

John R. Shook and Paul Kurtz, eds.
The Future of Naturalism.
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This is a collection of essays originating in a 2007 conference on naturalism at the Center for Inquiry, an organization known for the application of skeptical analysis of various forms of paranormal claims, alternative medicines, and the supernatural claims of religion. The question of the future of naturalism is clearly important, though Kurtz gets rather carried away when he declares that the conference was a ‘historic occasion’ (179). The essays in this book are nominally organized around the theme of the ‘future of naturalism’, or as the editors put it, ‘how naturalism might best evolve in order to uphold its ‘ambitious claim’ to be the ‘most reasonable philosophy’ (10). The book is clearly intended to bring together supporters of naturalism, and none of the contributors are outright opponents of naturalism, though nonetheless a surprisingly wide range of views is offered. However, anyone who wants to hear a more critical approach to naturalism will have to look elsewhere (e.g. *Naturalism in Question*, ed. Mario de Caro and David Macarthur (Harvard 2008)). Though *The Future of Naturalism* is somewhat loosely organized and does not aim to be comprehensive, it provides a useful variety of perspectives on what naturalism is and what it should be.

One of the difficulties with assessing the school of naturalism is that ‘naturalism’, like the term ‘realism’, has so many different meanings that one wonders whether it is even useful. And we are given a bewildering variety of definitions of naturalism in this book, ranging from the scientific perspective that science is the one legitimate source of truth about the world, to the pragmatic, which Rosenthal characterizes as the idea that ‘humans are within nature, but nature is not the mechanical universe of the Newtonian worldview’, to even a more-or-less dualistic position in Rescher’s article, which he calls ‘idealistic naturalism’ (as distinct from ‘scientific naturalism’). The one thing all of the authors seem to agree on is the rejection of traditional ‘supernatural’ religion, with its attendant miracles, faith healings, etc. However, if ‘naturalism’ simply means not accepting bogeymen, gnomes, or Bigfoot, then the concept is just not that philosophically interesting. Moreover, here again terminology becomes problematic. We are not offered a definition of ‘supernatural’ (and it is very hard to come up with one) and, as John Lachs’ useful contribution points out, in fact everyday religion is quite naturalistic, in the sense that it posits a single world in which are present deities, demons, angels, etc., rather than a separate, supernatural, transcendent realm in which these entities exist. The rejection of religion, then, does not seem to follow from the adoption of naturalism per se, but rather from a very different issue, concerning just what the contents of nature really are. That is, according to Lachs, both religious and scientifically minded people are empirically minded, agreeing that knowledge is based on our ability to ‘get or fail to obtain certain experiences’ (71); hence virtually everyone is a naturalist.

One section of the book is devoted to the relation between pragmatism and

naturalism. The pragmatists, especially Dewey, tended to see themselves as naturalists, and Part 2 of the book asks the question, ‘Can Pragmatism Assist Naturalism?’ However, Sandra Rosenthal’s excellent account of pragmatism makes the point that pragmatic naturalism is very far from what most philosophers would consider naturalism. In particular, it strongly resists the scientific reductionism of many naturalists, and wholly rejects the artificial dichotomy between ‘objective’ science and ‘subjective’ humanities. Science, as she points out, is as value-laden as any human mode of inquiry, and is not a privileged, unique insight into the ‘real’ nature of the world. Indeed, if anything, the lesson of pragmatism is that science is ultimately grounded in the humanities, not the reverse. She invokes Dewey for the claim that science gains its full meaning ‘only within the context of everyday experience’ (86). This is not a position that is likely to be congenial to many naturalists.

The volume is not without its more extreme and one-sided versions of naturalism. Editor Kurtz at one point celebrates the death of God: ‘religion is exposed as poison (hear! hear!)’ (192). This is the sort of extravagant excess that undercuts the claim of naturalism to be ‘reasonable’ or even scientific: where is the empirical evidence that religion is on the whole more harmful than good—let alone a pure ‘poison’, whatever that means—or that an atheistic society will be better overall? Recall that the wars of the 20th century were fought behind atheist ideologies, including Hitler’s version of Darwinism and Marx’s materialism, and that these wars were so deadly thanks to the technology made possible by science.

Perhaps the clearest example of scientism in the book is found in Brian Leiter’s brief discussion of naturalized jurisprudence (what he calls ‘applied’ naturalism). In a fully-formed naturalism, he declares, we will not find ‘any moral facts or supernatural entities, since these play no role in any scientific enterprise with the “predict and control” bona fides of successful sciences’ (197). The lumping together of morality with the supernatural is problematic enough, as is the questionable notion of moral ‘facts’. The issue is whether there are moral *norms*; to assume—as Leiter appears to assume—that norms must be reduced to ‘facts’ is to beg the question. But more troubling is the dogmatic assumption that the only thing that is real are those entities investigated by science, and that follow the ‘predict and control’ model. Indeed, the attempt to assimilate morality into the idea of prediction and control leads to incoherence, for the very idea of morality (at least in its Kantian version) is precisely *not* to control others (or predict them) but to provide a basis for their autonomous decisions. Further, one would have thought that the ‘predictive’ model of legal decision-making had been killed off long ago, given that it is useless to the judge who must decide what justice requires (or the legislator who must choose what laws to pass). It attempts to reduce decision-making agents to the passive, determined objects of prediction, the very problem with trying to assimilate normative disciplines into the scientific model. It attempts to reduce decision-making agents to the passive, deterministic objects of prediction, but in doing so it illustrates the very problem with trying to assimilate normative issues into the scientific model. Leiter also mischaracterizes Legal Realism as merely a ‘causal’ theory (204), when in fact it had a strong and essential normative component, holding that law should be used to achieve desirable progressive social goals.

The one serious omission from this volume is any substantial discussion of the most compelling problem for naturalism: the role of the normative. Often the naturalists portray their goal as if it were simply to combat superstition and pseudoscience in society. However, the most important critics of naturalism have not been defenders of angels and leprechauns, but rather have argued reasonably that norms or values cannot be reduced to facts or causes, and yet norms are pervasive and essential in all human activities, including science. This creates a dilemma for naturalism: it denies the reality of norms only at the cost of becoming either a useless or an implausible theory, but if it admits norms then it requires a major departure from the methods of science, which are concerned with the descriptive, not the normative. It is unfortunate that there is no extended discussion of this problem in the book. Nonetheless, despite these limitations, those interested in the question of naturalism will find some useful ideas in this volume.

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