

Précis,  
Only A Universe, Or A World Too?  
A Study Of Naturalism  
(part 2, pp. 24-56)

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(Page numbers reflect where discussion of that subject commences in my paper.)

## INTRODUCTION

Last week we discussed historically how naturalism developed, and we examined in depth both naturalism and its important sub-category of physicalism. Today we want to examine naturalism's foundations, its implications, its influence in our culture, and finally a Christian response.

## FOUNDATIONS: THE DISAPPEARING PILLAR (p. 24)

### Scientism: Science Turned Religion (p. 24)

On first glance, naturalism appears to rest on the twin pillars of science and philosophy, although many naturalists overlook or deny naturalism's philosophical underpinnings. Upon closer examination, we find the perceived pillar of scientific support actually disappears into the pillar of philosophical support.

One of the essential premises of naturalism is that empirical science is ultimately the only source of knowledge or by far the most important.

This is naturalism's sleight of hand. It offers us a theory *about* science as though it were a theory *from* science. Naturalism asserts with pretensions of scientific certitude that all knowledge is exhausted by what is accessible to science. But if knowledge beyond scientific knowledge exists, science cannot know that. Naturalism's claim then is not science, falsifiable by the scientific method, but a metaphysical claim. When that metaphysical claim parades as a scientific fact it is not science but *scientism*, a philosophy or religion disguised as science.

### The Sandlot Bully (p. 27)

Why is this distinction important? Simply because if, as the naturalist argues, science reigns as supreme over all other forms of knowledge and exhausts all reality, then it becomes impossible to question naturalism as a worldview. It becomes *the* worldview by fiat. And though, as a worldview it has abandoned the realm of science and entered the world of metaphysics and theology, it cannot be questioned on metaphysical or theological grounds. Like a playground bully, it has burst onto the sandlot, insisting to play the game, but refusing to do so by the rules, since, obviously, it knows better.

But naturalism is a philosophy and not science, and as such must defend itself philosophically. In my paper (pp. 28, 29) I list three things that Moreland and Craig point out that naturalism must do establish itself with philosophical credibility.

### The Emperors Clothes (p. 30)

More fundamental even than science's failure to answer the big metaphysical questions, is its failure to recognize its own profoundly metaphysical nature. Moreland and Craig list ten metaphysical presuppositions which are the very basis of science itself (p. 30). Unless those are defended philosophically science cannot get off the ground. Unfortunately, naturalism has no scientific basis, nor has it recognized and adequately defended its philosophical pillar. Given the metaphysical difficulties of its dependence on human reason, Groothuis remarks: "The truth vacuum created by naturalism siphons out of objective existence not only religious concepts, but philosophical and even scientific concepts as well."<sup>1</sup> It begins to look a lot like the emperor has no clothes.

### IMPLICATIONS: IS GOD WATCHING? (p. 33)

What are the implications of naturalism?

Some aspects of naturalism, such as its optimism in human reason, have contributed to important scientific, technological, and political advances. Though as the Catholic theologian George Weigel argues, Enlightenment influences in the American Experiment are often exaggerated,<sup>2</sup> they were nevertheless a factor, as Allan Bloom makes clear.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, within the decade of the end of the American Revolution, the French Revolution, influenced by those same Enlightenment ideals of rationalism but without the Christian influence present in the American endeavor, violently exposed the fallacy of unbridled rationalism and human reason. The Enlightenment Era was essentially over.

A glaring and ironic implication of naturalism is the way that the naturalist dogma of physicalism undercuts the whole naturalist idea. Johnson states,

The story of the great scientific mind that discovers absolute truth is satisfying only so long as we accept the mind itself as a given. Once we try to explain the mind as a product of its own discoveries, we are in a hall of mirrors with no exit.<sup>4</sup>

The most consequential idea of naturalism and the Enlightenment was the eventual denial of God. Groothuis says: "The end of theism brought with it the end of objective value, meaning and significance..."<sup>5</sup> Or, as Nietzsche asks, "Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the horizon?"<sup>6</sup> The end result was nihilism. In Sire's words:

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay*, (Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity Press, 2000), 42, 43

<sup>2</sup> George Weigel, *The Cube and the Cathedral*, (New York, NY, Basic Books, member of Perseus Books Group, 2005), 105

<sup>3</sup> "And not only Dewey, but everyone from the beginning of our regime, especially those who said, 'We hold these truths to be self evident,' shared the rationalist dream." Allan Bloom, *The Closing Of The American Mind*, (New York, NY, Simon and Schuster, 1987), 195

<sup>4</sup> Phillip E. Johnson, *Reason in the Balance*, (Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity Press, 1995), 62

<sup>5</sup> Groothuis, 37

<sup>6</sup> Cited by Groothuis, 37

“Nihilism came about not because theists and deists picked away at naturalism from the outside. Nihilism is the natural child of naturalism.”<sup>7</sup>

And so, we have observed a progression. The exaltation of human reason in the Enlightenment led from theism to deism and finally to naturalism. Naturalistic modernism has then given rise to, nihilism, existentialism, and postmodernism.

