Naturalism and Theism as Competing Traditions

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1. INTRODUCTION

Some would think it strange to raise the question of the success of naturalism because in so many ways naturalism has been a merely negative position, and still remains surprisingly difficult to define positively: Should it be in terms of ontology or epistemology, and if epistemology is it explanation in terms of the physics of today or the ideal physics at the end of time? It is still *tempting*, is it not, to define it negatively, as a non-theistic or non-supernaturalistic worldview? Perhaps it could be defined epistemologically in terms of what could be comprehended by physics in the mind of an omniscient God—if only there were one.[1]

'Naturalism' is sometimes used interchangeably with 'materialism' and 'materialism' with 'physicalism'. With each of these terms there are two main sorts of theses being denied. One is theism (along with any additional supernatural beings such as angels and demons); the other is substantial dualism with regard to the person—no immaterial mind or soul. There is no reason at all to take physicalism or naturalism with regard to humans as tantamount to atheism, although surprisingly many seem to do so. As the

[1] The lack of clarity regarding that to which the term 'naturalism' refers can be seen by checking philosophical sources from different decades. For example, in John Passmore's *A Hundred Years of Philosophy* (1957) it is taken to refer to a small group of philosophers in the early twentieth century; compare this with the extensive list of philosophers and topics in the index of the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (1998).

title of this essay suggests, my concern here is strictly with the competition between theism and non-theism.[2]

Yet it is a mistake at this point in intellectual history to think of naturalism in this sense as *simply* the denial of the existence of God, rather than in terms of competing worldviews, as in a debate I heard between Richard Dawkins and Simon Conway Morris. Dawkins exclaimed that he and Conway Morris understood the science exactly the same and Dawkins kept asking Conway Morris why he insisted on adding God to it. The position that I shall take in this essay is that naturalism should be seen as a *tradition* in its own right, beginning with David Hume's corpus, and perhaps also with Baron d'Holbach's *System of Nature* (1770), which presented a systematic treatment of the world as a whole, humanity's place in it, immortality, the structure of society. The tradition includes others' accounts of the origins of religion; later Karl Marx's, Sigmund Freud's, and Friedrich Nietzsche's explanations of the persistence of religion; and a variety of later theories of ethics basing morality on human reasoning as opposed to divine will. Richard Dawkins, E. O. Wilson, Daniel Dennett, and others are current contributors to this tradition.

So, in contrast to the approaches taken by philosophers of religion for the past few centuries, the tenability of theism is not to be approached by attempting to construct relatively brief arguments for the existence of God. Instead it depends on finding criteria for rational comparison of large-scale traditions such as this relatively new naturalist tradition and one or more of the older theistic traditions. I shall draw upon resources from Alasdair MacIntyre to consider what it would take to make such a comparison.

My plan, then, will be first to present MacIntyre's somewhat technical description of a tradition and his account of how it is possible (sometimes) to make rational adjudications between competing traditions—despite the fact that each usually incorporates its own standards of rationality and accounts of truth. In part this involves examining the intellectual crises each has faced and the extent to which each has or has not been able to overcome them. Next, I look at what I take to be the most serious crises Christian theism has faced in the modern period and note its progress in addressing them. Finally, I shall describe naturalism as a developing

[2] I have argued for a physicalist account of the person in my 2006.

tradition and raise questions about the crises that naturalists ought to be worrying about.

2. MACINTYRE ON THE CHARACTER AND COMPARISON OF LARGE-SCALE TRADITIONS

So far I have been using the word ‘tradition’ in its ordinary, non-technical sense. I now want to introduce it as a philosophical term of art, as developed by MacIntyre. Although he disclaims being an epistemologist, I have long been promoting his as the most sophisticated account of human rationality to date. However, I often find my audiences unimpressed. While this may be due to the obscurity of my writing or to the fact that his lengthy and dense books do not compress well, I also suspect that his achievement can best be appreciated against the background of the philosophy of science of the 1970s, with which many in my audiences are unfamiliar. I expect that many readers of this volume do know this history. The rationale for reading him in this light is the fact that he offered an early account of his epistemological insights in an article titled “Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science” (1977/1989). Here he replied to Thomas Kuhn’s philosophy of science (1970) and noted shortcomings in Imre Lakatos’s response to Kuhn (Lakatos 1970). I shall come back to this shortly.

The primary stimulus for further development of these epistemological insights came from his work in philosophical ethics. In *After Virtue* he argued that moral positions could not be evaluated apart from traditions of moral enquiry. Yet, without a means of showing one such tradition to be rationally superior to its competitors, moral relativism would follow (1984). In two succeeding books he has elaborated his concept of a tradition and shown by example the possibilities for such comparative judgments (1988; 1990).

Traditions generally originate with an authority of some sort, usually a text or set of texts. (Recall the role of classic texts in Kuhn’s paradigms.) The tradition develops by means of successive attempts to interpret and apply the texts in new contexts. Application is essential: traditions are

socially embodied in the life stories of the individuals and communities who share them, in institutions, and social practices.[3]

(Think of Kuhn's standard experimental practices, normal science, the role of the community.) A large-scale tradition, as already mentioned, also incorporates its own theories of knowledge. For example MacIntyre points out the contrast between the epistemologies embedded in the Augustinian and Thomist traditions of the middle ages, one a Platonic epistemology altered by Augustine's doctrine of original sin; the other Aristotelian. Thus, working *within* a given tradition there will be widely agreed practices and standards for justifying claims. The difficult and more interesting question is the one addressed here: how to justify these practices and standards themselves. Finally such traditions, providing the essentials of an entire worldview, incorporate some account of ultimate reality, which sheds light on the question of the meaning of life and provides a foundation for ethics.

