

VARIETIES OF NATURALISM

OWEN FLANAGAN

THE MANY MEANINGS OF NATURALISM

Here are some things ‘naturalism’ has been taken to mean or imply.

1. Philosophy should ‘respect’, ‘be informed by’, ‘wholeheartedly accept’ the methods and claims of science.
2. When a well-grounded philosophical claim and an equally well-grounded scientific claim are inconsistent (whatever ‘equally well-grounded’ means), the scientific claim trumps.
3. Philosophical questions are not distinct from scientific questions—they differ, if they do differ, only in level of generality.

This chapter has had the longest shelf-life, on and off, of any paper I’ve ever written. The germination stage began in graduate seminars in the late 1970s with W. V. O. Quine and his first Ph.D. student, George Berry, now both deceased. I dedicate this paper to their lives and work. The original ancestral version of this essay was delivered at a conference on ‘Naturalism and Anti-naturalism’ in Elizabethtown, Pa., almost a decade ago. I am most grateful to Michael Silberstein, Al Plantinga, Stuart Silvers, Susan Haack, and Michael Ruse for helpful discussions during that wonderful summer week in Pennsylvania. Close and not-so-close continuations of the original were delivered to audiences in Athens, Georgia, and Athens, Greece, and Los Angeles, St Louis, Ithaca, New York, and Rethymno, Crete. I thank those audiences. Special thanks also for the wisdom of Philip Clayton, John McDowell, Michael Tye, David Wong, Hagop Sarkissian, Kevin DeLapp, Andrew Terjesen, Tom Polger, Eddy Nahmias, Alex Rosenberg, and Leonore Fleming all of whom helped me to articulate better what is, I hope, a defensible and robust form of naturalism.

4. Both science and philosophy are licensed only to describe and explain the ways things are.
5. Both philosophy and science are, in addition to the businesses of description and explanation, in the business of giving naturalistic justifications for epistemic and ethical ideals and norms.
6. There is no room, or need, for the invocation of immaterial agents or forces or causes in describing or accounting for things.
7. Mathematics and logic can be understood without invoking a Platonic (non-naturalistic) ontology.
8. Ethics can be done without invoking theological or Platonic foundations. Ethical norms, values, and virtues can be defended naturalistically.
9. Naturalism is another name for materialism or physicalism; what there is, and all there is, is whatever physics says there is.
10. Naturalism is a form of non-reductive physicalism; there are genuine levels of nature above the elemental level.
11. Naturalism is a thesis that rejects both physicalism and materialism; there are natural but 'non-physical' properties, e.g. informational states.
12. Naturalism claims that most knowledge is a posteriori.
13. Naturalism is indifferent to claims about whether knowledge is a priori or a posteriori, so long as whatever kind of knowledge exists can be explained, as it were, naturalistically.
14. Naturalism is, first and foremost, an ontological thesis that tells us about everything that there is.
15. Naturalism is, first and foremost, an epistemic thesis, which explains, among other things, why we should make no pronouncements about 'everything that there is'.

I could go on.¹

Wittgenstein and Bouwsma

Now there are two objections to almost any kind of naturalism: one due to Wittgenstein, the other to O. K. Bouwsma. In his *Tractatus* of 1922 Wittgenstein writes:

- 4.111 Philosophy is not one of the natural sciences.
 4.112 Philosophy aims at the logical clarification of thoughts.

¹ I really mean that I could go on. I have developed lists of the meanings of 'naturalism' that I won't subject the reader to, but which remind me of Paul Simon's song 'Fifty Ways to Leave Your Lover'. Important work on the variety of meanings of 'naturalism' includes Kitcher (1992); Rosenberg (1996); entries on 'Naturalism' in Audi (1999), and in Honderich (1995). A new and excellent work, *Naturalism in Question*, ed. De Caro and Macarthur (2004) contains classic and many new state-of-the-art reflections on naturalism, its meaning, and its prospects as a distinctive and robust philosophical position.

- 4.1121 Psychology is no more closely related to philosophy than any other natural science [is related to philosophy].
- 4.1122 Darwin's theory has no more to do with philosophy than any other hypothesis in natural science.

4.111 and 4.112 do not entail anti-naturalism, but 4.1121 and 4.1122 do—at least of the Quinean variety. However, although Wittgenstein's view is anti-naturalistic, it is so pretty much solely in virtue of *stipulating* against naturalism, not by *arguing* against the credibility of any one of its various meanings.

Bouwsma's worry is of greater concern, since it is that naturalism is a glib and promiscuous doctrine. He writes (1948): 'The naturalist is excited about something... the scientific method... [B]ut math is not knowledge that depends in any way on scientific method... Has the naturalist ever heard about numbers?' And he adds: 'For the philosophical naturalist the universal applicability of the experimental method is a basic belief.'

He then says this:

Compare to vacuumism, the belief in the universal applicability of the suction nozzle: The vacuum cleaner salesman may argue to himself, 'If I ever give this up, I'll never sell another vacuum cleaner. It is basic.' To the housewife who asks: 'And can it dust books?' he replies, 'of course!' And when he shows her and finds that it does not do so well, does he deny the universal applicability of the nozzle? No such thing... Since the universal applicability of the nozzle is now the touchstone of dust, either he is not skillful [yet] with the nozzle or there is no dust—it just seems like dust.

I will not here explore Bouwsma's vacuumism analogy, except to say that as a self-proclaimed naturalist, I feel the force of his point. It is something to worry about.

NATURALISM: A COMMON CORE?

In any case, with Bouwsma's credible concern in view, the first point is that the terms 'naturalism' and 'naturalist' lack a single determinate meaning. Furthermore, many variants once out on the streets seem open to the vacuumism worry.

The *OED* suggests that the original *philosophical* meaning of the term 'naturalism' dates back to the seventeenth century and meant 'a view of the world, and of man's relation to it, in which only the operation of natural (as opposed to supernatural or spiritual) laws and forces is admitted or assumed'.

Barry Stroud (1996) writes, 'Naturalism on any reading is opposed to supernaturalism... By "supernaturalism" I mean the invocation of an agent or force which somehow stands outside the familiar natural world and so whose doings cannot be understood as part of it. Most metaphysical systems of the past included some such agent. A naturalist conception of the world would be opposed to all of them.' Indeed,

Stroud goes on to suggest that anti-supernaturalism is pretty much the only determinate, contentful meaning of the term 'naturalism'. Assuming he is right, then anti-supernaturalism forms the common core, the common tenet, of 'naturalism' insofar as 'naturalism' is anything like a coherent philosophical doctrine spanning the last four centuries. Let me be clear about a matter of considerable importance: the objectionable form of 'supernaturalism' is one according to which (i) there exists a 'supernatural being or beings' or 'power(s)' outside the natural world; (ii) this 'being' or 'power' has causal commerce with this world; (iii) the grounds for belief in *both* the 'supernatural being' *and* its causal commerce cannot be seen, discovered, or inferred by way of any known and reliable epistemic methods.