#### Morals, Significance, Faith, and Future (p. 36)

Without God right and wrong becomes subjective and relative. Allan Bloom, commenting on Max Weber’s assessment, remarks, “Reason cannot establish values, and the belief that it can is the stupidest and most pernicious illusion.”<sup>8</sup> Without a transcendent measure of right and wrong, we have no basis to judge it wrong to exterminate Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, or unborn human beings, as the twentieth century has so horrifically demonstrated. As David Berlinski observes: “And as far as we can tell, very few of those carrying out the horrors of the twentieth century worried overmuch that God was watching what they were doing either. That is, after all, the *meaning* of a secular society.”<sup>9</sup> (emphasis his)

Additionally, the loss of significance that naturalism fosters is exacerbated by the loss of a future implied by the loss of faith. George Weigel, refers to an article by David Hart regarding the loss of a future in the post-Christian Europe:

...it seemed to him “fairly obvious that there is some direct indissoluble bond between faith and the will to a future, or between the desire for a future and the imagination of eternity.” No faith, no future: “This is why post-Christian Europe seems to lack not only the moral and imaginative resources for sustaining its civilization, but even any good reason for continuing to reproduce.”<sup>10</sup>

#### Predetermined Beasts (p. 38)

Nor do the implications stop there. As Berlinski points out, naturalism leads inexorably to a deterministic view of life. We ultimately have no significant choices. Everything happens by the determination of random natural processes, and nothing we can ever do will alter those outcomes. We are mere cogs in a materialistic machine.

Finally, in spite of the protestations of naturalists to the contrary, man is reduced to a brute beast. If we learned anything from the twentieth century, we should have learned this.

### INFLUENCE: NATURALISM IN THE CULTURE (p. 40)

Though the Enlightenment ended long ago, the naturalistic worldview which it enlivened has endured and shows no signs of an imminent demise. Thus, as we shall see, naturalism makes its presence felt throughout our culture.

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<sup>7</sup> James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 5<sup>th</sup> Ed. (Downers Grove, IL, IVP Academic, InterVarsity Press, 2009), 97

<sup>8</sup> Allan Bloom, *The Closing Of The American Mind*, (New York, NY, Simon and Schuster, 1987), 194

<sup>9</sup> David Berlinski, *The Devil’s Delusion*, (New York, NY, Basic Books, member of Perseus Books Group, 2009), 26, 27

<sup>10</sup> Weigel, 163

One paradox of naturalism is how it enjoys a level of dominant influence within the culture, and encounters at the same time a measure of contempt and disregard. On the second point, a strong majority of Americans reject naturalism's creation myth of evolution, either wholly or in part. Johnson says, "The same materialists are frustrated however, because so many people are perversely unwilling to accept conclusions that a reductionist science necessarily implies."<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, it would be a grave mistake to regard such resistance as evidence that naturalism is not a major, perhaps *the* major worldview influencing the direction of our culture.

#### Science, Education, and Law (p. 40)

Phillip Johnson's 1995 book, *Reason in the Balance*, describes in considerable detail how naturalism has permeated Western institutions of science, law, and education. A decade earlier, Allan Bloom's best selling bombshell, *The Closing of the American Mind*, exposed the gutting of the concept of right and wrong, good and evil, with the concept of relativistic "values." This evisceration of good and evil is a direct consequence of naturalism's insistence that our universe is a closed system, especially closed to God.

Johnson describes what he calls the shift in America's religious philosophy during the last half of the twentieth century. "What has really happened is that a new established religious philosophy has replaced the old one." In most arenas of our public institutions, this new religious philosophy has gained the upper hand, and endeavors to silence the old religion.

In his book Johnson illustrates how the grand metaphysical story of science dominates within the scientific community, even to the extent that theistic scientists tacitly operate within materialistic parameters just to get along. Ben Stein's 2008 documentary, *Expelled, No Intelligence Allowed*, demonstrates pointedly the scientific community's efforts to preclude consideration of anything but its own creation story. Likewise, Berlinski, tells how naturalists dominate within the scientific community and work overtime to shut down all debate and preclude consideration of other bona fide options.

Similarly, in education at all levels, Johnson shows how naturalism rules the day. Naturalism's pretension that it is science, while any talk about God is religion, is utilized to preclude the consideration of any non-materialist explanations on the premise of separation of church and state. However, we have already seen how naturalism is in fact, rooted in scientism, and is, in fact, a metaphysical belief, or, as Ronnie Rogers calls it, a "non-supernatural religion."<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, naturalistic relativism is employed in our schools in the teaching of "values" through mechanisms such as "values clarification" and "moral reasoning" classes.

As in science and education, so also in law, naturalism has achieved hegemony in many cases. Johnson, citing the influential Supreme Court jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes, illustrates how naturalistic views of morality are now widely accepted. According to Johnson, Holmes' view of morality was a modernist view. Johnson observes regarding Holmes' view: "Morality is entirely a human creation, however, and it is based on

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<sup>11</sup> Johnson, 65

<sup>12</sup> Ronnie W. Rogers, *The Death Of Man As Man*, (Bloomington, IN, CrossBooks, a div. of Lifeway, 2011), 8

emotions or feelings rather than knowledge.”<sup>13</sup> This is, of course, naturalism pure and simple in the service of the law.

