

ARTICLE

EPICUREANISM AND EARLY MODERN NATURALISM

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It is often suggested that certain forms of early modern philosophy are naturalistic. Although I have some sympathy with this description, I argue that applying the category of naturalism to early modern philosophy is not useful. There is another category that does most of the work we want the category of naturalism to do – one that, unlike naturalism, was actually used by early moderns.

KEYWORDS: Epicureanism; naturalism; materialism

I

It is often suggested that early modern philosophy, or some important strand thereof, is *naturalistic*.¹ Such suggestions are motivated by a number of factors. They can be intended to help moderate views of early modern philosophy as unduly influenced by theological considerations, or to raise the prestige and increase the interest of early modern philosophy with a certain audience. They can also result from attempts to pay greater attention to early modern natural philosophy. And it cannot be entirely accidental that such descriptions have become more popular as it has become more popular to think that philosophy in general should be naturalistic. All of these motivations deserve some sympathy. However, closer examination reveals that applying the category of naturalism to early modern philosophy is not useful. Moreover, there is another category that does most of the

¹For the suggestion that early modern philosophy is largely naturalistic, see Philip Kitcher, 'The Naturalists Return', *Philosophical Review*, 101 (1992) No. 1: 53–114, at 56; Victor Nuovo, 'Aspects of Stoicism in Locke's Philosophy', in *Studies on Locke*, edited by Sarah Hutton and Paul Schuurman (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer, 2008) 1–25, at 2. See also the papers in *Inquiry*, 51 (2008) No. 5, Special Issue, *Naturalism in Modern Philosophy*. For the suggestion that the empiricists are naturalists, see e.g. Michael Ayers, 'Was Berkeley an Empiricist or a Rationalist?', in *The Cambridge Companion to Berkeley*, edited by Ken Winkler (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 34–62, at 46.

work we want the category of naturalism to do – one that, unlike naturalism, was actually used by early moderns.

Determining what makes an explanatory category useful is no easy task. However, two desiderata are relatively simple and uncontroversial. First, whatever category we come up with, it should divide the early moderns into two categories – naturalists and non-naturalists – and these categories should correspond to our pre-theoretic ideas about who is a naturalist and who is not. The correspondence need not, of course, be exact. Analytical use of a category may well motivate some revision. And some philosophers may count as naturalistic in certain respects and non-naturalistic in others. However, a conception of naturalism that applies to none of the paradigm cases would be a conception not of naturalism but of something else.

Thus one way to begin is by asking who the paradigmatic early modern naturalists are. Here and throughout, discussion will be limited to philosophers writing before Hume, and ethics and political theory will be bracketed out altogether. Since the main challenge in finding a useful conception of early modern naturalism is finding one that is compatible with theism, it makes sense to stop at Hume. Bracketing out ethical naturalism is somewhat less principled, but the questions raised by such discussion would be sufficiently different to require separate treatment.

Who, among the philosophers of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, are the paradigmatic naturalists? The early moderns themselves, as argued below, had no conception of naturalism as we understand it. Thus this question must concern the paradigmatic naturalists of twenty-first-century scholarship. Unfortunately, even a cursory survey of scholars' intuitions reveals widespread disagreement about who counts as a naturalist and who does not. Hobbes seems to be the figure most commonly thought of as a naturalist – but some commentators deny that Hobbes is a naturalist at all, because his natural philosophy is almost entirely *a priori*.² Intuitively, Gassendi and Spinoza should probably count as naturalists as well.³ Some people might add Locke. It turns out to be easier to identify paradigmatically *non*-naturalistic philosophers: Malebranche, for example.

²See, for instance, Noel Malcolm, 'A Summary Biography of Hobbes', in *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes*, edited by Tom Sorell (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 13–44, at 18.

³References to Spinoza in general as a naturalist or to Spinoza's metaphysics as naturalistic are extremely common. (So, of course, are references to Spinoza's ethics as naturalistic, though that is outside the scope of this paper.) See, for instance, Don Garrett, 'Philosophy and History in Modern Philosophy', in *The Future for Philosophy*, edited by Brian Leiter (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) 44–73, at 70; Alan Donagan, *Spinoza* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Nicholas Jolley, 'The Reception of Descartes' Philosophy', in *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes*, edited by John Cottingham (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 393–423, at 413. For Gassendi, see Catherine Wilson, *Epicureanism at the Origins of Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) 26.

A second and equally uncontroversial *desideratum* is that whatever conception of naturalism we come up with, it should be useful. In other words, it should help us achieve our goal, whatever that is. But here again we run into problems right away, for it is less than obvious what twenty-first-century scholars are trying to achieve by talking about early modern naturalism. It is reasonably clear how categorization can be useful when the categories involved are actors' categories. For those can reveal how philosophers themselves conceived of their projects: who they identified with, who they saw as their opponents, and so on. Thus the use of actors' categories can help us get a better grasp of what is at stake in early modern philosophical debates. But since naturalism is not an actor's category for the early moderns, this cannot be the goal scholars are trying to achieve by talking about naturalism.

