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The Ethical Inadequacy of Naturalism

J.P. Moreland, in *Promise* (May/June 1996): 36-39.

Denying the existence and emergence of morality and ethics, Naturalism, a growing worldview, proves inadequate in explaining human nature and its qualities. Having examined the myth of evolution and scientism in Part 1, Moreland explores the jeopardy of the absence of ethics in this second part of a four-part series.

You don't have to be a rocket scientist to recognize that our society is in a state of moral chaos. The simple fact that Jerry Springer and his talk show competitors are such popular theaters of moral expression is enough to send shivers down the spine of anyone with an ounce of moral sensibility. This moral chaos should come as no surprise to Christians who know well that there is a deep connection between the world view of a culture and its moral beliefs and behaviors. The shift from a Judeo-Christian worldview to a naturalistic one is what lies behind much of the moral chaos we now face. In April 1986, Steven Muller, the president of Johns Hopkins University, got it right when he warned that our crisis in moral values is due largely to the loss of a Judeo-Christian worldview and its replacement with secularism and scientism as the major components of secularism. During the L. A. riots following the Rodney King beating, an African American bystander said on a TV interview how surprised she was that people were acting like animals. What was unclear was why this should surprise anyone given that we are taught all week long in public schools that this is exactly what we are – animals.

Muller was right to locate the source of our moral crisis in the emergence of scientific naturalism as the dominant worldview among cultural elites. In what follows, I will add a bit of meat to the bones of Muller's statement by discussing three areas of the moral life where the intellectual resources of naturalism must be weighed in the balance and found wanting.

Before we begin, let us recall what we said in Part I about naturalism. Succinctly put, it is the view that the spatio-temporal universe of physical objects, properties, events, and processes that are well established by scientific forms of investigation is all there is, was, or ever will be. There are three major components of naturalism. First,

naturalism begins with an epistemology, a view about the nature and limits of knowledge, known as scientism. Second, naturalism contains a theory, a causal story, about how everything has come to be. The central components of this story are the atomic theory of matter and evolution. Third, naturalism has a view about what is real: physical entities are all there are.

The Existence and Exemplification of Value

Consider the statement, "The ball is hard." If this statement is true, it has implications for the way the world is. There is some specific ball that exists, and there is a real property, hardness, it possesses or exemplifies. Now consider the following value statements: "Mercy is a virtue." "Friendship is good." "Human beings have worth." Each of these statements is true and, commonsensically, they ascribe non-natural, intrinsically normative value properties to mercy, friendship, and human beings. By a non-natural property I mean an attribute that is not a scientific, physical characteristic of physics or chemistry (e.g., being a C fiber, having negative charge, being magnetic). By intrinsically normative I mean a property that is 1) valuable in and of itself and 2) something we ought to desire. Now it is easy to explain how these properties could exist and "show up," as it were, in the spatio-temporal universe on a Christian view of things. For Christians, the most fundamental entity in being is not matter or energy or any other physical thing studied by science. It is God, and among His attributes are those of moral and ontological excellence: wisdom, kindness, goodness, and the like. God created the world to be a place where these values are exemplified and play a role in the course of things.

How is a naturalist to treat statements like these? The problem is that the properties expressed in them are just not scientifically testable, physical properties nor are they at home in a naturalist view of how we know things, how things came to be, and what is real. Intrinsically normative, non-natural properties are not known by the methods of science. I cannot find out that mercy is a virtue by some laboratory experiment. Nor are they the kinds of properties that could come to be present by strict physical laws. It is obvious that no property that science studies is normative. So what is a naturalist to do? There are three main courses of action available. First, a naturalist can try to paraphrase sentences like "Mercy is a virtue" as mere expressions of emotion ("Hooray Mercy!") or as mere commands ("Prefer mercy!"). But these paraphrases don't work because "Mercy is a virtue" is true, but mere expressions of emotion or pure imperatives are neither true nor false, and they leave unanswered why it is we should express emotions in this way or obey this command.