MacIntyre ironically characterizes Enlightenment thought as the tradition of traditionless reason. In contrast, he argues that all rationality is essentially tradition dependent. Outside of all traditions, one is morally and intellectually bankrupt. But must this *not* lead to radical relativism? Where could one stand to judge one tradition rationally superior to another? It is time to return to the relation between MacIntyre's insights and the philosophy of science.

Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* was criticized by many as presenting an irrationalist account of science. Lakatos responded with what he thought was a more rationalist account of scientific methodology. He argued that one could choose between competing research programs on the basis of one being more progressive than its rival (1970). Paul Feyerabend countered that this criterion is inapplicable because sometimes degenerating programs suddenly become progressive again, so one never knows when it is rational to give it up (1970, 215). I believe I am not alone in judging that Lakatos never gave a satisfactory answer to this challenge.

MacIntyre's insight is to point out that there may actually be an asymmetry between the rivals. From the point of view of one program it may be possible to explain *why* the other program failed, and failed *at just*

[3] MacIntyre says that his technical notion of a practice serves the same role in his philosophy as do language games in Wittgenstein's. (Conversation, May 14, 1996).

the point it did. One example is the competition between the Copernican and Ptolemaic programs. The crisis to which Galileo responded involved inconsistencies of Ptolemaic astronomy with both Platonic astronomical ideals and Aristotelian physics. The latter was inconsistent with empirical findings on terrestrial motions. Galileo resolved the crisis by reconceiving astronomy and mechanics, and in the process redefined the place of experiment in natural science. At last, the history of late medieval science could be cast into a coherent narrative. In general, MacIntyre says:

> The criterion of a successful theory is that it enables us to understand its predecessors in a newly intelligible way. It, at one and the same time, enables us to understand precisely why its predecessors have to be rejected or modified and also why, without and before its illumination, past theory could have remained credible. It introduces new standards for evaluating the past. It recasts the narrative which constitutes the continuous reconstruction of the scientific tradition. (1977/1989, 146)

What the scientific genius, such as Galileo, achieves in this transition, then, is not only a new way of understanding nature, but also and inseparably a new way of understanding the old science's way of understanding nature. The new science is taken to be more adequate than the old because it is only from the standpoint of the new science that the inadequacies of the old science can be characterized.

> It is from the standpoint of the new science that the continuities of narrative history are re-established. (1977/1989, 152)

Thus, MacIntyre claims that scientific reason turns out to be subordinate to, and intelligible only in terms of, historical reason, and criticizes Kuhn for failing to highlight these narrative connections between successive paradigms.

MacIntyre's concern in his three volumes on philosophical ethics (1984; 1988; 1990) was to rejuvenate the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition of virtue ethics and to argue for its rational superiority to both the Enlightenment tradition and what he calls the genealogical tradition—Nietzsche and his followers. In the process he developed an account of the possibilities for rational adjudication between such large-scale traditions. The comparison depends on there being participants within the traditions with enough

empathy and imagination to understand the rival tradition's point of view in its own terms. All mature traditions face epistemological crises such as incoherence, new experience that cannot be explained, or simple inability to advance their enquiries beyond a certain point. Thus, one aspect of the adjudication between competing traditions is to construct a narrative account of each tradition: of the crises it has encountered and how it has or has not overcome them. Has it been possible to reformulate the tradition in such a way that it overcomes its crises without losing its identity? Comparison of these narratives may show that one tradition is clearly superior to another: it may become apparent that one tradition is making progress while its rival has become sterile. Echoes of Lakatos here. The important *asymmetry,* though, results when the superior tradition provides resources to characterize and explain the failings and defects of the other more adequately than the protagonists of the failing tradition are able to do.

The central claim of this essay is that the question of theism versus naturalism needs to be reformulated in terms of rival traditions. I shall try to show that naturalism is something like a MacIntyrean tradition, perhaps now with important subtraditions within it, just as there are within Christianity. I say "something like" because most adherents of naturalism do not spend their time re-interpreting and applying Hume's texts. However, within the subtraditions of Marxism and Freudianism there certainly has been this feature.

The competition for this 'tradition' cannot be understood in terms of naturalism versus theism in general, much less religion in general, but rather in terms of specific theistic or other religious traditions. So in the remainder of this essay I shall focus on modern Western Christianity.

3. CRISES IN CHRISTIANITY

In this section I shall list the intellectual crises facing modern Western Christianity that I take to be the most significant and note briefly what sorts of moves are presently being made in Christian scholarship to meet them. All would agree that the following are at least *among* the most significant. I shall list them in what I take to be their order of significance. The first is what I shall simply call the epistemological problem: How, if at all, can the Christian belief system be justified? Second and closely related

is the problem of religious pluralism: How can one claim that Christianity is true when confronted with the conflicting claims of other religions? Third, the problem of natural evil: If God is all good and all powerful, how is this to be reconciled with all of the suffering of humans and animals that is *not* caused by human misdeeds? Finally, what about the real or perceived conflicts between Christian teachings and science?