Stroud suggests that all reputable philosophers, except for Alvin Plantinga, are naturalists according to the deflated sense of the term. Stroud is, I am sure, wrong in thinking that supernaturalism is extinct among philosophers.² That temporarily to one side, suppose, as I think is plausible, that some sort of commitment to the dispensability of supernaturalism is a *necessary* condition for naturalism. Still, five things are worth commenting on. First, the commitment to the dispensability of supernaturalism does not entail a rejection of all forms of spirituality or religion. Theologians and philosophers who are religious naturalists reject the conjunction of (i)–(iii) above, and that amounts to a rejection of the objectionable form of supernaturalism. Furthermore, many forms of embodied spiritual commitment are themselves committed to the dispensability of supernaturalism in the objectionable sense (i)–(iii). Buddhism comes to mind, as do some strands in Hinduism, Jainism, many kinds of shamanism, as well as among many liberal Christian communities in North America (Quakers, Unitarian Universalists). Second, putting the *OED's* and Stroud's criteria together, naturalism is a very general thesis; neither what is 'natural', 'a natural law', or 'a natural force', nor what is 'non-natural', 'supernatural', or 'spiritual' are remotely specified. All the important details are left out or need to be spelled out.

² Kitcher (1992), like Stroud, claims that naturalism is pretty much the only game in town. I can't really get into the matter here. But this claim has credibility only to the degree that they intend some version of the idea that for the *purposes* of doing ontology in what I will below call the non-imperialistic sense, or for doing naturalized epistemology or ethics, divine agency does not need to be introduced to play an *explanatory* role. Stroud thinks that Plantinga is a naturalist when it comes to descriptive epistemology, but not when it comes to normative epistemology. As I read Plantinga, he is resolutely dedicated to using the well-accepted tools of modal logic to make the case for theism. But there are other major contemporary philosophers whose views should also give him pause. W. P. Alston, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Charles Taylor come to mind. Taylor expresses the idea at the end of *Sources of the Self* (1992) that perhaps God can play a role in the justification of our ethical norms. MacIntyre holds a two-level view; like Aquinas, he thinks that there are natural and supernatural justifications of norms. The natural justifications are satisfactory, but the divine ones are 'more' ultimate. One way to state my point is that Plantinga, Alston, MacIntyre, and Taylor are theists, but it is not clear that they are philosophical supernaturalists in the objectionable sense that involves commitment to (i), (ii), and (iii). It's (iii), of course, that is the big troublemaker. If the case for (i) and (ii) can be made with acceptable epistemic methods, then we have a form of religious naturalism.

Third, the thesis is ambiguous between an ontological claim and an epistemological claim—one could read the claim as one to the effect that no supernatural entities can be countenanced when saying ‘what there is’; or it might be read as a weaker claim to the effect that one should dispense with supernatural stuff in *explaining* things, in particular the things in *this* world, while making no restrictions on what one can believe exists. Fourth, the view is stated a bit more negatively than a proud proponent of a philosophical view should like. We are not told what the naturalist is committed to so much as what the view excludes. Imagine a political leader who, when asked about her political position, says: ‘Well, I really can’t say what my view is, but, rest assured, it is *not* communism.’ The fifth point is that even if the belief in the dispensability of supernaturalism is a necessary condition for naturalism, the *scope* of the thesis has not been specified.

SCOPE

Let me explain this last point about *scope* a bit more. All economists I know believe that one does not need to invoke divine agency in explaining whatever it is that economists allegedly explain. Economics in our time, like the other human sciences, dispenses with supernaturalism for the sake of doing economics. Economists are naturalists in this narrow sense. Economics abides by what I’ll call *methodological naturalism*. When it comes to divine agency, economics simply dispenses with it, presumably because economists find no explanatory work for divine agency to do in economics.

Suppose a poll reveals that most economists believe in God; that is, when asked questions, say, about the origin of the universe or life after death, they invoke divine agency.³ Economists, or these economists, we might say, are *ontological non-naturalists* in the domain or domains comprised by these non-economic questions.

Are economists who are methodological naturalists when doing economics and ontological non-naturalists when doing something else inconsistent? I don’t see that they are. If they are, explain to me how.

Imagine further—what I suspect is in fact the case—that many economists when pressed about their views concerning human agency *within* economics turn out to be closet Cartesians; that is, they believe in a view of the mind–body relation—the relation between reason, desire, and action—that involves interaction between a non-physical mind and a physical body. Suppose, further, that despite all the talk about the ‘iron force of the invisible hand’ of economic rationality, economists at

³ Economists can’t think that value is grounded non-naturalistically without great effort. But I leave that to the side for now.

least sometimes speak as if they believe in a libertarian conception of agency. Are these economists courting inconsistency?

I am inclined—but only half-heartedly—to say ‘yes’, since according to one conception of naturalism, it is supposed to exclude not only immaterial divine agents from doing any explanatory work but immaterial finite agents as well. So imagine, while thinking in this vein, that we bring the economists into group therapy sessions run by naturalistically inclined philosophers. We get them to see their commitments about the mind–body relation and about free will clearly, and as a community they resolve to be compatibilists about free will. But imagine that on the mind–body problem they are only willing to budge a small distance. Suppose the economists say this to the philosophers: ‘We’ve thought a lot about your worries that our methodological naturalism is unstable so long as we don’t take a firm stand to the effect that mental events *are* complex brain events. But in fact we don’t see that we depend on any view whatsoever about the metaphysics of mind *in doing economics*. Sure, we make assumptions about the motivational structure of mind, and (thanks to you) we see that we assume complex psychophysical laws. But the nature of mind and the nature of the mind–body relation is your problem, not ours. Philosophical therapy has taken us this far: we see that *qua* economists we can be, possibly should be, *neutral* on the metaphysics of mind. Thank you for your services. God bless the intellectual division of labour. Goodbye.’

Are these economists inconsistent? Again, I don’t see that they are. The first group of economists I imagined were saved from inconsistency by distributing some commitments *inside* and some *outside* economics. The community of economists now being imagined claims that certain questions considered as litmus tests for membership in the club of naturalists by most contemporary *philosophers of mind* are questions on which they *qua* economists—even, I suspect, *qua* naturalistic philosophers of economics—can remain neutral or agnostic about *inside* economics.⁴

I have been focusing so far mostly on the contrast between naturalism and supernaturalism. The reason is to see if the contrast reveals, as I think it does, the one necessary condition of naturalism as a historical doctrine, the one thing about which all card-carrying naturalists agree, or should agree.⁵

⁴ Crudely, the *scope* of a view has to do with how many domains it claims to reach across. The *range* of a view would then involve what it is ontologically committed to using: say, some device like Quine’s proposal in ‘On What There Is’ (1948), e.g. ‘to be is to be the value of a bound variable’.

⁵ However, even if this is true, one implication of what I have said so far is that one cannot infer from a commitment to methodological naturalism within one of the special sciences—even if the methodological naturalism is tied to or results in ontological naturalism within *that* domain—that one is an ontological naturalist across the board. Going in another—and in this paper underdeveloped—direction, one should not judge that, for example, a mathematical Platonist thinks or should think, just on the basis of her mathematical Platonism, that any traditional theological beliefs are worth entertaining.

