

Is Contemporary Naturalism Leaning Towards Fundamentalism?

Sean Butler

Ph.D. student, Claremont Graduate University

Abstract: Humanity has a tendency to move toward dogmatism with regard to ideology. I observe that one of humanity's enlightened domains of inquiry, natural science, might prove susceptible to this tendency by way of the ideology known as naturalism. Here I ask whether or not contemporary naturalism is leaning toward fundamentalism. I subsequently levy the accusation that there are identifiable instances of fundamentalism in the naturalist worldview, as represented through the New Atheists. Lastly, I conclude with a caution to those who would favor dogmatism regarding the pursuit of knowledge through the natural sciences.

Keywords: fundamentalism, science, scientism, dogmatism, naturalism

On October 11, 2011, a moderately popular podcast series called *The Partially Examined Life* aired an episode entitled "New Atheist Critiques of Religion" in which the so-called New Atheists (Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens) were critically engaged.¹ Many listeners were disappointed in the treatment of the New Atheists during the podcast, but the hosts made some interesting observations about the works of these authors that have led me to ask this question: Is contemporary naturalism leaning towards fundamentalism? I ask this question first because the New Atheist movement appears to be linked with post-9/11 extremist attitudes about religion, and second because each of the New Atheists claims that their worldview is not only supported

¹ Partially Examined Life," Accessed June 11th, 2014, <http://www.partiallyexaminedlife.com/2011/10/11/episode-44-new-atheist-critiques-of-religion/>

by the natural sciences, but follows directly from the naturalism that they claim is essential to these sciences. New Atheism is a controversial ideology that is supported by naturalism and claims about scientific realism. Since it appears to be a reaction to religious extremism, one might find that a strict adherence to this ideology begins to resemble fundamentalism.

Both naturalism and fundamentalism are problematic terms that we will have to wade through before I can coherently deliver my concern. Once my particular use of these terms is made clear, then I will attempt to demonstrate how naturalism is at least occasionally inclined towards fundamentalism. This discourse will not end with an accusation against any particular ideology, but with a warning against dogmatism in general.

I. "Fundamentalism"

"Fundamentalism" is a dynamic term whose meaning ranges from historical specificity to wild name-calling. Indeed, Malise Ruthven notes, "Academics are still debating the appropriateness of using the 'F-word' in contexts outside its original Protestant setting."² Below I will briefly outline the historical development and evolution of the term, provide criticisms of certain contemporary uses of the term, and argue in favor of my particular usage.

Historically speaking, fundamentalism refers to American Protestants in the early twentieth century. The term was used to identify those whose theological commitments were carefully outlined and valued as central or fundamental to

² Malise Ruthven, *Fundamentalism: The Search for Meaning*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 5.

Christian faith.³ One of the more central developments that solidified fundamentalism as a class of Protestantism in America was the composition and distribution of *The Fundamentals*, a work that functioned to both congeal Protestant communities and outline the core statements of faith that were non-negotiable within the community.⁴ Thus Ruthven notes, “Fundamentalism’ originated in the very specific theological context of early twentieth-century Protestant America, and its applicability beyond its original matrix is—to put it mildly—problematic.”⁵

“Fundamentalism” did not remain specifically tied to the context of its origination, but up until the recent past (the last 30 years or so) remained associated specifically with Christianity. This leads those who advocate for a more conservative use of the term, such as James Barr, to conceive of fundamentalism only in a Christian context.⁶ In popular parlance, however, the term has come to be used beyond its Christian heritage.⁷ Today the term is used in a wide variety of ways; scholars who write on the subject are left to define their own use of the term. Torkel Brekke, who discusses fundamentalism in the context of globalization, for example, draws examples from Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism.⁸ In this vein, it remains quite common to discuss fundamentalism more globally than in relation to American Protestant religion, but the term is often still confined to the context of religion. Niels Nielson Jr., offering an additional perspective, thinks of

³ Ibid, v.

⁴ Ibid, 12-15.

⁵ Ibid, *Fundamentalism*, v.

⁶ James Barr, *Fundamentalism*. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978).

⁷ Ruthven, *Fundamentalism*, 31.