3.1. The Epistemological Problem

I believe that Princeton philosopher Jeffrey Stout has given the most incisive account of the onset of Christianity's epistemological crisis in his book *The Flight from Authority: Religion, Morality, and the Quest for Autonomy* (1981). He argues that the most significant epistemological change at the dawn of modernity involved a change in the meaning of the word 'probable.' Medieval thinkers distinguished between *scientia* and *opinio. Scientia* was a concept of knowledge modeled on geometry; *opinio* was a lesser but still respectable category of knowledge, not certain but probable. But for them 'probable' meant subject to approbation, theses approved by one or more authorities. Theological knowledge would obviously fare well in this system, being that which is approved by the highest authority of all, namely God.

However, the multiplication of authorities that occurred in conjunction with the Reformation made resort to authority a useless criterion for settling disputes. The transition to our modern sense of probable knowledge depended on recognition that the *probity* of an authority could be judged on the basis of *frequency* of past reliability. Here we see one of our modern senses of 'probability' intertwined with the medieval sense. Furthermore, if nature itself has testimony to give, then the testimony of a witness may be compared with the testimony nature has given in the past. Thus one may distinguish between internal and external facts pertaining to a witness's testimony to the occurrence of an event: external facts have to do with the witness's personal characteristics; internal facts have to do with the character of the event itself, that is, with the frequency of events of that sort. Given the "problem of many authorities" created by the Reformation, the task increasingly became one of deciding which authorities could be believed, and the new sense of probability—of

resorting to internal evidence—gradually came to predominate, making external evidence, the testimony of witnesses, count as evidence only at second remove. The transition from authority to internal evidence was complete.

Stout traces the fate of theism after this epistemological shift. The argument from design was reformulated in such a way that the order of the universe only supplies empirical evidence for God's existence, not proof, as it had in the Middle Ages. In addition, in an early stage of development it became necessary to provide evidence for the truth (that is, revealed status) of Scripture as a whole. If such evidence could be found, then the content of Scripture could be asserted as true. In a later stage it was asked why the new canons of probable reasoning should not be applied to the various contents of Scripture themselves. Here is where the challenge of higher criticism made its mark. Historian Claude Welch writes that by the beginning of the nineteenth century the question was not merely *how* theology is possible, but whether theology is possible *at all* (1972, 59). Stout's prognosis is grim: theologians must either seek some vindication for religion and theology outside of the cognitive domain or else pay the price of becoming intellectually isolated from and irrelevant to the host culture.

My own view is much less pessimistic. I have argued (1990) that theology's failure in the past to meet modern standards of justification is due not to the irrationality of theology but to the fact that modern *theories* of rationality have been too crude to do justice to theological reasoning[4] — and not only to theology, but to scientific reasoning as well. To support this latter claim, consider reactions to Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions.* Kuhn showed that scientific practice at its best not only did not measure up to, but actually violated the methodological norms of then-

[4] I argue that theological schools come very close to fitting Lakatos's description of scientific research programmes. They are organized around a core thesis, generally about the nature of God. They have auxiliary hypotheses that are subject to change (doctrines), and draw upon their own sorts of evidence, some scriptural and some empirical. The empirical data include religious experience and historical events. Comparable to Lakatos's and Kuhn's theories of instrumentation, theologians and Christian practitioners have a theory of discernment to judge which putative religious experiences are genuine and thus provide legitimate data for theology.

current theories in the philosophy of science. There were two possible conclusions one could draw: either science is irrational or else the positivists' theories of rationality were inadequate. Philosophers of science have largely taken the second point of view. Only now do we have theories of human reasoning that are (in Paul Feyerabend's terms) "sly and sophisticated enough" to do justice to the complexity of scientific reasoning. I would say all the more so with regard to theological reasoning. So, I claim, the resources are now available, largely in MacIntyre's work, to solve the epistemological crisis.

3.2. Religious Pluralism

The problem of religious pluralism is one already noted by Hume in the eighteenth century, but the modern study of comparative religion did not begin until approximately 1870 (Welch 1985, 104). There have been a variety of Christian responses. One important strategy, beginning already with Friedrich Schleiermacher in 1799, is the claim that all religions are external expressions of a universal awareness of the divine. Early versions often argued that the Christian expression was superior to the others. Another strategy, begun with Max Mueller's response to the 1893 World Parliament of Religions is to claim that all of the major religions in fact have more in common than they have differences.

My own reading of the current situation is that the (supposedly) impartial study of religion has been for some time disconnected from the pursuit of Christian theology. However, there is a recent and still somewhat small resurgence of interest in giving a Christian *theological* account of religious pluralism that is both appreciative of the other religions and capable of reconciling their existence with the truth of at least the general outlines of Christian teaching. Keith Ward, recently retired Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford, is a notable example (Ward 1994; 1996; 1998).

Despite the likely opprobrium from the academy, my own approach would be to see them as competing clusters of traditions in need of the MacIntyrean treatment that I am proposing for Christianity and naturalism. One can raise questions such as the following. Christianity has (with some difficulty, to be discussed below) managed to adapt to and incorporate the

findings of modern science. Can the other major religions do so as well? I had the privilege of attending the First International Congress on Dialogue between Science and Religion in Tehran in 2006. I believe it is too soon to tell whether Islamic traditions will be able to make this adjustment. For example, I raised the question of whether Islam could, like Christianity, incorporate a physicalist account of human nature in order to accord with contemporary biology and neuroscience. There was not a great deal of optimism expressed. If it is not possible to make such adjustments I, and many Islamic scholars as well, would count this an intellectual crisis.

