corrington 1994; for an explicitly atheistic account see Crosby 2002).

Pantheism seems like the most straightforward and common strategy for embracing naturalism while maintaining belief in God; on such a world view, God and nature are simply coterminous. But certain religious naturalists, especially those indebted to process philosophy, would argue instead for a version of *panentheism*, the belief that nature is a part but not exhaustive of the divine reality. Here God in some (“primordial”) sense transcends but is nevertheless continuous with the natural world, so that in the latter respect God is both determinate and subject to

change. Now the insistence on such continuity would seem crucial for maintaining a naturalistic perspective. God may transcend the world but not in the sense of being “wholly other,” that is, may be greater than but not radically different from the world. Otherwise, one would appear to be defending a notion of transcendence that necessarily entails supernaturalism. Indeed, it has been argued that certain versions of pantheism are perfectly compatible with orthodox Christian thought; these versions can be understood to embody “a demand that ontology undertake thinking out much more profoundly and much more accurately the relation which exists between absolute and finite being” (Rahner and Vorgrimler 1981: 359–60).

Critics of classical theism might protest that no matter how “profoundly” conceived, any account that distinguishes between God and nature as “absolute” and “finite” will necessarily prove to be incoherent. Yet the mere existence of such an account surely complicates the programmatic rejection by religious naturalists of supernaturalism in all of its forms. To the extent that naturalism is to be defined precisely in terms of its exclusion of supernaturalism, it may make a great deal of difference as to which concept of the supernatural is being repudiated. Yet that concept too is exceedingly vague.

Supernaturalism is usually linked to belief in invisible agents, entities or powers standing outside of nature and not subject to the kind of scientific inquiry that the investigation of nature typically involves. God, gods, ghosts, demons and spirits of all kinds represent the most commonly conceived population of the supernatural realm. Naturalists will have no traffic with such a population; these supernatural beings can explain nothing in nature, can have no effect upon the world in which we live, because they simply do not exist. Widespread belief in their existence can be analyzed in various ways: historically in terms of the limits of a pre-modern science that resorted to anthropomorphism and teleology in order to fill in certain theoretical gaps (in modernity, this strategy continues to be embodied in “intelligent design” arguments); sociologically, as the need to invest socially constructed principles and values with a greater weight and significance; psychologically, as a response to intense feelings of helplessness, beginning with those experienced in infancy; or perhaps in terms of evolutionary accounts about how humans have evolved in and adapted to nature in such a way that they might be predisposed to embrace belief in invisible agents.

All, some or none of these explanations may be defended as meritorious. That the possible truth of belief in the supernatural is not listed among these explanations, however, might be regarded as an attempt to “block the road of inquiry,” a cardinal error from the perspective of Peirce’s pragmatism (a view that will be evaluated briefly in the final section of this essay). At this juncture, I want simply to remark on the fuzziness of the logic that governs the use of the word “supernatural” in various types of discourse. I want to note the conceptual gap that exists between a belief in Odin or Zeus on the one hand, and on the other hand (to take one useful but hardly unique example) Duns Scotus’s idea of God as univocal in being with all of nature, yet distinguished from all things in nature by possessing being in an infinite mode. I note this gap only to suggest that it makes a difference for our understanding of religious naturalism, insofar as the latter is defined as standing in a dialectical relationship with some concept of the supernatural.

“Invisibility” is often identified as a salient feature of those entities designated as supernatural. Yet scientists regularly posit the reality of theoretical entities that can be known only through their effects. Whether talking about gravity or God, quarks or *ch’i*, invisibility alone is not a criterion that would allow one to banish something to the realm of the supernatural. There would have to be additional characteristics of the thing in question that prevent it from ever becoming the subject of scientific inquiry. Agency might be proposed as one of those characteristics. I can test for and measure the force of gravity in a scientific manner that it might be impossible

to duplicate when dealing with an object of inquiry that is also a *subject*, thus, something with its own independent purposes and volition. Invisible agents, indeed, would seem to comprise a category of entities that scientists would have difficulty studying in any straightforward fashion.