⁸ Torkel Brekke, *Fundamentalism: Prophecy and Protest in an Age of Globalization*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

fundamentalism in terms of its relation to other ideologies. Like Ruthven, Nielson identifies fundamentalism in contrast to modernism, giving it a flavor of conservatism. For Nielson, then, fundamentalism lies on a spectrum with fundamentalism on the far right (ultra conservative) and modernism on the left (liberal progressivism).⁹

“Fundamentalism” is also linked to behaviors within ideological groups. Steve Bruce, in his work *Fundamentalism*, identifies fundamentalism with zealotry, which is in turn understood as reflecting intolerance.¹⁰ Bruce conceives of fundamentalism as embodying violence. In this way, he is willing to conceive of it as being open to more than just religion. The term also functions as an indicator of extremism. Linking “fundamentalism” with behavior, then, disenfranchises the term from its religious or ideological context and comes to describe one’s relation to one’s ideology rather than the ideology itself. Thus, Bruce identifies the behavior of going to extreme lengths to influence one’s culture as a qualification for fundamentalism.¹¹

It is now my obligation to delineate my specific meaning of “fundamentalism.” I will do so by critiquing other scholars’ restrictions on the term and then outlining criteria for my implementation of the term. To begin bluntly, I repudiate the assertion that terms must be used in their original context, and thus I hold no great connection to terms’ ‘baptism’ in language. Indeed, to confine the tokens of discourse to their original context is to destroy discourse. Contexts change out of necessity, and so, then, must token usage.

⁹ Niels Christian Nielsen, *Fundamentalism, Mythos, and World religions*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993, 3.

¹⁰ Steve Bruce, *Fundamentalism*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Polity, 2008, 2.

¹¹ Bruce *Fundamentalism*, 7-9.

Since it is the case that words like "fundamentalism" do transcend their historicity, it is more appropriate to look to modern usages to identify the sense of a term. It should be obvious that "fundamentalism" does not only refer to a branch of Protestant Christianity in its contemporary context. For example, contemporary media is flooded with accusations of fundamentalism regarding Islam. Do we only properly use 'fundamentalism' with regards to religion then? I, along with Brekke, Ruthven, and Nielson, say "no." Is "fundamentalism" descriptive of a particular sort of ideology as Ruthven and Nielson conceive of it? Again I say "no." Brekke again notices that the term describes one's relation to ideology, not the content of one's ideology. Many people today realize fundamentalism as present in all sorts of various traditions/ideologies/worldviews all over the world as Brekke has pointed out. It seems to me, then, that Brekke represents the more contemporary usage of "fundamentalism." However, his view remains limited in that he identifies "fundamentalism" as relating to religion, but fails to provide a criterion that confines the usage of the term to religious traditions.

Here I will set forth the criteria for my implementation of the term "fundamentalism." The initial popularization of the term came with the work *The Fundamentals*, and I intend to honor the title of this work. Fundamentalism, then, is about adherence to and identification of fundamentals.¹² This is my first criterion. Those in any tradition who identify and focus on a core set of fundamentals are on the path to fundamentalism. Those who are uncompromising about their fundamentals and treat their perspectives as inerrant manifest a greater degree of

¹² Ruthven, *Fundamentalism*, 12-15.

fundamentalism. Thus the second criterion is uncompromised inerrancy—which is the stance that one remains committed to certain fundamental beliefs because one maintains that they are without error. This view entails that any contradicting claims, *ipso facto*, must be in error. Being severely oriented to social change or the popular acceptance of the identified fundamentals, is my third criterion. The fourth criterion is the arbitrary construction of a worldview that, while proclaimed to be related to the fundamentals, has a questionable, confused, or downright contradictory relation to them. To clarify this point further, one becomes more fundamentalist when one asserts the truth of particular propositions under the pretext of following from the core tenets of the ideology when it is at best unclear how said proposition relates to the core tenets. The fifth and final criterion is an inflated sense of self-worth. Those who understand themselves and their ideologies as not only teleological in the grand sense, but also dramatically more important than what they are reacting to, fulfill this final criterion.

“Fundamentalist,” then, does not name a single group of individuals who share a single ideology (indeed there is always variance within a group relative to its shared ideology), but rather describes the attitude of a group or individual in relation to some ideology.

For those who still object to my use of the term “fundamentalism,” consider these words by Steve Bruce.

