

Zygon Conversations: Responses to Year 2000 Articles

THICK NATURALISM: COMMENTS ON *ZYGON* 2000

by *Willem B. Drees*

Abstract. The term *naturalism* arouses strong emotions; *religious naturalism* even more. In this essay, naturalism is explored in a variety of contexts, in contrast to supernaturalism (in metaphysics), normativism (in ethics and epistemology), and rationalism (in the philosophy of mind). It is argued that religious naturalism becomes a “thick” naturalism, a way of life rather than just a philosophical position. We can discern a subculture with a historical identity, a variety of dialects, stories that evoke attitudes and feelings, as well as more systematic theological elaborations. In this context, religious naturalists are called to thicken further the ways of life that embody their religious and naturalist sensitivities. In order to speak of a naturalist theology in this context, one has to define theology in a way that avoids assumptions regarding the supernatural; this can be achieved by presenting theologies as particular combinations of cosmologies (informed by the sciences) and axiologies (values).

Keywords: naturalism; religion and science; religious naturalism; thick naturalism.

Naturalism as a term and concept arouses strong emotions. Some like it as a banner to follow, some only as the enemy to fight. *Religious* naturalism is even more controversial: Is it truly religious? And if so, is it still naturalism? Quite a number of contributions to *Zygon* in 2000 have been in one way or another on naturalism and its relation to religion, or on its close

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cousin, liberal theology in the light of the sciences. I will first consider three discussions in which naturalism functions, with quite different contrasts, namely, the science-and-religion discussion, disputes on naturalism and normative elements in ethics and epistemology, and disputes on naturalism and rationalism in the philosophy of mind. Thereafter, I will consider the perspectives for religious naturalism as a form of religious life. I conclude with a proposal for an understanding of the nature of theologies that does not a priori exclude theological elaborations of religious naturalism.

One general disclaimer: the label “naturalism” may suggest to the reader that there is a single, well-defined philosophical position. However, this is misplaced concreteness; we rather face family resemblance among a variety of projects. This variety can be appreciated as indicating the liveliness of religious naturalism. Though I occasionally speak as if I represented the naturalists, mine is just one voice among many. I have been labeled a “religious naturalist”; this essay may be seen as an attempt to understand who others say I am.

NATURALISM AS A POSITION IN RELIGION-AND-SCIENCE

In the context of religion-and-science, naturalism can be compared to creationism, bridge building, and natural theology.

Some Christians reject insights offered by the sciences, such as insights regarding the age of Earth and the evolutionary history of biological species. The most recent manifestation of such a creationism is “intelligent design,” less openly against specific findings of science but outspokenly anti-naturalist in its (ab)use of science. In contrast to religious antagonisms toward science, naturalists wholeheartedly accept the findings of the natural sciences, more or less as the scientists themselves understand their results.

Others in religion-and-science respect the sciences too, while seeking to develop a bridge between theology and science. However, naturalists do not opt for the bridge model. This model is symmetrical; theology and science each has its own side of the river, like two distinct and autonomous kingdoms, the task being to connect the two sides by building a bridge with foundations in the banks on both sides of the water. However, as Arthur Peacocke (2000, 120–25) argues, the intellectual standing of these two human endeavors is quite dissimilar. Nor can we treat the banks as given; rather, in doing religion-and-science we are engaged in disputes over the nature of religions.¹ Thus, unlike the bridge builders, naturalism tends to emphasize asymmetry between religion and science.

Natural theologians might agree with naturalists on the choices just indicated: accepting science and, at least in the context of natural theological arguments, asymmetry in the argumentative pattern, which runs from science to theology. However, natural theology often serves as apologetics for a fairly traditional theological position. Naturalism, however, sides with revisionary rather than apologetic strands in natural theology, as the argu-

ment built upon the sciences may result in significant revisions of traditional beliefs.

Most models of particular divine action are at odds with a naturalistic understanding of the world and offensive to moral qualities one would ascribe to any god worthy of worship. However, naturalists can allow for an ontological form of transcendence (Drees 1996; 1998). This may be construed via a scheme of primary and secondary causes, with the transcendent realm giving effectiveness and reality to the laws of nature and the material world governed by them; such a position can be labeled “theistic naturalism,” as God would be the ground of all reality and thus intimately involved in every event—though not as one factor among the natural factors. The difference between natural and divine contributions is important in this model; the analysis given by Michael Heller (2000) of singularities in cosmological models and God’s relation to temporal entities is an excellent example of such an approach.