Nevertheless, it would be hasty to conclude that such difficulties are insurmountable. Quarks are a bit harder to investigate than water molecules, and human agents may represent a more problematic subject matter for the scientist than inert substances such as metals or minerals. In any given case, the scientific method will have to be adapted appropriately for the purpose of investigating a specific subject matter. So what about invisible agents? Distinguished American philosophers such as William James and Charles Peirce, at the very least, did not rule out the possibility that questions about their existence could be submitted to experiment and scientific scrutiny.

Even if these pragmatists were incorrect, it is important to admit also the vagueness that attaches to concepts like “science” and the “scientific method.” Many religious naturalists will regularly delimit “nature” to whatever is accessible, in principle if not immediately, to disciplined scientific inquiry. This seems like a reasonable way to proceed. Indeed, defining naturalism in terms of its subject matter’s accessibility to a scientific methodology may be more useful than conceiving of it as a perspective that rejects all belief in the supernatural, especially given the range of opinions about what terms like “nature” and the “supernatural” might be taken to mean. The precise “nature of nature,” its content and limits, cannot be established in advance of scientific inquiry, but only in the long run, gradually determined as the result of such investigation. Religious naturalism could be generally characterized, then, as a perspective shaped by confidence in scientific method, chastened by suspicions about knowledge claims not clearly grounded in such inquiry. This is a characterization that is certainly compatible with religious naturalism, at least in most of its modern versions.

Philosophical pragmatism is an intellectual movement in modernity that has been typically linked to scientific developments in the post-Darwinian era. William James and Charles Peirce, already invoked here, were both trained as scientists, firmly grounded in its principles and methods, and to some extent practitioners. Moreover, pragmatism is a philosophy that many contemporary religious naturalists find congenial for their purposes and to which they appeal for support. The observation that James and Peirce were both thinkers for whom the hypothesis about God’s reality was a live one is not intended to refute these naturalists but only to complicate their thinking about naturalism. “God” is not a concept in which James or Peirce would have had any interest if they assumed that the reality it might denote could have no observable effects or that it could not become the appropriate subject matter for scientific inquiry. The question is exactly what kind of scientific method would be required for such an inquiry, what level of nuance and sophistication would have to be displayed by the scientist employing such a method. For the classical American pragmatists (including Dewey and others) the scientific method was too important for its application to be limited to use in the laboratories of physical scientists. For these thinkers, everyday human life is a laboratory, inquiry is ubiquitous, and the only path to knowledge is an empirical one. Pragmatism is best typified as being firmly rooted neither in a theory of truth nor of meaning (as it often is), but rather in a distinctive theory of *inquiry*; and the idea of *experience* employed in that theory represents a radical rethinking of the concept as it was deployed by earlier British empiricists such as John Locke and David Hume.

These remarks are intended to suggest that the idea of the supernatural is too vague for the purpose of defining philosophical naturalism simply as any perspective that repudiates supernaturalism. If nature is all that there is then, to be sure, any consistent religious naturalist will be inclined to reject a two-tier view of reality that posits a rigid distinction between the natural and

the supernatural. At the same time, eschewing a sharp nature/culture distinction may be more productive for the project of articulating a contemporary religious naturalism. Consistent with classical pragmatism, such a perspective will regard the creation and development of culture—with its symbols, languages, institutions and practices—as precisely the sort of thing that human beings are *naturally* inclined to do. Moreover, in opposition to social constructivism of a radical sort, such naturalists will claim that human experience is not only shaped by social and cultural factors, but by certain biological characteristics that humans share as members of a species—opposable thumbs, eyes in the front rather than on the side of our heads, brains constructed like ours, certain natural drives and inclinations, etc. The brief remarks about Peirce below will supply the case study for such a perspective.