Second, a naturalist can paraphrase "Mercy is a virtue" in a reductionist way where the normative property "virtue" is replaced by a scientific, natural property, such as, "I like mercy" or "Merciful acts tend to promote survival." The first sentence is a statement of psychology, the second of evolution. Unfortunately, these paraphrases don't work either. Why? They leave out the normative component of "Mercy is a virtue." From the fact that someone likes mercy it does not follow that mercy is something we ought to value. Nor does it follow that mercy is intrinsically valuable from the fact (if it is a fact) that merciful acts promote survival unless, of course, we are already assuming that survival is an intrinsically good, normative state of affairs. But such an assumption would merely relocate normative value for the naturalist, it would not naturalize it.

These days, most naturalists have seen the folly of these two moves and, for those who try to preserve objective, non-natural value, an evolution-of-the-gaps move is made: somehow, mysteriously, at some point in the history of evolutionary development, values simply emerged. Now, apart from the fact that this is just a name for the problem to be solved and not a solution, it should be clear that this move is an otiose ad hoc abandonment of naturalism. Why? Because the existence and emergence of value is not something that is at home given the three components of a naturalist worldview. It is interesting to note that naturalist J. L. Mackie agreed and argued that the emergence of moral properties would constitute a refutation of naturalism and evidence for theism: "Moral properties constitute so odd a cluster of properties and relations that they are most unlikely to have arisen in the ordinary course of events without an all-powerful god to create them." Mackie's naturalistic "solution" is to opt for subjectivism about values, a solution, I suppose, that the L. A. rioters following the King beating trial could have nicely appropriated had they taken the time to read Mackie.[2]

Naturalism, Proper Function, and the Good Life

The Declaration of Independence tells us that all men are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among them, the right to pursue happiness. Now, happiness or the good life has come to mean a life of pleasure and the possession of consumer goods. But historically, happiness or the good life meant a life of eudaimonia – a state of ideal human flourishing and proper human functioning constituted by a life of character and virtue lived the way human beings were meant to live. It is easy to see how this notion of the good life makes sense in a Christian worldview. For a human being to live the good life is for him or her to function in the way proper to ideal human living. One functions properly just in case one functions the way one was meant to function by one's Designer. Since the Designer is Himself a

virtuous person of character, and since He made us to imitate Him, the good life of proper functioning is a life of virtue and character. In this way, we see how Christian theism clarifies and justifies a rich conception of the good life of virtue and character as a life in which humans function the way they were meant to function by God.

Christian theism provides a satisfying answer to a question related to why we should care about the good life: Why should I be moral? If I am trying to decide what my life plan will be – what I will care about, live for, spend my time seeking – and if I want my life plan to be rationally justified and sensible, then why is it reasonable for morality and the life of virtue to be a key part of my life plan? Why isn't it more reasonable to live a life of pure egoism in which my own self interests, defined any way I wish, are all that should matter to me, rationally speaking? Why should I not just pretend to care for morality when it is in my self-interests to do so, all the while not really adopting the moral point of view at all? Christian theism says we should be moral because the moral life of virtue is real, we know some truths about it, and to live in disregard of the moral life is to live out of touch with a real and important part of reality made by God. Moreover, God made us to function best when we live the life of virtue. To live in disregard of morality and virtue is to live like a fish out of water, i.e., to live contrary to our proper functioning.

Obviously, naturalists cannot help themselves to this depiction of the nature of and grounds for the good life.

While not all naturalists agree about the nature of morality and the good life – how could they when it is hard enough to have any clear room for objective value in a naturalist view of things – many tough-minded naturalists opt for a view of morality which Daniel Callahan calls "minimalist ethics": One may act in any way one chooses so far as one does not do harm to others. Unfortunately, such an ethic draws too sharp of a distinction between public and private morality, it reduces humans to isolated moral atoms who create their own moral universe, and it deprives us of meaningful and true ways to discourse about the good life of virtue in its individual and communal forms. Other naturalists follow Alasdair MacIntyre and take virtues and the good life of human excellence to be mere expressions of value relativized to one's culture and tradition (presumably, not Nazi culture) or to one's private beliefs and choices (presumably, not Jeffrey Dahmer's.)

