

Naturalism, atheism and religion

Naturalism means that nature works by itself. It works from within and there is nothing outside of it working on it. There is no supernatural according to naturalism. What if a statue comes to life? Naturalism will have to assert that it is still natural! Is that bias? No for nature can simulate the supernatural.

What we call natural laws, comes from humankind's experience of how nature works. We take it as law that dead people stay dead because that is what our experience tells us. Laws do not need a lawgiver. Even if there were nothing at all, it would not change the fact that if there were people it would be wrong to murder them. It would still be law.

Naturalism, perhaps, is a better term to use than atheism. Naturalism implies that all belief in the supernatural is rejected while it is possible to be an atheist and still believe in magical powers or beings.

Naturalism and science are equated or identified as the same thing in the thinking of many. It is replied by anti-naturalists that naturalism is the belief that there is no magic or supernatural but just nature while science is simply the method for investigating nature and how it works. So naturalism is a philosophy and science is a method. The religionists argue then that you don't have to be a naturalist to be a scientist. But the scientific method presupposes a philosophy - naturalism. Scientists do not expect a magical or supernatural cure for cancer but a natural one. Naturalism and science are two aspects of the same non-supernatural outlook. They are different but inseparable. Science is the method used by naturalists. And scientists presuppose naturalism at least when they are acting as scientists. Religionists simply resort to lying in order to deny that science and the supernatural are necessary incompatible. They are incompatible.

Religion then likes to argue that because God is a non-natural being and is not a material being or force, science simply cannot investigate God. Thus it is able to claim that scientific evidence against God is irrelevant. Yet in the next breath it will say there is scientific evidence for God's existence. It can't make up its mind. And if God exists, his activity can be investigated. Thus it is not true that science has nothing to say about God or the possible non-existence of God. If science cannot investigate God it can investigate what may have been done by a God - eg design.

Religion sometimes admits that there is no mark of God at all on the universe. Science says there is nothing. So religion then reasons that God lets the universe act like it is on its own! It doesn't wonder why God would be so deceptive! It is outrageous how some can claim that evolution makes God far more necessary than he would be if the Genesis story were true. In fact if God hides and lets the universe act as if he were not there then evolution cannot be a sign of the existence or activity of God.

The Naturalist may choose to believe that perhaps the supernatural is possible but that we have no reason to believe in it. That is fine. The Naturalist may take this stance because he or she worries that saying that the supernatural is impossible smacks of dogmatism and arrogance.

What is the most important is that the Naturalist is going to live as if there is no supernatural.

Believers are naturalists most of the time - they forget about their God and just treat nature and material things as ends in themselves.

Naturalists do not believe in miracles or magic or the supernatural.

Suppose you have a cat and you get rid of it by dumping it miles away. You know it is naturally possible for it to find its way home in time for its breakfast in the morning. But you would be extremely doubtful that it will happen. That is not biased. Yet Christians accuse those who say miracles are possible but doubtful of bias. That is unfair. If its not biased in the case of the cat, it is even less biased in the case of miracles. A miracle would be a rarer event and stranger than the cat getting home. You won't assume the return of the cat is a miracle though you could. You will assume its natural. Answers such as, you are assuming miracles are so strange and rare that any evidence for them is suspect, are only attempts to bluff. That miracle beliefs inspire such tactics makes us find such beliefs worrisome. And supporters clearly understand what we are saying when they resort to manipulation. And often they refuse to stop doing it - they become fundamentalists and obscurantists in that thing.

People have to contradict themselves to believe in miracles.

Perhaps there are unknown laws of nature that are able to raise a man from the dead. Religion responds - the only way it can! - that this objection is wrong because we don't need to know all nature can do before we can be sure something is a miracle. It says it is enough to know what nature cannot do. But in this it contradicts itself. If we don't know all nature can

do then we cannot know what nature cannot do. At least if we assume miracles don't happen and say they are tricks, mistakes or freaks of nature or all of these, we avoid contradicting ourselves.

John Hick (page 173, Philosophy of Religion for A Level, OCR Edition Anne Jordan, Neil Lockyer and Edwin Tate, Nelson Thornes Ltd, 1999) stated that natural law is a term or concept we use to describe what generally can be expected of nature. He argued that it is a generalisation based on how we see nature working and does not imply a rigid law to which there can be no exceptions. In general you stay at school when you are a child but if you are sick that is an exception to the general rule. For Hick, experience tells us what generalisations to make and experience can tell us what is an exception. A generalisation is something you have to engage in for you cannot take account of every possible event. It is like a summing up of what you expect to happen, of what you expect the normal course of things to be.