ONTOLOGY: IMPERIALISTIC AND NON-IMPERIALISTIC

If I have established anything so far, it is simply these two points. First, in terms of the history of the usage of the term 'naturalism', some kind of exclusion of the supernatural, of the spiritual, is required. The exclusion condition can be stated precisely: any form of supernaturalism that embraces (i)–(iii) above is excluded. But the second point—the one that has to do with what I call 'the scope question'—is that even this sort of minimal core meaning says too little to characterize a robust and positive philosophical doctrine.

We can see this by looking again at the *OED*'s and Stroud's characterizations. Recall that the *OED* states that the philosophical meaning of 'naturalism' is 'a view of the world, and of man's relation to it, in which only the operation of natural (as opposed to supernatural or spiritual) laws and forces is admitted or assumed'. Whereas Stroud (1996) writes: 'Naturalism on any reading is opposed to supernaturalism... By "supernaturalism" I mean the invocation of an agent or force which somehow stands outside the familiar natural world and so whose doings cannot be understood as part of it.'

Examined closely, these two formulations do not say the same thing. The reason is this: the *OED* definition is compatible with a view like that of the French deists—a view according to which a supernatural force is invoked to explain what occurred before the big bang as well as what might occur after the big bust. To be sure, even on the *OED* characterization of naturalism, the naturalist cannot admit or assume spiritual agents or forces in explaining what Stroud calls 'the familiar natural world'. But the *OED* formulation does not exclude, as Stroud's rendition does, belief in agents or forces that stand *outside* the familiar natural world.

I want to be clear that nothing in the analysis so far precludes spirituality or religion. It depends on whether the objectionable form of 'supernaturalism' is espoused. According to that objectionable (and not unfamiliar) form of supernaturalism, (i) there exists a 'supernatural being or beings' or 'power(s)' outside the natural world; (ii) this 'being' or 'power' has causal commerce with this world; and (iii) the grounds for belief in *both* the 'supernatural being' *and* its causal commerce cannot be seen, discovered, or inferred by way of any known and reliable epistemic methods.

Many forms of naturalistic spirituality reject supernaturalism in the objectionable sense described by Ursula Goodenough (1998; also Chapter 50 below). I myself am religious: a Celtic-Catholic-Buddhist. And I see my ethical commitments as supported and enhanced by deep transcendental cognitive convictions and emotions that powerfully ground a conviction that I am a part of the whole, inextricably connected to everything else that there is. But I reject (i)–(iii).

Stroud's formulation invites the interpretation that naturalism, understood positively, is an *ontological* position of the widest scope. Naturalism says that what there

is, *and all there is*, is the natural world. A weaker view, one invited by the *OED*, is that naturalism is an ontological position of narrower scope—it is a view about what, to put it crudely, we should be ontologically committed to, given our cognitive capacities and limits when talking about *the* world, ‘world’ with a small ‘w’.⁶

Speaking for myself, I do not hold, and would not recommend holding, an all-encompassing or imperialistic ontological naturalism. My reason is pretty simple: I don’t see that we can or do have access to any information that would warrant any all-encompassing claims about everything that there is *or* is not.

Now this might appear to give comfort to the supernaturalist—indeed, to aid and abet his cause. Never fear. The supernaturalist can take no solace from the point about our epistemic limits. It is not as if in saying that the naturalist cannot make warranted claims about what there is, or is not, in the widest possible sense, I make room for the supernaturalist to move in. The reason is simple: my point applies to all *Homo sapiens*. *Qua* finite, historically embedded animals, humans are in no position to make positive or negative assertions about ‘everything that there is, and is not, in the widest possible sense’. No variety of imperialist ontologist, naturalist nor non-naturalist, should find a friend in me or in what I have said so far.

What I do think is warranted, all things considered, is a form of ontological naturalism about *this* world—for *all we know and can know, what there is, and all there is, is the natural world*. Truth be told, this is pretty vague. Since the conception of what is ‘natural’ is not a constant, the central concept in the motto lacks a clear and determinate meaning.⁷ Still, vague as it is, the view is not friendly to theism. The epistemological humility called for is not so humble that it tolerates agnosticism. Theological claims do not work and for that reason they are something akin to nonsense, lacking in cognitive significance, as they used to say in the old days.

⁶ I usually chastise those who promote this sort of argument within the philosophy of mind, e.g. Colin McGinn, calling them ‘mysterians’ (Flanagan 1992). Here I am simply acknowledging the force of these arguments against ontology in the widest sense. A different point, worth pursuing, is that we have been very successful as a species at overcoming obstacles, e.g. our inability to fly, by inventing prosthetics. Airplanes get us to fly, and microscopes and telescopes get us to see beyond nature’s endowment. Past success at overcoming physical or cognitive barriers may partly explain why we are not inclined to accept any limit as insurmountable.

⁷ Stroud (1996) calls this ‘open-minded or expansive naturalism’, and he says this about the view: ‘What I am calling more open-minded or expansive naturalism says we must accept everything we find ourselves committed to in accounting for everything we believe is so and want to explain... But now it... looks as if this expandable or open-minded form of naturalism does not amount to anything very substantive or controversial... If that is still called “naturalism” the term by now is little more than a slogan on a banner raised to attract the admiration of those who agree that no supernatural agents are at work in the world’ (Stroud 1996: 54). Stroud goes on to suggest that we might just as well call the view ‘open-mindedness, period’.

That said, I want to be clear that nothing I have argued so far suggests that ontology or metaphysics be eliminated. Quite the contrary. I am attracted to the view that the ontological thrust of philosophy originates in the interests and purposes of those individuals who are, depending on one's perspective, blessed with or afflicted with (to paraphrase Sellars) 'the desire to understand how things, in the widest possible sense of the term, hang together, in the widest possible sense of the term'.

Witness the economists discussed earlier, who do not have the thirst for ontology that many philosophers have. For those who have this thirst there is plenty of work to be done extracting the ontological commitments made across the disciplines, evaluating the warrant for these multifarious commitments, and attempting to continually update our picture of what ontologically it makes sense to be committed to.⁸ The impulse to make the picture consistent is itself one of the things that the naturalist needs to account for.

So far I have been focusing on such questions as: Are there many meanings of naturalism? Is there some necessary feature required for being a naturalist? The answer to both these questions, I have suggested, is 'yes'. I have also been trying to figure out whether, and to what extent, it is a wise philosophical strategy to be ontologically imperialistic about one's naturalism, and I have suggested that it is not wise. But then again it is not wise, for the very same reasons, to be imperialistic about one's supernaturalism. There is little warrant for *confidence* in imperialistic naturalism or supernaturalism.

For the rest of this chapter I am going to switch gears and address an objection or set of objections directed specifically at the programme of naturalized epistemology and naturalized ethics, focusing specifically on the case of naturalized ethics. The objection has to do with certain alleged incapacities that ethical or epistemological naturalism has when it comes to dealing with norms and normativity, with justification, and with 'ought' talk—key issues for religion-and-science discussions.