Categorization can also be useful for constructing an overarching historical narrative, although even here one might prefer to use actors' categories. However, noting this simply pushes the question back a step. What purpose do scholars hope to achieve in constructing such narratives? One obvious answer is that having an overarching narrative is very useful pedagogically. However, thinking about the categories most widely used for analysing early modern philosophy in the past – namely, rationalism and empiricism – is discouraging. These categories derive from Kant. What Kant gained from using them is obvious.⁴ They were a key part of his attempt to demonstrate that he had transcended the disputes of his philosophical predecessors and synthesized their best insights. It is rather less clear what we have acquired by thinking of the history of philosophy this way, other than a way of organizing the curriculum now widely believed to be inaccurate.⁵

II

An obvious place to begin is by looking at the category of naturalism as the early moderns conceived it. Unfortunately, they did not really make use of such a category. This is not a claim about terminology: although the term 'naturalism' is very rare, 'naturalist' is quite common. However, it does not function as the name or description of a philosophical school: there is no circumscribed set of philosophical views associated with the term 'naturalism'.⁶ Calling someone a naturalist, in other words, is not a description of their philosophical allegiances or tendencies.

⁴Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Paul Guyer and Allan Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) A471/B499.

⁵That the traditional distinction between empiricism and rationalism is radically misleading has been argued most prominently by Louis Loeb, in his *From Descartes to Hume: Continental Metaphysics and the Rise of Modern Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981).

⁶One indication of this is that Goclenius's *Lexicon*, the most important seventeenth-century philosophical dictionary, has no entry for naturalism – just 'natura' and 'naturale'. Rudolf

The most common usage by far is the one in which the naturalist is just the natural philosopher.⁷ Indeed, in his *Glossographia*, Thomas Blount defines ‘Naturalist’ as ‘a natural Philosopher, one skilled in the Reason, and causes of natural things’.⁸ Boyle favours this sense of the word: consider the work entitled *A disquisition about the final causes of natural things wherein it is inquir’d, whether, and (if at all) with what cautions, a naturalist should admit them?*⁹

In another usage, however, the term ‘naturalist’ functions as a term of abuse, suggesting atheism or at least heterodoxy. In a rare use of the term ‘naturalism’, in his 1642 *The Acts and Monuments of the Church Before Christ Incarnate*¹⁰ the Anglican Bishop Richard Montagu speaks of ‘Atheists or men ... who will admit nothing of Morality, but Naturalismes, and humane reason’.¹¹ Examples involving ‘naturalist’ abound. An equation of naturalists with infidels – as in the phrase ‘any infidel, or mere naturalist’ – is found, variously spelled, in a number of places: consider Francis White’s 1624 *A replie to Iesuit Fishers answere* (21);¹² Edward Stillingfleet’s *Rational Account of the Grounds of the Christian Religion* (175);¹³ and William Laud’s *Relation of the Conference between William Laud ... and Mr. Fisher* (49).¹⁴ Similarly, in his *Epicurus’s Morals*, Charleton notes that Epicurus ‘was a mere naturalist, borne and educated in times of no small Pagan darknesse’ (21).¹⁵ And in his *Natural Theology*, Matthew Barker parenthetically describes Galen as ‘a meer *Naturalist*, and so an *Atheist*’ (165).¹⁶

Goclenius, *Lexicon philosophicum, quo tanquam clave philosophiae fores aperiuntur* (Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1980).

⁷Occasionally, however, the mere naturalist or student of nature is opposed to the more dignified natural philosopher. See John Vicars, *Prodigies and Apparitions, or, Englands Warning-Piece* ([London?]: Tho. Bates by Ralphe Markland, 1643) 23. See also William Twisse, *A Discovery of D. Jacksons Vanitie* ([London]: W. Jones, 1631) 425.

⁸Thomas Blount, *Glossographia, Or, A Dictionary, Interpreting the Hard Words of Whatsoever Language* (London: Thomas Newcomb, 1674) [no pagination].

⁹Robert Boyle, *A Disquisition about the Final Causes of Natural Things Wherein It Is Inquir’d, Whether, and (If at All) with What Cautions, a Naturalist Should Admit Them?* (London: John Taylor, 1688).

¹⁰Richard Montagu, *The Acts and Monuments of the Church Before Christ Incarnate* (London: Printed by Miles Flesher and Robert Young, 1642).

¹¹This is the *OED*’s first recorded use of the term.

¹²Francis White, *A replie to Iesuit Fishers answere to certain questions prou[n]ded by his most gracious matie: King Iames* (London: Adam Islip, 1624).

¹³Edward Stillingfleet, *A Rational Account of the Grounds of Protestant Religion* (London: Rob. White for Henry Morlock, 1665).

¹⁴William Laud, *A Relation of the Conference between William Laud, Late Lord Arch-bishop of Canterbury, and Mr. Fisher the Jesuite* (London: JC for Tho. Bassett, T. Dring, and J. Leigh, 1672).

¹⁵Walter Charleton, *Epicurus’s Morals* (London: W. Wilson for Henry Herringman, 1656).

