NATURALISM RECONSIDERED

WITTGENSTEIN AND MERLEAU-PONTY

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Naturalism has many differing senses, some positive and some negative. While it is used in positive senses by the tradition of analytical philosophy, with Ludwig Wittgenstein its best example, and by the tradition of phenomenology, with Maurice Merleau-Ponty its best exemplar, it also has an extremely negative sense on both of these fronts. In fact, both Merleau-Ponty and Wittgenstein in their basic thrusts adamantly reject reductionistic naturalism.

Although Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology rejects the naturalism that Husserl rejects, he early on found a place for the "truth of naturalism." In a parallel way, Wittgenstein accepts a certain positive sense of naturalism, while rejecting Quine's kind of naturalism, which has great affinities with that rejected by phenomenology. It is the aim of this essay to investigate the common ground in the views of Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty regarding the naturalism that they each espouse and that which they each adamantly reject. We will first consider the view of Wittgenstein before turning to that of Merleau-Ponty in an attempt to bring out the common ground between them.

Wittgenstein's Naturalism

Despite their protestations to the contrary, skeptics consistently act as though the external world, other minds, etc., exist. They simply cannot help believing, regardless of the doubts they may air. Hume believed where skepticism and instinct clash, instinct wins out:

> To bring us to so salutary a determination, nothing can be more serviceable, than to be once thoroughly convinced of the force of Pyrrhonian doubt, and of the impossibility, that anything, but the strong power of natural instinct, could free us from it.[1]

David Pears has noted that as soon as "Hume traces the idea of causal necessity back to its origin . . . he halts his inquiry."[2] But "if [Hume] had known how the brain works," Pears confidently adds, "he would have taken his investigation . . . into neurology."[3] Equating naturalism with some kind of scientific reductionism is not uncommon. In a survey of the philosophy of language and mind from 1950–1990, Tyler Burge simply assumed that "naturalism" was, in fact, interchangeable with "physicalism."[4] Indeed, for several decades this view has been widely accepted mostly due to the overwhelming influence of W. V. O. Quine.

In "Epistemology Naturalized," Quine suggests that epistemology should rely on the techniques and assumptions of the natural sciences.

> Epistemology, or something like it, simply falls into place as a chapter of . . . natural science. It studies a natural phenomenon, viz., a physical human subject. This human subject is accorded a certain experimentally controlled input . . . and in the fullness of time the subject delivers as output a description of the three dimensional external world and its history. The relation between the meager input and the torrential output is a relation that we are prompted to study.[5]

Accordingly, a naturalized epistemology is supposed to offer a scientific explanation of how "the meager input and the torrential output" are related. It will also provide a scientific explanation of how it is that some of our beliefs come to be knowledge and others do not.

Wittgenstein advocates something quite different in kind. Wittgenstein would probably place Quine's reductive, scientific naturalism in a language-game, where reasons and explanations

can be offered. Wittgenstein's own suggestion, however, occurs at a lower level, a non-ratiocinated "animal" or "primitive" level.[6] At this level, we do not depend on explication or justification. Rather, at this level, our convictions about the world, other minds, etc., are borne out in what we unreflectively do, not in what we say, nor in the reasons why we say what we say.

Although Wittgenstein's naturalism is quite different from Quine's, philosophers, like Pears, nonetheless believe it should have "ranged more freely across the border between philosophy . . . and science":

> At certain points in his argument [Wittgenstein] relies on the fact that language is founded on a pre-existing system of related perceptions and actions. But his exploitation of this fact is often curiously inhibited, perhaps because he was reluctant to cross the line dividing philosophy from science.[7]

However, we find this kind of naturalism far too narrow and share in Howard Wettstein's lament:

> "naturalism" nowadays brings to mind one of several reductionist or eliminative paradigms. To naturalize a concept, as we say, is to reduce it to something physicalistically acceptable. . . . That naturalism has become so identified is unfortunate, for such identification is entirely too restrictive.[8]

