

FOR A NEW NATURALISM

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1. The Challenge of a New Naturalism

Arran Gare and Wayne Hudson

Contemporary naturalism is changing and scientific reductionism is under challenge from those who advocate a more comprehensive outlook, in effect, an expanded naturalism which is no longer the naturalism of the sixteenth century, a naturalism which much contemporary political and social thought still takes for granted. This volume, arising from the first *Telos* Australia Symposium held at Swinburne University in Melbourne, Australia, in 2014, introduces some of the key questions in the current debates. It also poses the question of whether more satisfactory political and social thought could be produced if scientific reductionism were replaced by a richer and more hermeneutical naturalism, one that takes more account of philosophical anthropology and philosophical biology, the co-involvements of human beings and their environments, and the potential of more naturalistically grounded approaches to culture.

The contemporary naturalist challenge is to overcome the one sided and predominantly mechanistic naturalism coming from seventeenth century Europe. At one level, this is a philosophical issue about how best to interpret the natural sciences and the world to which they relate. At another level, it is about developing a rationalism capable of providing a basis for ethics, education and aesthetics. If our civilization continues to uncritically accept mechanistic and reductionist versions of naturalism, then it is unlikely to be able to solve the massive problems that confront it--from economic development to international security to climate change. On the other hand, if a richer and more inclusive naturalism can be developed without losing the explanatory purchase and progress characteristic of the modern natural sciences, then we may be able to overcome the agnosticism about goals and values that deforms the contemporary West. Aiming for a richer naturalism does not, of course, imply that civilized life can be made or sustained without cultural meanings that are creations rather than representations of a fixed or static natural order. Granted that cultural meanings play a crucial role, progress towards a richer naturalism can be made by recognizing the philosophical weaknesses of mechanistic and reductionist forms of naturalism, by understanding the interactions between the

development of Western discourses and political and economic developments, and by taking sustained account of recent developments in the sciences which suggest that holistic perspectives that do not eliminate the human from the natural world can add explanatory power, not least in physics and biology. The approach we advocate implies that the standard separations between human experience and the natural world and between fact and value are unsound. These separations arose with the scientific revolution of the sixteenth century and became pervasive after the work of David Hume and the emergence of Kantian and neo-Kantian philosophy, with its separation of pure from practical reason. Subsequently neo-Kantians, Positivists and Logical Empiricists directed Western thought away from value-based engagement with the universe and this arguably had deleterious effects upon both human cultural development and on the environment, widely conceived to include both sentient and insentient nature.

Following the rise of Kantianism and the marginalization of the natural law tradition of political, legal and ethical thought, it came to be widely accepted in liberal societies in the West that ethics and political philosophy should be founded on practical reason without recourse to claims about the natural order. The ‘supernaturalism of reason’ Kantians promoted was often presented as a liberation from dogmatic metaphysics, but it also encouraged a detachment from the results of the actual sciences since questions of practical reason were independent of them. Kantianism was not, of course, the only trend. At the end of the nineteenth century, for example, the British Idealists, especially T. H. Green (1836-1882), produced substantive political and social philosophy. The British Idealists lost their adherents however, in the early to mid twentieth century, partly because they failed successfully to confront Darwinian evolutionary theory and Social Darwinism.

Partitional thinking also played a major role in analytical philosophy. Thus the British philosopher G.E. Moore (1873-1958) famously argued that drawing conclusions from descriptions of what is the case to conclusions about what is good involved what he called ‘the naturalistic fallacy’. The Logical Positivists reformulated this opposition as the claim that there was an unbridgeable gulf between *facts*, the domain of objective knowledge, and *values*, the domain of subjective preferences. Such views were especially influential in the United States, where subliminal social Darwinism shaped political, social and economic policy after World

War Two. A form of social Darwinism was also influential in the Communist world where, despite socialist rhetoric, economic formations, institutions and technology were evaluated by how successfully they facilitated the domination of nature and people. Rejecting this crude instrumentalism, most Western Marxists followed the Hungarian Marxist Györgi Lukács (1885-1871) and treated nature as a social category, even though a much richer approach had been advanced by the German Jewish Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch (1885-1977). Once again there were negative consequences for social and economic thought. Many gave up criticizing economists and accepted the economists' portrayal of themselves as contributors to a positive science concerned with objective truth about what is required to regulate the economy efficiently. Subsequently Critical theory, as developed by the Frankfurt School, came to be dominated by cultural studies and later discourse ethics. Neither in the capitalist world of the West nor in the allegedly socialist East were there powerful discourses that integrated political, social and economic thought with the actual results of the sciences studying nature. There were, to be fair, contributions to natural law-based sociology and economics from Catholic philosophers, most obviously Heinrich Pesch (1854-1926), but they too were weak on the outcomes of the actual sciences, even though they sometimes invoked them at an expert level in the defense of theism and in bioethics.