It is thought that Hick refutes Hume's argument that even if an exception to the general rule takes place, we cannot believe in it for it is more likely to be wrong. For example, if a man rises from the dead we can regard this as unbelievable because we believe and see that dead people stay dead. The evidence for the man rising is weaker than the evidence that dead people do not rise.

It cannot be denied that there is something right about this argument. We instinctively feel that people who report magical events are somehow mistaken. Hume should not have written that an exception to the general rule is not believable even if it happened. He should have written, "There are general laws of nature and sometimes exceptions happen. But these exceptions themselves are natural. My argument is directed at those who say there are supernatural exceptions."

Believers say the problem with Hume's argument is that it assumes that accepting natural law and accepting the exception to it is mutually exclusive (page 177, Philosophy of Religion for A Level, OCR Edition). They argue this makes no sense for we recognise exceptions to general rules and laws all the time. They say there is no contradiction between the law and its exception. For example, nobody could walk on the moon but there are exceptions. But when you see that Hume was thinking not of events like that but of magical or miraculous ones the problems vanish.

If somebody rises from the dead can you assume you have witnessed one exception to the general rule? How do you know it is one exception? What will you think the next time somebody dies? How do you know that the exception is not an exception but the rule changing permanently?

For Hume, science is more objective than human testimony.

Richard Swinburne denies this. See page 178, Philosophy of Religion for A Level, OCR Edition Anne Jordan, Neil Lockyer and Edwin Tate, Nelson Thornes Ltd, 1999). He says that testimony to miracles is based on

- * what our memories tell us
- * what others testify to
- * the physical evidence that something has taken place

Swinburne concludes that these are the same things that believer in natural law and science depend on. Science and miracles then depend on the same things. So if they cannot show a miracle has happened they cannot show science is reliable either.

We should assume miracles are natural events so they are not really miracles.

The advantages of assuming miracles are not supernatural are these:

1 If you have to assume one or the other, assume the most likely thing or the most natural thing - only believe in miracles as a last resort ie when they are proven 100%. To declare Bigfoot real, witnesses and footprints are no good. They are only good for showing the subject needs debate and discussion. You need a body live or dead. You need that for the risen Jesus too and even more so for nobody is calling Bigfoot supernatural or a miracle of God. Extraordinary claims need extraordinary evidence - meaning hard evidence.

Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence - they demand a huge quality of evidence or a huge quantity or both and all angles need to be covered. That is why the Christians are wasting their time churning out books supporting the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus when they refute just a few objections to it. To deny that such evidence is needed for such an anomalous event is to accuse objectors to the resurrection historicity of unreasonableness and bad faith. There can be no such thing as treating a person rightly or wrongly if that principle is wrong for all our ethical ideas have to make recourse to evidence and try to handle it properly. The strongest miracle believers in the world are unsurprisingly the most

vicious and insecure - all you have to do is see the hatred Medjugorje supporters vent at those who doubt the miracles there on the web.

2 Religion says that you should not assume miracles don't happen but should look at the evidence. Sorry religion but we not under obligation to treat your ideas as special. We can't investigate every religion's miracle claims.

3 It is better to contradict reality - ie sincerely say miracles haven't happened when they have done than to contradict yourself - to deny this is to say that religious beliefs come before people. If you contradict yourself you deceive yourself and won't be able to support the truth anyway. Better to err excusably than to err inexcusably.

4 There is no honesty in the religious position and there is in those who assume miracles don't happen. Miracles are a source of scandal.

Naturalism is the default position. Look for a natural explanation for the seemingly supernatural. If you can't find one then wait for one. Or decide that the indicators of the natural explanation, and what it is, are lost. Religion agrees but chooses to defy the truth.

The sensible person presumes naturalism is true for he wants the world view that he needs - he does not need a magical one and it only leads to illusion and trouble.

Natural law is a descriptive thing not a prescriptive thing. A brick always falling down is describing not saying it should be that way or that somebody commanded it to be that way. The descriptive and prescriptive can go together. But which one is more important? Without a descriptive there cannot be any prescriptive. Things need to work as if they work by rules before rules can be made. See the point? Naturalism is not only true but unavoidable and even believers in religion follow it deep down without knowing it. God contradicts the as if. God is goes with the idea of the deliberate creation of rules. Even if he does create them he is still the product of forces that behave as if they are rules.