¹⁶Matthew Barker, *Natural Theology, or, the Knowledge of God, From the Works of Creation* (London: Nathaniel Ranew, 1674).

Further difficulties with the notion of naturalism in early modern philosophy derive from the category of the ‘Renaissance naturalists’ or ‘Italian naturalists’ – a group that includes figures like Bruno, Campanella, Pomponazzi and Telesio. Renaissance naturalism is metaphysical, *aprioristic* and unscientific: indeed, it is hard to recognize as naturalism in our sense of the term at all. The Renaissance naturalists may be so called because nature – in the sense of Boyle’s pagan deity, to be discussed below – is the chief explanatory principle in their philosophy. But here, again, the chief import of the term naturalism is simply atheism (or perhaps a particular brand thereof).¹⁷ This is the sense of the term operative in Leibniz’s famous remark that ‘Spinoza began where Descartes ended, in Naturalism’.¹⁸

III

Almost all early modern uses of the term ‘naturalist’ fall into one of two patterns, equating the naturalist with either the atheist or the natural philosopher.¹⁹

Thus, early moderns did not use the terms ‘naturalism’ and ‘naturalist’ to categorize any particular set of philosophical views. However, this is insufficient to show that they did not make use of any category of naturalism, especially since the closely related categories of nature and the natural were very widely used. Five early modern uses of the terms ‘nature’ and ‘natural’ seem relevant:²⁰

(a) *Rerum natura* or, sometimes, just *natura* is the world or universe.

This use is extremely common. In one of the most famous early modern discussions of the concept of nature, Robert Boyle’s *Free Enquiry into the Vulgarly Received System of Nature*, Boyle explains that

... we take nature for the universe or system of the corporeal works of God, as when it is said of a phoenix or a chimera that there is no such thing in nature ...

¹⁷For more on Renaissance naturalism and some cogent worries about calling it ‘naturalism’, see Richard Tuck, ‘The Institutional Setting’, in *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, edited by Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 9–86, at 63–7.

¹⁸Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, ‘Comments on Spinoza’s Philosophy’, in *Philosophical Essays*, edited by Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (Cambridge: Hackett, 1989) 272–83, at 277.

¹⁹For the one exception I am aware of, see note 20 below.

²⁰I omit the sense in which the nature of something is its essence. Although this is an extremely common sense of the term – perhaps the most common, in fact – it is not relevant to this discussion. Three of Boyle’s senses of the term ‘nature’ cluster around this usage: nature as internal principle of motion, nature as an aggregate of powers of a thing, and nature as essence or quiddity. Robert Boyle, *A Free Enquiry Into the Vulgarly Received Notion of Nature*, edited by Edward Davis and Michael Hunter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 19. All other references to Boyle are to this work.

and that we could simply substitute ‘the world’ (Boyle, 23). In this sense, every created thing is part of nature, and the natural is opposed simply to the divine. It is hard to see how this sense of the term ‘nature’ could yield an interesting conception of naturalism. For in this sense, the naturalist would simply be someone who is interested in nature, that is, in the world created by God. However, a closely related sense is somewhat more promising:

- (b) The world as it is created and sustained by God is known as *the order of nature*.²¹ Along similar lines, what is *secundum naturam* is opposed to what’s *praeter, super* or *contra naturam*, namely the miraculous (Goclenius, *Lexicon*, 741).

It is in this sense, Boyle explains, that ‘we understand by nature the established course of things, as when we say that nature makes the night succeed the day’ (Boyle, 19). This sense could more accurately be captured by speaking of the established order or settled course of things. Although (b) and (a) are closely related, they are not the same: miracles are part of nature according to (a), but not according to (b).

Sense (b) seems more promising than (a) for our purposes because it suggests that the natural is allied with the regular or law-like. However, it is worth considering some other common early modern senses of the term ‘nature’ as well. Here is another:

- (c) The part of religious doctrine that can be known by human reason alone, without the aid of divine revelation, is *natural religion*.²²

I noted above that the term ‘naturalist’ carried suggestions of heterodoxy or atheism for the early moderns. But the term ‘natural religion’ has no such negative connotations. Natural religion and revealed religion are typically understood as complementary avenues to knowledge. (Along similar lines, the *natural law* is the set of moral truths that can be known by human reason unaided by revelation.²³) Sense (c) allows

²¹For instance, ‘Natura est . . . [ordo] rerum naturalium a Deo sanctitus, ut cum dicitur aliquid fieri secundum Naturam’, and ‘Natura est Mundus seu . . . universitas rerum’ (Goclenius, *Lexicon*, 739.)

²²Interestingly, the one English use of the term ‘naturalist’ I’ve found which cannot be understood as meaning either ‘atheist’ or ‘student of nature’ uses this notion of the natural. In his *A Discourse Concerning Repentance* (London: T.R. for Richard Marriott, 1677), N. Ingelo says that some of his claims are also made ‘by Men that were not profess’d Divines, and were Philosophers, and such strict Naturalists too, as to be extraordinarily careful not to take any thing into their Philosophy upon the account of Revelation’ (xvii).