The objection is important. The opponents of naturalism are right: if there is no room for normativity, then there is no room for naturalism. Let me explain.

⁸ William James presents a particularly interesting case, both as someone who struggled all his life with the problem of naturalism and non-naturalism, and as a reminder of how the job description one decides to work under can make it easier or harder to make charges of inconsistent ontological commitments stick. In a famous passage in the 'Epilogue' to *Psychology: The Briefer Course*, James (1892) writes: 'Let psychology frankly admit that for her scientific purposes determinism may be claimed, and no one can find fault. . . . Now ethics makes a counter-claim; and the present writer, for one, has no hesitation in regarding her claim as the stronger, and in assuming that our wills are "free". . . the deterministic assumption of psychology is merely provisional and methodological.' The strategy here is to keep two *prima facie* incompatible commitments afloat by claiming a scope difference and thus denying the real incompatibility. Because the philosopher, especially the ontologist, has the Sellarsian thirst to understand how 'things considered, in the widest possible sense, hang together, in the widest possible sense', he has far greater demands placed upon himself—purely in virtue of his vocation to draw things together into a coherent 'big picture'.

EPISTEMOLOGY NATURALIZED AND THE PROBLEM OF NORMATIVITY

In ‘Epistemology Naturalised’, Quine (1963) suggested that epistemology be assimilated to psychology. Although I personally never read Quine’s arguments for naturalization as arguments against a normative role for epistemology, many have. Putnam writes: ‘The elimination of the normative is attempted mental suicide... Those who raise the slogan “*epistemology naturalised*”... generally *disparage* the traditional enterprises of epistemology’ (1982: 229). And Jaegwon Kim writes: ‘If justification drops out of epistemology, knowledge itself drops out of epistemology. For our concept of knowledge is inseparably tied to that of justification... itself a normative notion’ (1993: 224–5).⁹

The alleged problem with epistemology naturalized is this: psychology is not in general concerned with *norms* of rational belief, but with the description and explanation of mental performance and mentally mediated performance and capacities.

Assuming for now that this apparent problem is real, then the naturalized epistemologist has two routes open. One is to give up altogether the projects of explaining norms and providing justification—perhaps by explaining all normative speech acts along emotivist lines, as noises people make when trying to get others to think and act as they wish. Since I agree with Putnam and Kim that this is a very bad road to go down, we must take a different road.

Here is the suggestion in broad strokes. The best way to think of epistemology naturalized is not one in which epistemology is a ‘chapter of psychology’, where psychology is understood merely descriptively, but rather to think of naturalized epistemology as having two components: a *descriptive-genealogical* component *and* a *normative* component. Furthermore, not even the *descriptive-genealogical* component will consist of purely psychological generalizations, for much of the information about actual epistemic practices will come from biology, cognitive neuroscience, sociology, anthropology, and history—from the human sciences broadly construed. More obviously, *normative epistemology* will not be part of psychology, for it involves the gathering together of norms of inference, belief, and knowing that lead to success in ordinary reasoning and in science. And the evolved canons of inductive and

⁹ Actually Putnam (1982: 229) seems to think that this worry is not one for the naturalist metaphysician, whose job is largely descriptive: ‘The materialist metaphysician often uses such traditional metaphysical notions as *causal power* or *nature* quite uncritically. The “physicalist” generally doesn’t seek to *clarify* these traditional metaphysical notions, but just to show that science is progressively clarifying the *true* metaphysics. This is why it seems just to [describe] *his* enterprise as “natural metaphysics,” in strict analogy to the natural theology of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.’ These are the words that precede and give the context to the anti-Quinean pronouncement that ‘Those who raise the slogan “*epistemology naturalised*”, on the other hand, generally *disparage* the traditional enterprises of epistemology’.

deductive logic, statistics and probability theory, most certainly do not describe actual human reasoning practices. These canons—take, for example, principles governing representative sampling and warnings about affirming the consequent—come from abstracting successful epistemic practices from unsuccessful ones. The database is, as it were, provided by observation of humanity, but the human sciences do not (at least as standardly practised) involve extraction of the norms. So epistemology naturalized is not epistemology psychologized *simpliciter*.¹⁰ But since successful practice—both mental and physical—is the standard by which norms are sorted and raised or lowered in epistemic status, pragmatism reigns.¹¹

ETHICS NATURALIZED

The same worries that Putnam and Kim express over Quine's conception of naturalizing epistemology recapitulate Kant's worries over Hume's approach to naturalizing ethics. And I take it that John McDowell's criticism of 'bald naturalism' in favour of 'second nature naturalism' is a way of stating the same concern: namely, that at least some kinds of naturalism are not equipped to explain ethical normativity. Although my approach is different from McDowell's, I don't think I can be charged with bald naturalism. But we'll see. Actually, I'm not sure who McDowell would think is an actual bald naturalist in ethics—unless he is thinking of John Mackie, possibly A. J. Ayer, and perhaps some evolutionary psychologists.

In any case, moral psychology, sociology, and anthropology—what Kant called the 'empirical side of morals'—might tell us what individuals or groups think ought to be done, what they believe is right or wrong, what they think makes a good person, and so on. But all the human scientific facts taken together, including that they are widely and strongly believed, could never justify any of these views.

In the *Groundwork*, Kant writes that a 'worse service cannot be rendered morality than that an attempt be made to derive it from examples'. Trying to derive ethical principles 'from the disgusting mishmash' of psychological, sociological, or anthropological observation, from the insights about human nature that abound 'in the chit-chat of daily life', that delight 'the multitude', and upon which 'the empty headed regale themselves' is not the right way to do moral philosophy.

¹⁰ To my mind the best work in naturalized epistemology is that of Alvin Goldman (1986, 1992). Goldman never tries to *derive* normative conclusions from descriptive premisses, although in ethics he sees (as I do) the relevance of the empirical to the normative and sensibly uses Peircean abduction to link the two. Furthermore, he continually emphasizes the historical and social dimensions of epistemology in a way that Quine did not.

¹¹ In epistemology, pragmatic evaluation is done relative to our cognitive aims. These to be sure are themselves norms, and as such are subject to the same sort of requests for rationales and warrant as all other norms.

What is the right way to do moral philosophy? We need 'a completely isolated metaphysics of morals', a pure ethics unmixed with the empirical study of human nature. Once moral philosophy has derived the principles that ought to govern the wills of all rational beings, then, and only then, should we seek 'the extremely rare merit of a truly philosophical popularity'.¹²

Despite his commitment to the project of the Enlightenment, Kant believed in God, the God of pietistic Lutheranism. And he believed that God was, in fact, the ultimate source of morality. Kant's key insight involved seeing that disagreement about theological details could be circumvented so long as God had given us a faculty of pure practical reason in which and through which all conscientious persons could discover the right moral principle—and indeed he (God, that is) had.