Religious naturalism as theodicy

Religious naturalism, whether it be articulated as some type of process theism or take the form of an explicit atheism, can be portrayed as a response to the traditional problem of theodicy against which classical theists have continuously banged their heads. In the former case, the problem is solved because the deity is conceived as being limited in power, subject to time, thus not responsible for evil and suffering in the world, but simply doing the best that such a deity can. If “ought implies can” then the finite God of the process philosophers ought *not* to be held accountable for existing evils but, rather, should be perceived as one who suffers with and for humanity, struggling along with and perhaps empowering them. The latter response is even more direct and simple; if there is no God then there can be no theological “problem of evil.” Indeed, if there is no God, many things regarded as “evil”—that is, those “natural evils” that cannot be linked to human agency—would have to be understood otherwise and responded to with stoicism. When humans observe terrible suffering or themselves suffer, it might raise a practical problem with which they must wrestle, but not a deeply philosophical one.

These “solutions” resolve the classical dilemma (God or evil) far more efficiently and convincingly than traditional theological strategies designed to soften it, such as the “tapestry theory” (whatever seems bad is a part of God’s master plan) or the “free will defense” (God chose to create free beings who would thus be capable of doing evil). Nevertheless, it must be recognized that such solutions are as expensive as they are elegant and simple. One horn of the dilemma (God) either is eliminated altogether or dramatically reduced in size and significance. In either case, the traditional belief in God associated with orthodox Judaism, Christianity or Islam must be abandoned. The expense involved here will be problematic, of course, only for someone who attaches value to such belief.

Although it might seem to constitute a peculiar argument from biography, it may be salient to observe that many of those thinkers who would classify themselves as “religious naturalists” (or are typically classified in that fashion) once embraced a much more orthodox perspective. While other motivations might be identified (for example, developments in modern science that made the clinging to an older metaphysics less tenable), the primary reason for moving from classical theism to religious naturalism in many such cases would seem to be the challenge of theodicy. For contemporary thinkers most especially, belief in an infinite, almighty and benevolent deity seems impossible in the wake of two world wars, massive genocide, frequent acts of terrorism and the rising threat of a nuclear and/or environmental apocalypse. In some instances, the arguments of religious naturalists are framed by explicit autobiographical remarks that clearly identify concerns about the problem of evil as a primary catalyst in the decision to abandon classical theism (e.g., Crosby 2002: 8–9; also, Crosby 2008). Yet, even if we refrain from

analysis of the motivations that may have shaped the changing minds of individual thinkers, we can observe more generally within Western cultures an increased discomfort with traditional beliefs about God, also the emergence and rising popularity of process and naturalist perspectives, throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century.

To be sure, many individuals continue to cling to those traditional beliefs. Moreover, it is a tricky matter to evaluate which factors are most relevant in the evaluation of those cases where such belief has been abandoned. The recent popularity of books about the “New Atheism” represents an interesting example. One could argue that such popularity is more closely tied to a post-9/11 concern about the role that religion plays in engendering acts of violence than to worries about the problem of evil more generally. Nor do the “New Atheists” seem to have any understanding of or interest in preserving religious values or articulating religious ideas in some more acceptable form; their objective is a repudiation of religion pure and simple (although sometimes Buddhism escapes their wrath, at least in its atheistic versions).

More relevant to this discussion may be an observation about the rising number of individuals who claim to be “spiritual but not religious.” What motivates the abandonment of organized religion by such persons even as they cling to some form of spirituality? What value does such a spirituality have and what needs does it serve? Moreover, what sort of empirically testable truth claims might one appeal to in support of belief in something “spiritual?”

Another more narrowly focused but potentially relevant observation concerns the tremendous popularity of Harold Kushner’s book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, first published in 1981. This book was written by a Rabbi whose journey from Conservative Judaism to belief in a finite God, benevolent but limited in power, was explicitly shaped by his own personal experience of human suffering. The question about this book and its many inspired readers is slightly different: Why jettison belief in the God of traditional theism but maintain belief in a smaller deity, one that simply does the best that it can?