²³In this sense of the term, the human mind counts as paradigmatically natural. There is also a Humean conception of the natural on which it *opposes* the rational, that is, where a belief is natural if it does not or cannot arise from reason. However, I am not aware of this sense being used before Hume.

for theists to be naturalists and thus allows at least the *prima facie* possibility of early modern naturalism. However, it is important not to underestimate the extent to which early moderns associated naturalism with heterodoxy:

- (d) According to Boyle, the term ‘nature’ is mostly commonly used to refer to ‘a semi-deity or other strange kind of being’ (Boyle, *A Free Enquiry*, 19–20; cf. 32).

Nature, that is, is a pagan goddess. Finally, one more sense of ‘natural’ is worth noting:

- (e) *Natural philosophy*, otherwise known as physics, is the branch of philosophy that studies the order of nature and the individual things within it.

Thus natural philosophy is opposed to logic, ethics and perhaps metaphysics. (The tripartite division is standardly associated with Stoicism and Epicureanism, the fourfold division with Aristotelianism.) It will be important later that the distinction between physics or natural philosophy and metaphysics or first philosophy is drawn in terms of subject matter rather than methodology. For Aristotle himself, the distinction is clear: metaphysics or ‘first philosophy’ studies objects that are independent and unchanging, while physics studies objects that are independent but changeable.²⁴ This distinction becomes somewhat messier for early moderns, since certain subjects – such as the nature of the human soul – fall under both physics and metaphysics, while in works like Descartes’s *Meditationes de Prima Philosophia* metaphysics comes to encompass even paradigmatically physical topics like the nature of bodies.²⁵ However, it remained true for the early moderns that the distinction between physics and metaphysics is content-dependent.

III

Surveying various early modern conceptions of nature and the natural shows that we cannot simply read off a useful conception of naturalism from them. So let us try another tactic: looking at some of the main *contemporary* conceptions of naturalism and seeing who they identify as early modern

²⁴The dependent, unchangeable objects are studied by mathematics. See Aristotle, *Physics*, II 193b23–194a12.

²⁵See Meditation 5 (AT 7.63–71) for the nature of bodies. AT = René Descartes, *Oeuvres de Descartes*, 11 vols, edited by Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: J. Vrin, 1996).

naturalists and why.²⁶ None will turn out to be useful for understanding early modern philosophy. Some fail by making every significant early modern a naturalist. Others fail because they make no one – or maybe just Hobbes – a naturalist. Still others count the intuitively correct figures as naturalists, but do so on the basis of motivations that cannot plausibly be considered naturalistic.

Contemporary conceptions of naturalism tend to cluster into two categories, ontological and methodological. The two notions can be expressed in slogan form as follows:

Methodological naturalism: philosophy is continuous with science.

Ontological naturalism: there are no supernatural entities.

Fleshing out these two slogans will require some work, particularly in explaining the relevant senses of ‘continuous’ and ‘supernatural’.

IV

Methodological naturalism’s slogan is that philosophy is continuous with science. Of course, the early moderns did not use the term ‘science’ or draw a disciplinary boundary around just those things we count as science. Their closest equivalent was physics or natural philosophy – one of the three or four disciplines constituting philosophy. Thus the slogan for methodological naturalism, translated into early modern terms, is

(1) Naturalism is the view that philosophy is continuous with physics.

And this is trivially true, since physics is part of philosophy. If (1) is how we conceive of naturalism, then all the early moderns will turn out to be naturalists.

This result does not show that (1) is entirely useless. The claim that all seventeenth-century philosophers are naturalists in this sense surprises some people – especially those who think of early modern philosophy as dominated by theism. Although there is substantial disagreement about exactly what one is committed to in virtue of being committed to naturalism, contemporary philosophers are more or less in agreement that theism and naturalism are opposed. But (1), like the original slogan that philosophy is continuous with science, is compatible with theism as long as science is compatible with theism. And early modern natural philosophers were almost always committed to the existence of a God who created and conserved the world, although they did not always agree on the extent to which physics must invoke God.

²⁶Michael Rea, *World Without Design: The Ontological Consequences of Naturalism* provides a good survey of competing contemporary conceptions of naturalism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 55ff.

A conception of naturalism that does not count every early modern as a naturalist would be more useful, so let us continue. Philosophers who think of naturalism as the view that philosophy is continuous with science probably have in mind that *metaphysics* is continuous with science. So a more accurate formulation of the slogan might be

- (2) Naturalism is the view that there is no distinction between metaphysics and physics (*or*, the view that there is no such thing as metaphysics, just physics).

This way of characterizing naturalism has some promise. It counts some early moderns as naturalists but not all, and it puts more or less the right people in the right category. It would count Gassendi, for instance, as a naturalist and Leibniz not. But although (2) draws the distinction in the right place, it does so for the wrong reason.