More recently, philosophy has continued to be relatively weak in its criticism of inadequate forms of naturalism and the sciences based on them. Some philosophical tendencies—phenomenology and hermeneutics, for example—have been critical of scientism, but until recently they have not engaged in depth with the results of the actual natural sciences. Process philosophers, to be fair, have done somewhat better, but they have been marginalized and/or ignored by most mainstream philosophers. In the late twentieth century most philosophers have carried on in social, political and ethical philosophy, and occasionally in aesthetics, as though the development of the sciences were of no relevance to their work, or have defended the cognitive claims of mainstream natural sciences and mathematics, relatively unconcerned with the implications of this way of understanding the world for humanity. Few philosophers have faced up to the demise of the humanities, their cognitive status and the values they strove to uphold. They have also offered little effective resistance to the collapse of the Humboldtian model of the university and the status it accorded the liberal arts and the humanities.

Currently the ground seems to be shifting. More and more contemporary thinkers recognize the misguided nature of the Kantian turn towards representation and away from the actual natural world in which human beings are located. In addition, more and more considerations are brought to bear that arguably favor a more naturalist, but non-reductive, approach to the management of both human affairs and the environment. In this volume we seek to articulate this new naturalist challenge and to provoke discussion about its political, social and economic implications. If the natural sciences move beyond reductionism and mechanism, new perspectives open up, especially if philosophy can rise to the challenge of thinking a naturalism that does not delegitimize the agency of human beings or the importance of experiences of natural beings. Given such an enriched naturalism, it may also be possible to question the view that objective knowledge of the natural world can have no bearing on values. Rather Ernst Bloch was right to attempt to revive a radicalized version of the natural law tradition as an alternative to Western subjectivism about values and morality. Where most Western Marxists provided almost no political philosophy and only rudimentary conceptions of nature,¹ Bloch called for a radicalized Aristotelianism, and revived interest in the work of Avicenna and what he called ‘the Aristotelian Left’.² He also reasserted the importance of the German philosopher Schelling (1775-1854) at a time when he was largely rejected as a mystical reactionary by Marxists. Building on these precedents, he defended a version of natural law that justified human dignity and offered hope for the future, partly because it took scientific knowledges about the nature of physical existence and human life seriously. Whether some form of natural law can be defended in contemporary terms remains to be seen, but it seems certain that only an approach that recognizes both human creativity and freedom and our location in nature will be adequate in the twenty first century. This volume contends for a new naturalism of this kind. It does not support scientific Romanticism, but it does submit that considerations favoring a new naturalism need to be given greater prominence in contemporary critical thought, even though early formulations of such a naturalism may subsequently require reformulation or correction in various respects.

¹ See Ernst Bloch, *Natural Law and Human Dignity* trs. Dennis J.Schmidt (Cambridge:MIT Press, 1987) and John Ely, ‘Ernst Bloch, Natural Rights, and the Greens’, *Minding Nature: The Philosophers of Ecology*, ed. David Macauley(New York: The Guilford Press, 1966), chap.6.

²Ernst Bloch, *Avicenna und die Aristotelische Linke* (1952) reprinted in *Das Materialismus Problem Seine Geschichte und Substanz Gesamtausgabe* vol 7 (Frankfurt a. M.:Suhrkamp, 1972) pp 479-546.

