

Précis,
Only A Universe, Or A World Too?
A Study Of Naturalism
(part 1, pp. 1-23)

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INTRODUCTION: A BURDEN OF PROOF (p. 1)

The Christian church has always faced a host of both internal and external challenges. The development of a comprehensive worldview of naturalism, accompanied by modernism, in the last two or three centuries must rank among one of the church's greatest external challenges. As responsible Christians wanting to engage our culture, it is important we understand it.¹

A Preliminary Definition (p. 2)

The Christian philosophers J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig define naturalism as meaning "that reality is exhausted by the spatiotemporal world of physical objects accessible in some way to the sense and embraced by our best scientific theories."² Thus, according to naturalism, there is no reality beyond the physical or natural world, and all reality can be examined and explored through science. Therefore, naturalism precludes the real existence of anything not accessible to science.

The Plan Of Attack (p. 3)

Today I plan to talk about where naturalism comes from historically. Then we will look in depth at the idea of naturalism and what naturalism says about what it means to be human. Next week we will consider the foundations of naturalism in scientism, the implications of naturalism, its prevalence within the culture, and the Christian response to it.

¹ Naturalism falls into the category of philosophy or metaphysics, which many people shy away from. However, Phillip Johnson says: "In fact, metaphysical assumptions are most powerful when they are unconscious and do not come to the surface because everyone in the relevant community takes them for granted."¹ This is certainly true of naturalism.

² J. P. Mooreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations For A Christian Worldview*, (Downers Grove, IL, IVP Academic, Intervarsity Press, 2003), 184

Defining “Naturalist” (p. 3)

When I use the term *naturalist* in this presentation, I am not referring to someone who loves and studies nature, but rather as a reference to someone who holds to naturalism as a worldview.

HISTORY: THE JOURNEY OF A THOUSAND MILES (p. 5)

Naturalism In Ancient Times (p. 5)

Naturalist themes are detectable in history going back nearly three millennia. Thales of Miletus (624-546 BCE) is considered by some to be the father of naturalism. Other early philosophical thinkers who held to elements of naturalism include Protagoras (490-420 BCE), Socrates (c. 469-399 BCE), and Epicurus (341-270 BCE).

Pre-Enlightenment Influences (p. 6)

Modern naturalism can trace its roots most directly back to around the sixteenth century and the development of the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation. In medieval times the Scriptures and the classics constituted the cultural authority. The Renaissance encouraged thinking outside the traditional biblical framework. During the sixteenth century the Reformation called into question the monolithic authority of the Catholic Church. Groothuis remarks: “The social effect of this theological reform, however, was a further destabilization of Christendom.”³ Following the Reformation, bitter theological and ecclesiastical conflicts, along with numerous religiously influenced wars, led many to question the very idea of divine revelation as a source of authority.⁴

Early Enlightenment (p. 7)

The birth of modern naturalism occurred during the period of the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) called the motto of the Enlightenment, “Dare to know.”⁵ The spirit of the Enlightenment was one of great confidence in the powers of human reason. Early influential figures in this regard were theists such as René Descartes (1596-1650), probably the most influential, John Locke (1632-1704), and Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626).

It was recognition of the ability of the human mind to understand and explain the natural world through human reason that ignited the excitement of the Enlightenment era. Modern science had been born and was proving to be remarkably successful in explaining the natural world.⁶

Shift In Authority (p. 9)

The development of supreme confidence in human reason, coupled with the disillusionment with the idea of divine revelation as a source of authority, led to a shift in authority from Scriptures and the classics to human reason. The necessity of reason

³ Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay*, (Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity Press, 2000), 34

⁴ Ibid, 35

⁵ Ibid, 34

⁶ Ibid, 49

had been replaced by the sufficiency of reason.⁷ Eventually, knowledge was constricted. Only that which could be known through human reason was knowable.⁸

As the eighteenth century progressed, leading figures became increasingly open in their opposition to the Church specifically, and Christianity in general. Though these individuals remained believers in God, they were now deists rather than theists. Thinkers such as Julien Offray de La Mettrie (1709-1751) considered God irrelevant to the discovery of knowledge. According to Sire, “It is precisely this feeling, this conclusion, which marks the transition to naturalism.”⁹ One of the most influential voices was that of Voltaire (1694-1778), who in concert with the *philosophes*, a cadre of French Enlightenment philosophers, openly attacked the Church and Christianity. Voltaire repudiated most of the distinctive doctrines of the church, including original sin, the Trinity, incarnation, atonement, the Eucharist, and he ridiculed the sacrifice of God on the cross.¹⁰

The most influential voice in the eighteenth century was Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778).¹¹ Rousseau profoundly influenced European political philosophy, a key aspect of which was his idea of the *general will*. It was his idea of the general will that laid the groundwork for the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution. The French Revolution played an important role in bringing the Enlightenment to an end, as we will see next week.