Many early moderns rejected Aristotle's characterization of the distinction between physics and metaphysics. However, they shared his assumption that distinctions between the different philosophical fields are drawn in terms of subject matter. And the naturalist claim that philosophy is continuous with science is meant to be *methodological* – it is the claim that philosophy has no special methods distinct from the empirical methods of science. Early modern philosophers accept this not because their metaphysics is empirical, but because their physics allows for *a priori* speculation. (Think, for instance, of the arguments Descartes takes to establish that a vacuum is impossible.²⁷) Thus, even those early moderns who held that physics and metaphysics are distinct drew no clear methodological distinction between the two fields.

Another way to make sense of methodological naturalism for early modern philosophy might be to focus on disagreements over the extent to which explanations in physics should refer to God. What explanatory role does God play in the natural philosophy of the clearest paradigm of naturalism, Hobbes? The short answer is: none.²⁸ The same is true for Gassendi, for although God is often invoked in his metaphysics he plays very little explanatory role.²⁹

However, God plays a crucial metaphysical role in other systems. For Descartes, for instance, the laws of motion are typically understood to be

²⁷*Principles of Philosophy* 2.16–18 (AT 8a.49–50).

²⁸A longer answer is that God may play an explanatory role far back in the causal chain as the cause of the first or second motion. However, at one point Hobbes tells us that God is not an appropriate topic for philosophy. See Thomas Hobbes, *De Corpore*, edited by Karl Schuhmann (Paris: J. Vrin, 1999) section 1.8.

²⁹Without God, it might be hard for Gassendi to explain the source of the immaterial soul or how it interacts with his body. However, since the immaterial human soul does very little work in his philosophy, this would not be terribly significant. Pierre Gassendi, *Opera Omnia* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Friedrich Fromann Verlag, 1964) 2.440b ff.; cf. 3.369a and 3.386a.

grounded in and derivable from the immutability of the divine will.³⁰ And in Malebranche's occasionalism, God must come into the explanation of each individual causal interaction.³¹ Distinguishing philosophies whose explanations eschew God from those whose explanatory power depends on God suggests a third conception of naturalism:

- (3) Naturalism is the view that philosophical explanations should only advert to things within the order of nature, not to God.

This conception of naturalism has several advantages. The extent to which a philosophical system relies on God for explanatory purposes comes in degrees. God might come into the picture only when discussing mind–body interaction, for instance, or when discussing *any* causal interaction. Hence, this conception allows the extent to which philosophies are naturalistic to come in degrees. Intuitively this seems right. For instance, intuitively Gassendi's physics is not fully naturalistic because it contains an immaterial human soul but it is more naturalistic than Malebranche's. Moreover, a system can leave room for God in its ontology without requiring God for explanatory purposes. Thus this conception makes naturalism compatible with theism, thereby allowing a significant number of early moderns to count as naturalists.

It is worth pointing out that this is *not* the sense of naturalism connected to 'natural religion', namely the sense in which the natural is what can be known by human reason. For it distinguishes between philosophers who do and do not think explanations can legitimately invoke God, not between philosophers who do and do not think that explanations can legitimately invoke revelation. Rather, this sense of the term pertains to the order of nature: it is the claim that in doing philosophy, we must confine ourselves to the order of nature, i.e. the system of regularities instituted in the created world, and not advert to its creator or his actions.

A further virtue of this conception of naturalism is that it can easily be made domain-specific:

- (4) Naturalism about *x* is the view that explanations of *x* must not refer to God.

Thus, someone could be a naturalist about animal generation, for instance, without being a naturalist about the mind, or a naturalist about the motion of inanimate bodies without being a naturalist about animal generation. It can also be made more general by ruling out appeal to entities other than

³⁰See e.g. Gary Hatfield, 'Force (God) in Descartes' Physics', *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*, 10 (1979): 113–40.

³¹Nicolas Malebranche, *The Search After Truth*, translated by Thomas M. Lennon and Paul J. Olscamp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 657ff.

God. One way to do so, which corresponds to a contemporary formulation of naturalism, is to rule out any entities without spatiotemporal location:³²

- (5) Naturalism is the view that natural-philosophical explanations cannot refer to entities lacking spatiotemporal location.

This would typically rule out God and the immaterial human soul, particularly the immaterial intellect and its objects of cognition.³³ It also rules out universals and essences, understood Platonistically, but since Platonism was a non-contender in the seventeenth century anyway, this is not so important.

Conceptions (3), (4) and (5) all concern the legitimacy of certain sorts of explanations in philosophy. It is natural to ask what grounds them: *why* is it illegitimate for philosophical explanations to advert to God? One possible answer is that philosophical explanations should not advert to God because he does not exist. But this cannot be the typical seventeenth-century motivation, since many early moderns accepted (3) or (4) while also accepting the existence of God. Indeed, even (5) is consistent with the existence of God, so long as one is willing to say – as Hobbes may have – that God is a body.³⁴ Thus, preserving the usefulness of the category of naturalism requires finding a motivation for (3) that is consistent with theism.