The contributors to this volume write from a variety of political, philosophical and scientific standpoints. They all agree, however, that a civilization based on reductionist naturalism, with its impoverished understanding of both human life and the universe, is failing to generate the political and social thought we need. And they all support the need for a naturalism that is wider than the objectivating naturalism that emerged in sixteenth century Europe. The first four chapters address the contested status of naturalism in contemporary philosophy. They do not address every issue, and they do not go into the work of all of the major philosophers currently writing about this issue. They do, however, bring a range of difficult questions into view. begin, Arran Gare criticizes analytical philosophy as a form of neo-Kantianism that minimizes any role for synthesis and eliminates any role for synthesis in philosophical thinking and confuses naturalism with reductionist scientism. Drawing on the neglected work of the British philosopher C. D. Broad, he argues for a new form of speculative naturalism which gives a place to philosophers facing the challenge of developing new forms of non-reductionist science to overcome the incoherence and failures of reductionist science. Gare claims that such a richer naturalism of this sort can align science with the humanities and provide a basis for new approaches to politics, education, economics and the environment. In the third chapter Wayne Hudson raises the vexed problem of a preferentially ordered pluralism. He advocates an inclusive speculative naturalism that allows that a range of differential naturalisms may have some value. He also suggests, in a Maimonidean spirit, that this speculative naturalism can be tempered by 'theology', appropriately defined, and can contribute to a recovery of utopia on philosophical anthropological principles. In the fourth chapter David Macarthur develops an innovative liberal form of philosophical naturalism that does justice to natural non-scientific things, including people, action, art, reasons, and ordinary objects. His chapter attempts to solve the so-called 'placement problem' raised by scientific reductionism.

The next chapters are concerned with theoretical developments in the sciences that arguably favor a post-reductionist naturalism, one that is not hostile to the humanities or to experience. In the fifth chapter Catherine Malabou challenges the assumption that comprehension of the constitution of cognition, organisms, or texts can only be achieved through the study of their genesis from foundations, pointing to a different form of comprehension from above their

foundations, epigenesis, irreducible to genesis. Kant grappling with cognition, Waddington with embryology and Ricoeur with texts, all invoking the notion of epigenesis, are shown to have defended such comprehension, and through a comparison of their insights, what it involves is explicated. In the sixth chapter Lenny Moss provides a novel evolutionary form of philosophical anthropology, allowing for 'natural detachment', which goes some way to providing an account of the emergence of normativity within nature and so the ethical foundation that Critical theory is often alleged to lack. Then, in the seventh chapter David Pan makes erudite connections between Kant's views in the *Critique of Judgement* and the recent work of the cultural anthropologist Terence Deacon, work which argues, in opposition to Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins and Gregory Schremp, that intentionality, teleology and interpretation play a role in both biological and cultural processes. Pan defends Deacon's claims by invoking Kant's characterization of organisms. On this view, the distinctiveness of humans is their capacity to determine their own purposes, providing a basis for ethics and political philosophy. Then in the eighth chapter Maurita Harney finds resources for an alternative to reductionism in a phenomenological naturalism which takes as its point of departure Merleau-Ponty's later 'ontology of nature' and is further enriched by Peirce's semiotics. Harney advocates an ontology of nature which encompasses meaning. She draws on contemporary biosemiotics to propose a naturalist semiotic approach to mind which does not separate the human being from the natural world. Then, in the ninth Freya Matthews locates ecophilosophy, with its rejection of dualism and attempt to restore meaning, purpose, agency, will and intentionality to nature, within the speculative naturalist tradition. Matthews urges the need to move from the specular to the onto-poetic. A radical engagement with irreducible immanence is needed, she argues, one that recognizes that the problem of duality arises within discursive thinking itself. Finally, in a concluding chapter the editors summarize some of the wider implications of the volume.

Clearly the ground covered is vast and the technical issues raised are many. This volume is an invitation to debate and controversy rather than the final word on matters of international importance. It signals, however, the challenge that an expanded naturalism poses to the fragmentation, pessimism and disillusion that pervades large parts of contemporary political and social thought. This thought is not well-grounded in current actual science and often explores neo-Kantian conceptions of rationality rather than the universe in which we find ourselves,

whereas, in our view, political and social thought which engages with actual contemporary science offers a way beyond the vagaries of twentieth century critical theory, just as it contributes to major advances on contemporary neoliberalism. An expanded naturalism will have both philosophical and natural scientific dimensions, several of which are discussed in this volume. No one knows exactly what forms such an expanded naturalism will ultimately take. However, it is already possible to see beyond the limitations of an objectivating naturalism and this, in turn, challenges us to rethink both the scope and purport of contemporary critical thought.