All of these individuals professed faith in God, however they were deists, not theists. Deism denies that God can be known through revelation or incarnation. He can only be known through nature, and nature can be understood through rationality and human reason.¹² Deism, then, became the bridge between theism and naturalism.¹³

The Enlightenment Project (p. 12)

The Enlightenment was more than simply an intellectual exercise. It was an endeavor; sometimes called the Enlightenment Project.¹⁴ This endeavor was to “free humanity from superstition and found a philosophy and civilization on rational inquiry, empirical evidence and scientific discovery.”¹⁵ This Project is typically referred to as *modernism*.

Modernism, impelled by the Industrial Revolution, endured well into the twentieth century. It was characterized by a highly rationalistic understanding of the world. Human Reason was extolled as the means by which all questions could be answered and all problems resolved.

⁷ James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 5th Ed. (Downers Grove, IL, IVP Academic, InterVarsity Press, 2009), 49, 50

⁸ Ibid, 67

⁹ Ibid, 68

¹⁰ Will and Ariel Durant, *The Age Of Voltaire*, (New York, NY, Simon and Schuster, 1965), 738

¹¹ Anthony Kenny, *An Illustrated Brief History of Western Philosophy*, (Malden, MA, Blackwell Pub., 2006), 267

¹² Sire, 49

¹³ Ibid 49, 66

¹⁴ Groothuis, 35

¹⁵ Ibid

Along with millions of European soldiers, modernism met its match in the trenches of World War I, its optimism in humanity exposed.¹⁶ But the non-theistic answers to modernism were deeply troubling in their own respects.

In my paper I discuss a distinction between modernism and modernity (p. 13). We can engage this issue during our discussion time as you like.

An Enduring Worldview (p. 13)

It is a curious feature of history that the Enlightenment foundered so badly on French soil. The French Revolution played a role in ending the Enlightenment intellectual experiment. Similarly, it was in the trenches in France that the ill-founded optimism of Modernism was exposed, ultimately to receive its death blow at Treblinka, Dachau, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki.

The enduring contribution, however, of the Enlightenment was naturalism, which survived the Enlightenment as well as modernism, and is very much with us today. One of the reasons for naturalism's persistence is that it managed to acquire a "creation story" such as all prominent worldviews require. This "creation story," Darwinian evolution, can account for naturalism's ongoing vitality. As Phillip Johnson observes, "If nature is all there is, how did complex things like ourselves come into existence? Without a satisfying answer to that question, naturalism is a nonstarter."¹⁷

NATURALISM DEFINED: UNDERSTANDING NATURALISM (p. 15)

Naturalism As An "ism" (p. 15)

It is significant that naturalism ends with the suffix "ism." In spite of what many naturalists would have us believe, naturalism is chiefly a metaphysical or philosophical construct, or what Ronnie Rogers calls a "non-supernatural religion."¹⁸

Universes And Worlds (p. 15)

An important clarification of terminology is in order here. When speaking of the existence of reality, philosophers sometimes speak of the *world* and the *universe*. But when they do so, they speak of them in just the opposite way that we might typically conceive. The *world*, in this respect, is "the sum total of everything whatever that exists including nonspatiotemporal abstract entities as well as the spatiotemporal universe of physical realities."¹⁹ The *universe*, on the other hand, is conceived only of spatiotemporal material realities (such as atoms, stars, rocks, energy). When used in this way the universe is actually *less* than the world. The universe contains only material realities, whereas the world includes the universe and also includes all non-material realities such as spirit, mind, soul, God, etc. An *ontologist* is someone who believes in the world. A naturalist is someone who believes only in the universe.

¹⁶ During the 20th Century, Modernism encountered its stepchild, Post-modernism. A convincing argument can be made that Post-modernism is not so much a replacement of modernism, but rather modernism "gone to seed." (See Groothuis, 40ff)

¹⁷ Johnson, 16

¹⁸ Ronnie W. Rogers, *The Death Of Man As Man*, (Bloomington, IN, CrossBooks, a div. of Lifeway, 2011), 8

¹⁹ Moreland and Craig, 184

Eight Elements Of Naturalism (p. 16)

William Sire identifies eight basic beliefs of naturalism, which I will identify now, but will address in depth from a Christian perspective next week.²⁰

1. Prime reality is matter and is all there is. Quoting Carl Sagan: “The Cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be.”
2. The Cosmos is a closed system.
3. Humans are merely complex matter. Quoting Pierre Jean Georges Cabanis: “...the brain secretes thoughts as the liver secretes bile.”
4. Death is extinction.
5. The universe is knowable through innate and autonomous human reason.
6. Ethics are a construct developed by human beings following the evolution of consciousness and self-determination.
7. History is linear, but without purpose.
8. Naturalism implies no core commitment.

Put succinctly, naturalism holds to a purely material view of reality. Reality is exhausted by the material universe. There is no reason to look beyond matter and energy to explain any phenomenon.