Kantian ethics, *qua* philosophical theory, we might say, is not openly supernaturalistic; but it is not naturalistic either. It would be naturalistic if we could give an account of a faculty of pure practical reason that possesses moral principles not gleaned from the observation of human practices and assessments of practices that work differentially well to meet our aims, and which, in addition, fits with the findings of the mental sciences. There is no such faculty that meets these criteria, and thus no faculty to account for.

The point I want to stress first is that we can—indeed, we should—conceive of naturalistic ethics in pretty much the same way as we think of naturalized epistemology. Naturalistic ethics will contain a *descriptive-genealogical* component that will specify certain basic capacities and propensities of *Homo sapiens*, e.g. sympathy, empathy, egoism, and so on, relevant to moral life. It will explain how people come to feel, think, and act about moral matters in the way(s) they do. It will explain how, and in what ways, moral learning, engagement, and response involve the emotions. It will explain what moral disagreement consists in and why it occurs; and it will explain why people sometimes resolve disagreement by recourse to agreements to tolerate each other without, however, approving of each other's beliefs, actions, practices, and institutions. It will tell us what people are doing when they make normative judgements. And finally, or as a consequence of all this, it will try to explain what goes on when people try to educate the young, improve the moral climate, propose moral theories, and so on.¹³

It should be pointed out that every great moral philosopher has put forward certain *descriptive-genealogical* claims in arguing for substantive normative proposals,

¹² Thanks (or no thanks) to Kant, the dominant conception of the intellectual division of labour as I write makes a sharp distinction between moral philosophy and moral psychology. Moral philosophy is in the business of saying what ought to be, what is really right and wrong, good and evil, what the proper moral principles and rules are, what counts as genuine moral motivation, and what types of persons count as genuinely good. Most importantly, the job of moral philosophy is to provide philosophical justification for its 'shoulds' and 'oughts', for its principles and its rules.

¹³ I want to make one general observation before I proceed. Most philosophers understand how a theory of meaning can have implications for meta-ethics; e.g. if we discover that ethical terms, like most other terms, lack definitions, it is not surprising that G. E. Moore couldn't

and that although most of these claims suffer from sampling problems and were proposed in a time when the human sciences did not exist to test them, they are almost all testable—indeed, some have been tested (Flanagan 1991).

For example, here are four claims familiar from the history of ethics which fit the bill of testable hypotheses relevant to normative ethics: (i) the person who knows the good does it; (ii) if one (really) has one virtue, one has the rest; (iii) morality breaks down in a roughly linear fashion with breakdowns in the strength and visibility of social constraints; (iv) in a situation of profuse abundance, innate sympathy and benevolence will ‘increase tenfold’, and the ‘cautious jealous virtue of justice will never be thought of’.

Presumably, how the *descriptive-genealogical* claims fare matters to the normative theories, and would have mattered to their proponents.¹⁴

find a definition of ‘good’. Failure to find a definition of ‘good’ would no more prove that it names a non-natural property than the same failure to find definitions for ‘fuzzy’ or ‘chair’ would prove that fuzziness is a non-natural property and chairs are non-natural objects. However, defenders of naturalistic ethics like myself are continually asked to explain how a better picture of moral psychology *can* contribute to our understanding of ethical theory in general, and normative ethics in particular. Moral psychology, cognitive science, cultural anthropology, and the other mental and social sciences can tell us perhaps how people *in fact* think and behave. Ethical theories tell us what the aims of ethics are, where to look to ground morality, and so on, while normative ethics tells us how we *ought* to feel, think, and act. It is hard to see how such factual or descriptive knowledge can contribute to the projects of helping us to understand the aims of ethics, where the sources of moral motivation lie, and how we ought to live. I used to be patient with this sort of hybrid of bewilderment and criticism of the programme of naturalized ethics. I am no longer patient, and I want to see if I can switch the burden of proof here. Read every great moral philosopher: Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Hutcheson, Smith, Hume, Kant, Mill, etc. I claim that you will find in each and every one of these philosophers a well worked-out *philosophical psychology* which postulates basic human dispositions that help or hinder morality, mental faculties—e.g. reason or emotion—where moral motivation has its source, and an argument for privileging one set of dispositions or one faculty when it comes to justifying a moral view. Furthermore, and relatedly, I claim that whatever normative theory is promoted by the philosopher in question will be best understood by seeing it in the light of the philosophical psychology he espouses. The point is that one ubiquitous feature of the tradition is that everyone, everyone, thinks that their philosophical psychology (I mean to include philosophical anthropology) has *implications* for ethics.

If this much is right, the question arises as to why the contemporary movement to naturalize ethics raises so many hackles? My guess is this: *philosophical psychology*, the sort that can be done from an armchair and which is an assemblage of virtually every possible view of mind, is now giving way to *scientific psychology*, which may eliminate some of the classical views of mind on empirical grounds. If this happens, then our ethical theories will be framed by better background theories about our natures. What could be wrong with this? Perhaps the fear is that if the background theory is scientific, this makes ethics a science. Or that if the background theory is a science, we can suddenly violate the laws of logic and derive ‘oughts’ from ‘is’s’. But no one has suggested these things!

¹⁴ What I am calling the descriptive-genealogical component will itself be normative in one sense, since it will involve descriptions of human actions, etc., and thus traffic in intentional description. But it will not be normatively ethical.

Nonetheless, *no* important moral philosopher, naturalist or non-naturalist, has ever thought that merely gathering together all relevant descriptive truths would yield a full normative ethical theory. Morals are radically underdetermined by the merely descriptive, the observational; but so too, of course, are science and normative epistemology. All three are domains of inquiry where ampliative generalizations and underdetermined norms abound.

The distinctively normative ethical component extends the last aspect of the descriptive-genealogical agenda: it will explain why some norms—including norms governing choosing norms (values, virtues)—are good or better than others. One common rationale for favouring a norm or set of norms is that it is suited to modify, suppress, transform, or amplify some characteristic or capacity belonging to our nature—either our animal nature or our nature as socially situated beings. The normative component may try to systematize at some abstract level the ways of feeling, living, and being that we, as moral creatures, should aspire to. But whether such systematizing is a good idea will itself be evaluated pragmatically.

Overall, the normative component involves the imaginative deployment of information from *any* source useful to criticism, self/social examination, formation of new or improved norms and values, improvements in moral educational practices, training of moral sensibilities, and so on.¹⁵ These sources include psychology, cognitive science, all the human sciences, especially history and anthropology, as well as literature, the arts,¹⁶ and ordinary conversation based on ordinary everyday observations about how individuals, groups, communities, nation-states, the community of persons, or sentient beings are faring.¹⁷

¹⁵ One might wonder what important moral philosopher—not overtly interested in religious grounding—did *not* conceive of his project this way. Kant and Moore come to mind.

¹⁶ Richard Rorty (1991: 207) convincingly suggests that the formulation of *general moral principles* has been less useful to the development of liberal institutions than has the gradual *expansion of the imagination* ‘[through works] like those of Engels, Harriet Taylor and J. S. Mill, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Malinowski, Martin Luther King Jr., Alexis de Tocqueville, and Catherine MacKinnon’.