A transcendent element might also be articulated in terms of “mystery,” which persists however far one pushes the sciences forward (e.g., theologian Gordon Kaufman or, in a different way, philosopher Milton K. Munitz). Such an agnostic naturalism aligns well with the sciences. Scientific explanations are very effective, but always within a framework of reality that already exists; certain limit questions may be posed in relation to the scientific understanding of reality while they cannot be answered within that framework (see, for a somewhat different defense of “harmless naturalism,” Almeder 1998).

A third option open to a naturalist is to consider reality as self-sufficient as well as of supreme value; thus, one could have a “pantheistic naturalism.”² Whichever version of naturalism is preferred, naturalists all agree in rejecting a magical or paranormal understanding of religion, where the hallmark of religion would be deviation from the normal. Thus, if we are to speak of naturalistic theologies, we need a definition of theology that is not tied to the acceptance of such counternatural elements.

NATURALISM VERSUS NORMATIVISM?

Science is a human practice; its insights may be useful, but why would we consider them true? Cultures with certain social norms survived, but why would one call the moral intuitions and practices that have evolved “good”? How would one ever justify particular beliefs and procedures? Can one distinguish epistemology from psychology, truth from belief, ethics from evolved morality? On such issues in epistemology and ethics, naturalism stands in contrast to normative views on epistemic or moral values and procedures. Where there have been many attempts to find an absolute demarcation between science and nonscientific activities, naturalists tend to deny that such a distinction is absolute. However, at the same time they do prefer science over pseudoscience—and thus live by such distinctions.

This challenge arises in any naturalism of a physicalist or otherwise monist kind. If there is only one category, say natural entities, there seems to be no basis for distinctions between various classes of ideas, for instance, between values and facts, since everything belongs to the same category. There is no external yardstick by which one can adjudicate others. Though in many ways naturalism stresses the objective rather than the subjective, it seems to lapse into certain forms of relativism. Not that normativists of various stripes in ethics or epistemology have an easy time; they have to face the problem of how they can justify their prescriptive rules—as they too are unable to step outside of the human predicament as embodied beings. An appeal to authority or revelation helps only believers who have already accepted that authority, whereas even those within such a community might be aware that ours is a pluralistic culture.

What approaches might be open to a naturalist who seeks to introduce the normative dimensions of science and morality without introducing a platonic ontology? That is a project that has been considered in various articles in *Zygon* as well (e.g., with respect to ethics and metaethics, Ruse 2000; Rottschaefer 2000). Somehow, humble origins are connected, via a long trajectory with many smaller and larger thresholds, to more lofty convictions which, in the end, as Ruse argues for earthly humans, need not be all too different from traditional ones on ethics and metaethics, such as those of Christianity. A huge distance separates our specialized technologies from the stone tools of early *Homo sapiens*, but the trajectory can be traced through a zillion small improvements. Similarly, when we think about scientific methods, say, double-blind experiments in testing medicine, is this still a matter of psychology, of describing how human beings come to know something, or has psychology given way to scientific method, to rules on how we ought to proceed? The transition from description to prescription is made provisionally, never beyond modification, though hopefully approximating the true and good. A similar situation occurs with morality: sociobiologists uncover evolutionary origins of our moral intuitions, but the norms they describe (e.g., regarding differences in treatment between young men and women, between those of our own tribe and those from elsewhere) need not be the norms we want to prescribe after public debate, careful reflection, and so on. And those we prescribe now need not be absolute; future generations may well revise our judgments.

Thus, we do without absolute norms and procedures, even though we provisionally accept, after public justification and individual reflection, rules and norms whereby we create a difference between unreflective description and reflective prescription. Recovering the normative in a naturalistic view of the world is an unfinished project. It is a project in which naturalism can benefit from other philosophical styles, such as pragmatism (with its sensitivity to the way our norms are rooted in human practices), and from Kantianism (with its reflections on never fully accessible, always elusive, transcendent regulative ideals).