3.3. Natural Evil

It has always been a part of Christian thought to consider how to understand the relation between the goodness of God and the immensity of human suffering, but it is only in the modern period that the problem of evil could be said to be of crisis proportions. Hume pointed out that if order and goodness were to be taken as evidence for a designer, then disorder and evil must be counter-evidence. The Lisbon earthquake led to mockery of G. W. F. Leibniz's famous thesis that this must be the best of all possible worlds.

There are a number of distinctions to be drawn regarding the problem of evil. There is one between the logical and evidential problems. Is the existence of evil logically inconsistent with the statements that God is omnipotent and all-good, thus falsifying traditional theism, or does it merely count as evidence against God's existence? Second, it has long been common to distinguish among three kinds of evil: first is moral evil, that is, human sin; second is natural evil, that is, suffering of humans and animals due to natural causes; and third is metaphysical evil, that is, the trying sorts of limitations to which humans are subject.

Moral evil is relatively easy to reconcile with God's goodness on the assumption that humans just *will* misuse their freedom and that freedom is a necessary condition for the kind of relation that God offers.

In earlier centuries of Christianity, natural evil was explained as a consequence of human sin. When Adam and Eve sinned, they brought upon themselves and the whole human race punishments in the form of disease and natural disasters. Not only that, their sin (or perhaps that of

angels who fell before them) disordered God's previously perfect cosmos, causing natural disasters and suffering for both humans and animals.

Now, however, with an evolutionary account of human origins and no concept of a historic fall, the question remains as to why innocent humans and animals are subject to so much suffering. The simple answer, of course, is that it comes largely from the ordinary working of the laws of nature. When children fall from trees, their bones break because of the force of gravity. Tsunamis are the result of earthquakes, and earthquakes are the result of plate techtonics.

But, one might ask, could the laws of nature not be different so that there is less suffering? Leibniz had already noted that the more we know about the world the more we realize that it is not possible to change one thing without changing others. He would thus be pleased by a recent development in science. This is what I shall call the anthropic calculations, which show that extremely slight changes in any of the constants or basic laws of physics would produce a universe unsuitable for life. Thus, it is possible now to argue that the laws of nature have to be almost exactly what they are in order for there to be life. The suffering that is caused by their operation can be seen as a necessary by-product of conditions built into creation in order that there be creatures who could respond freely and lovingly to God (see Murphy, Russell and Stoeger 2007).

The second law of thermodynamics is interesting because of its relevance to metaphysical evil. This law represents a limitation on the varieties of processes that could occur according to the other laws of physics. Thus, the effects of entropy limiting human and animal life are everywhere: the need for food; the need for clothing and shelter to conserve energy; fatigue; aging; and ultimately death. These limitations in human life are not moral evils, but certainly provide much of the motive for sin, from instances simply of being too tired to do a good deed, to robbery, murder, and many wars. Entropy plays a major role in causing suffering as well: hunger pangs, certain forms of disease, predation.

There are a number of other issues that complicate this problem, which I shall not go into here, such as the question of divine intervention to protect people from natural disasters. Nonetheless, I believe that the "necessary by-product" defense sketched here is a genuine advance in resolving this critical problem.

3.4. The Rise of Modern Science

Many conservative Christians, particularly in the U. S., and many non-religious scientists believe that science and religion are essentially incompatible, and of course this is based largely on the Galileo affair and on past and present controversies over teaching evolution in schools. However, these two cases were not *intellectual* crises. Or if they were, they were very short-lived. Even quite conservative theologians quickly found ways to integrate evolutionary theory into their accounts of creation (Livingstone 1987). I include the rise of modern science as an intellectual crisis, though, for two reasons. First, it went hand in hand with the epistemological changes detailed earlier, which constituted what I believe to have been the most severe crisis for the Christian tradition.

Second, modern physics, particularly after Newton, presented a metaphysical picture of the cosmos as a closed causal order operating on the basis of natural laws. This created a problem for understanding God's role in earthly affairs once the universe had been created. Deism was a popular option: God has no ongoing role. Liberal theologians gave up on all notions of *special* divine action—that is, miracles, answers to prayer, and so forth. Insofar as an event seems to be a special act of God, this is only because subjectively it reveals God's purposes more than the others. God's ongoing action is limited to upholding the whole natural order.

Conservative theologians object that the removal of God from history essentially guts Christianity of its meaning, and contend that the author of nature can and does intervene in the natural order. There is a lively discussion among scholars interested in the relation between Christian theology and science as to whether it is possible to give an account of special divine action without supposing that God violates the laws of nature. I believe that this is still an open question.

I do not believe that the problem of divine action, however, is itself of crisis proportions. Rather, I see the *perception* of the problem to be at the root of the development of liberal theology, and I sympathize with those for whom the liberal form of Christianity is so uninteresting as not to be worth getting out of bed for on Sunday morning. The revolution initiated by Schleiermacher was to interpret all religious language, including Scripture and doctrine, as expressions of human religious awareness. In the

hands of later and lesser thinkers, this is sometimes *all* that Christianity is about. Stout's quip regarding this type of theology: it is "giving the atheist less and less in which to disbelieve" (1981, 148). So there has been a sense in liberal Christian academia of having reached something of a dead end. This, rather than the problem of divine action itself, is the real crisis; liberal theologians have, in MacIntyre's words, found themselves unable to advance their enquiries beyond a certain point.