And just as naturalism influences the application of the law, as Ronnie Rogers demonstrates in his book, *The Death Of Man As Man*, citing President Barak Obama’s speech upon lifting the ban on embryonic stem cell research, it also is deeply influential in the making of laws.<sup>14</sup>

The influence of naturalism in all these arenas matters because it impacts our everyday lives. It matters to us, to our children, and to our children’s children. If, as I have shown, naturalism has a set of very troubling implications, then the extent to which it has influenced the culture in which we live matters a great deal.

## RESPONSE: CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW? (p. 47)

So, how should the Christian think about and respond to naturalism?

The response of the Christian scriptures to the assertions and claims of naturalism are forceful and unambiguous. It begins with the first four words of Genesis, “In the beginning, God...” (Genesis 1:1). But naturalist’s denial of God should come as no surprise to the Christian. The Apostle Paul described this as a trait of humankind since the beginning. (Romans 1:18-20). Two things are clear from Paul’s words. First, God has in some way made himself known to man, and second, man, wanting no part of God, has always sought to suppress that knowledge.

One way that God makes Himself known to man is through the natural world. Hence the more true science discovers about the natural world, the more clear should be the general revelation of God. This implies, of course, that for a believer to be engaged in the practice of science is a high calling indeed.

## A Biblical Response (p. 50)

In closing I wish to recall the eight elements of a naturalistic worldview which I detailed earlier and consider briefly the biblical response to those points.

1) To naturalism’s claim that prime reality is only matter, the Scriptures teach us that the transcendent God is in fact the prime reality. Without apology, the Bible declares Him to be the uncaused Cause, the origin and sustainer of all things. (Genesis 1:1; John 8:58; Colossians 1:17; Isaiah 46:9)

2) Naturalism claims the universe is a closed system, but the Bible teaches that God created the world, ex nihilo, that all space and time are His doing. All things came into being through Him, and nothing exists that did not come through Him. (Hebrews 1:3; John 1:3; Job 38:4-10)

3) Naturalism holds to physicalism, denying man’s soul. Jesus, however, clearly teaches that man has both a body and soul. Clearly He wanted His disciples to know that there was much more to life than the material and physical. Likewise, Paul asserts a distinction between body and soul and countenances the possibility of out-of-body experiences. He also speaks of the dualist nature of man when he speaks of being absent

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<sup>13</sup> Johnson, 143

<sup>14</sup> Rogers, 3

from the body but present with the Lord. (Matthew 16:26; Matthew 10:28; I Corinthians 6:16; Luke 12:22-23; II Corinthians 12:1-4; 2 Corinthians 5:6-8)

4) Naturalism contends that death is extinction. The Scriptures teach not only that there is life after death, but that how and where we live that life is of the greatest importance. (Luke 16:19-30; 2 Corinthians 5:10)

5) Naturalism claims that all reality is knowable through innate and autonomous human reason. The Bible esteems the importance of human reason, and calls us to utilize it. However, it also makes clear its limitations, and the necessity of divine revelation. (Isaiah 1:18; Romans 1:28; Isaiah 55:9; Romans 1:18-20)

6) Naturalism asserts that ethics are a human construct. The Scriptures teach that all morals find their source in God, and that He communicates them to men through their conscience and through revelation. (Leviticus 11:44; Romans 2:15; Romans 5:12-21; Exodus 20:1-17 and Matthew 5-7)

7) Naturalism views history as moving in a linear, cause and effect direction, but without any purpose. The Bible affirms the linear cause and effect nature of history, but it has a clear purpose in the will and purposes of God. (Isaiah 46:9, 10; Job 42:2; Proverbs 16:3; Ephesians 1:9, 10)

8) Finally, naturalism implies no core commitment. The Scriptures, in contrast, calls all men to honor, obey, love, and worship God, that our whole lives are to be directed towards our Creator. (Romans 11:36; 1 Corinthians 10:31; Matthew 22:37, 38)

#### Our Task (p. 54)

The task of the Christian, when encountering those influenced by naturalism, should be two fold. First is to provide the intellectually compelling case for the Christian worldview, while calling on the naturalist to defend his or her own case. Second, the Christian should continue to point out the ultimately moral issues that are at stake and the need of all of us to be reconciled to God through Jesus Christ.

This is anything but an exercise in futility. Whether or not we as Christians will ever successfully move the culture back to a more theistic framework only God knows, but we have an obligation to engage within the public square. On an individual level there is much the Christian can do, both in teaching the next generation, and in influencing and persuading individual naturalists with a view to bringing them to an encounter with their living Creator. The remarkable story of the atheist Anthony Flew which I detail at the end of my paper, who late in life expressed an openness to hearing from God, should give some encouragement that honest and thinking naturalists can be persuaded, given sufficient evidence, persuasive arguments, and the activity of the Holy Spirit working in and through us.

By His grace, and in His love, let us engage.