NATURALISM VERSUS RATIONALISM?

The issue of naturalism arises also in anthropology, for example, in reflections on the human person as one who acts, experiences, and thinks in this world. In this context, naturalism stands primarily in contrast to rationalism, which treats major characteristics of human beings as nonmaterial (mind, soul, and so on), somehow only secondarily connected to our material bodies. Rationalism is often understood as the view that reason is a source of a priori knowledge, distinct from and perhaps even in contrast to revelation, emotion, or knowledge through the senses. In contrast to rationalistic positions, naturalism invites us to understand human persons as natural beings (even though with remarkable potential), materially constituted, owing their particular abilities to an evolutionary history of billions of years. Within the scientific community, research projects such as “embodied A.I.” (artificial intelligence) and “connectionism” seem to indicate a shift away from the dualistic tendencies in rationalism. Our predicament in this respect is similar to the one mentioned earlier, but now in the context of anthropology (philosophy of mind, and so forth): if it is all messy natural processes inside, what then is left of the distinct character of consciousness, ideas, feelings, and the like? The naturalist assumes that in the end all aspects of human existence including consciousness are to be seen as natural (though remarkable) phenomena that emerged in material reality.

The *emergence* of mental capacities is why it seems conceptually problematic to me, unlike Clayton’s pantheist (Clayton 2000; see also Drees 1999), to model the God/world relationship as analogous to the mind/brain relationship if one also wants to assert as a theist the ontological primacy of God over the world. Pantheism could be developed as a version of theistic naturalism, but when Clayton (2000, 703) writes that “mental life suggests a level of reality that breaks the bonds of naturalism,” he opts for a theologically motivated ontology that is no longer compatible with the broadly conceived naturalism presented here. He opposes theism and naturalism; I suggested earlier that this need not be the case for all varieties of theism, though it is true for his package of pantheism and an anthropology with dualistic elements, not because of the pantheism involved but because of the anthropology assumed.

A naturalistic understanding of human nature becomes especially intriguing when it comes to the nature of culture as a natural phenomenon, which allows within nature for a way of living that transcends the boundaries of the given by introducing in an unprecedented way the power to reconstruct one’s environment (ever since the control of fire and the beginnings of agriculture), powered by the ability to project alternative courses of action and situations, whether possible or fictitious. In essays on human nature, *Zygon* transcends apologetic debates on naturalism versus religious

alternatives and comes to deal with the understanding of human lives, including religious and moral experiences and valuations.

The contrast between rationalism and natural, embodied existence may perhaps also make intelligible why various naturalists are highly suspicious of formal, rational approaches in philosophy, for instance in the philosophy of religion, where highly rationalistic scholarship continues in ways unsurpassed in other areas of philosophy. For the naturalist, logical possibility is not enough, and it may even be suspicious in relation to phenomena in our messy world. Thus, Loyal Rue (2000) does not focus on the possibility of a particular theological system but on religions as phenomena in human lives. And Peacocke (2000) seeks to find a way to present a theological view of reality as reasonable (via “inference to the best explanation”), not as rational in an abstract, disembodied style.

NATURALISM

So far, we have considered naturalism in three different contexts. Let me summarize and expand my conclusions.

Naturalists accept science as provisionally the most appropriate authority when it comes to understanding our world—provisional, as science is fallible. Nonetheless, consolidated science is the most reliable source of insights available. This attitude of naturalism need not imply scientism, as there may well be meaningful questions that are not treated in the context of the sciences.

Naturalists treat religion and science as dissimilar. Thus, the project of religion-and-science is not perceived as symmetrical (building bridges, discerning consonance) but rather as asymmetrical and revisionary: we seek to articulate possible religious views of the world that are consistent with the sciences; religions serve as interpretations more than as partners in the intellectual quest.

Naturalism is open to a variety of different metaphysical interpretations, such as theistic naturalism, agnostic naturalism, and pantheism, which offer different ultimate interpretations of natural reality, the reach of our knowledge, and values of or in the world, though such answers to ultimate questions are significantly constrained by our knowledge regarding more proximate causes.

