

The Convergence of Naturalism and Teleology

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Since Francis Bacon postulated the Baconian Method and helped spur the first scientific revolution, scientific understanding has flourished. Through multiple revolutions of science and technology, an increased understanding of the world has been built and theories to explain all kinds of phenomena, from the northern lights to the quark, have been developed. To this day, despite many advancements and societal changes, the Baconian method still drives new scientific discoveries. As a result, humans have come to know a vast amount of information about our world, have developed theories for many experiences, and seem to be within reach of explaining even that which currently escapes understanding. Consequently, the philosophy of naturalism has become increasingly popular. With the rise of naturalism, the debate surrounding the validity of teleology has also increased, leaving many wondering whether there is any purpose to an individual's human life. While many assume that naturalism eliminates the possibility of a teleologically ordered reality, it is possible for the two ideologies to exist in conjunction.

Naturalism is a point of view which claims reality is defined solely by nature, eliminating the existence of supernatural forces. Its methodological component promotes the scientific method as an authority and benchmark for knowledge and justification. This implies the theory of causal closure (Papineau, 2016). Causal closure, put simply, requires that physical effects have purely physical causes. Therefore, if the natural reality is all which exists, it must have only natural causes. This frames the argument as one in which, to fully embrace naturalism in its purest sense, one must acknowledge the claim of a purely physical existence wherein everything, even the abstract such as morality, mathematics, and emotions, have a physical existence. At first glance, this might seem counterintuitive. However, it could be stated that because morality and emotions are inspired by physical events, every action taken as a result of these formed worldviews have a physical cause, upholding causal closure. Similar arguments could be made

for mathematics due to its equinumerical connection with the physical (Papineau 2016). While it may be possible to overcome the hurdle of abstraction to accept naturalism, the teleological component can be difficult to understand.

If the natural world is all that exists, without any supernatural or other externally involved sources or causes, then an intelligent designer and a designed mission does not exist for an individual person. This raises debate regarding the validity of purpose. The question, “What is the meaning of life?” is one that is asked throughout the world and speaks to the yearning of the human person for a reason for being. In addition, purpose¹ exists in most facets of nature itself. The ecosystem only works because each of its components performs its role, keeping the whole in harmony. The same could be said of biological organisms, with each organ fulfilling a particular duty (Haught, 2006). Einstein himself recorded his belief in some purpose, citing his duty to work to provide for society some small measure of what it had provided for him. He also mentions the unfortunate life he thinks people who don’t believe in purpose must lead (Einstein 2016). In this sense, he introduces one of several oppositions to the idea of purpose – that purpose is a human construct used in order to lead happy lives. However, it is important that the idea of purpose is not that of a pre-ordained plan each person must follow, but is more literally the “actualizing of value” (Haught 2016). In this way, purpose is more accurately the movement towards the attainment of some good.

Using the perspective of purpose as the pursuit of a good rather than a divined plan maintains the ability of purpose to be logically reasonable even within the context of naturalism. Many of the opposing arguments to teleology have to do with scientific discoveries upheld by naturalism. One of these is the increase of entropy. Proponents of this argument indicate that

¹ Purpose in the apparent sense in which something serves a particular function

because our universe is becoming increasingly disordered, it is a sign that we are not oriented towards any particular good. Davies proposes that this increase in entropy is not disorder in a chaotic sense, but rather an increase in organized complexity (Davies, 2005). His view is supported when one looks around Earth. Three thousand years ago, Earth had less entropy, however it did not have many of the sophisticated technological innovations that we've developed over the past millennia which many would argue have contributed towards societal progress. It is further supported by the theory of evolution, which, despite its lack of ability to anticipate the future, has still demonstrated a trend towards organisms of increased complexity, from microbes to mammals. An alternate explanation to this phenomenon would be that we live in one of an infinite number of universes, meaning one of those universes, perhaps this reality, would chance upon this confluence of phenomena. While this is logically possible, it is argumentatively equivalent to naïve theism (Davies, 2005) because it can be neither verified nor falsified, making it difficult to justify. It is clear that while the naturalistic perspective may eliminate the possibility of intelligent design, it does not eliminate the possibility of a teleological existence.

The founding principle of naturalism is that it comes to understand and know reality through the application of the scientific method to the physical world. This entire practice centers on the idea that it is good to pursue and understand the truth — a purpose by definition. To deny the connection between teleology and naturalism would mean to claim that truth is not a good being sought through investigations involving the scientific method. To admit this would mean to support the pointlessness of the very process which naturalists claim is the metric by which factuality can be determined. Therefore, it is clear that while many may believe that naturalism

eliminates the potential for purpose to exist, purpose is actually at the foundation of naturalistic approaches to life.

References

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