Enough said about the trials and tribulations of Christian scholarship. This should be enough to illustrate an important claim that MacIntyre makes against relativists. Relativists are likely to assume that proponents of one tradition will always see problems with rival traditions but be blind to problems with their own. This is certainly not the case, and many serious thinkers have judged one or more of these crises to be irresolvable and have rejected the tradition as a whole.

4. THE BIRTH OF THE MODERN NATURALIST TRADITION

James Turner makes a startling claim in his highly regarded book *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (1985). He argues that disbelief was *not* a live option in the U. S. until roughly between 1865 and 1890. This is surprising because we are all aware of proofs for the existence of God going back through the Middle Ages to ancient Greek philosophers. I shall not comment on the ideas available in the ancient period; however, it has recently become common to see medieval philosophers and theologians as *not* intending to persuade atheists to believe in God — since there were none — but rather as engaging in the much more modest task of showing that reason could justify belief in a God already accepted on other grounds and for other reasons. The so-called medieval synthesis made God so central to all branches of knowledge and all spheres of culture that it was *in*conceivable that God does *not* exist.

I have already described the difficulties created for theologians by the rejection of authority as a proper epistemological category. The irony is that the change can be traced back to Christians themselves for not being able to settle their differences after the Reformation. The source of agnosticism can also be traced to the Reformation. If one thinks of the

agnostic not as one who simply has not formed a judgment on the existence of God, but rather as one who has concluded that human reason is incapable of making such a judgment, the story traces back to Catholic apologists in the Renaissance such as Michel de Montaigne. These apologists revived ancient skeptical methods to show that there is no rational way to decide between Protestant and Catholic claims. Therefore the only sensible course of action is to stay within the established (that is, Catholic) faith. The availability of these skeptical arguments helped pave the way for atheism, of course: if one cannot tell whether the Protestant or Catholic or Jewish version is correct, then maybe none is (Popkin 2003, ch. 3). But a variety of other factors were needed to justify a positive rejection of religious belief.

Philosopher Merold Westphal helpfully distinguishes two sorts of atheism (1993). One he calls evidential atheism, well represented by Bertrand Russell's account of what he'd say if he were to meet God and God asked why he had not been a believer: Not enough evidence God! Not enough evidence! Given the difficulties already noted in adapting theological reasoning to modern canons of rationality, this response is readily understandable.

But if religious claims are false then one needs an *explanation* of why they are so widely believed; just as, if there are no witches, we want to know what caused people to believe there were. David Hume in Britain and Baron d'Holbach in France in the eighteenth century began the attempt to explain the origin of religion naturalistically. They argued that religion is a response to fear of the unknown, coupled with superstitious attempts to control or propitiate unseen powers. Such attempts continue today, as I shall note later.

But why does religion persist in the modern world, now that we understand natural causes? The explanations here come from Westphal's second variety of atheists, the masters of suspicion. Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud practice the hermeneutics of suspicion, the

> attempt to expose the self-deceptions involved in hiding our actual operative motives from ourselves, individually or collectively, in order not to notice (. . .) how much our beliefs are shaped by values we profess to disown. (Westphal 1993, 13)

These three develop their suspicion with primary emphasis, respectively, on political economics, bourgeois morality, and psycho-sexual development, but each also subjects the religion of Christendom to devastating critique.

Two further steps were needed to make atheism a truly viable position. It would be possible to say that religion may be an illusion, but a harmless or even beneficial illusion in that it shores up morality. So two sorts of arguments were needed. One sort was to show that religion did not serve to reveal anything about the moral order that we could not get just as well by the use of human reason. Most of the work in philosophical ethics during the modern period had this as its aim. The other was to adduce historical evidence to the effect that religion has, in fact, promoted the worst evils in history—or at least more evil than good.

So within the space of two and a half centuries, roughly from 1650 to 1890, unbelief has become a live possibility. But, as I said at the beginning, this is not merely the excision of God from an otherwise common worldview, but rather the slow development of a *rival* tradition alongside the various theistic traditions and subtraditions.

Recall that a tradition, as I am using the word, is essentially a worldview, thought of in terms of its historical development. As such, it incorporates an account of ultimate reality and an account of what is most important in human life. The latter is essential as a foundation for ethics. It also involves an epistemology. A tradition is socially embodied in social practices and institutions. Let us consider some of these practices.

One might not think of the discipline of history as a naturalist practice, but one of Hume's chief philosophical and historical goals was to supplant the traditional Christian story line of creation, fall, and redemption by a new unity of action based along secular and humanistic lines. His six volume *History of England* was written from a purely secular point of view in order to show that history can be understood perfectly well without the "prophetic-providential" mode of interpretation that was common in his day (Livingston 1984). Now even Christian historians practice their craft on the basis of naturalist assumptions.

It is probably fair to say that the most important practices and institutions embodying the naturalist worldview are found in science. After the demise of the physico-theologies of the seventeenth century, the natural

sciences began to be distinguished from natural theology. Amos Funkenstein credits Immanuel Kant with the most systematic and complex endeavor “to emancipate science from its theological baggage” (1986, 346).