Normative dimensions, as they arise in intellectual and moral pursuits (true, good, or, more modestly, better or worse), have to be recovered; otherwise, naturalism becomes self-referentially incoherent when claiming to be the better view of existence.

Humans are embodied beings, almost never fully rational but rather confused about their own motives. In anthropology, naturalists should not be naive about the extent to which people pursue interests, and fool others and themselves, both intellectually and morally, as psychologists and sociobiologists, among others, have made abundantly clear. However,

though they are not entirely rational and saintly, human beings need not be dismissive of sincere attempts to rise morally and intellectually above their own interests.

So much for contemporary naturalism, as the concept has taken shape in the philosophy of mind, philosophy of science, ethics, and metaphysics. In order to speak of *religious* naturalism, we need more than this intellectual exercise in understanding our world. This is currently happening; religious naturalism becomes a tradition, a way of life.

THICK NATURALISM

If *religious* naturalism is to be viable, it will have to become a *thick* naturalism, like a culture with all the idiosyncratic elements that make for a rich life, allowing for a decent amount of coping with the vicissitudes of life, with stories that support values and motivate humans.

The notion of “thick” is appropriated here from the distinction made by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) between thin and thick descriptions of a culture. One may focus on a few of the major institutions of a culture and offer a fairly abstract and general (“thin”) description, but one may also concentrate on the multitude of habits, beliefs, commercial practices, skills, narratives, and the like that make for a more tightly woven whole.

To me, this multifaceted development of such an approach is one of the remarkable trends of the essays in *Zygon* this year. This is not so clearly appreciated when one focuses on a particular controversy (e.g., intelligent design) or an issue generated by traditional Christian theology (e.g., divine action), but the journal is one locus among many where religious naturalism is taking shape as a relatively thick phenomenon. Let me highlight a few aspects of this emerging thickness of religious naturalism.

Religious naturalism is emerging as a subculture with an identity of its own. Michael Cavanaugh (2000) describes some contemporary contributions, but this subculture has a history that, often unconsciously and occasionally consciously, has become a formative part of its identity. In 1998 *Zygon* devoted a series of articles to the legacy of Ralph Burhoe. Beyond this journal, one may refer to various philosophers, scientists, and theologians, such as Henry Nelson Wieman, George Santayana, John Dewey, Charles Sanders Pierce, Mordecai Kaplan, and Jack J. Cohen, and to some extent even Alfred N. Whitehead and William James as forerunners; there is in many respects a huge overlap between religious naturalism and American pragmatism. Beyond the last century and a half, we may go back further in time and claim to be heirs of Baruch Spinoza as well as of British scientists who became pantheists. It is remarkable how many similarities one may find between Humphry Davy and his companions seeking a course between more conservative church life and areligiousness (Knight 2000). For them, too, pantheism became a way of making sense of their world

and a reason for their scientific vocation. Of course, every figure is to be seen in the context of his time (at this moment no matriarch comes to my mind), and thus, claiming them as ancestors is to some extent projection and appropriation out of context, but that is precisely the kind of (intellectually ambivalent) practice that strengthens identity. In this case, the “exemplary” figures are all individuals who were perceived as somewhat heretical by the traditional religious community of their time, while standing in close contact with, if not being part of, the scientific community—precisely the mix that may fit a contemporary subculture of religious naturalists.

Religious naturalism should be able to live with its own self-understanding. In his contribution to *Zygon* this year, Loyal Rue (2000) offers a naturalistic theory of religion, which basically says that religions are not about God but about human lives. That being said, the question remains: If religion is not about God (and thus not imposed upon us by a supernaturalistic ontology, which makes it true and infinitely useful), why should we continue to practice it, albeit in a modified version? Perhaps no religious naturalist claims that we should, in the sense that others who don't identify with it are not fulfilling certain obligations. But there is still the challenge to spell out in more detail the promises involved, like the final sentence of Rue's contribution, “that any existential losses incurred by naturalizing religious meanings may be compensated for without remainder by an acquired sense for the mystery and sanctity of nature itself” (Rue 2000, 602).