It is possible to argue that any religious naturalism linked to process theology represents a form of halting atheism (Raposa 2012). Such an argument would be rooted in the claim that atheism pure and simple represents a more coherent and honest solution to the problem of evil than any process alternative. It would develop the insight that belief in a “friendly” but finite deity offers the believer very little in the way of tangible resources for dealing with suffering or the struggle with evil. If we are alone in this struggle (practically speaking), then solidarity among ourselves is best achieved by clearly recognizing that fact, expecting nothing in the way of assistance or consolation from mysterious, non-human allies. On a reading of Dostoevsky that takes actions as speaking louder than words, Ivan Karamazov’s handing back his ticket to God as witness to the depth of innocent human suffering does in fact represent a rejection of God (Dostoevsky 1950: 291). Why would one tear that ticket in half and keep a piece of it? What would such a gesture represent and how could it best be defended?

Now these questions may seem irrelevant if the earlier discussion of the vagueness of “religious naturalism” is rejected and the claim is pressed that no perspective qualifies for this label unless it is explicitly atheistic. At worst, any God-talk among naturalists should be interpreted as purely metaphorical and at best it should be eschewed altogether. But then questions linger about what makes such a naturalism “religious” in any sense. In the case of world religions that are explicitly atheistic, there are typically certain conceptions—such as “Nirvana,” the “Buddha-nature” or the “Dao”—that distinguish such a perspective from a purely non-religious point of view. What conceptions, explicitly, do this work for religious naturalism and what sort of reality

do they denote? If the position that one comes to occupy on the other side of an intense wrestling with the problem of evil can be purged of the nostalgia for the God of classical theism, why not eliminate all nostalgia for the supernatural, even in the vague form that concepts like the “religious” or “sacred” may represent?

Proponents of religious naturalism might insist that it is not the positing of any kind of being or reality in or beyond nature that warrants the description of their world view as religious, but, rather, the appropriateness of certain human attitudes in response to nature—such as awe, wonder, piety, humility, compassion and gratitude. Yet it would still be possible to challenge such a view by asking what the value added is by employing the adjective “religious” in the articulation of it. Why must one be even vaguely religious in order to experience wonder, to feel compassion or gratitude? If one need *not* be, then what is religious about the special way that certain naturalists might claim to have such experiences? Moreover, precisely what is it about nature that makes it “spiritually evocative” and thus elicits such responses (Wildman 2009)? If no compelling answer to these questions can be given, then the continuing usage of words like “religious” or “spiritual” might best be explained as nostalgic and the naturalist who values clarity and consistency might be advised to drop them.

The application of a rigorous scientific method to the study of nature should not undermine the conviction that all human experience of nature is always already interpreted experience. (This conviction can be grounded in a number of ways. I prefer to anchor it to a Peircean conception of experience-as-semiosis, but a Wittgensteinean argument that all perception is a matter of aspect seeing or “seeing as” would work equally well.) What is it then about how religious naturalists experience nature, their *interpretation* of it, that causes them to respond with awe or gratitude, to be filled with compassion? If nothing exists beyond nature, nevertheless, religious naturalists tend to discern something sacred in its depths. Is this “something” real in nature or is it merely something peculiar about their way of attending to nature? Perhaps the latter is a prerequisite for discerning the former. Perhaps this way of attending is in fact tinged with a kind of nostalgia, not necessarily for the abandoned God of traditional theism, but for a lost communion with something real in nature that continues to kindle hope and desire.

Was Peirce a religious naturalist?

