

SO
PHILOSOPHY

FOR A NEW NATURALISM

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TELOS INVESTIGATIONS

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For a New Naturalism

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Introduction

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Contemporary naturalism is changing and scientific reductionism is under challenge from those who advocate a more comprehensive outlook. This special issue of *Telos*, based on the first Telos Australia Symposium held at Swinburne University in Melbourne in February 2014, introduces some of the key questions in the current debates. It also poses the question of whether more satisfactory political and social thought can be produced if scientific reductionism is replaced by a richer and more hermeneutical naturalism, one that takes more account of philosophical anthropology, actual 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, however, 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 knowledge accumulation 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, mean downplaying human historicity and plasticity. Nor does it imply that civilized life can be made or sustained without high levels of cultural meaning that are creations rather than representations of a fixed or static natural order.

In our view 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 across the sciences which suggest that more 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 all 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 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 to confront Darwinian evolution and Social Darwinism, and their intellectual influence has waned ever since, although the reform movements they engendered did not peak until the third quarter of the twentieth century.

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

according to how successfully they facilitated the domination of nature and people. Rejecting this crude instrumentalism, most Western Marxists followed the Hungarian Marxist Györgi Lukács (1885-1971) and treated nature as a social category, even though a much richer approach had been advanced by the German Jewish 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 was required to regulate the economy efficiently. 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 defence 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 they have not engaged in depth with the results of the actual natural sciences. Process philosophers, to be fair, have done somewhat better, but have been marginalized and 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 no 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 favour a more naturalist but non-reductive approach to the management of both human affairs and the environment. In this issue of *Telos* 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 de-legitimize the agency of human beings or the importance of experiences of natural beings. Given 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, the editors of this special edition believe that 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 extraordinary 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. Obviously it will be important to avoid overstatement and scientific Romanticism. On the other hand, new ideas about naturalism should be allowed to emerge, even though they may subsequently require reformulation and correction.

The contributors to this issue 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, will fail to generate the political and social thought we need. The first four papers in this special edition address the status of naturalism in contemporary philosophy. To begin, Arran Gare criticizes analytical philosophy as a form of neo-Kantianism that minimises any role for synthesis and eliminates any role for synthesis in philosophical thinking and confuses naturalism with reductionist scientism.

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.

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 second paper Wayne Hudson advocates an inclusive speculative naturalism that allows that a range of differential naturalisms may have some value. He suggests 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 third paper 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 paper attempts to solve the so-called 'placement problem' raised by scientific reductionism. In the fifth paper Greg Melleuish and Susanna Rizzo argue that naturalism has to take account of the mutability of the ways in which human beings interact with the world, both in terms of ideas and the modes of understanding they adopt in order to relate to the world. They question more absolutist versions of naturalism and argue that naturalism needs to be rooted in the plasticity of human nature and its limitations.

The next group of papers is concerned with theoretical developments in the sciences that arguably favour a post-reductionist naturalism, one that is not hostile to the humanities or to experience. In the fifth paper Lenny Moss argues that Critical Theory requires an account of the emergence of normativity within nature itself and then provides a novel evolutionary anthropology, based on natural detachment, which goes some way in this direction. His discussion breaks new ground.

Then, in an erudite paper, David Pan discusses the importance of cultural and biological processes where intentionality and thus teleology are an issue, and makes connections between Kant's views in the *Critique of Judgement* and the recent work of Terence Deacon. In the seventh paper Maurita Harney advocates an ontology of nature which encompasses meaning. She 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 draws on contemporary biosemiotics to propose a naturalist semiotic approach to mind which does not separate the human being from the natural world. In the eighth paper 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.

The last three papers attempt to rethink ethics and politics on the basis of post-reductionist naturalism. In the ninth paper Peter Corning argues that a scientifically-grounded framework for social justice can now be developed on the basis of recent scientific findings in a range of disciplines. He claims that a biosocial contract can be generated from three complementary normative principles – equality, equity, and reciprocity--each of which can now be understood as having a basis in nature. In the tenth paper Jeff Klooger explores unexpected convergences between the anti-naturalism of the social philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis and the recent work of Terence Deacon. He shows that careful exegesis reveals many points of contact, despite the

different disciplinary orientations of the two authors. In the eleventh paper Coffman and Mikulecky, building on their controversial monograph, *Global Insanity* (2012), argue that the contemporary assumption that everything must be sacrificed to economic growth rests on scientific reductionist naturalism and that Robert Rosen's work on complexity offers an alternative naturalism which can lead to better political, social and environmental outcomes.

Clearly the ground covered is vast and the technical issues raised are many. We see this issue of *Telos* as an invitation to debate and controversy, rather than as the final word of matters of national and international importance.

The Editors

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