If in our ordinary lives we manage to live comfortably with the complex meanings of terms such as ‘car’, I do not see why we should not be able to find words that allow us to say something useful about a range of religio-political movements. Although I accept all the reservations about ‘fundamentalism’, the term is now so firmly

established in common parlance that we are unlikely to dissuade people from using it.¹³

II. “Naturalism”

As with “fundamentalism,” “naturalism” requires elucidation. In the words of Evan Fales, “An initial difficulty that faces any discussion of naturalism is that there is surprisingly little agreement of just what naturalism *is*.”¹⁴ Here, I face this difficulty. It may be true that I sometimes conflate naturalism with New Atheism or materialism, or physicalism, or brain reduction, or scientific realism. I welcome criticisms along these lines. The simple fact of the matter, though, is that I must condense varying perspectives delivered with specific and variant ideologies in mind into a relatively brief narrative about naturalism. So, like with the case of fundamentalism, I will express here what I mean by “naturalism” with every confidence that apparent confluences that follow will nonetheless fit my criteria and work for my overall discourse.

To uncover my meaning of “naturalism,” I will again explore how others conceive of the term. Fales identifies three primary categories of naturalism: Naturalism as a research program, methodological naturalism, and epistemological naturalism.¹⁵ Kai Nielsen identifies four: Cosmological, methodological, ethical, and scientific.¹⁶ Though the above categories of naturalism do help to shed light on the variety of ways naturalism is understood, the sort that coheres with my use of the

¹³ Bruce *Fundamentalism*, 12.

¹⁴ Michael Martin, *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 121.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 122-128.

¹⁶ Kai Nielsen, *Naturalism and Religion*. (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2001), 136.

term resembles that of Richard Olson, who discusses scientific naturalism as follows: "The fundamental assertion of scientific naturalism is that there can be no warrant for believing any knowledge claim that does not emerge out of the methods of natural science."¹⁷ This understanding is closest to Fales' epistemological naturalism in which the domain of knowledge is limited to the natural world, which, in turn, is delivered to the human body of knowledge through the natural sciences. Nielsen's cosmological and scientific naturalism also fits this sense of the term. Naturalism, then, is intimately linked with scientific realism, a position that Paul Churchland identifies here:

I remain committed to the idea that there exists a world, independent of our cognition, with which we interact, and of which we construct representations [...] Global excellence of theory remains the fundamental measure of rational ontology. And that has always been the central claim of scientific realism."¹⁸

One can plainly see that there is a naturalist cosmology present here along with a naturalist epistemology and methodology that is identified as inextricably present in scientific realism. It should be noted, however, that none of these conclusions are themselves arrived at by science but rather provide a context—a background metaphysics—for scientific practice.

I prefer to discuss naturalism in terms of metaphysics, differentiating it from scientific practice. I am thus not concerned with methodological naturalism or other sorts of naturalism that do not entail ontological commitments. The metaphysical naturalist who weds his metaphysics to scientific realism generally conceives of the

¹⁷ Richard Olson, *Science and Scientism in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008) 194.

¹⁸Paul Churchland, "The Anti-Realist Epistemology of van Fraassen's The Scientific Image." *Philosophical Quarterly* 63. 279.

role of science as compiling truths about reality, or at least probabilistically moving closer to the truth. This perspective of science has been challenged by giants such as Popper and Kuhn who, while having failed to end the debate on how truth relates to science, have not been obviously overcome by any positions advanced since. Once the methodology of natural science is concerned with a monopoly on truth, scientific naturalism is better understood as an appeal to ultimacy.

An appeal to ultimacy in scientific realism is frequently met with the charge of scientism. Regardless of this charge, when scientific naturalism conflates metaphysics with science, it yields a worldview that harkens back to Descartes' distinction between mind and body. In this context, the Cartesian distinction renders some interesting commitments about the mind and brain, the chief of which is a reduction of the former to the latter. Weaker versions of naturalism, thus, are not here encapsulated in my use of the term. Naturalism is to be understood in what follows as a metaphysical position that is specifically intertwined with the program of the natural sciences, the epistemological nature of these sciences, and the cognitive and biological conclusions that purportedly found cognition. It should be noted that naturalism, as here understood, entails atheism and the denial of ontic status to extra-physical entities (thus the intimate relation to physicalism and materialism).

