

Tudengikonverents 2008
Teadus ja elu. Sisu ja siht.
12/09/2008

NANCEY MURPHY

PhD teadusfilosoofias, DTh. Professor Nancey Murphy on omandanud Ph.D. teadusfilosoofia alal (University of California, Berkeley) ja Th.D. teoloogias (Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley). Töötades kristliku filosoofia professorina (Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena) on Murphy avaldanud rea raamatuid ja artikleid ning andnud loenguid, esinenud konverentsidel ja nõustanud spetsialiste teaduse ja teoloogia vaheliste suhete küsimustes. Koos Warren Browni ja Newton Malony'ga pälvis Murphy raamatu eest Whatever Happened to the Soul? 1999. aastal rahvusvahelise mainega auhinna Templeton Prize for Outstanding Books in Theology and the Natural Sciences.

Naturalism ja teism kui konkureerivad traditsioonid ehk maailmavaate osatähtsusest teaduses

Enamus kristlasi loobus 19. sajandil tõestamast kristluse või teismi väiteid teaduse abil. Ometigi olen ma märganud, et konverentsid nagu see siin, omavad kahetist rolli: esiteks heidab see kõrvale illusiooni, et kristlus ja teadus ei sobi omavahel kokku. Teiseks võime me kasutada teadust, et leida vastuseid intellektuaalsetele kriisidele, mis kerkivad esile meie oma traditsioonis.



KORRALDAJAD:



TOETAJAD:



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Naturalism and Theism as Competing Traditions, or the Importance of Worldviews in Science

1 Introduction

You are probably aware of the fact that some conservative Christians in the US continue to attack evolutionary biology, and attempt to have creationism or so-called intelligent design taught in public schools. These Christians do not always make their motives clear. Phillip Johnson published a book in 1991 titled *Darwin on Trial*, arguing that there is insufficient evidence for evolutionary theory and so those who accept and promote it must be doing so because their real agenda is to promote atheism. In a later book, *Reason in the Balance*, it became clear that his deeper agenda is based on his belief that evolutionary theory is the cause of the loss of “family values.”

All of this is old news. More recent news, which I shall claim is related, is what is being called the new atheism, or the atheist surge. This is a growing list of books and authors who attack religion on the grounds that it is not only irrational but also the greatest cause of evil in the world. Several of these authors, especially Daniel Dennett and Richard Dawkins, claim that their critiques of religion are based in one way or another on science.

These two movements together show why it is appropriate to raise the issue of worldviews when we discuss science. The connection between them is that they both fail to distinguish between science itself and a worldview that has grown up along with science in the modern era. I shall refer to this worldview as scientific naturalism; other names are scientific atheism, and naturalistic humanism. In this lecture I shall address the topic of worldviews. However, while “worldview” is an old and venerable term in philosophy, I shall suggest that Alasdair MacIntyre’s concept of a large-scale intellectual tradition is more useful for current purposes. Thus, my claim is that the new atheists are contemporary contributors to the scientific naturalist tradition. I end with some remarks on the role of science itself in supporting the Christian tradition.

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2 Worldviews and/or Traditions

The questions of what is a worldview, and what worldviews are available was much discussed in German philosophy in the nineteenth century. Here is one description of a worldview, written by theologian Owen Thomas: “A worldview is an interpretation of one’s whole experience, bodily, psychological, social, political, scientific, moral, aesthetic, and religious experience. All people have worldviews whether they are aware of them or not and whether these worldviews are inchoate and implicit or clearly worked out. It is impossible to live without a worldview. . . . For its adherents, a worldview gives the truth about history, life, and existence, and reveals the way to salvation and healing.” (1)

There is no agreement about how to individuate worldviews. For example, the great sociologist Wilhelm Dilthey created a three-fold typology based on philosophical systems: naturalism, the idealism of freedom, and absolute idealism. Religion scholar Ninian Smart distinguished worldviews geographically. He lists six: first, the largely Christian West; second, the Marxist countries. (He was writing in 1983 so this would include all of you.) Third, the Islamic crescent; fourth, old Asia; fifth, the Latin South America; and sixth, multitudinous smaller societies mainly in Africa and the Pacific.

Neither Dilthey’s nor Smart’s divisions seem to cut the social and intellectual world at its joints. Smart mentions that Marxism is but one form of atheism, but does not acknowledge the extent to which atheism is an element of the worldview of many Western academics—nor the fact that much of the population in the former Soviet block remained Christian.