Both of these naturalist strategies – minimalist ethics and the relativization of virtue – are simply inadequate to capture the nature of morality and the good life or to explain why they have such hegemonic authority. This inadequacy can be seen in three areas. First, these naturalist strategies take the good life to be whatever an

individual or culture chooses to create and value as long as no harm is done to others. But as Harvard philosopher John Rawls admits, this view implies that a person who chooses to spend his entire life counting blades of grass is equally living the good life of virtue as is Billy Graham or Mother Teresa as long as both freely choose their activities and can pursue them in a satisfying way.[4]

Second, naturalists have no way of expressing what it means to function properly in a normative way. Because they do not believe we were created by God, there is no way we were meant to function, no form of life that is proper to our nature as creatures in God's image. This can be seen in Georgetown Philosopher Tom Beauchamp's attempt to protect a relativistic view of the good from certain obvious problems. Beauchamp discusses the view within our purview, viz., that the good is whatever satisfies the relativistic preferences freely chosen by individuals.[5] Beauchamp recognizes that if everyone happened to prefer certain horrible desired satisfactions (e.g., regularly fondling children) then this would have to count as the good on this definition. Beauchamp responds by saying that the good should be redefined as whatever satisfies the relativistic preferences freely chosen by individuals if they are choosing rationally, i.e., if they are functioning properly in their choices. Unfortunately, rationality for Beauchamp does not mean choosing the way we ought to choose, or the way we were designed to choose since this would be circular – the good would be defined in terms of choosing what we ought, but choosing what we ought would be defined as choosing what is really good. The only solution here is to say either that rational behavior is simply what is statistically regular among adults who grow up in a typical way in society or it is behavior that promotes the survival of the species. It should be obvious that this will not work. It is easy to conceive of possible worlds where most adults prefer to fondle children or where such behavior could have survival value. But in these possible worlds fondling children would still not constitute the life of virtue. Without a normative notion of proper functioning, the naturalist is stuck with problems like this.

Finally, many naturalists agree with atheist Kai Nielsen, who acknowledges that there is no answer to the question of why we should be moral. For Nielsen, the choice between adopting the moral point of view vs. living a life of pure selfishness in total disregard for morality and virtue is an arbitrary, non-rational choice.[6] But any view that reduces the difference in worth between the overall lifestyle of a greedy, hateful racist vs. the life of St. Benedict to being nothing more than an arbitrary choice like the one between being a fast-food lover vs. learning to play the tuba is deeply flawed. It is no wonder that moral chaos has resulted from the hegemony of naturalism among our cultural elites.

The Special, Equal Value of All Human Beings

It is a cherished belief of most people that human beings simply as such have equal value and rights and that they have significantly greater value than animals. However, this claim is difficult if not impossible to justify given a naturalist world view. For many naturalists, the best, and perhaps only way to justify the belief that all humans have equal and unique value simply as such is in light of the metaphysical grounding of the Judeo-Christian doctrine of the image of God.[7] Such a view depicts humans as substances with a human nature and for at least two reasons, that framework must be abandoned. For one thing, the progress of science has regularly shifted entities (e.g., heat) from the category of substance to the category of quality, relation, or quantity. Thus, there most likely is no such thing as a human nature, and talk of such should be understood solely within the categories of biology, chemistry, and physics and with a view of humans as mere ordered aggregates of parts.