Naturalism, then, will be meant to address the proposition that there exists a natural, mind-independent, objective world that is devoid of super-natural and non-physical (i.e. not fully explicable in terms of physical science) entities (something like Kant's noumena). Additionally, I will use "naturalism" to include the position

that this world can be known most effectively, if not exclusively, through the natural sciences whose theories produce for us an ever closer representative approximation of how the world “really” is.

III. Naturalism Tending Toward Fundamentalism

In this section, I aim to make the case that naturalism at least sometimes may properly be understood as fundamentalism. If I can illustrate fundamentalism in certain common naturalist positions, popular authors, and accepted arguments, then I will take this for establishing a tendency towards fundamentalism. This is not to say that naturalism equates to fundamentalism. This is also not an all out condemnation of the scholars addressed. What I will take myself for having demonstrated is simply that it is possible for naturalism to be a fundamentalist ideology. The consequences of this demonstration will be expressed in the conclusion.

In what follows, I have selected the New Atheist Daniel Dennett as exemplary of fundamentalist naturalism. Though each of the New Atheists mentioned at the beginning of this paper demonstrate fundamentalism in their ideology, I have selected Dennett because of his reputed philosophical prowess. Thus, considering a few prolific instances of naturalism that are representative of the ideology in general, one will come to see a likeness to, or tendency toward, fundamentalism. I will follow these examples with arguments made by respected philosophers that challenge naturalism and identify fundamentalist tendencies either illuminated by them or through their disregard by the New Atheists.

Daniel Dennett is widely regarded as one of the most proficient advocates for naturalism. Here I will outline some select places where I see a tendency toward fundamentalism in Dennett's worldview. To begin, let us look to Dennett's position on the coherence and truth of the sciences. Whereas it is commonplace for philosophers and scientists alike to acknowledge the presence of anomalies within science (scientific paradigms if you will), problems and contradictions that drive theory development forward, Dennett's position is more dogmatic. With regard to evolutionary biology, Dennett claims there are "no contradictions at all,"¹⁹ a clear appeal to inerrancy. Were this true, Dennett might escape an accusation of leaning toward fundamentalism, but it is not. It is necessary for the theory of evolution that life developed from non-living matter. It is also true that biology asserts that life comes only from life.²⁰ These two propositions are in clear conflict with one another. This, however, does not discredit science, but rather functions to drive empirical investigation and theory development forward. Dennett, however, in accepting evolution as a fundamental aspect of both atheism and naturalism, claims its inerrancy.

Founding a worldview on this fundamental aspect of natural science proves illuminating in Dennett's ideology. The theory of evolution has many facets, but all of them pertain to the field of biology. Dennett, however, will claim otherwise. Not only is evolution a "true story" for Dennett, but it is also claimed that evolution

¹⁹Daniel Dennett, and Alvin Plantinga. *Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 137.

²⁰ This development in biology originates with Louis Pasteur's discovery of microscopic organisms which is followed by a rejection of spontaneous generation.

informs the very birth of the cosmos among other things.²¹ The suggestion that Darwin's theory of evolution applies beyond its biological context is a claim that elevates the theory beyond its proper application. Such an elevation simply does not follow from the theory itself. Adherence to the literal truth of Darwin's theory of evolution and its biological context does not entail its application beyond this domain. Nonetheless Dennett advocates that the theory applies to a great deal more. Evolution, Dennett proposes, has provided mankind with something more valuable than its mere biological application, and Dennett seems to make it a mission to testify to its universal applicability. We can clearly identify that the rigorous advocacy for the adoption of Darwin's theory beyond its proper application by society at large is indicative of fundamentalism. Dennett's non-sequitur adherence to universalizing Darwin's theory is proclaimed to be supremely valuable to society. That is to say, he insists that society adopt his less than coherent worldview. Even further, all of this is said to support atheism, a rejection of the societal norm of theism, and would have atheists construct their worldview on Darwin's theory of evolution regardless of context.²² Though Dennett's evangelism is far from violent (which I still maintain is not necessary for classification as "fundamentalism"), Dennett clearly meets many of the criteria for fundamentalism here. He identifies evolution as a fundamental aspect of his ideology, he claims inerrancy with regards to said fundamental, he rigorously works to move society to accept his new way of thinking, constructs an atheist worldview from evolution

²¹Dennett, *Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?* 147.

²² Ibid, 135-148.

even though it does not follow, and considers his cause of such great importance that the wellbeing of society is at stake if his position were not accepted.