A better tool for analyzing the beliefs of various populations is Alasdair MacIntyre’s concept of a large-scale tradition. The word “tradition,” of course, has varied meanings and uses, but MacIntyre has developed a somewhat specialized definition. All traditions begin with an authority of some sort, usually a text or set of texts. Traditions are socially embodied in institutions and social practices. They provide an account of ultimate reality, and in this way they provide moral guidance and answers to questions about the meaning and purpose of life. To participate in the tradition is to engage in an ongoing debate about how the tradition’s formative texts should be interpreted and applied in the current context.

Clearly MacIntyre’s account of a tradition applies to the major religions. We can distinguish traditions and sub-traditions: Christianity divides into Eastern and Western; Western Christianity divides into Catholic, mainline Protestant, and the radical reformation tradition.

MacIntyre’s interest is in philosophical ethics, and his focus is on the tradition of virtue ethics, from Homer through Thomas Aquinas. This tradition was supplanted by the Enlightenment tradition. One source of moral relativism today is the fact that the Enlightenment tradition itself has been rejected, and it is not clear what will take its place.

The fact that Thomas Aquinas is a central figure in both the Catholic tradition and MacIntyre’s tradition of virtue ethics shows that we still do not have an entirely unambiguous way to divide up the world’s people and intellectual movements. But I believe that “tradition analysis” is a finer instrument than “worldview analysis.”

3 Scientific Naturalism as a MacIntyrean Tradition

I now want to argue that the way to understand the new atheists is to see them as current participants in the modern naturalist tradition. And we can understand the tradition by considering its development.

Owen Thomas makes it clear that the naturalist tradition grew out of the Christian tradition, and before that, the Hebrew prophets’ denunciation of the gods of the nations. Another source was the Christian humanism of the Renaissance. This was, to a great extent, a reclamation of authentic Christianity in its appreciation of the goodness of creation, the resurrection of the body, and the image of God in humankind. Thus, Thomas calls the current competitor to Christianity naturalistic *humanism*.

It is an irony of the history of unbelief that the source of agnosticism can be traced to the Reformation. If one thinks of the agnostic not as one who simply has not formed a judgment on the existence of God, but rather as one who has concluded that human reason is incapable of making such a judgment, the story traces back to Catholic apologists in the Renaissance such as Michel de Montaigne.

(1)Owen Thomas, “The Atheist Surge,” unpublished, p. 4.

These apologists revived ancient skeptical methods to show that there is no rational way to decide between Protestant and Catholic claims. Therefore the only sensible course of action is to stay within the established (that is, Catholic) faith. The availability of these skeptical arguments helped to pave the way for atheism, of course: if one cannot tell whether the Protestant or Catholic version is correct, then maybe none is (Popkin 2003: ch. 3). But a variety of other factors were needed to justify a positive rejection of religious belief.

Philosopher Merold Westphal helpfully distinguishes two sorts of atheism (1993). One he calls evidential atheism, well represented by Bertrand Russell's account of what he'd say if he were to meet God and God asked why he had not been a believer: Not enough evidence God! Not enough evidence! Given the difficulties in adapting theological reasoning to modern canons of rationality, this response is readily understandable.

But if religious claims are false then one needs an *explanation* of why they are so widely believed; just as, if there are no witches, we want to know what caused people to believe there were. David Hume in Britain and Baron d'Holbach in France in the eighteenth century began the attempt to explain the origin of religion naturalistically. They argued that religion is a response to fear of the unknown, coupled with superstitious attempts to control or propitiate unseen powers. Such attempts continue today in the writings of the new atheists. For example Daniel Dennett reports on a discipline called the cognitive science of religion. These scholars attempt to explain religious beliefs on the basis of so-called cognitive modules, that developed during humans' evolutionary history. For example, one module is an agency-detection system and so we look for non-physical agents such as gods or spirits to explain events.

But why does religion persist in the modern world, now that we understand natural causes? The explanations here come from Westphal's second variety of atheists, the masters of suspicion. Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud practice the hermeneutics of suspicion, the "attempt to expose the self-deceptions involved in hiding our actual operative motives from ourselves, individually or collectively, in order not to notice . . . how much our beliefs are shaped by values we profess to disown" (1993: 13). These three develop their suspicion with primary emphasis, respectively, on political economics, bourgeois morality, and psycho-sexual development, but each also subjects the religion of Christendom to devastating critique.