While a reductive, scientific naturalism will undoubtedly help us comprehend some of what Wittgenstein calls our "human natural history,"[9] this comprehension occurs within a complex and highly developed language-game. Any hypothesis within the language-game of science will depend upon further explication or justification, but because it is borne out in our unreflective actions, Wittgenstein's naturalism does not. For example, explaining that the world exists is not the reason we actually hold this conviction, it develops out of our necessity of walking on it, planting trees on it, waging war on it, etc. Wittgenstein's naturalism is found by looking to instinct, habit—what we unreflectively do.

Any attempt to group Wittgenstein's naturalism with the scientific kind of naturalism found in Quine is simply misguided. As Wittgenstein himself said:

> our considerations could not be scientific ones. It was not of any possible interest to us to find out empirically "that, contrary to our preconceived ideas, it is possible to think such-and-such"—whatever that may mean. And we may not advance any kind of theory. There must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations.[10]

Not only is Quine's scientific naturalism "explicitly reductionistic and . . . based on the model of the natural sciences," Jose Medina also notes that it "rest[s] on an untenable methodological monism," one that fails to address normatively structured aspects of our cognitive activities.[11] These aspects "are left out of neurophysiological explanations."[12]

Quine favors a methodological monism that consists of three increasingly reductive levels of explanation: the mental, the behavioral, and the physiological. Mental explanations are, in a certain sense, empty; they "lack [the] clarity inherent in mental notions," says Quine. Behavioral explanations are "half-way houses," serving as agreed upon explanations that we settle on until something better comes along. But it's at the physiological level where we arrive at "causal explanations."[13] Medina rightly rejects this reduction: "there are central aspects of our cognitive activities that the causal explanations of neurophysiology simply do not address."[14] By reducing our human natural history to scientific considerations, Quine restricts other socio-anthropological influences. For example, while the study of evolutionary biology can tell me how it has come about that I protect my child from an oncoming car—perhaps a neurophysiologist can even pin-point what region of the brain is active when I push him out of the way—my comprehension of this occurs at a high level of ratiocination. To confuse this issue is to confuse cause with reason:

> what is most distinctive about our cognitive activities is that they are susceptible of justification; and this means that these activities are not grounded in causes, but in reasons. . . . Quine's naturalistic program rests on a fundamental confusion between reasons and causes, and is therefore unable to ac-

> commodate the normativity of cognition (which is left unexplained or, at best, explained away).[15]

For Wittgenstein, however, there is no why, there is no need for justification at this level. As he says, we should not be asking the question, "'What goes on in us when we are certain that ...?'—but: How is 'the certainty that this is the case' manifested in human action?"[16] As such, Wittgenstein's brand of naturalism must be understood in terms of a combination of embodiment, social practice, and interaction with the world.

Having seen Wittgenstein's sense of naturalism, we can now turn to Merleau-Ponty's treatment of it.

Merleau-Ponty's Naturalism

We can find a parallel to Wittgenstein's rejection of reductionist naturalism and to his appropriation of a positive sense of naturalism in Merleau-Ponty's treatment of naturalisms. In a similar fashion, Merleau-Ponty both rejects naturalism and at once accepts an appropriate sense of it. The ambiguity in Merleau-Ponty's relation to naturalism is deepened by the equivocation in the use of the term "naturalism," leading to a failure to distinguish the complexity and contradictions of philosophical wealth contained under the label. The naturalism of the modern period of philosophy, springing up against a Newtonian backdrop of modern science, must not be read into what is called naturalism today, as a naturalism springing up against a contemporary world-view, arising as a result of the demise of the absolute claims of modern science.[17] This distinction between naturalism of the modern world-view and a naturalism of the contemporary world-view allows the emergence of phenomenology to be correlated with other philosophies, such as that of Wittgenstein, emerging in a similar context of rejecting certain aspects of the old world-view with its reductionistic naturalism.[18]