Though I am certain the above demonstration of Dennett's fundamentalist leanings satisfies my claim as a sufficient condition, there will undoubtedly be those who desire greater clarity regarding my charge of incoherence. To further demonstrate the presence of an incoherent and constructed worldview (criterion four), let us look to Dennett's position regarding minds, brains, and even robots. It is a common flaw for the fundamentalist naturalist to ignore certain widely adopted imperatives of logic; the imperative I have in mind that Dennett frequently ignores is familiarly expressed as 'a lack of evidence is not evidence of a lack'. Regarding the question about whether or not it is possible for technology to become cognizant, Dennett proposes that Alan Turing's famous test, the Turing test, is the necessary and sufficient condition for cognition in technology.²³ That is, all that is required, and without regard to any other considerations, the Turing test determines whether or not cognition is present in a given item. There is a clear conflation here of metaphysics with epistemology, and he is willing to assert the existence of a lack (i.e., a lack of cognition) due to lack of evidence (we have not yet seen evidence of cognizant machines). Consider, if you will, a world in which machines evolve to a point where they would pass the Turing test if tested, but nonetheless remain untested. It is an absurd conclusion to claim that they are not cognizant simply because they have not been demonstrated to be so. Surprisingly, in his 1985 and 1997 postscripts to a paper on the subject, Dennett notes how the Turing test has

²³ Ibid, 3-31.

both failed with regard to people and succeeded with regard to technology. According to Dennett, if he were to follow his position to its logical end, some people are not cognizant while some technology is. This error will inevitably rear its head again in the face of recent claims in the media about a computer passing the Turing test, no doubt inciting dubious excuses as to why computers remain without cognition.²⁴ The assertion of a lack of cognition due to a lack of evidence for cognition is a common error amongst realists, physicalists, and naturalists, and, if continuously ignored, moves an ideology ever closer to fundamentalism.

At the core of Dennett's confusion is a conflation between "real" and "useful."²⁵ Elsewhere, Dennett makes the move from theory to knowledge where truth does not follow; he is inclined to take good scientific theory as truth, or a "true story of how all living things came to have the designs we observe."²⁶ Of this, he claims, "there can be no reasonable doubt."²⁷ This is either intolerance to those who object (see Alvin Plantinga's arguments below), or a type of rhetoric and/or propaganda. I feel compelled to point out that the assertion of truth in the conclusions of science functions not only to eliminate the inherent anomalies and mysteries in science, but also the drive toward the theory production that follows.

Dennett's move is a claim of true mindless evolution, a theoretical framework for the atheist who seeks to build a scaffolding to shelter his ideology; he lets his non-scientific commitments guide his understanding of scientific claims. The claim

²⁴ Popular media is abuzz with this content, a representative article on this issue can be found here: <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/jun/08/super-computer-simulates-13-year-old-boy-passes-turing-test>

²⁵Dennett, *Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?*, 97.

²⁶ Martin, *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, 137.

²⁷Dennett, *Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?*, 137. Emphasis mine.

of mindlessness in evolution is quite simply not a part of the theory of evolution at all but rather a presumption adopted by those who seek to add understanding to their beliefs much like the religious apologist would (theology is often understood as 'faith seeking understanding'). Dennett's apologetics come through strongly when he asserts that opposing theories are insufficient and that certain design arguments fail, thus invoking the false dilemma fallacy, and concluding that since his opponents are wrong, he is right. He states, "Only a theory with the logical shape of Darwin's could explain how designed things came to exist, because *any* other sort of explanation would be either viciously circular or an infinite regress."²⁸ It is clear that Dennett is in error to suppose that no theory exists that is comparable to Darwin's simply because he is either unaware or unaccepting of them. Here, fundamentalism is ripe.

One central area where naturalism tends toward fundamentalism, at least in so far as it relates to mind-talk, is with the explanation of cognition and whether or not our thoughts are true. Advocates of evolution such as Dennett claim that a necessary aspect of the evolution of brains is "*getting it right*."²⁹ "Truth tracking," as Dennett frequently calls it, is not sufficiently explained by arguments that suggest that brains are wired for the truth. If brains were wired for truth, one would be obligated to provide an explanation as to why some beliefs of brains are false and others true. After all, individuals are clearly capable of an innumerable number of false beliefs. Another problem with the assumption of truth tracking is the evolution of non-human species. As Alvin Plantinga points out, with reference to a

²⁸ Martin, *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, 142.