These are practices parallel to those of Christian scholars. There are also now secular versions of practices that used to belong solely to the church, such as marriage by a justice of the peace. A legal system has been developed that is independent of canon law. Psychotherapy competes with spiritual direction.

The naturalist account of ultimate reality, of course, is the universe itself. It is interesting that some naturalists give this thesis a religious tone and salvific trappings. For example, Carl Sagan offers a peculiar mix of science and what can only be called ‘naturalistic religion’. He begins with biology and cosmology but then uses concepts drawn from science to fill in what are essentially religious categories—categories, by the way, that fall into a pattern surprisingly isomorphic with the Christian conceptual scheme. He has a concept of ultimate reality: The Universe is all that is or ever was or ever will be. He has an account of ultimate origins: Evolution with a capital E. He has an account of the origin of sin: the primitive reptilian structure in the brain, which is responsible for territoriality, sex drive, and aggression. His account of salvation is gnostic in character — that is, it assumes that salvation comes from knowledge. The knowledge in question is scientific knowledge, perhaps advanced by contact with extra-terrestrial life forms who are more advanced than we. Sagan’s account of ethics is based on the worry that the human race will destroy itself. So the telos of human life is simply survival. Morality consists in overcoming our tendencies to see others as outsiders; knowledge of our intrinsic relatedness as natural beings (we are all made of the same star dust) can overcome our reptilian characteristics (Ross 1985).

Richard Dawkins offers a naturalistic account of the meaning of life: he believes in a universe indifferent to human preoccupations, one in which the good life involves pursuing all sorts of closer, warmer, human ambitions and perceptions,” including especially “the feeling and awed wonder that science can give us. . . .”

This is

> one of the highest experiences of which the human psyche is capable. It is a deep aesthetic passion to rank with the finest that music and poetry can deliver. It is truly one of the things that makes life worth living and it does so, if anything, more effectively if it convinces us that the time we have for living is finite. (1998, x)

Mary Midgley's book, *Science as Salvation* (1992) provides an extended argument and set of examples to support the claim that naturalism is more than a philosophical position allied with the sciences themselves, but is rather a worldview and a way of life, with its own mythology and ultimate values.

Now, if I have made my point that we think of naturalism as a something like a MacIntyrean tradition, can we show that it is facing any major crises? I shall propose two possibilities: one is the explanation of the persistence of religion now that we are all supposed to know of its primitive origins and the disguised motives that have kept us in its thrall. The other is providing an adequate account of the moral binding-ness, to coin a term, of morality.

4.1. Explaining Religion's Persistence

I have claimed that two necessary tasks for the naturalist tradition have been to explain the origin of religion and also its persistence now that the ignorance upon which its origins are presumed to be based has been surpassed. Hume and others offered explanations of the origin of religion from the beginning of the naturalist tradition, and I am not sure that there have been any improvements here. The work of Pascal Boyer is currently receiving considerable attention. One of Boyer's theses is that religious concepts are informed by very general assumptions from what he calls domain concepts such as person, living thing, man-made object. However, they violate usual inferences regarding these concepts. A spirit or ghost is a special kind of person that is disembodied and can go through walls. The generality of these domain specific concepts explains why similar religious concepts appear in widely different cultures (2003).

For Comte and Marx, religion was supposed to fade away as society developed. So I believe that the interesting question is whether there is an

adequate explanation to be found for the persistence of religion. And there is a self-referential twist here. I begin my education as an intelligent believer (if that is not an oxymoron). I attend college and am exposed to the causal explanations for my belief. Should that not make me as suspicious of my own belief as the masters of suspicion are themselves of the beliefs of others? Should I not then examine my own motives, and might I not find that, say, Freud is right? Yet one of the most sympathetic treatments of Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche is by Westphal, an evangelical Protestant, in a book that he wrote *for Christians,* and suggested *as a Lenten meditation!*

There are certainly explanations of religion to be found today that are by comparison to the old masters, less sophisticated: Dawkins's, for example (1998). Freud's explanation is based on his estimation of human life as constant conflict between the individual's most powerful drives and the worlds of both nature and culture. Culture demands restrictions on impulses, and nature ultimately destroys us through sickness, aging, and death. Religious doctrines are illusions, beliefs induced because they fulfill deep-seated desires. The desire is for an all-powerful and benevolent father who will compensate us in another life for the permanent internal unhappiness that we experience in this one.

According to Dawkins, religious belief held into adulthood is a function of the person not getting over the necessary gullibility of children that allows them to be apt learners, combined with the tendency children have to retain rigidly the lessons that have been drilled into them.

Freud and Dawkins are both influenced by James Frazer's thesis about the origins of religious ceremonies. Frazer traces them to symbolic or representational thinking wherein causal connections are expected between things that resemble one another. While Dawkins merely repeats Frazer's thesis, Freud's very complex theory involves insights into the way believers acknowledge small sins and atone for them as a means of hiding from themselves their deep and total sinfulness.

Two significant new moves in the tradition are attempts to explain religion neurobiologically and by means of cognitive science. The first I see as highly questionable. The second requires much more serious evaluation.