One possibility is that the conception of legitimate explanation embodied in (3) derives from the principle that whatever God can do by primary causes, he can also do by secondary causes. The desire for a secondary-causal explanation is often associated with the Boylean rhetoric of natural philosophy as ‘reading the book of nature’, as opposed to the book of revelation. On this conception of natural philosophy, it is aimed at a larger theological purpose – knowledge of God and his greatness – but its very ability to achieve that purpose depends on staying within the order of nature. One reads the book of nature by interpreting the text, not by speculating about its author’s intentions.

If this is right, the main motivation for accepting (3) is a God-oriented one. This suggests that (3) should not really be considered a form of

³²David Armstrong, ‘Naturalism, Materialism, and First Philosophy’. Reprinted in *Contemporary Materialism*, edited by Paul Moser and J. D. Trout (London: Routledge, 1995) 35–46, at 35.

³³But not always: Henry More, for instance, thinks of the immaterial human soul as having location and Locke agrees that if there is an immaterial soul it has location: John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975) Essay 2.27.2. Henry More, *The Immortality of the Soul, so farre forth as it is Demonstrable from the Knowledge of Nature and the Light of Reason* (London: Printed for J. Flesher, by William Morden, 1659) 3.

³⁴See e.g. *Leviathan* 34.2 and 46.15. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, edited by Edwin Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994).

naturalism at all. A little care is in order here. Early modern acceptance of (3) may very well have helped produce something like twenty-first-century naturalism. But (3) remains very different from contemporary naturalism in its motivations. The concern for the autonomy of science prominent in twenty-first-century methodological naturalism is absent from the seventeenth century.

Consider who would accept (3) and who would reject it. Descartes and Malebranche, as discussed above, would reject it. So would Berkeley. Indeed, Berkeley and Malebranche both hold that one must deny (3) and bring God into philosophy in order to prevent atheism.³⁵ In contrast, figures like Boyle, Gassendi, and Hobbes would accept (3) – and at least the first two justify (3) through explicitly God-oriented rhetoric. And the appeal of (3) is very broad: the majority of scholastic Aristotelians would endorse it as well. This by itself is not fatal, but certainly diminishes the significance of the category of naturalism if it includes everyone except a few occasionalists and idealists. Moreover, since (3) was a mainstream view for quite a long time, it cannot be the source of Berkeley's and Malebranche's worries. There must be some other factor that – perhaps in conjunction with (3) – might lead to atheism and hence would trigger Berkeley and Malebranche's insistence that God be invoked in philosophical explanation.

V

Like methodological naturalism, ontological naturalism can be formulated in a variety of ways:

- (6) There are no supernatural beings.
- (7) There are no gods.
- (8) Whatever exists is material.
- (9) Whatever exists is located in space and time.
- (10) Whatever is invoked in the explanations of our best science exists.

Although (6) is intuitively plausible, it requires some specification of what makes an entity supernatural in order to be useful. One such specification is provided by (7). However, (7) again makes naturalism equivalent to atheism and thus renders it unhelpful as an explanatory category. Another specification is provided by (8), but (8) faces a similar problem: it makes naturalism identical to materialism, again rendering the category of naturalism unhelpful. Moreover, (8) makes Hobbes the only prominent

³⁵One complication is that Berkeley and Malebranche think that God has to be invoked in metaphysical explanations but not physical ones, while writers like Descartes and Gassendi do not sharply distinguish metaphysics and physics.

early modern naturalist, and it risks making any view including forms or forces non-naturalistic. This is intuitively unacceptable.

A somewhat better specification of what makes an entity supernatural is implicit in (9). Because it allows immaterial entities as long as they have spatiotemporal location, (9) is somewhat more broadly applicable than (7) or (8). It also has the advantage of including immaterials such as forms and forces. However, (9) is worryingly arbitrary. For instance, on (9) Locke's immaterial soul should be acceptable to naturalists, because it is collocated with the body, but Descartes's immaterial soul should not be. However, it is implausible that Locke would be significantly less naturalistic had he neglected to specify that souls are collocated with bodies, or that Descartes would be more naturalistic had he located the mind in the pineal gland.³⁶

In contrast, (10) abandons any attempt to specify what intrinsic features make an entity naturalistically acceptable in favour of deferring to the authority of science. It is somewhat difficult to be precise about what (10) amounts to. If it implies that only those entities that will be included in the final, complete science exist, then it is not providing much in the way of guidance. If it implies that only the entities used in the explanations of current science exist, then there is good reason to think (10) is simply false. Its spirit might be better captured by a methodological claim:

- (11) One should only accept the existence of those entities used in the explanations of our best science.

However, given the astonishing optimism of early modern natural philosophers, the difference between (10) and (11) can be glossed over.

Both (9) and (10) have certain disadvantages. While (9) is too narrow, (10) is unhelpfully broad. Many early moderns invoked God to do explanatory work in physics, so ontological naturalism as specified by (10) allows God. Almost everyone invoked the immateriality of the soul, so that will be legitimate for naturalists too. So will plastic natures; a trichism of matter, soul and spirit; correspondence relations between microcosm and macrocosm; the weapon salve; and a whole host of other entities.³⁷ Now one might respond that if plastic natures are required for our best scientific explanations, then they *should* be part of a naturalistic ontology. This is

³⁶For Locke's claim that the immaterial soul (if it exists) is collocated with the body, see *Essay* 2.27.2 and 2.27.28.