²⁹ Dennett, *Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?*, 52.

frog, animals, insects, and trees need not have true beliefs in order to consume nutrients; all that matters for the frog is that the fly is caught, not that it has true beliefs about the fly.³⁰ Naturalists reject such points and maintain that their position remains impugnable. This is nothing more than dogmatic adherence to what they conceive of as the objective conclusions of science, which wholly depend on the acceptance of a naturalist worldview (the background metaphysics of naturalism).

I am evidently not alone in my observations of error in the naturalist ideology. Plantinga further reminds us that,

First, science doesn't address some of the topics where we most need enlightenment: religion, politics, and morals, for example. Many look to scientists for guidance on matters outside of science, matters on which scientists have no special expertise. They apparently think of scientists as the new priestly class; unsurprisingly, scientists don't ordinarily discourage this tendency. But of course a scientist pontificating on matters outside her field is no better than anyone else pontificating on matters outside her field. Second, science contradicts itself, both over time and at the same time. Two of the most important and overarching contemporary scientific theories are general relativity and quantum mechanics. Both are highly confirmed and enormously impressive; unfortunately, they can't both be correct."³¹

Ian Barbour has observed this as well: "Scientists are no wiser than anyone else when they step out of their laboratories and speculate beyond strictly scientific work."³² The naturalist who proclaims he is following science faces one of two problems here. Either he is a scientist stepping outside his expertise into metaphysics (and possibly theology), or he is a metaphysicist who cannot proclaim scientific expertise.

³⁰ Ibid, 69.

³¹ Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), xii.

³² Ian Barbour, *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues*. (New York: Harper One, 1997), 87.

In Thomas Nagel's new book *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False*, Nagel offers several arguments demonstrating that the contemporary naturalist clings to an untenable ideology. Focusing on the mind-body problem, Nagel demonstrates the numerous problems with naturalism, a few of his more substantial arguments are paraphrased here: 1) "Materialism requires reductionism; therefore the failure of reductionism requires an alternative to materialism."³³ Though Nagel does not attempt to argue against reductionism, it is clear that he observes its diminished support among philosophers. It is also important to note that any commitment to reductionism remains completely hypothetical, yielding no mechanism or evidence of a mechanism that accounts for the mind's arrival in the evolution of matter. Nagel then criticizes the scientific naturalist who claims to know that this will be the inevitable path of scientific progress as making claims from ignorance.³⁴ It is certainly an unfounded speculation that wafts of prophecy. I know of no scientific justification for predictions of this kind. Such predictions are passed off as either obvious or inevitable though they remain unsupported by empirical investigation. Empirical investigation, or scientific experimentation, is touted as the veridical determinant in all other cases and yet it is forsaken here.

With regard to both theism and naturalism, Nagel addresses a critical piece in the project at hand regarding skepticism,

³³ Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 15.

³⁴ Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False*, 20.

Neither of these proposals provides a defense against radical skepticism—the possibility that our beliefs about the world are systematically false. Such a defense would inevitably be circular, since any confidence we could have in the truth of either a theistic or an evolutionary explanation of our cognitive capacities would have to depend on the exercise of those capacities.”³⁵

This is reminiscent of Alvin Plantinga’s famous evolutionary argument against naturalism, which is stated in his recent work *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion and Naturalism* as:

(1) P(R/N&E) is low. (2) Anyone who accepts (believes) N&E and sees that P(R/N&E) is low has a defeater for R. (3) Anyone who has a defeater for R has a defeater for any other belief she thinks she has, including N&E itself. (4) If one who accepts N&E thereby acquires a defeater for N&E, N&E is self-defeating and can’t rationally be accepted. Conclusion: N&E can’t rationally be accepted. [Where P = Probability, R = Reliability of cognitive faculties, N = Naturalism, E = Evolution])³⁶

If such strong arguments against naturalism exist, why is it that dogmatic naturalists continue to espouse the inerrancy of their position and the impugnability of their worldview?

Regarding the sensitive issue of evolution, consider Nagel’s observation that we rely on evolutionary theory to analyze and evaluate everything from our logical and probabilistic cognition to our moral sense. This reflects the view that empirical science is the one secure, privileged form of understanding, and that we can trust other forms only to the extent that they can be validated through a scientific account of how and why they work.³⁷

³⁵ Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False*, 24.