Brain scans of subjects in prayer have received a great deal of press, but make the mistake of confusing one very unusual sort of religious experience with the whole of religion. There was a fine article on neurotheology by Sharon Begley in *Newsweek* magazine several years ago (2001). It was followed by a critical response by Kenneth Woodward, whose main point is that it is a mistake to confuse spiritual experiences of any sort with religion (2001): "Losing one's self in prayer," he says,

> may feel (. . .) uplifting, but these emotions have nothing to do with how well we communicate with God. In fact, (. . .) the sense that God is absent is no less valid than the experience of divine presence. The sheer struggle to pray may be more authentic than the occasional feeling that God is close. (. . .) Neurotheologians also confuse spirituality with religion. But doing the will of God (. . .) involves much more than prayer and meditation. To see Christ in the person of an AIDS victim or to really love one's enemy does not necessitate a special alteration in the circuits of the brain. (. . .) In short, religion comprehends a whole range of acts and insights that acknowledge a transcendent order without requiring a transcendent experience.

However, if the neurotheologians have too narrow a concept of religion or religious experience, so too have theologians themselves for the past century or more, along with spiritual writers and earlier scientific students of religion. In contrast, a number of contemporary writers, such as Catholic theologian Nicholas Lash, want to deny that there is *any particular* "division of life" which is the privileged place of our encounter with God. Religion that is "something real" arises whenever humans have God in mind with the might of their being (1986).

Another new movement in the study of religion is the application of the tools of cognitive science. An impressive contributor here is Harvey Whitehouse (2004). Much of the study of religion has taken an implicit approach, that is, attempting to explain religious representations in terms of various functions that the devotees themselves would not recognize. Whitehouse sees some value in this sort of work, but emphasizes that the explicit content of religious ideas must be taken into account as well. Religious representations need to be understood in part on the basis of universal cognitive "hardware" but also on the basis of the mechanisms

that account for the selective spread and retention of religious representations.

Whitehouse has worked out a clear distinction between what he calls imagistic and doctrinal forms of religion. The imagistic clearly appeared first in human history; it is found among small cohesive groups and is characterized by infrequently repeated and highly emotionally arousing rituals. Doctrinal religion is usually practiced by larger, less intensely related groups, and involves complex semantic schemas. The hold of imagistic religion on its members comes largely from the huge personal cost of the initiations members have gone through and the "revelations" they have had in attempting to find meaning in that experience. Persistence in the doctrinal mode depends initially on rhetorically compelling prophets or preachers, but to be maintained must be reinforced by repetition that is neither too lax nor too oppressive.

It is not possible here to convey the detail and subtlety of Whitehouse's work or that of others in the cognitivist school. It is certainly the case that this research program needs to be taken seriously before it would be possible to claim that the persistence of religion cannot be explained naturalistically.

4.2. Ethics

If the modern naturalist tradition began with Hume and his arguments against the necessity of postulating God to uphold morality, then we may be coming full circle. Two of the most respected philosophical ethicists of this generation have concluded that modern moral reasoning is in a state of disorder and that the disorder could be mended by returning to a theistic justification. In a thin volume with the modest title *Morality*, Bernard Williams surveys the major approaches to ethics from Antiquity to the present (1972). He finds most of them defective in that they are not capable of answering the question why be moral (at all)? However, there is also a sort of theory

> that (. . .) seeks to provide, in terms of the transcendental framework, something that man is for: if he understands properly his role in the basic scheme of things, he will see that there are some particular sorts of ends which are properly his and which he ought to realize. One archetypal form of such a view is the belief that

> man was created by a God who also has certain expectations of him (Williams 1972, 63).

However, he says, it has been practically a philosopher's platitude that even if a God did exist, this would make no difference to the situation of morality. But Williams believes this platitude to be based on mistaken reasoning:

> If God existed, there might well be special, and acceptable, reasons for subscribing to morality. (Williams 1972, 72)

Unfortunately, concludes Williams the atheist, the very concept of God is incoherent; religion itself is incurably unintelligible.

MacIntyre has taken very seriously the challenge of Nietzsche's critique of traditional morality, but finds little in modern thought with which to counter it. The development of theories in philosophical ethics from Hobbes at the beginning to the Bloomsbury group in the early twentieth century has been a failed attempt to provide a theoretical rationale for traditional morality. This has led him to conclude that modern moral discourse is in a grave state of disorder. He makes a pointed analogy: contemporary moral discourse is comparable to a simulacrum of science after a know-nothing regime has killed the scientists, burned the books and trashed the laboratories. Later, fragments of scientific texts are read and memorized, but there is no longer any recognition of the *point* of science (1984, 1f.).

Similarly, MacIntyre says, our moral language is a hold-over from the past, but we have forgotten the original point of morality. In particular we have forgotten the context that once gave it its meaning. What we moderns (and postmoderns) have lost is any notion of the ultimate purpose or *telos* of human life. Such accounts of the human *telos* used to be provided by traditions, usually religious traditions, but sometimes, as in Aristotle's case, by a metaphysical tradition. MacIntyre argues that the correct form of ethical claims is something like the following, conditional statement: "If you are to achieve your *telos*, then you ought to do x." It is a peculiar feature of modern Enlightenment views of ethics that their proper form has been taken to be apodictic: simply, "you ought to do x." Modern philosophers have developed competing theories regarding the most basic

moral claims: you ought to act so as to achieve the greatest good for the greatest number; versus: you ought to act so that the maxim of your action can be willed universally. But because morality is taken to be autonomous—that is, unrelated to other knowledge—there is no way to arbitrate between these most basic construals of the moral 'ought.' This impossibility results in the interminability of moral debates in our society. However, the interminability should not, says MacIntyre, be taken as the intrinsic nature of moral discourse, but ought rather to be seen as a sign that the entire Enlightenment project has taken a wrong turn.