Merleau-Ponty's anti-naturalism and much of his fundamental orientation against certain trends in physiology and psychology, agreeing with Husserl's antagonism to naturalistic psychology, is really a rejection of a naturalism that is a product of European science, caught up in many presuppositions of the modern world-view, and closer to the Newtonian backdrop than to contemporary science. Such a realization affords an open attitude to Merleau-Ponty's entire endeavor in *The Structure of Behavior*: to arrive at a correlation between nature and consciousness, allowing the "truth of naturalism" to emerge and to be clarified in a broader context.[19] Further, such realization allows the natal bond between man and nature to be more basically and clearly understood.[20] He integrates nature and consciousness in such a way as to overcome at least implicitly a narrow and strictly Newtonian view of nature, yet allowing a subtle and implicit tinge of naturalism, if it is not confused with a narrow, archaic, and naïve view of naturalism. It necessitates a view of nature that does not lower nature and man, but elevates nature and allows a place for man. Thus, in the correlation between nature and consciousness in *The Structure of Behavior* and in the consideration of the body and the world in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty explicitly attempts to integrate the "truth of naturalism,"[21] arriving at a position that contains much in common with Wittgenstein. For instance, in attempting to reach that basic originary and ground level of experience (*Ursprung*), Merleau-Ponty's reflections in a sense entail a philosophy of nature, but not that of the natural scientist which is a construct built up as a second level elaboration of the measurable as it was considered in the modern world-view. Rather, it is a philosophy of nature at a level presupposed by natural science. In this way, Merleau-Ponty's position can be seen to be parallel to that of Wittgenstein in that the naturalism that he rejects belongs to a language game of a more derived level than the naturalism that he accepts.

For Merleau-Ponty nature on this basic level is one with my body, in that it is accessible only through the commerce and union or intercourse of my body with it as the home of the whole of the sensory realm, considered as a unity of perception. Merleau-Ponty explicitly states his purpose in *The Structure of Behavior* as: "Our goal is to understand the relations of consciousness and nature."[22] To do so, he uses the term "behavior"

as neutral to the abuses in interpreting consciousness by realism/empiricism and intellectualism. This use puts him at the same point where we found Wittgenstein in his use of behavior in a non-reductionistic sense. And in a similar fashion, he states a view of nature at the outset that reflects the modern world-view as a position which he is trying to overcome: "By nature we understand here a multiplicity of events external to each other and bound together by relations of causality."[23] Following this view of nature, as seen above with Wittgenstein, any non-reductionistic correlation between nature and consciousness becomes impossible. In order to re-read the correlation between nature and consciousness as a non-reductionistic one and in order to integrate the partial truth of naturalism with the partial truth of intellectualism, each of these must be considered inadequate. Much clarity in reading and interpreting Merleau-Ponty is derived from seeing his attempt to upgrade nature, to enrich the view of nature, and to preserve the natal bond between man and nature, "the quasi-organic relation of the perceiving subject and the world."[24]

Merleau-Ponty, as well as Wittgenstein, achieves a re-reading of the correlation within a contemporary world-view, overcoming the inadequacies of their reductionistic views as products of the modern world-view. Merleau-Ponty questions those alternatives as follows:

> Thus, among contemporary thinkers in France, there exist side by side a philosophy, on the one hand, which makes of every nature an objective unity constituted vis-à-vis consciousness and, on the other, sciences which treat the organism and consciousness as two orders of reality and, in their reciprocal relation, as "effects" and as "causes." Is the solution to be found in a pure and simple return to critical thought? And once the criticism of realistic analysis and causal thinking has been made, is there nothing justified in the naturalism of science—nothing which, "understood" and transposed ought to find a place in a transcendental philosophy?[25]