¹⁷ Critics of naturalized ethics are quick to point out that notions like ‘flourishing’, ‘how people are faring’, ‘what works for individuals, groups, nation-states, the world, etc.’, are vague, virtually impossible to fix in a non-controversial way. This is true. The pragmatist is committed to the requirement that normative judgements get filled out in conversation and debate. Criteria of flourishing, what works, and so on will be as open to criticism as the initial judgements themselves. It is hard, therefore, to see how the criticism *is* a criticism. The naturalist is open to conversational vindication of normative claims; she admits that her background criteria, cashed out, are open to criticism and reformulation; and she admits that words like ‘what works’, ‘what conduces to flourishing’, are superordinate terms. Specificity is gained in more fine-grained discussion of particular issues. But in any case there is no ethical theory ever known, naturalist or non-naturalist, which has not depended on abstract concepts. Thin concepts sometimes yield to thick concepts: ‘That’s bad.’ ‘Why?’ ‘Because it is immodest.’ Now, one can and often does stop here. But one can go on in any number of directions: ‘Why is it immodest?; Why should I care about immodesty?’

The standard view is that descriptive-genealogical ethics can be naturalized, but that normative ethics cannot. One alleged obstacle is that nothing normative *follows* from any set of descriptive-genealogical generalizations. Another alleged obstacle is that naturalism typically leads to relativism, is deflationary, and/or morally naïve. It makes normativity a matter of power: either the power of benign but less than enlightened socialization forces, or the power of those in charge of the normative order, possibly Fascists or Nazis or moral dunces. A third obstacle is that norms themselves do not fit within a naturalistic picture of things—norms are not, one might say, part of the natural fabric of this world. The fourth obstacle to a naturalized normative ethics is related to the three previous obstacles, but is usefully marked off on its own. It is that the project of normative justification requires us to get *outside* the natural world, including the world of ‘all actual, and thus far actualized, human practices’, to the world of unactualized possibilities, and to the space of better or worse ways of being—ways of being that have not been actualized and that perhaps are even unactualizable in principle, but that are nonetheless worthy as ideals.

I will not remotely be able to answer all these concerns in a satisfactory manner. But let me sketch out some of the things that the ethical naturalist can say in response to these worries, things that I hope will at least allay any fears that ethics naturalized is simply a non-starter.

NATURALIZING NORMATIVITY

Consistent with my theme in the first part of the paper, I want to be clear that, just as there are many varieties of naturalism, speaking generally, so there are differences among those committed specifically to the programmes of epistemology naturalized and ethics naturalized. Indeed, one difference (which appears, for example, in Quine’s later work) is that one can believe that the programme of epistemology naturalized can succeed but believe that ethics naturalized cannot. This is not because normativity cannot be naturalized but because ethics is ‘methodologically infirm’, and permanently so. It is not a discipline in a position to make ‘cognitively significant’ claims, as it were. But I can’t go into this line of argument here (Flanagan 1982, 1988).

In any case, speaking for myself, here are some tenets of ethics naturalized as I conceive it. First, ethical naturalism is non-transcendental in the following respect: it will not locate the rationale for moral claims in the a priori dictates of a faculty of pure practical reason—there is no such thing—*nor* in divine design, which, even if there is such a thing, is beyond our cognitive limits to speak of. Because it is non-transcendental, ethical naturalism will need to provide an ‘error theory’ that explains the appeal of transcendental rationales and explains why they are less credible than pragmatic rationales, possibly because they are disguised forms of pragmatic rationales.

Briefly, here is what I have in mind: it may well be a natural cognitive tendency to want reasons for action. Unless one is an eliminativist or a physicalist in the reductive sense—a bald naturalist—reasons exist, as do norms and ideals. Reasons, furthermore, can be causes. But being a reason that causes is not the same as being a reasonable cause; or, better: a motivating reason is not, in virtue of being motivating, something that it is reasonable to believe in or something in terms of which to justify one's (other) thoughts or actions. If I believe that 'Santa Claus will not deliver coal to me unless I behave myself', this will motivate me, but it is not the sort of thing we think a sensible adult should believe, let alone be motivated by.

However, since beliefs that have contents that don't refer are no problem for the naturalist, the causal power and efficacy of beliefs about things that don't exist is not something that worries the naturalist either. It is largely a matter of psychological, sociological, and anthropological inquiry why different sorts of things are motivating reasons: i.e. why certain reasons and not others motivate at different times and places. The role for the normative naturalist is to recommend ways of finding good reasons for belief and action and to indicate why it makes sense to be motivated by such reasons.

Motivational grounds to one side, there is always the interesting question of whether, even if we judge the motivating reasons for some norm or set of norms to be unwarranted, we judge the norm or set of norms themselves unwarranted. There is no strict implication. One is inclined to say that even if one behaves well only because one believes Santa Claus thoughts, and even though there is no Santa Claus, one should still behave well—albeit for non-Santa-Clausy reasons. On the other hand, it may just be the case across multifarious social contexts that things like Santa Claus thoughts motivate as well, if not better, than 'Mom and Dad disapprove of XYZ' thoughts. If this is so, we need an explanation, one that explains how beliefs in certain kinds of non-existent objects can motivate and motivate powerfully. False beliefs that produce goods are an interesting phenomenon, but they create no special problem for the naturalist.

Suppose, as seems plausible, that Kant intended his *grounding* of the categorical imperative in pure practical reason both to rationalize the categorical imperative and to motivate us to abide by it. If one denies, as I do, that there is such thing as pure practical reason, and if we also think that the categorical imperative expresses deep moral insight, then we need to give an alternative account of how Kant came or could have come to express the deep insights he expressed. Likely sources include his own pietistic Lutheranism, his wise observations that many thoughtful people see a distinction between happiness and goodness, and emerging Enlightenment ideals about human equality and respect for persons. I don't mean to be suggesting that Kant's insights are justified, if they are justified, by the full story of the genesis of these insights. My point is that Kant was (a) standing at a certain place in the articulation and development of certain norms in Europe; (b) was heir to a set of critical norms for thinking about norms; and (c) deployed these norms of rationality and criticism when evaluating the practices and opinions revealed in history *and* when imaginatively extrapolating from history. His situation and his smarts situated him nicely to

express some of the deepest moral insight ever expressed. However, although Kant was very smart, he lacked insight when it came to telling us what it was that he was consulting in displaying his deep moral insights.¹⁸

Regarding the challenges to naturalism based on open-question arguments or allegations of fallacious inferences from is to ought, the ethical naturalist has all the resources to meet the challenges effectively. With regard to open-question problems, ethics naturalized need not be reductive, so there is no need to define 'the good' in some unitary way such that one can ask the allegedly devastating question: 'But is that which is said to be "good", good?' To be sure, some of the great naturalists—most utilitarians, for example—can be read as trying to define the good in a unitary way. This turned out not to work well, in part because the goods at which we aim are plural and resist a unifying analysis. But secondly, the force of open-question arguments fizzled with discoveries about failures of synonymy across the board—with discoveries about the lack of reductive definitions for most interesting terms.