This is a question that I have explored at greater length elsewhere (Raposa forthcoming). The brief remarks included in this essay are intended to serve as the case study of a perspective that can be juxtaposed to those views typically identified as forms of religious naturalism. Because it can be partially contrasted with those views, Peirce’s philosophy of religion may offer a critical vantage point. Yet because it is also largely continuous and compatible with other types of religious naturalism, especially those that take pragmatism seriously, this critique will necessarily be a “gentle” one.

Among the classical American pragmatists, John Dewey is rather easily labeled as a religious naturalist. In his Terry Lectures, he championed the scientific method, clearly jettisoned any concept of the supernatural, challenged organized “religion” with an emphasis on the “religious” dimension of all human experience, and considered the word “God” as a meaningful label only for certain ideals that have the power to shape human endeavor (Dewey 1934). William James seems also to fit into this category, albeit a bit less comfortably. In his Gifford Lectures, he had argued for a “science of religions,” distinct from theology and devoted to the empirical study of religion, with an emphasis on examining descriptions of different religious experiences and evaluating them in terms of their pragmatic “fruits”

for human life and activity (James 1983). At the same time, James's late radical empiricism tinged with panpsychism, the voluntarism fueling his defense of our "will to believe," and his accommodation of a certain over-belief in something "More" than what science can ascertain to be true—all test the limits of a naturalistic perspective.

At first glance, Charles Peirce would not appear to fit into this category at all. On the one hand, he identified God as *Ens necessarium* and as the Creator of the universe. He also clearly rejected pantheism and challenged the meaningfulness of belief in any kind of finite deity. At times, he even seemed vaguely inclined to defend a rather peculiar version of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity (Raposa 1989). Yet Peirce, like all naturalists, was a philosophical monist. He declined to affirm a dualistic world view that carved up the universe into mind and matter. He came close to accepting materialism, but given the late nineteenth-century scientific resources available to him, Peirce judged materialism to be inadequate for explaining consciousness or understanding the ideality in nature. Instead, Peirce embraced objective idealism in the form of an extreme scholastic realism (inspired by the metaphysics of Duns Scotus). He was convinced that "general principles are really operative in nature," that there is "a reasonableness energizing in the world"; it is the task of science to discover such principles and to discern such a reasonableness (Raposa 1989: 16, 33).

Peirce's insistence that the scientific method is the only reliable means for "fixing" our beliefs clearly suggests an affinity between his philosophy and naturalism. Everything real is potentially knowable and the best way to acquire knowledge is to engage in scientific inquiry. Now Peirce was not excessively optimistic about what any individual inquirer may come to know through inquiry, and he made some notorious comments about how in matters of "vital importance," individuals should not look to reason but rather should lean on human instinct and common sense. Nevertheless, it would be wise to rebuff any interpretation of these remarks as suggesting that Peirce intended to drive a deep wedge between theory and practice or to limit the role played by science in our gradually coming to know more about the world. In his view, the most powerful and important human instincts are those that shape the process of reasoning itself. Instinctively, birds build nests and bees make honey. By comparison, engaging in inquiry is what human beings are instinctively designed to do; even if training and discipline are required for us to do it well, reasoning is something that humans do *naturally*.

The deductive explication of ideas (determining what else would be entailed should any given idea be affirmed as true) and the inductive testing of their validity were both forms of inference that Peirce rooted in "abduction," that special mode of reasoning by means of which new ideas are formulated as hypotheses. It was abductive reasoning in particular that he regarded as instinctive; while more often wrong than right, the hypotheses that we generate to explain natural phenomena are more frequently correct than should be the case if we were not naturally predisposed to learn the truth. This is how Peirce eventually came to understand the criterion of "simplicity," as recommended to the scientist for use in selecting the best available hypothesis. Rather than logical simplicity, as he had previously affirmed, Peirce modified his view so that the simpler hypothesis was to be identified as the one that is more "natural, the one that instinct suggests" (Peirce CP 6.477).