Second, Darwin's theory of evolution has made belief in human nature, though logically possible, nevertheless, quite implausible. As E. Mayr has said: "The concepts of unchanging essences and of complete discontinuities between every *eidos* (type) and all others make genuine evolutionary thinking impossible. I agree with those who claim that the essentialist philosophies of Aristotle and Plato are incompatible with evolutionary thinking." [8] This belief has, in turn, led thinkers like David Hull to make the following observation: "The implications of moving species from the metaphysical category that can appropriately be characterized in terms of 'natures' to a category for which such characterizations are inappropriate are extensive and fundamental. If species evolve in anything like the way that Darwin thought they did, then they cannot possibly have the sort of natures that traditional philosophers claimed they did. If species in general lack natures, then so does *Homo Sapiens* as a biological species. If *Homo Sapiens* lacks a nature, then no reference to biology can be made to support one's claims about 'human nature.' Perhaps all people are 'persons,' share the same 'personhood,' etc., but such claims must be explicated and defended with no reference to biology. Because so many moral, ethical, and political theories depend on some notion or other of human nature, Darwin's theory brought into question all these theories. The implications are not entailments. One can always dissociate '*Homo Sapiens*' from human being,' but the result is a much less plausible position." [9]

Finally, this observation has led a number of thinkers to claim that the traditional sanctity of life view of human beings is guilty of speciesism (a racist, unjustified bias towards one's own biological classification) and to settle on personhood and not simply on being human, as constituting our locus of value. Thus, value resides in

personhood, not humanness. What is a person? A person is anything that satisfies the right list of criteria, e.g., has a self concept, can form meaningful relations with God or others, can use language, can formulate goals and plans, etc. There are two key implications of this view: 1) There can be human non persons (e.g., defective newborns, people in comas) and personal non-humans (e.g., orangutans) and the latter have more value than the former. 2) Since the features that constitute personhood can be possessed to a greater or lesser degree, then some individuals can be more of a person and, thus, have more rights and value than other individuals. In my view, 1) is false. Being a person is to being a human as being a color is to being red. There can be non-human persons (angels) but there can be no human non-persons just as there can be colored non-red things (blue things) but no red non-colored things.[10] Proposition 2) is one that naturalists have worked hard, and in my view, unsuccessfully, to avoid.[11] In any case, it should be clear that the high intrinsic and equal value of all human beings is easy to justify given Christian theism but they are hard to square with naturalism.

In sum, ideas matter. A culture cannot adopt any world view it chooses without having to face serious implications of that choice. Once the ethical implications of taking the naturalistic turn are laid bare, it becomes clear just exactly where a major source of our current moral chaos lies: the world view of naturalism.

ENDNOTES

¹ JL Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 115. Cf. J. P. Moreland, Kai Nielsen, *Does God Exist?* (Buffalo, N. Y.: Prometheus, 1993), chaps. 8-10.

² JL Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (N. Y.: Penguin Books, 1977). Cf. Louis Pojman, *Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1990).

³ See Callahan's statement and critique of this position in "Minimalist Ethics," *The Hastings Center Report* 11 (Oct. 1981): 19-25.

⁴ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 424-33.

⁵ Tom Beauchamp, *Philosophical Ethics* (NY: McGraw-Hill, 1982), pp. 84-86.

⁶ See JP Moreland, Kai Nielsen, *Does God Exist?* (Buffalo, N. Y.: Prometheus, 1993), pp. 97-135.

⁷ Helga Kuhse, Peter Singer, *Should the Baby Live?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 118-39.

⁸ E. Mayr, *Populations, Species, and Evolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970), p. 4.

⁹ David Hull, *The Metaphysics of Evolution* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1989), pp. 74-75.

¹⁰ Cf. JP Moreland, "Humanness, Personhood, and the Right to Die," *Faith and Philosophy* 12 (January 1995): 95-112; JP Moreland, Stan Wallace, "Aquinas vs. Descartes and Locke on the Human Person and End-of-Life Ethics," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 35 (September 1995): 319-30.

¹¹ For a response to the main naturalist attempt to avoid 2), see JP Moreland, John Mitchell, "Is the Human Person a Substance or Property-Thing?" *Ethics & Medicine* 11 (1995).