With regard to the alleged is—ought problem, the smart naturalist makes no claims to establish moral norms demonstratively; he or she points to certain practices, values, virtues, and principles as reasonable based on inductive and abductive reasoning.¹⁹ Indeed, anyone who thinks that Hume thought that the fallacy of claiming to move demonstratively from is to ought revealed that normative ethics was a non-starter, hasn't read Hume. After the famous passages in the *Treatise* about is—ought, Hume proceeds for several hundred pages to do normative moral philosophy. He simply never claims to *demonstrate* anything. Why should he? Demonstration, Aristotle taught us long ago, is for the mathematical sciences, not for ethics.

I've been arguing that neither epistemology naturalized nor ethics naturalized will be a psychologized discipline *simpliciter*—neither will be a 'chapter of psychology'. Both will make use of information from all the human sciences, and in the case of

¹⁸ Hume, I dare say, was doing roughly the same thing, but understood somewhat better than Kant what he was doing when he engaged in espousing certain norms. Surely no one thinks that Hume's arguments against religious institutions and religious belief were based on anything like simple description of the practices of most people. He believed that religious belief and practices led, more often than not, to cruelty and intolerance. Given that fact and that, in addition, such beliefs and practices are based on claims that humans lack the cognitive equipment to make with warrant, we have a two-pronged argument for the adjustment of ordinary epistemic and ethical norms.

¹⁹ Speaking now only for myself: my kind of ethical naturalism implies no position on the question of whether there really are, or are not, moral properties in the universe in the sense debated by moral realists, anti-realists, and quasi-realists. The important thing is that moral claims can be rationally supported, not that all the constituents of such claims refer or fail to refer to 'real' things. Furthermore, in both the realism/anti-realism case and the cognitivist/non-cognitivist case different answers might be given at the descriptive and normative levels. J. L. Mackie (1990) is an example of a philosopher who thought that ordinary people were committed to a form of realism about values, but were wrong. In spite of this, Mackie saw no problem with advocating utilitarianism as the best moral theory, and in that sense was a cognitivist—a cognitivist anti-realist, as it were.

ethics from the arts as well, for the arts are a way we have of expressing insights about our nature and about matters of value and worth. The arts are also—indeed, at the same time and for the same reasons—ways of knowing, forms of knowledge, natural knowledge. Actually I want to say the same for sacred texts as well: Greek, Roman, and Egyptian mythology; the Talmud; the *Bhagavadgita*; the Old and New Testaments; the Analects of Confucius; the sayings of Mencius and Buddha; and numerous others. Such works provide many of the deepest insights ever expressed into our natures and our goods. Naturalists will, however, be fussier than most about ‘origin stories’, especially ones that court the supernatural. But for reasons suggested earlier, concerns about the ontological commitments revealed in these stories need not—indeed, should not—make the naturalist worry that deep truths are *not* being stated. If it ever becomes important (which it rarely does), then the naturalist will need to explain how and why she is committed to the view absent the origin myth.²⁰ There are, as we saw above, many ways to conceive these texts as full of spiritual insight.

Overall, norms will be generated, evaluated, and revised by examining all the available information in the light of standards we have evolved about what guides or constitutes successful practice. This will include, of course, practices about identifying, specifying, and defending certain norms as superior to others. First-order, second-order, third-order, and possibly higher-order evaluation of norms is something that natural human minds can do (or capacity that can be developed in certain cultures).

I should say something quick about two more issues, since I raised them: the first is how *and* whether norms—and let us add to the list: ideals, imagination, allegiance to ideals, normative guidance, and so on—can be cashed out naturalistically. Non-reductive naturalistic versions of philosophy of mind and of minds following norms, such as those defended by Allan Gibbard, Simon Blackburn, Alvin Goldman, Alasdair MacIntyre, Mark Johnson, George Lakoff, and myself, among others, have shown that such minds are possible and actual.

The other issue is how ethics naturalized avoids (to pick the worst-case scenarios) extreme relativism or—even worse—nihilism. The answer is simple. The ends of creatures constrain what is good for them. Not all kinds of food, clothing, and shelter suit us animals, us members of the species *Homo sapiens*. Nor do all interpersonal and intrapersonal practices suit us. We are social animals with certain innate capacities

²⁰ I need to state this carefully. Remember that the objectionable form of supernaturalism conjoins (i) belief in supernatural powers with (ii) claims about their causal efficacy, (iii) absent recourse to any intersubjectively certified epistemic methods. (iii) is the main troublemaker. Natural theology claims to establish (i) and (ii) in epistemically respectable ways: e.g. by familiar inductive or abductive arguments, such as the cosmological or design arguments. But I think these arguments fail. Both theistic arguments and naturalist arguments about origins commit themselves to an infinite regress, of spirit or matter, respectively. So it’s a draw at that point. But naturalistic arguments can explain much better how this universe came to be in standard causal terms, matter and energy producing more of the same. Theistic arguments have no theory about how that which is not material or energetic can cause anything. This, by the way, is the big problem for ‘intelligent design’.

and interests. Although the kinds of play, work, recreation, knowledge, communication, and friendship we seek have much to do with local socialization, the general facts that we like to play, work, recreate, know, communicate, and befriend seems to be part, as we say, of human nature. Even prior to the powerful (natural) effects of culture, we prefer different things when it comes to shelter, play, communication, and friendship than beavers, otters, dolphins, birds, orang-utans, and bonobos. This much constrains extreme relativism.

Nihilism is also not a problem. Humans seek value; we aspire to goods, to things that matter and interest us. Nihilism can be a problem when what I earlier called motivating reasons are exposed as not good 'grounding' or 'justifying' reasons. The loss of faith in parental wisdom and authority during adolescence is an example lately on my mind. Nihilism is also a familiar problem for theists who lose the faith. And for the same reasons. But nihilism is not a special problem for naturalists. Animals like surviving. Reflective animals like living well. Over world-historical time reflective animals develop goals for living: welfare, happiness, love, friendship, respect, personal and interpersonal flourishing. These are not an altogether happy and consistent family of values. Still, even if there are incompatibilities involved among the ends we as animals, socialized animals, seek, the fact remains that there *are* ends we seek, and nihilism is not normally an issue—it is not usually a 'live option'. Nihilism is the view that nothing matters. Things do *matter* for us—certain things matter because of our membership in a certain biological species, and certain things matter to us in virtue of how we have evolved as social beings with a history. That is the way it is.

I close with Dewey's insight that 'Moral science is not something with a separate province. It is physical, biological, and historic knowledge placed in a humane context where it will illuminate and guide the activities of men' (1922: 204–5). What is relevant to ethical reflection is everything we know, everything we can bring to ethical conversation that merits attention—data from the human sciences, from history, from literature and the other arts, from playing with possible worlds in imagination, and from everyday commentary on everyday events.