Peirce's theory of instinct is a thoroughly evolutionary account that ought to be congenial to most naturalists. The development of our capacity for human reasoning has occurred in response to the need to adapt to a complex variety of environmental factors. Successful adaptation was linked for Peirce most especially to basic needs associated with human nutrition and reproduction. He admitted that instincts shaping human reasoning were likely to be less reliable the further removed such reasoning became from matters directly associated with these practical needs. At the same time, Peirce insisted that "man is so completely hemmed in by the bounds of his

possible practical experience, his mind is so restricted to being the instrument of his needs that he cannot, in the least, *mean* anything that transcends those limits” (Peirce CP 5.536). All human conceptions are to some extent anthropomorphic.

Peirce’s anthropomorphism has been largely ignored by scholars and often poorly understood. In correspondence with William James, rather than linking pragmatism to some doctrine of humanism, Peirce indicated his preference for the word “anthropomorphism,” the latter being more “expressive of *the scientific opinion*.” Such an anthropomorphism implies theism in Peirce’s view, not belief in any kind of finite God, but rather, in a supreme “Ideal” conceived as “a living power.” “Moreover, the human mind and the human heart have a filiation to God.” Thus portrayed, anthropomorphism represents a “good sound solid strong pragmatism” (Peirce CP 8.262). Elsewhere, Peirce contended that there is no “more adequate way” of conceiving God as the cause or creator of the universe “than as vaguely like a man” (Peirce CP 5.536). Not only did Peirce affirm an “anthropomorphic” God, he also contended that “if we cannot in some measure understand God’s mind, all science ... must be a delusion and a snare” (Peirce CP 8.168).

This “strong pragmatism” is Peirce’s own rather idiosyncratic version of naturalism. All human reasoning is rooted in instinct, shaped by human practical concerns. “To say ... that a conception is one natural to man,” he opined, is “just about the same thing as that it is anthropomorphic”; furthermore, this is “as high a recommendation as one could give to it in the eyes of an Exact Logician.” In truth, “‘anthropomorphic’ is what pretty much all conceptions are at bottom.” Once again, this is primarily a claim about the role that instinct plays in abduction, so that one inclined to reject such anthropomorphism would be wise “to remember that every single truth of science is due to the affinity of the human soul to the soul of the universe, imperfect as that affinity no doubt is” (Peirce CP 5.47).

Peirce’s “Neglected Argument for the Reality of God,” embodies an experiment based on the presupposition that such an “imperfect” affinity exists—a presupposition that Peirce regarded as indubitable given the otherwise inexplicable success of science in so rapidly discovering truths about nature, also given an evolutionary account about how our capacity for reasoning must have developed in continuous adaptation to the natural world in which human beings live and move and have their being (Peirce CP 6.452–91). The reader performs that experiment whenever she engages in the practice of “musement,” a kind of playful but disciplined meditation on the origin and nature of the universe. This is a practice in which billions of individuals, from the earliest intelligent hominids and then throughout human history, must have engaged and from which the idea of God will have arisen. The first part of Peirce’s essay, a “Humble Argument,” invites his readers to enter the “skiff of Musement” in order to test the claim that such an idea will *naturally* tend to suggest itself under these conditions, and then grow in attractiveness and power as the muser continues to contemplate it. Later sections of the essay indicate that it is intended less as an argument for the reality of God (despite its title) than as an argument for the naturalness or instinctiveness of the God-hypothesis. This later material also links musement to Peirce’s mature theory of inquiry, so that it will be recognized as the first or abductive stage of any scientific investigation. Peirce offers several proposals, based on the principles of his pragmatism, about how this hypothesis might be put to the test as an ideal shaping human life and conduct.