If MacIntyre is correct in his claim that the original meaning of the moral 'ought' has been lost, it is not surprising that most modern moral theories have attempted to reduce morality to something else: pleasure, enlightened self-interest, sympathy, social convention. Of course, emotivism is the most radical reduction: moral judgments merely express one's attitudes or feelings toward an action or state of affairs.

The most recent attempts to account for ethics aim to reduce ethics to biology. E. O. Wilson says:

> Self-knowledge is constrained and shaped by the emotional control centers in the hypothalamus and limbic system of the brain. These centers flood our consciousness with all the emotions—hate, love, guilt, fear, and others—that are consulted by ethical philosophers who wish to intuit the standards of good and evil. What, we are then compelled to ask, made the hypothalamus and limbic system? They evolved by natural selection. That simple biological statement must be pursued to explain ethics and ethical philosophers. (1975, 153)

Michael Ruse presents a more sophisticated argument for evolutionary ethics than many of his predecessors (1986). He recognizes, as some apparently do not, the difference between 'altruism' as a moral term and 'altruism' as it is used in biology to describe animal behavior that contributes to the survival of the group. I shall use 'altruism^{m}' for the moral concept; 'altruism^{b}' for the biological concept. Ruse suggests that whereas insects and lower animals are genetically programmed for altruism^{b}, humans have instead been selected for a disposition toward altruism^{m}. Thus, he is able to argue for an evolutionary source for altruism^{m} without confusing it with altruism^{b}.

However, having properly distinguished moral behavior from superficially similar animal behavior, he then goes on to argue that morality, thus properly understood, has no possible rational justification:

> The evolutionist is no longer attempting to derive morality from factual foundations. His/her claim now is that there are no foundations of any sort from which to derive morality—be these foundations evolution, God's will or whatever. (Ruse 1986, 234)

Since there can be no rational justification for objective moral claims, what is needed instead is a causal account of why we believe in an objective moral order. Ruse's answer is that the survival value of altruism[m] does in fact provide such an explanation.

In particular, the evolutionist argues that, thanks to our science we see that claims like "you ought to maximize personal liberty" are no more than subjective expressions, impressed upon our thinking because of their adaptive value. In other words, we see that morality has no philosophically objective foundation. It is just an illusion, fobbed off on us to promote altruism[b]. So Ruse's account, while more sophisticated than Wilson's in that he fully appreciates the conceptual difference between morality, on the one hand, and sentiment, convention, etc. on the other, is most starkly reductive: moral objectivity is merely an illusion.

The lack of moral objectivity may seem *not* to be a problem so long as we all agree on the basic outlines of morality, such as the idea that altruism is a good thing. But so far there has been no answer to Nietzsche, an atheist looking at the same Darwinian biology as the other naturalists. He regards other-regarding, benevolent, justice-seeking, self-sacrificial 'morality' as "slave morality." Christians and others of their kind advocate it because they are usually weak and oppressed, so requiring justice from the rich and powerful is in their self-interest. It was people such as these who invented the distinction between good and *evil* so that they, in their resentment, would have a pejorative term for those who reject their slave morality. Having the label of "evil" for these others feeds the masses' sense of moral superiority. Nietzsche writes:

> From the beginning Christian faith has been sacrifice: sacrifice of all freedom, of all pride, of all self-confidence of the spirit; it is simultaneously enslavement and self-derision, self-mutilation. (1886/2002, 44)

For his part, the herd man of today's Europe gives himself the appearance of being the only permissible type of man and glorifies those characteristics that make him tame, easy-going and useful to the herd as the true human virtues, namely: public spirit, goodwill, consideration, industry, moderation, modesty, clemency, and pity" (1886/2002, 86f.).

There is scholarly debate about the extent to which Nietzsche's ideas influenced the rise and acceptance of Nazism and the eugenics movement. But apart from any actual historical exemplification, we can certainly see how different a Nietzschean world would be from one based on the mild-mannered altruism that Ruse, Wilson, and others assume that biology favors.

So I conclude that the lack of an account of the moral ought, recognized as a feature of the modern naturalist tradition by some of its most sophisticated proponents (MacIntyre was himself one of these) represents a severe crisis for the tradition.

5. CONCLUSION

It is time to sum up. Of course, a MacIntyrean evaluation of two rival traditions is not possible in one short essay. I shall only say one thing in favor of the theistic point of view, which I may have appeared to do more to discredit than to support. It could easily be argued that the cognitivist approach to the spread and persistence of religion could be *incorporated into* a theistic tradition, and in fact used to good effect to improve preaching, church attendance, and so on. Also, if MacIntyre and Bernard Williams are correct, a theological account of reality solves the problems of the foundations of morality. This would be one small step in arguing for a theistic tradition.

However, I shall be content if I have done nothing more in this essay than to have changed the terms of the debate. No more arguments for the existence of God, or arguments against the existence of God, but rather,

consideration of what it would mean to show that a naturalist tradition or a theistic tradition is rationally superior to its most significant rivals.*

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