³⁶Plantinga. *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism*. 316-345.

³⁷Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False*, 27.

I agree with Nagel when he says,

The priority given to evolutionary naturalism in the face of its implausible conclusions about other subjects is due, I think, to the secular consensus that this is the only form of external understanding of ourselves that provides an alternative to theism—which is to be rejected as a mere projection of our internal self-conception onto the universe, without evidence.”³⁸

Nagel, in the debate about naturalism, here identifies what we are witnessing as competing ideologies vying for culture control rather than coherent philosophy.

Haught agrees that the naturalists have overstepped their limits in that, “Many scientists today, after all, are confident that they can explain not only life, but also human consciousness in terms of chemistry and other “lower level” sciences.”³⁹ Such conclusions seem to do violence to the very nature of empirical science in the necessary role of a perceiving subject in empirical observation. If reductive physicalism is true with regard to brains, then whatever empirical data one observes in the practice of science is properly understood as an internal process of that individual’s brain, rather than propositions properly identifying external phenomena. Haught reminds us,

Metaphysical reductionism is a belief system that has been (con)fused with science and sold to the public as though it were *pure* science. But while passing itself off as such, it is in fact not science at all. Reductionism is a mostly modern sort of creed or ideology that triumphantly parades the halls of academe, largely unchallenged, marching hand in hand with scientism and scientific materialism. It is an inevitable corollary of the epistemological assumption that science is the privileged way to truth, and a constant partner to the materialist conviction that matter alone is real. As such, it falls into

³⁸Ibid, 29.

³⁹ John Haught, *Science and Religion: From Conflict to Conversation*. (New York: Paulist Press, 1995) 73.

the category of unfalsifiable beliefs rather than that of verifiable knowledge.”⁴⁰

Whereas the ultimacy of naturalism is passed off as “true” science, it is actually a metaphysical movement beyond science, and in some sense a betrayal of science.

IV. Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I would like first to wrap up my above accusations of fundamentalism and then put them in a context of concern. I find myself witness to fundamentalist attitudes in certain of the positions of popular naturalists. Above I have addressed the more timid of the New Atheists, though others more clearly demonstrate fundamentalism in its present use as synonymous with zealotry. One need not look far for examples. Richard Dawkins publicly and repeatedly accuses religion (if there even is such a thing) of being or causing evil.⁴¹ Christopher Hitchens goes so far as to claim, “religion should be treated with ridicule, hatred and contempt.”⁴² Such hatred, ridicule, and contempt might be acceptable in fundamentalist spheres, but have no place in the secular endeavor of growing wisdom. Even the recent remake of Carl Sagan’s famous *Cosmos* television series begins with a condemnation of the Catholic Church. There is a dark side to the ideology of naturalism, and this concerns me greatly.

I take myself for having demonstrated that naturalism is at least sometimes coherently understood as fundamentalism. Indeed I have sought to represent

⁴⁰Haught, *Science and Religion: From Conflict to Conversation*, 79-80.

⁴¹ An example of such a claim by Dawkins can be found here:

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/alexberzow/2013/09/30/richard-dawkins-is-wrong-about-religion/>

⁴² Dennett, *Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?*, 57.

naturalism in a fair light. Though my above accusations of tendencies toward fundamentalism have been rather aggressive, it is not my aim to put any of the above individuals or worldviews in a box. My attack on naturalism is aggressive because there is a legitimate danger in fundamentalist attitudes, and if it too came to pass that science and naturalism (of any sort) became dogmatic, then the search for knowledge would be dealt a serious blow. Humility seems more appropriate, especially with regard to epistemology. As Nagel suggests, "All that can be done at this stage in the history of science is to argue for recognition of the problem, not to offer solutions."⁴³ There exist more modest sorts of naturalism or realism that do not take as many dogmatic leaps and thus might not be appropriately fundamentalist (take Almeder's blind realism for example).⁴⁴ Dogmatic ideology is threatening to intellectual progress in the sciences as well as anywhere else, and those whom we can identify as fundamentalists ought to be ashamed at worst and rethink their position at best.

⁴³ Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False*, 33.

⁴⁴ Robert Almeder, *Blind Realism*, (Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, 1992).

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