An important source for both Marx and Freud was Ludwig Feuerbach. Owen Thomas credits Feuerbach with introducing naturalistic humanism in the modern period. He notes Karl Barth's claim that Feuerbach understood Christianity better than any other theologian of his century. So here is a clear instance of the splitting off of a new branch of thought from the trunk of the Christian tradition.

Two further steps were needed to make atheism a truly viable position. It would be possible to say that religion is an illusion, but a harmless or even beneficial illusion in that it shores up morality. So two sorts of arguments were needed. One sort was to show that religion did not serve to reveal anything about the moral order that we could not get just as well by the use of human reason. Most of the work in philosophical ethics during the modern period had this as its aim. The other was to adduce historical evidence to the effect that religion has, in fact, promoted the worst evils in history--or at least more evil than good.

So within the space of two and a half centuries, roughly from 1650 to 1890, unbelief has become a live possibility. But this is not merely the excision of God from an otherwise common worldview, but rather the slow development of a *rival* tradition alongside the various theistic traditions and subtraditions.

Recall that a tradition, as I am using the word, is essentially a worldview, thought of in terms of its historical development. As such, it incorporates an account of ultimate reality and an account of what is most important in human life. The latter is essential as a foundation for ethics. It also involves an epistemology. A tradition is socially embodied in social practices and institutions. Let us consider some of these practices.

It is probably fair to say that the most important practices and institutions embodying the naturalist worldview are found in science. After the demise of the physico-theologies of the seventeenth century, the natural sciences began to be distinguished from natural theology. Amos Funkenstein credits Immanuel Kant with the most systematic and complex endeavor "to emancipate science from its theological baggage" (1986: 346). Peter Harrison reports that the birth of modern science is now seen to have taken place during the nineteenth century, and that William Whewell first coined the term 'scientist' (Harrison 2006, 86).

Historians may not think of themselves as engaging in a naturalist practice, but one of David Hume's chief philosophical and historical goals was to supplant the traditional Christian story line of creation, fall, and redemption by a new unity of action based along secular and humanistic lines. His six volume *History of England* was written from a purely secular point of view in order to show that history can be understood perfectly well without the "prophetic-providential" mode of interpretation that was common in his day (Livingston 1984). Now even Christian historians practice their craft on the basis of naturalist assumptions, and the methodological "atheism" of both historians and biblical critics has had a much more significant impact on Christian self-understanding than that of the natural sciences.

These are practices parallel to those of Christian *scholars*. Of course there are also now secular versions of practices that used to belong solely to the *church*, such as marriage by a justice of the peace. A legal system has been developed that is independent of canon law. Psychotherapy competes with spiritual direction.

The naturalist account of ultimate reality, in its humanist form, was humankind itself. More recent scientific naturalists claim that scientific knowledge demotes humans to accidents of cosmic history. For these current naturalists ultimate reality is the universe itself. It is interesting that some naturalists give this thesis a religious tone and salvific trappings. For example, Carl Sagan offers a peculiar mix of science and what can only be called 'naturalistic religion.' He begins with biology and cosmology but then uses concepts drawn from science to fill in what are essentially religious categories—categories that fall into a pattern surprisingly isomorphic with the Christian conceptual scheme. He has a concept of ultimate reality: "The Universe is all that is or ever was or ever will be." He has an account of ultimate origins: Evolution with a capital E. He has an account of the origin of sin: the primitive reptilian structure in the brain. His account of salvation is gnostic in character--it assumes that salvation comes from knowledge, in this case scientific knowledge, perhaps advanced by contact with extra-terrestrial life forms. Sagan's account of ethics is based on the worry that the human race will destroy itself. So the telos of human life is simply survival. Morality consists in overcoming our tendencies to see others as outsiders; knowledge of our intrinsic relatedness as natural beings (we are all made of the same star dust) can overcome our reptilian characteristics (Ross 1985).

Richard Dawkins offers a naturalistic account of the meaning of life: he believes in a universe indifferent to human preoccupations, one in which the good life involves pursuing "all sorts of closer, warmer, human ambitions and perceptions," including especially "the feeling and awed wonder that science can give us. . . ." This is "one of the highest experiences of which the human psyche is capable. . . . It is truly one of the things that makes life worth living and it does so, if anything, more effectively if it convinces us that the time we have for living is finite" (1998: x). Mary Midgley's book, *Science as Salvation* (1992) provides an extended argument and set of examples to support the claim that naturalism is more than a philosophical position allied with the sciences themselves, but is rather a worldview and a way of life, with its own mythology and ultimate values. Phillip Johnson names Stephen Hawking's book as especially important in providing a naturalistic meta-narrative, a book titled *A Brief History of Time*, and sees Hawking himself as a sort of naturalist's saint (*Reason in the Balance*).