The two aspects of consciousness highlighted by empiricism and intellectualism can be polarized as follows: on the one hand are the characteristics of consciousness emerging from its empirical conditions, from the transcendence of the "thing" of science, from the aspects of the lived experience which are concrete and existing. According to this view of consciousness, it is a "flux of individual events, of concrete and resistant structures."[26] This aspect of consciousness is contrasted with the aspect presented by transcendental philosophy that is the "idea of consciousness as constituting the universe before it and grasping the objects themselves in an indubitable experience."[27] Or as a pure consciousness constituting from on high a unity of discrete sense impressions. This aspect of consciousness reveals it as the tissue of significations and as the field of meanings. Merleau-Ponty brings these two aspects of consciousness together into a harmonious and consistent view doing justice to both insights. His treatment reaches that originary level allowing for a treatment of perception overcoming the contradiction that he considers all theories of perception to attempt to overcome: the contradiction between a view of consciousness as a function of the body or as part of the world, and a view of consciousness co-extensive with the world, as that which grasps the external events in the realm of conditions of possibilities projected and constituted by itself before itself.[28] Thus, Merleau-Ponty attempts to consider the relation between nature and consciousness in such a way as to overcome this paradox existing in the respective views of consciousness by those whom he calls the intellectualists and the empiricists.

We have now shown that Wittgenstein's rejection of reductionist naturalism and his appropriation of a positive sense of naturalism have a parallel in Merleau-Ponty's treatment of naturalisms. In a similar fashion, Merleau-Ponty rejects naturalism and at once accepts an appropriate sense of it. Further, they both have found a place for the "truth of naturalism." For both Merleau-Ponty and Wittgenstein, the truth of naturalism is a structure of behavior contained within their respective attempts to deal with the nature-man relationship in non-reductionistic terms. In describing the structure at the root of human experience they both have evolved respective po-

sitions, preserving the element of the empirical naturalistic view as the natal bond between man and "nature" on this basic human level of behavior: and, on the other hand, preserving the constitutive aspect of perception and experience prior to the level of consciousness, arriving at the level below the level of the constituted and constituting. On this level, the corporeal dimension is considered to be one with nature, yet unique and distinct from the lower, physical and living levels. Merleau-Ponty reaches conclusions in *The Structure of Behavior* quite compatible with Wittgenstein's contemporary, non-reductionistic naturalism: first, that the higher levels of behavior are not reducible to the lower levels; and second, that the former are rooted in the latter.[29] Thus we have found much common ground between their respective views regarding naturalism, giving rise to the suspicion that there is a more pervasive commonness.