Like any subculture, religious naturalism is not uniform. To the contrary, as in any living community, there arise various dialects, with different speakers giving slightly different interpretations to the same words. Some dialects are mutually incompatible; there are Christian and humanist dialects of religious naturalism and biological, psychological, and physicalist ones, reflecting upbringing, training, and heritage as well as needs and situation. Some dialects are of another tradition as well, just as the local dialect near the border of my country is considered by some as a dialect of Dutch, whereas others treat it as a dialect of German. Thus, I read the contributions by Peacocke (2000) and David Pailin (2000) as essays on Christian theology as well as on religious naturalism, offering valuable challenges to those who are more specifically located in either of these particular subcultures. There is a wide range of personal styles, from the sober and minimalist (Stone 1992; Hardwick 1996) to the ecstatic and exuberant (Corrington 1997), from the analytical to the evocative (Goodenough 1998). Religious naturalism is, in my terms, the umbrella that covers a variety of dialects, some of which are revisionary articulations of existing traditions, whereas others may be more purely naturalistic, indebted almost exclusively to the sciences (though often, implicitly, a lot of Western values and monotheistic metaphysics are imported as well). There is family resemblance, with affinities and disagreements, not a unity.

Religious naturalism takes shape also through stories—the evolutionary epic as a master narrative as well as smaller stories that evoke attitudes and feelings rather than philosophical essays that convey intellectual claims. The contributions by Ursula Goodenough (2000) in this year's *Zygon*, derived from her book *The Sacred Depths of Nature* (1998), can be understood thus, as can, for instance, the novel *An Answer for Pierre* by Gretl Keren Fischer (1999). Naturalism may inspire poetry; it has its romantic side as well. And it offers a setting for understanding the darker aspects of one's own existence; “death is the price to be paid. . . . My somatic life is the wondrous gift wrought by my forthcoming death” (Goodenough 1998, 151).

There is also plenty of work on more systematic theological elaborations; aside of authors well known to readers of *Zygon* such as editors Karl Peters and Philip Hefner, one may think, for instance, of Jerome Stone (1992) and, offering an even more articulate theology, Charley Hardwick (1996). This brings me to some final comments on the nature of theology and thereby also on the possibility of naturalistic theologies.

THEOLOGY AS COSMOLOGY-AND-AXIOLOGY

Typical of theologies as systematic positions seems to be that they offer a particular view of the way the world is *and* of the way the world should be—of the true and the good, of the real and the ideal. Each theology is a particular mix of and a particular relationship between a cosmology—in the metaphysical sense as a view of the way the world is—and an axiology—a view of the values that should be realized. As William James wrote in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* ([1902] 1958, 49) on the difference between “whether one accept the universe in the drab discolored way of stoic resignation to necessity, or with the passionate happiness of Christian saints”: “At bottom the whole concern of both morality and religion is with the manner of our acceptance of the universe. Do we accept it only in part and grudgingly, or heartily and altogether? Shall our protests against certain things in it be radical and unforgiving, or shall we think that, even with evil, there are ways of living that must lead to good?” Thus, as a heuristic to clarify and explore a complex area of discussion, I suggest a formula for understanding the nature of theologies:

$$\text{a theology} = \text{a cosmology} + \text{axiology}$$

with the + sign not being a mere addition but the crucial issue: how the two are brought together.³

Theologies can be quite different in the way they relate the cosmological and the axiological aspects. Let me indicate a few examples. Sociobiology can be a scientific “theology” when it pronounces, on the basis of its cosmology, the values we are supposed to adhere to. Such a “theology” is fully dominated by one pole. Within the Christian tradition, there are—

in my definition—various theologies. When the emphasis is on God's saving activity, the tension between the way the world is and the way it will be is prominently placed, whereas in creation-oriented views (whether ecologically inspired or as natural theologies), cosmology and axiology stand less in contrast; the prophet emphasizes the tension, whereas the mystic stresses the way we belong to reality. Whiteheadian process thought is one particular articulation of the interplay of axiological and causal elements. This way of integrating regulative ideals into cosmology has required particular, and in my opinion problematic, choices in cosmology, choices regarding both panexperientialism and the place of physics in the order of the sciences. However, it is an interesting and relevant attempt to integrate valuational and causal elements in a single categorial scheme.