What Is Man? (p. 17)

Implicit in Sire’s eight points, particularly numbers two and three, are important naturalistic claims about what it means to be human. Naturalism’s philosophy of humanness is called *physicalism*.

While physicalism is naturalism’s philosophy of humanness, *dualism* identifies what is commonly the theist’s philosophy of humanness. Moreland and Craig summarize the two views in this way: “Physicalism claims that a human being is completely physical, and dualism claims that a human being is both physical and mental.”²¹

Clearly, physicalism has profound implications and consequences as it denies dualism. According to physicalism, human beings are nothing more than a collection of material substances and events. They have no soul.

Most physicalists hold that the very presence of self-consciousness and other features unique to humanness render the human being as significant by comparison to other living things. It is difficult, however, to understand how such features of humanness, if they are, in fact, the consequence of random purposeless mutations, can be considered as anything other than random luck without any grandeur, or significance.

The dualist, however, counters that man is significant precisely because he is not only physical, but spiritual as well. He possesses a mind/soul, made in some sense like God and capable of knowing and relating to God. Man’s significance lies not primarily in his difference from the rest of living creatures, as in naturalism, though that difference is great, but rather in his likeness to his Creator.

²⁰ Sire, 68-85

²¹ Moreland and Craig, 229

Do I Have A Mind? (p. 19)

On what basis does the dualist hold to the belief that the mind is distinct from the physical brain? A primary argument supporting the dualist claim involves the law of Indiscernibility of Identicals. This law of logic states that, “If you’ve got two truly identical things, then there is only one thing you are talking about—not two—and any truth that applies to “one” applies to the “other.”²² If it is possible to show that something is true about one thing that is not true about another, then those things are, in fact, distinct from one another and not the same thing.

The physicalist claims that “alleged mental entities are really identical to physical entities... .”²³ The dualist demonstrates that there are mental properties/events which possess aspects that are not true of physical properties or events. For example, mental properties/events (i.e. sensations, thoughts, beliefs, desires, and free choice) are what are called *self-presenting properties*. These properties present themselves directly to the subject, he has them immediately in his consciousness.²⁴ In addition, a person has private access to his mental properties. No one else has direct access to such properties. On the other hand, physical properties are not self-presenting.²⁵

Similarly, mental properties are *incorrigible*. That is, the subject is incapable of being mistaken about that mental property. Someone may have an experience of seeing a large oak tree. Now it is possible that a person may not be really seeing the tree, but it does not appear possible to be mistaken that one is seeming to see the tree. Physical properties, however are not incorrigible.²⁶

So, the dualist argues, the fact that mental properties are both self-presenting and incorrigible, contra physical properties, demonstrates that the mind is distinct from the physical aspects of the person.

Other aspects of mind that show it to be distinct from the physical brain are self-consciousness,²⁷ first person perspective, ongoing personal identity over time/change, and free will.

Objections To Dualism (p. 22)

The physicalist raises three key objections to dualism:

First, they argue that dualism fails to account for how the non-material mind interacts with the brain. However, the objection assumes that because we do not know *how* one thing causes another, it is not reasonable to believe *that* it does. This is a non sequitur. It is quite feasible to not know the mechanism by which one thing causes another, and yet for the cause-effect relationship to exist.

²² J. P. Moreland, “Physicalism, Naturalism and the Nature of Human Persons,” in *To Everyone An Answer*, ed. By Francis J. Beckwith, William Lane Craig, and J. P. Moreland, (Downers Grove, IL, IVP Academic, div. of InterVarsity Press, 2004), 229

²³ *Ibid*, 230

²⁴ Moreland and Craig, 234, 235

²⁵ Moreland, 231

²⁶ Moreland and Craig, 234-236

²⁷ Anthony Flew remarks: “First of all, neurons show no resemblance to our conscious life. Second and more important, their physical properties do not in any way give reason to believe that they can or will produce consciousness.” Flew, 173, 174

Second, physicalists claim that since we know that humans are the result of the physical process of evolution, then humans are only physical. However, the objection begs the question against the dualist by assuming that humans are the result of merely material processes. But this, in part, is what the debate is about. The dualist argues that humans are not merely the result of strictly material processes.

The third objection employs Ockham's razor. The argument states that physicalism is simpler than dualism because it postulates just one type entity to explain a human being instead of two. Applying Ockham's razor, the simpler solution should be preferred. However, once again the physicalist begs the question, because the dualist argues that there are several phenomena for which physicalism gives inadequate answers, hence it is not the simplest answer to the problem.

The Driving Force Of Naturalism And Physicalism (p. 23)

What is the primary intellectual driving force behind physicalism? As Moreland and Craig point out: "In our view, the real intellectual driving force behind modern physicalism is not the philosophical case for it and against dualism, but a cultural commitment to naturalism and to scientism."²⁸

Next week we will address additional aspects of naturalism, and a Christian response.

²⁸ Moreland and Craig, 261, 262