³⁷Plastic natures are associated with Cudworth; a trichism of matter, soul and spirit with writers influenced by Neoplatonism such as van Helmont; correspondences between microcosm and macrocosm with Fludd; and the weapon salve with Digby. Ralph Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (London: Richard Royston, 1678); Kenelm Digby, *Two Treatises* (Paris: Gilles Blaizot, 1644); Robert Fludd, *Mosaical Philosophy* (London: Humphrey Moseley, 1659); Jean-Baptiste van Helmont, *Ortus medicinae* (Amsterdam: Ludovic Elzevier, 1648).

an entirely reasonable response. But notice that if it is accepted, then basically every early modern philosopher will count as a naturalist.

VI

The best version of methodological naturalism we have found is (3): the view that natural philosophy should not rely on God for explanatory purposes. And the best version of ontological naturalism we have found is (10): the view that only the entities involved in the best explanations of natural philosophy exist. How are these two views related? Clearly, the conjunction of the two yields atheism. Hence almost no early modern who accepts (10) would also accept (3). And any early modern who accepts (3) due to a view of natural philosophy as reading the book of nature would reject (10). In the early modern period, then, ontological and methodological naturalism as we have formulated them work at cross-purposes. This is worrying.

What motivated early modern adherents of (10)? Why might a seventeenth-century philosopher think we should only accept the existence of the entities used in natural philosophical explanations? This is really a two-part question: why privilege natural philosophy over the other branches of philosophy? And why privilege philosophy over the other disciplines?

The first question is relatively easy to answer. No one who drew a sharp distinction between physics and metaphysics would accept (10) to begin with. So it is really the question of why physics, rather than ethics or logic, gets to determine our ontology – and this is trivial.

The second question is somewhat more difficult. Consider an example: Berkeley, who accepts (10) and suspects that a large portion of his audience accepts it as well. In fact, this suspicion is part of what motivates his insistence on God being a central part of natural philosophy. For if only the entities used in natural philosophical explanation should be accepted, then – on pain of atheism – God must play a central role in the explanations of natural philosophy.³⁸

Notice where we are now. Intuitively, Berkeley is not a naturalist. And neither is anyone else who accepts (10) and considers it a reason to ensure that God does explanatory work in natural philosophy. Thus (10) can be just as much the product of theistic motivations as (3) and hence, like (3), is sufficiently different from contemporary naturalism to require another name.

VII

Finding a conception of naturalism that makes it an interesting historiographical category has proven difficult. On our best formulation

³⁸See e.g. George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, edited by Jonathan Dancy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). *Principles* 1.156, at 162.

of methodological naturalism, it is extremely broad, including the majority of early moderns and Aristotelians. Moreover, because it is often motivated by theological concerns it is unclear whether it has enough in common with contemporary naturalism to warrant the same name. A similar problem arose with regard to ontological naturalism. And while methodological naturalism included many mainstream neo-Aristotelians as well as writers like Hobbes and Boyle, ontological naturalism had the even less intuitive implication of including people like Berkeley.

A large part of why it is difficult to delineate a category of naturalism that is useful for analysing early modern philosophy is that we associate naturalism with a set of ideas about the role and status of science that are entirely foreign to the early moderns. This by itself is good reason to abandon the use of naturalism as an explanatory category in the historiography of early modern philosophy. However, abandoning it leaves us with no way to characterize one interesting strand of early modern philosophy. An alternative category would be useful.

There are certainly legitimate reasons for performing historical analysis using categories that are not actors' categories. However, all other things being equal, it is better to use actors' categories. And in this case, there is an actor's category available, one that does roughly the work we want the category of naturalism to do. It picks out a certain tendency or stance that is exemplified by philosophers such as Hobbes and Gassendi. This is the category of Epicureanism.

VIII

What does it mean for an early modern to be an Epicurean? No one in the seventeenth century adopted *all* of Epicurus's views. Any philosophical system that reiterated, say, the Epicurean theory of vision would have been considered laughable. And any system that reiterated Epicurus's account of the gods would have been considered heretical. So, what makes an early modern an Epicurean?³⁹ One possibility is that any philosopher is an Epicurean who self-identifies as such. This appears to be a sufficient condition: consider Walter Charleton, for instance, or La Mettrie.⁴⁰ But it is not a necessary condition in a context where there is good pragmatic reason

³⁹For an extended discussion of early modern Epicureanism and the many different ways in which it manifested itself, see Catherine Wilson, *Epicureanism at the Origins of Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). Wilson does not discuss the relationship between Epicureanism and naturalism in any detail, but it is clear that she conceives of Epicureanism as roughly naturalistic in the contemporary sense: see e.g. 158.