NOTES

1. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, §XII, Part III.
2. David Pears, "Wittgenstein's Naturalism," *The Monist* 78 (1995): 411.
3. Ibid.
4. "A doctrine I will call 'naturalism' (and sometimes called 'physicalism') emerged first as a distinctive point of view in the philosophy of mind in the early 1950s." Tyler Burge, "Philosophy of Language and Mind: 1950–1990," *The Philosophical Review* 101 (January 1992): **page**.
5. Willard van Orman Quine, "Epistemology Naturalized" in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (**Place**: **publisher**, 1969), 82–83.
6. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (**Place**: **Publisher**, **year**), §§359, 475.
7. Pears, "Wittgenstein's Naturalism," 412.
8. Howard Wettstein,"Terra Firma," *The Monist* 78 (1995): 425.
9. Wittgenstein uses this phrase and a variation on it ("natural history of mankind") in the following passages [**complete publication data!**]: *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, Section VI, §49; *Philosophical Investigations*, §415; §§78, 950, 1109. In *Philosophical Investigations*, he offers a hint at what he means by this: "What we are supplying are really remarks on the natural history of human beings; we are not contributing curiosities however, but observations which no one has doubted, but which have escaped remark only because they are always before our eyes" (§415). And again, in *Remarks On The Philosophy Of Psychology*, he offers this further clue: "The facts of human natural history . . . are difficult for us to find out, for our talk passes them by, it is occupied with other things. (In the same way we tell someone: 'Go into the shop and buy . . .'–not: 'Put your left foot in front of your right foot etc. etc., then put coins down on the counter, etc. etc.')" (§78). These actions stems from our (human) natural history of performing non-ratiocinative acts. Because these acts do not explicitly cross our minds we never doubt them. When we tell someone to go to the bakery and buy a loaf of bread, she is not paralyzed with over-whelming doubt. She may have some doubt concerning, say, the whereabouts of the bakery or what kind of bread is being requested, but her doubt does not require explicit instructions concerning how to walk, what it means "to walk," whether she has legs, what a bakery is, what bread is, what coins are, what coins are used for, where to place them, etc. For Wittgenstein, doubts such as these do not arise. We hold many convictions without explicit thought and in total absence of argumentation. We cannot help but accept many things. This unreflective action has developed (evolved) naturally and necessarily from our human history. The "peculiar necessity" that unfolds in our human natural history is not based on reasoning or on agreement that we form certain convictions about the world around us; it is simply what we do. Our convictions manifest themselves in actions that occur in our forms of life. We cannot exceed the scope of our human natural history because our human natural history determines the scope.
10. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §109.
11. José Medina, "Wittgenstein's Social Naturalism: The Idea of Second Nature After The Philosophical Investigations," in *The Third Wittgenstein: Post-Investigations Works*, ed. D. Moyal-Sharrock (**Place**: **Publisher**, **year**), 79.
12. Ibid., 81.

13. Willard van Orman Quine, (1975) "Mind and Verbal Dispositions" in *Mind and Language*, ed. S. Guttenplan (**Place**: **Publisher**, **year**), 87.
14. Medina, "Wittgenstein's Social Naturalism," 80.
15. Ibid., 81.
16. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, II xi, 225. While our fundamental convictions are borne out not in word or thought but in action, they are not limited to our evolutionary biological developments; social influences occur at a fundamental level as well. While these are obviously different in that they must first be learned, for Wittgenstein, they often occur before we develop the capacity to discern right from wrong, good from bad, etc. They must be positively reinforced at early stages in our development.
17. Dewey's is a good instance of such a contemporary naturalism, totally rejecting the modern world view with its naturalism and confusion of scientific method with the contents of science, and its absolute claims for Newtonian Physics.
18. Herbert Spiegelberg notes the ambiguity in the use of the term "naturalism" and the differences between Husserl's use and the contemporary American use, but does not clarify the different "naturalisms" of the different world-views, which helps considerably in grasping the affinities between Merleau-Ponty and Wittgenstein. See Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965), vol. I, 80–81.
19. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, trans. Alden L. Fisher (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 201-224.
20. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays*, ed. James M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 12–13.
21. Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, 201–24, especially 224.
22. Ibid., 3.
23. Ibid., 3.
24. Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 12–13.
25. Ibid., 4. Merleau-Ponty's work is not phenomenological in the strict transcendental sense of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. In *The Structure of Behavior* he enters into the behavioral and psychological positions, indicates from within these positions their inadequacies, leads to a holistic view and to the phenomenal field, and to an interpretation of the unique level of human behavior as structure, as a sophisticated interpretation of the correlation between nature and consciousness. In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, taking up, to some extent, where *The Structure of Behavior* left off, psychological descriptions engage his attention as preliminary to what he calls, in his own unique appropriation from Husserl, transcendental phenomenology.
26. Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, 215.
27. Ibid. Merleau-Ponty's use of the term "transcendental" must not be confused. In some contexts, as in the case above, the "transcendental" indicates a position such as Kant's or Husserl's (two quite different or varied meanings of the term are found in their uses). But in other contexts Merleau-Ponty uses the term to designate a phase of his own phenomenology or an aspect of the phenomenal field of perception. He adapts the term so that it is no longer an idealism, but an existentialism, designating has unique position.
28. Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, 215.
29. Ibid., 184.

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