4 Naturalism versus Theism

It has been argued that there is no rational way to adjudicate between conflicting worldviews, since it is the worldviews themselves that provide all of one's intellectual resources. The value of MacIntyre's work on traditions, however, is that he has argued, and shown by example, that it is sometimes possible to show that one tradition is more rational than its rivals. It can sometimes become obvious that a tradition has failed on its own terms. That is, it has encountered intellectual crises and has not found within itself the intellectual resources to solve the crises. This recognition leads adherents to abandon the tradition in favor of another. There are probably numerous examples of abandonment of the Marxist subtradition due to internal intellectual crises.

We Christians are aware of numerous crises facing Christianity throughout the modern period: the challenge of historical-critical methods; the question of how to adapt or to resist the new empiricism fostered by science; the real or apparent conflicts between Christian teaching and scientific developments.

Finally, the problem of natural evil was exacerbated in the modern period. Natural evil refers to the suffering of animals and humans “at the hands of nature” rather than (merely) from human evil. One blow was evolutionary theory: it was no longer possible to attribute death and the painful disorder of creation to the human fall, since we now know that death, disease, and starvation preceded the appearance of humans by eons. This latter crisis seems to be the most potent reason today for Christians (and Jews) to renounce their traditions.

One of the most significant tasks facing contemporary Christians, in their apologetic arguments against the naturalists, is, first, to show that their positions are not in fact based on science. But at least as important, we need to show that the Christian tradition can indeed incorporate the findings of science into its worldview. In fact, there are many instances in which science can be shown not only to be a harmless inclusion into our belief system, but can actually be used to help solve some of our own internal crises.

Consider the problem of natural evil. We can now say that most of the suffering and untimely death that occurs is a result of natural processes—floods, earthquakes, droughts, epidemics. In short, these are not direct acts of God, but rather the consequence of the ordinary working of the laws of nature. But then one could ask why the laws of nature are such as to result in so much misery.

Science actually provides rich resources for arguing that, just as the philosopher Leibniz claimed, this is the best of all possible worlds. The most powerful source is what the scientists refer to as the anthropic principle, or the apparent fine-tuning of the cosmological constants. It has been shown in exceptional detail that if any of the constants or laws of the basic sciences had been different, even in some cases by as little as one part in a billion, the whole course of the development of the universe would have gone differently, and in every case it would have resulted in a universe unfit for life. For example, I often wish for a weaker gravitational force. It would make it much easier to move around, and would diminish the injury organisms suffer from falls. But if gravity were a bit weaker in relation to the other major forces, the universe, after the Big Bang, would have spread out and cooled too fast for stars and planets to form.

There are also more local scientific theories that explain particular painful elements of life. Our planet is one of very few in the universe known to have an active crust. This is the source of earthquakes and volcanos. We are all particularly aware of the recent earthquake in China. But geologists can explain that if we did not have these moving tectonic plates, we would not have the geography that makes our water systems work, and the crust of the earth would by now be deprived of the elements needed for life. We need the earth’s recycling system in order to be here.

So Christians can incorporate these scientific developments in order to show that the earth’s environment is not hazardous to life because of God’s neglect or indifference. Rather, the laws of the universe were indeed finely-tuned in the only way they could be in order for us to be here at all. It is after all the best of all possible universes.

5 Conclusions

I began by juxtaposing the creationists on the Christian side and the new atheists on the other. I claimed that recognizing the modern scientific naturalist, humanist tradition as both an outgrowth of biblical religion and as a potent challenger to current Christianity, we could see what these two antagonistic groups have in common. Neither is recognizing that science in itself is not the same as, nor even much support for, scientific naturalism. The claims of the naturalists to be scientific in all of their beliefs is simply false. When intelligent design theorists such as Phillip Johnson argue that evolutionary biology is inherently atheistic, he is playing right into the atheists’ hands.

Most Christians gave up in the nineteenth century on trying to prove Christianity or basic theism on the basis of science. However, I have noted that endeavors such as this conference play a double role in supporting the Christian tradition. First, it dispels the illusion that Christianity and science are incompatible. Second, we can use science in particular cases to address some of the intellectual crises that confront our own tradition.

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