⁴⁰Consider the titles of their books: Walter Charleton, *Physiologia Epicuro-Gassendo-Charltoniana* (London, 1654); Julien Offray de La Mettrie, *Système d'Epicure*, in *Machine Man and Other Writings*, translated by Ann Thomson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 89–116.

to avoid the label. Epicureanism was widely associated with atheism, ethical nihilism, and gross immorality. Leibniz, for instance, said that the ‘disciples and imitators’ of Epicurus ‘are inclining everything toward the universal revolution with which Europe is threatened’.⁴¹ Given this reputation, it is hardly surprising that cautious philosophers would try to avoid being called an Epicurean.

Another possibility is that one is an Epicurean if (at least some of) one’s peers identify one as such. This criterion applies to many more people than the first. Gassendi and Hobbes, for instance, were widely called Epicureans.⁴² In that respect it is preferable. However, just as the negative connotations of Epicureanism prevented some philosophers from identifying as Epicureans, they also motivated accusations of Epicureanism. In the early modern context, branding a view as Epicurean obviated the need to argue against it. Moreover, the label came to be used very loosely. In eighteenth-century France, for instance, it often seems as though anyone who thinks that pleasure is a good thing is called an Epicurean. However, something more precise is necessary if the category of Epicureanism is going to be useful for historians of early modern philosophy. This suggests that we should characterize early modern Epicureanism in doctrinal terms.

There is no one doctrine that is held by everyone usefully thought of as an Epicurean. However, many philosophers held most of the following:

- (1) Everything that exists, with the possible exception of God, is a material individual. This view is opposed to Cartesian dualism, neo-Aristotelian hylemorphism, and the various forms of substance dualism. Epicurus held a species of this view: every substance is composed of purely material atoms moving in void space. But materialism more generally came to be thought of as Epicureanism.

This view is most commonly associated with Hobbes.⁴³ But Locke famously flirts with it as well.⁴⁴

- (2) Thus, the mind is a material entity and should be explained like any other natural thing. This contrasts with a view of human beings that emphasizes the fact that they were created in the image of God.

⁴¹Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*, translated by Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) 462.

⁴²For Hobbes, see e.g. Gianbattista Vico, *Vico: The First New Science*, edited by Leon Pompa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 1.2, at 15. For Gassendi, see e.g. Leibniz, *New Essays*, 374.

⁴³See e.g. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 463.

⁴⁴Locke, *Essay* 4.3.6.

This is not found in its pure form in any early modern before Hume, but certainly some seventeenth-century philosophers approached it more closely than others.

- (3) All causation is efficient causation. Since there are no forms, as (1) tells us, there is no formal causation. And there is no teleology intrinsic to bodies and thus no final causation.⁴⁵

This includes all the figures mentioned elsewhere in this list, and more besides: it is characteristic of seventeenth-century mechanism in general.

- (4) There is no providence: whether or not there is a God or gods, there is no divine intervention into the workings of the natural world and no special concern taken for humans.

Spinoza is the clearest early modern example of this.⁴⁶

- (5) The world came into existence through natural processes.

The notorious ‘Lucretian evolution’ of Descartes’s suppressed *Le Monde* is the most famous early modern example of this view, – although Descartes is careful to explain it as a hypothetical origin of the world distinct from the actual one.

- (6) There is no separate discipline of metaphysics, only physics. In other words, physics is first philosophy.

Finally,

- (7) Radical empiricism. As (1) and (2) imply, there is no immaterial intellect and no special objects of cognition for such a faculty. Moreover, all mental representations are derived from impressions, either those made on the senses or those acquired by reflection.

Hobbes again is the clearest example of this. But – if we emphasize the empiricism here and not its metaphysical basis – Locke, Gassendi and Spinoza were also tempted by this view.

This list of doctrines suggests that talk of Epicureanism can fill more or less the same role that naturalism is intended to fill. It captures a certain

⁴⁵While neo-Epicureans like Gassendi say that all causation is efficient causation, they do allow that a full explanation will involve appeal to the matter being shaped as well as the ‘agent’ doing the shaping, and in that attenuated sense accept a kind of material causation.

⁴⁶Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*; appendix to Part 1, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, edited and translated by Edwin Curley (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985).

intellectual orientation that we can discern to greater and lesser extents in various early modern philosophers – one many contemporary naturalists would be sympathetic to. And it categorizes early modern philosophy in terms the early moderns used. This makes it easier to map the philosophical terrain accurately and helps us avoid anachronistic ideas about the role of science in the structure of knowledge. Giving an extended demonstration of how the category of Epicureanism helps us understand the early moderns is beyond the scope of this paper.⁴⁷ Its aim has been to show that there are problems using the category of naturalism and that Epicureanism can do more or less the same work for us. At the very least, it aims to spur thought about what is built into our conception of early modern naturalism and what we hope to gain by deploying it.⁴⁸

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⁴⁷But see Wilson, *Epicureanism*, for this.

⁴⁸I would like to thank Stewart Duncan, Matthew Kisner, Walter Ott and Catherine Wilson for helpful comments on previous versions of this paper.