To repeat a point I have made elsewhere, one lesson such reflection teaches, it seems to me, is that if ethics is like any science or is part of any science, it is part of *human ecology*²¹ concerned with saying what contributes to the well-being of

²¹ Why think of ethics naturalized as a branch of human ecology? Well as I insist in Flanagan (1991) the principle of minimal psychological realism (PMPR) is not sufficient to fix correct theory, because many more theories and person-types are realizable than are good, *and* because many good ones have yet to be realized. Moral theories and moral personalities are fixed (and largely assessed) in relation to *particular environments* and *ecological niches* which change, overlap, etc. Therefore, it is best to think of ethics as part of *human ecology*, i.e. neither as a special philosophical discipline nor as a part of any *particular* human science. Are all ways of life OK? Are the only legitimate standards of criticism 'internal' ones? The answer is *no*. What is good depends a great deal on what is good for a particular community, but when that community interacts with other communities, then these get a say. Furthermore, what can *seem* like a good practice or ideal can, when all the information from history, anthropology, psychology, philosophy, and literature is brought in, turn out to have been tried, tested,

humans, human groups, and human individuals in particular natural and social environments.²²

Thinking of normative ethical knowledge as something to be gleaned from thinking about human good relative to particular ecological niches will, it seems to me, make it easier for us to see that there are forces of many kinds, operating at many levels as humans seek their good; that individual human good can compete with the good of human groups and of non-human systems; and finally, that only some ethical knowledge is global—most is local, and appropriately so. It might also make it seem less compelling to find ethical agreement where none is needed. Of course, saying what I have said is tantamount to affirming some form of ethical relativism. I intend and welcome this consequence.

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS ON RELATIVISM

My original impulse was to leave things at that. Defending ethics naturalized, a pragmatic ethic conceived as part of human ecology, originally seemed like enough for this essay. However, I know from speaking with others over the years that any kind of relativism needs very elaborate defence, and this despite the fact that almost everyone I know is a moderate relativist in my sense (although they don't always know, see, or admit it). For the sake of the reader who wonders how the argument for moderate relativism would go on from here, I provide this sketch.

One initial observation: to say that one is a moderate relativist or a pluralistic relativist (Wong, in press) is not to say that there will not be consistent consensus on certain big-ticket moral truths. Murder and rape will be judged wrong everywhere. Why? Because universal conditions of human flourishing demand it. Where, then, does the pluralism come in? Well, here are a couple of examples. Among certain Nepalese nomads a certain kind of polyandry is practised. A bride marries all the brothers in a family. Is there anything wrong with this practice? From what I know, it works OK. Everyone is happy with the practice; no one is exploited. If so, the practice is morally acceptable, even though it doesn't appeal to us.

Among certain Hindus a son should never get his hair cut or eat chicken the day after his father dies. This is a serious moral violation among Hindus. What is

and found not to be such a good idea. So if ethics is part human ecology, and I think it is, the norms governing the evaluation of practices and ideals will have to be as broad as possible. To judge ideals, it will not do simply to look and see whether healthy persons and healthy communities are subserved by them in the here and now, but this 'health' must be bought without incorporating practices—slavery, racism, sexism, and the like, which we know can go unnoticed for some time—that can keep persons from flourishing, and eventually poison human relations, if not in the present, at least in nearby generations.

²² David Wong asks if the method I favour favours consequentialism. The answer is no.

going on here may be hard for us to understand. The best explanation is that the deep structure of the Hindu form of life and the associated conception of filial piety yield a different moral obligation at the surface. No surprise. But it is a perfect example of relativism worth respecting.

The question that invariably arises against even the moderate relativist is how a relativist can make *any* credible value judgements. A relativist might try to *influence* others to adopt certain norms, values, and attitudes, but this couldn't be done *rationally*, since the relativist doesn't believe in rationality.

This is an old debate, one the anti-relativist cannot win. The relativist does believe in rationality. She simply thinks that multifarious social worlds will yield reasons to accept somewhat different practices or ways of instantiating shared values (as in the Hindu case). The charges against relativism are indefensible and invariably strike me as unimaginative, born themselves of some sort of irrational fear that even moderate relativism will cause the social world to come undone. We are to imagine that the relativist could have nothing to say about evil people or practices—about Hitler, for example. Here I can only gesture towards a two-pronged argument that can be spelled out in detail (see Flanagan 2002). The first prong involves emphasizing that relativism is the position that certain things are relative to other things. So 'being a tall person' is relative. Relative to what? Certainly not to everything. It is relative to the average height of persons. It is not relative to the price of tea in China, or to the number of rats in Paris, or to the temperature at the centre of the earth, or to the laws regarding abortion, or to zillions of other things. The relativist is attuned to relations that matter, to relations that have relevance to the matter at hand. Even if there is no such thing as 'transcendent rationality' as some philosophers conceive it, there are perfectly reasonable ways of analysing problems, proposing solutions, and recommending attitudes. This is the essence of pragmatism. Pragmatism is a theory of rationality.

The second prong of the argument involves moving from defence to offence. Here the tactic is to emphasize the contingency of the values we hold dear, while at the same time emphasizing that this contingency is no reason for not holding them dear and constitutive of meaning. If it is true, as I think it is, that whether consciousness of the contingency of life undermines confidence, self-respect, etc., depends on what attitudes one takes towards contingency, then there are some new things to be said in favour of emphasizing 'consciousness of contingency'. Recognition of contingency has the advantage of being historically, sociologically, anthropologically, and psychologically realistic. Realism is a form of authenticity, and authenticity has much to be said in its favour. Furthermore, recognition of contingency engenders respect for human diversity which engenders tolerant attitudes. This has generally positive political consequences. Furthermore, respect for human diversity and tolerant attitudes are fully compatible with deploying our critical capacities in judging the quality and worth of alternative ways of being. There are judgements to be made of the quality and worth of those who are living a certain way, and there are assessments about whether we should try to adopt certain ways of being that are not at present our own. Attunement to contingency, plural values, and the

vast array of possible human personalities opens the way for the use of important and under-utilized human capacities: capacities for critical reflection, for seeking deep understanding of alternative ways of being and living, and for deploying our agentic capacities to modify our selves, engage in identity experimentation, and meaning location within the vast space of possibilities that have been and are being tried by our fellows. It is a futile but apparently well-entrenched attitude that one ought to try to discover the single right way to think, live, and be. But there is a great experiment going on. It involves the exploration of multiple alternative possibilities, multifarious ways of living, some better than others and some positively awful from any reasonable perspective. The main point is that the relativist has an attitude conducive to an appreciation of alternative ways of life and to the patient exploration of how to use this exposure in the distinctively human project of reflective work on the self, on self-improvement. The reflective relativist, the pragmatic pluralist, has the right attitude—right for a world in which profitable communication and politics demand respect and tolerance, but in which no one expects a respectful, tolerant person or polity to lose the capacity to identify and resist evil where it exists; and right in terms of the development of our capacities for sympathetic understanding, acuity in judgement, self-modification—and, on occasion, radical transformation.

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