

NATURALISM

Naturalism is a term that stands for a family of positions that endorse the general idea of being true to, or guided by, "nature", an idea as old as Western thought itself (e.g. Aristotle is often called a naturalist) and as various and open-ended as interpretations of "nature". Since the rise of the modern scientific revolution in the seventeenth century, nature has increasingly come to be identified with the-world-as-studied-by-the-sciences. Consequently, naturalism has come to mean a set of positions defined in terms of the scientific image of nature or the methods of scientific inquiry. In this brief article I shall focus upon explicating three versions of *scientific* naturalism: 1) naturalism in the arts especially literature; 2) philosophical naturalism; and 3) naturalism in the social sciences. These different naturalisms correspond to different ways of appealing to science, whether it be adopting a scientific stance towards human and social life, or a broadly empirical approach to inquiry in general, or a scientific worldview.

Naturalism in field of the arts refers to art that depicts everyday subjects in a 'realistic' manner, one free from stylisation, idealization or academic convention. Although the term has been used to describe a style of painting since the late seventeenth century (e.g. Caravaggio's), it only became an important term of art criticism in the nineteenth century, Gustave Courbet being one of the leading examples. Naturalism as a literary category was first applied to a genre of French fiction exemplified by Emile Zola, which builds on the anti-romantic 'realist' fiction of Gustav Flaubert and Honoré de Balzac, writers who deliberately adopt a scientific – that is, detached and objective -- approach to human life. The vision of the human depicted in naturalist literature owes much to a picture of the world suggested by Darwin's theory of evolution: a purposeless, Godless world of competitive striving where the notion of free will is treated with suspicion. Under these historical and ideological influences, American literary naturalism arose in the 1890's as a reaction to the 'realist' fiction of middle- and upper-class life of the 1870's and 1880's, e.g., the novels of Henry James. Its chief exemplars include Stephen Crane, Theodor Dreiser, Jack London and Frank Norris. The American school is typified by an anti-individualist view of humans as largely determined by environmental forces, frank and animalistic depictions of sex and violence and an unflinching treatment of the harsh realities faced by immigrants and the working-class in modern industrialized American cities.

It is important to note, however, that not all appeals to nature are to be understood in terms of an allegiance to naturalism. For example, the writings of Emerson and Thoreau – memorably, *Walden* -- reveal a vision of nature that challenges the assumptions of naturalism, in particular, that idea that the objective is a matter of excluding the subjective. Although Emerson and Thoreau accept that nature is everything that is distinct from one's own consciousness, they are interested in a larger reciprocity and interdependence of mind and nature that bears the influence of German philosophers such as Kant and Schelling. Another example of an anti-naturalist appeal to nature is the tradition of thinking about

human conduct and law in terms of natural rights or the related, but older, idea of natural law. Here the appeal to nature refers to principles or rules of conduct that are given as opposed to humanly constructed. In this tradition what is naturally given is typically understood as a matter of God's law. Naturalism, of course, is strongly opposed to theism.

Modern philosophy recognizes two basic strains of naturalism, ontological and methodological naturalism. Ontological naturalism takes the subject-matter of the natural sciences as its model of the genuinely real. A leading advocate, David Armstrong, holds "that reality consists of nothing but a single all-embracing spatiotemporal system" (1980, p. 149). On this view, the natural world is nothing but the world posited by the explanations of the natural sciences (say, physics, chemistry, biology). Many naturalists think this implies a conception of nature as a single unified causal order. These ontological commitments are primarily meant to exclude supernatural entities, such as the Christian God, demons, spirits and souls; anything that is not the subject-matter of a natural science. Naturalism can accommodate religion to the extent that it is understood as a certain kind of experience, which does not require any commitment to the existence of supernatural entities or events (e.g. angels, miracles).

Not uncommonly contemporary naturalists adopt a sceptical attitude to the social (or human) sciences. This may be expressed as an unwillingness to think of the social sciences as genuine sciences at all or, less drastically, as the doctrine that the posits of these sciences are reducible in principle to the posits of paradigmatic natural sciences such as physics. However, there is nothing in naturalism itself that requires this dismissive or reductive approach to the social sciences and not all naturalists share it (e.g. pragmatists such as John Dewey).

Today, many debates about naturalism are conducted in a semantic key. That is, the question is one about how we are to interpret the core concepts of a target non-scientific discourse given a scientific view of nature. For instance, how we are to account for our thought and talk about reasons, moral goodness, numbers, aesthetic values, etc.? Do such terms refer to anything in nature? If not, are the sentences in which they occur true or false or do they play a non-referring role? The semantic project of accounting for the role of non-scientific concepts in this way is called naturalization. Just how revisionary of ordinary ways of thinking this project is depends upon two important questions: 1) whether there are irreducible and indispensable non-scientific forms of understanding? and 2) whether one accepts the social sciences as genuine sciences?

The second strain of philosophical naturalism is methodological naturalism, which takes as its model the methods of inquiry of the natural sciences. It holds that nature as a whole is properly studied by the same empirical methods as employed by the natural sciences. Since human beings are a part of nature this implies that the study of human nature is continuous with the study of non-human nature. It also implies that knowledge is, properly speaking, scientific knowledge. W.V. Quine draws the radical conclusion that there is no a priori knowledge thereby undermining traditional philosophy. The question whether philosophy has

any autonomy in relation to science has subsequently become an important topic of dispute.

Naturalism in the social sciences can be understood along roughly the same lines as philosophical naturalism. In this context, ontological naturalism is the view that the subject-matter of the social sciences is, ultimately, no different in kind than that of the natural sciences. But most writers in the social sciences understand naturalism primarily as a methodological doctrine: the view that the methods of inquiry of the natural sciences (e.g. the attempt to discover laws or law-like regularities, empirical testing and corroboration, a clear distinction between facts and values) are no less applicable to man as to nature: to the study of people; society; morality; politics; and culture. Naturalism thus represents a rejection of the influential idea defended by Dilthey, Weber and others that there is a fundamental difference between the scientific understanding of nature (Erklären) and the sort of empathetic understanding of human beings that involves seeing things from the subject's point of view (Verstehen).

Since many naturalists advocate a sharp contrast between the scientific image of the world and the manifest image of everyday experience, some of the most important questions in contemporary metaphysics concern the question how we 'place' items in the manifest image (e.g., meanings, morals and modalities) within the scientific image. Another important debate is whether we should follow the naturalistic identification of the natural world with the scientific image. John McDowell, for example, has argued that it is a metaphysical prejudice to treat the 'disenchanted' world of the natural sciences as exhausting our conception of nature. What it leaves out of account is a richer conception of the world revealed to critical human thought and experience, one that includes sui generis normative phenomena such as reasons, meanings and values.

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