Peirce’s anthropomorphism should not be read as a claim that God is to be conceived simply as a human being “writ large,” nor should it be conflated with anthropocentrism. In Peirce’s view, the universe is “perfused with signs” (Peirce CP 5.449, note 1). The whole of nature is a text or “great poem” that can be read as signifying some divine purpose, albeit one shrouded in extraordinary vagueness. While “the nominalists are fond of insisting on the distinction between words and things, between signs and realities,” for a realist and

an objective idealist (like Peirce) “the very entelechy of reality is of the nature of a sign.” To be sure “we ought not to think that what are signs to us are the only signs; but we have to judge signs in general by these” (Peirce 1979: 297). This is not anthropocentrism (ours are not the “only signs”), but an articulation of anthropomorphism in semiotic terms (we can only judge “signs in general” by “what are signs to us”). This “judging of signs” is the task of interpretation. In a world perfused with signs that task is ongoing, but such a world is potentially knowable, at least in the long run, to a community of interpreters operating with sound scientific principles.

How far removed is such a semiotic realism from the perspective of those thinkers most readily identified as religious naturalists? Recall that in his letter to James, Peirce described God as an “ideal” both “supreme” and “living.” John Dewey also conceived of God as ideal, more precisely, as an “active relation” between the ideal and the actual. The ideal for Dewey is something that can be known through the imagination but is not itself purely imaginary. It is fashioned from “the hard stuff of the world of physical and social experience” (Dewey 1934: 49). One might propose that such an ideal could even be regarded as “living” in some sense, but in no way did Dewey imagine God as being “vaguely like a man.” It is also not clear how much reality Dewey’s God possesses independently of the human beings who conceive of ideals and adapt their behavior accordingly. Nevertheless, one could argue for a certain continuity between Peirce’s perspective and Dewey’s later religious naturalism.

A more intriguing comparison might be one made between Peirce and several contemporary thinkers. Peirce’s portrayal of musement resonates with the way that certain naturalists describe the kind of human relationship to nature that best qualifies as “religious”: for example, an attentive “transaction” with the book of nature that takes the form of “reading again and again” (Hogue 2010: 64); or the practice of mindfulness as a bio-*semiotic* exercise, that is, as a development of our capacity to discern “something more” in nature, to develop a habit of “really really” seeing it (Goodenough 2003: 107). Now when one “really really” sees nature what is it that one discerns in its depths? Does it display any purpose, possess any value, independently of what one might project upon it? Does it actively elicit awe, gratitude, maybe even a certain kind of love from the one who contemplates it? Does it have the potential to shape dramatically the behavior of one who is continuously mindful, one whose contemplation of it is habitual rather than episodic?

Peirce characterized “it” as being only very vaguely like a person, yet more like a person than like an impersonal thing—something “living.” The hypothesis that it *is* personal, in any event, is one that would naturally tend to suggest itself (he conjectured) to any individual who engages in musement for a considerable period of time. To reject such a hypothesis in advance would represent a violation of the principle that one should not do anything to block the road of inquiry. On the other hand, testing the hypothesis would involve continuing to engage in the mindful contemplation of nature, open to whatever reveals itself in the process. It would also involve transforming one’s life into a laboratory, testing the values and purposes discerned in contemplation by trying to embody them in conduct, allowing the love and gratitude elicited in musement gradually to shape one’s behavior.

Perhaps, as Emerson famously suggested, humans once had “an original relation to the universe” that has dramatically eroded in modern times (Emerson 2009: 1). Such an erosion might be explained in any number of ways, as theories of modernity weave together different narratives: stories about the rise of a “secular age,” about the emergence of capitalism and the impact of commodification on human life, or about the formation of enlightenment ideologies and the implication of new technological practices for human thought and consciousness. On any such account, our relationship to nature has significantly changed. If that is the case, then the

tendency of some naturalists to cling to the “religious” might represent a nostalgia for what has been lost, an instinctive longing rooted in a natural “filiation” to the universe. Peirce once opined that the facts that “stare us in face” are often *not* the “ones most easily discerned” (Peirce CP 6.162); and so this would not be a foolish nostalgia for something past and irretrievable, but rather an edifying desire to discover—now occluded—the deepest meanings that nature always signifies and continuously renews.

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