The attempt to combine "is" and "ought" statements is what makes theology problematic *and* valuable. Again and again, this difficulty finds expression in the problem of evil, which typically concerns the relationship or tension between the two main components. This tension is also present within religious naturalism, both when it comes to the introduction of normative elements in a naturalistic understanding and when we consider the variety of positions adopted. Whereas some understand God primarily in ontological terms, for instance as the most powerful reality upon which we are dependent, with all the moral ambivalence that is thereby imported into the concept of God (e.g., Burhoe), others use the concept of God primarily valuationally, as a label for elements in reality deemed sacred (e.g., Hardwick and Stone), concentrating on that which is ultimately significant, on regulative ideals, and the like; they have to face the challenge of articulating how this can be considered real and effective.

The definition of theology as cosmology-and-axiology allows us to respect the autonomy of science and also of moral discourse. We can further differentiate between science and any interpretation of science as a view of reality, that is, any cosmology, metaphysics, or philosophy of nature. A cosmology, in this sense, is a view of what the world (with its substances and relations, matter, forces, causality, etc.) might be like, given what we know (and what we know not to be the case; science may well be stronger in what it excludes than in what it includes). Any such metaphysics is an interpretation of scientific knowledge, constrained but underdetermined by the sciences.

As far as theology is concerned, this definition allows one to concentrate on existential issues, which become prominent when our reality is not in accord with what we think ought to be (the "and" in the formula), rather than on supernatural or magical elements (which would upset the "cosmology" in the expression). Religion need not be about that which upsets the cosmological order but rather about the way the axiological and the cosmological are related in harmony or in tension. This also means that a religious naturalistic theology need not be conservative and defensive; it

can well allow for the longing for redemption, for improving reality—an attitude in which we envisage the sciences as involved not only in understanding our reality but also in transforming it.

GRATEFUL FOR THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Philip Hefner introduced three articles in *Zygon* in March 2000 under the title “The Enlightenment Won’t Go Away.” I fully agree: modernity is not over, even though it has been transformed in the last few ages in its self-understanding and its awareness of guilt for failures to live up to its own ideals of universality and impartiality. To say that it won’t go away sounds too much as if one hoped it would. However, in my perception, naturalists are—or ought to be—grateful for the Enlightenment, for the rise of modern science with its ideal of well-tested knowledge, and for the rise of human rights independent of descent, race, gender, and so on. This movement has liberated us from various fears and opened up possibilities for doing good. That we have not always lived up to our ideals is no reason to abandon the ideals; rather, we should be persistent in their pursuit, including the pursuit of self-understanding and of self-criticism while on our way.

NOTES

1. I criticized the bridge metaphor in an editorial, “Bridges?” in *Science & Religion News* 3 (Fall 1992): 8, a precursor of the magazine *Science and Spirit*. This elicited a response in the same journal (4 [Spring 1993]: 8), by W. Mark Richardson and Wesley J. Wildman; though they accepted some of the criticisms, they stuck to the symmetrical analogy, as befitted their role as editors of the anniversary volume from the Berkeley-based Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, which is perhaps the most prominent advocate of the bridge image as indicating a vision of the goals and methods to be used in religion-and-science (Richardson and Wildman 1996, xi–xiii).
2. Pan-en-theism, the view that everything is in God, though God is greater than and/or has ontological priority over the natural world, is in this scheme a variety of the theistic position, not of the pantheistic one.
3. Though there are some superficial resemblances with a scheme proposed by Nancy Murphy and George Ellis in their book *On the Moral Nature of the Universe* (1996), there are major differences. My scheme, a discussion of which I published in Dutch in 1990, is a heuristic for exploring the field rather than a substantial thesis about the (singular) proper view of the relationship between theology, ethics, and the sciences. Besides, I do not want to pronounce in this context on “the moral nature of the universe”; my formula can also be used to describe positions of those who consider the universe to be amoral, whether indifferent or evil (e.g., T. H. Huxley, G. C. Williams). Unlike Murphy and Ellis, for whom each level of understanding requires a higher one until it finally includes a doctrine of God, I do not consider an atheist to be necessarily deficient in understanding; he or she simply holds a different existential position.

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