

Philosophical Naturalism and Moral Nihilism

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Abstract: The natural sciences are often used to support worldviews of philosophical naturalism. Some Christians respond by claiming that philosophical naturalism logically implies moral nihilism. Often these claims are coupled to arguments that the theory of evolution promotes selfishness and eugenics as "natural goods." This seminar will briefly discuss the oversimplifications of biological evolution behind these claims and ways to disentangle the science of evolution from philosophical naturalism, then move on to discuss the broader claim that philosophical naturalism implies moral nihilism. Some moral theorists look for a non-theistic basis for objective moral authority in self-evident principles, reason, community, nature, or some combination of those. We'll consider distinctions between reductionist naturalisms and emergentist naturalisms, and end with a discussion about whether some versions of the argument that philosophical naturalism imply moral nihilism rely on such a low view of creation and common grace as to make them problematic for Calvinists. If so, does a high view of creation and common grace suggest a better response to philosophical naturalism?

1) Contrary to how it is sometimes portrayed, the theory of evolution does not imply that selfishness is a "natural good" (because selfishness enhances survival). It is true that in some circumstances "selfishness" promotes individual survival, however:

- Evolution "rewards" parental care for young; kin selection; reciprocal altruism; cooperation. These have been studied, and there are examples of them published in the research literature.
- There are possible "rewards" for altruism beyond kin selection and reciprocal altruism: spandrel theory, individual selection theory, sexual selection theory, group selection theory, co-evolution of genes and society. There are several competing theories about how and why humans evolved altruistic tendencies beyond kin selection and reciprocal altruism. Data cannot yet tell us which of them, if any, or which combination of them, is correct. (Note that these theories do not claim that humans are always altruistic; obviously, humans are not. Rather, these theories attempt to explain why humans have both altruistic and selfish tendencies in competition – rather than being purely selfish.)
- All of the theories for the evolution of altruism share this theme: the greater the social inter-relatedness and inter-dependency in a group, the greater the rewards for cooperation and altruism.

2) Contrary to how it is sometimes portrayed, the theory of evolution does not imply that eugenics is a "natural good" (because eugenics would enhance survival of a species). It's highly debatable whether eugenics would enhance species survival in all but the most extreme circumstances.

- Selection on genes depends on environment. (*e.g.* The negative effects on survival of genes for poor vision is very weak a modern society, but stronger in a hunter-gatherer society.)

- Consider two otherwise equal societies, one practicing eugenics, one promoting altruism towards the disadvantaged and suffering. Which will do better in the long run? I would argue that in most circumstances – unless there are extreme constraints on use of limited resources, for example – the society promoting altruism towards the disadvantaged and suffering probably would do better in the long run. Because of how human psychology works, experiencing cooperation promotes more cooperation, experience (and witnesses) altruism promotes more altruism. Altruism promotes cooperation, and cooperation almost always produces the greatest gains in the long run.

3) The theory of evolution does not imply that philosophical naturalism is true or that moral nihilism is true.

Here is the simplest argument: God can work through natural processes. God could have used evolutionary processes to create humanity (and thus we have conflicting impulses towards selfishness and altruism), and then revealed to us how we ought to behave.

Now we shift from considering the implications of evolution to considering the implications of philosophical naturalism.

4) Some Christians argue that the worldviews of philosophical naturalism logically imply moral nihilism. (I will call this **NINI**, for *Naturalism Implies Nihilism*.) Sometimes this argument is advanced as an apologetic or evangelistic strategy. I'll quote just one example, from James Sire, *The Universe Next Door*. Sire learned these arguments from other Christians, and Sire's book has influenced many Christians.

"The ethics of Christian theism affirms the transcendent origin of ethics and locates in the infinite-personal God the measure of the good.... Naturalists, however, have no such appeal, nor do they wish to make one.... Naturalists have tried to construct ethical systems in a wide variety of ways. Even Christian theists must admit that many of the naturalists' ethical insights are valid. Indeed theists should not be surprised by the fact that we can learn moral truths by observing human nature and behavior, for if women and men are made in the image of God and if that image is not totally destroyed by the Fall, then they should yet reflect – even if dimly – something of the goodness of God." *Sire, pg. 72, 74.*

"Many naturalists – most, so far as I know – are very moral people. They are not thieves; they do not tend to be libertines.... The problem is not that moral values are not recognized but that they have no basis.... [In naturalism] Our maker has no sense of value, no sense of obligation. We alone make values. Are our values valuable? By what standard? Only our own. Whose own? Each person's own. Each of us is king and bishop of our own realm, but our realm is pointland. For the moment we meet another person, we study another king and bishop. There is no way to arbitrate between two free value makers. There is no king to whom both give obeisance. There are values, but no Value.... Society is not a body at all. It is only a bunch. Thus does naturalism lead to nihilism. If we take seriously the implications of the death of God, the disappearance of the transcendent, the closedness of the universe, we end right there. Why, then, aren't most naturalists nihilists? The obvious answer is the best one: Most naturalists do not take their naturalism seriously. They are inconsistent." *Sire, pg. 98, 102.*

5) Many moral theorists argue that the NINI argument is probably false. They find a basis for **the existence of objective, normative morality** (facts about how a person ought to behave regardless of whether that person assents), **authority to enforce** moral obligations, and **authority to decide** what is and is not a moral obligation, in:

- **self-evident principles,**
- **reason,**
- **community,**
- **nature,**

or some combination of those. An expert on philosophical ethics could summarize the many options which have been proposed over the centuries. To provide a very brief overview, I'll use a few quotes from *Philosophical Ethics* by Stephen Darwall, Chapter 3, "Naturalism."

- "A metaethical, or ethical, naturalist is a metaphysical naturalist who believes that there are ethical facts that are facts about the natural order and no less open to empirical investigation than are the objects of other, more obviously empirical disciplines.... What distinguishes ethical naturalists among metaphysical naturalists is their belief that value is an aspect of nature." (p. 28, 30)
- "Many ethical naturalist theories of value take their cue from the (natural) properties of valuation.... Something has value (for a person) if he would want it if he knew, was experienced with, and fully appreciated all the nonethical aspects of it. A view of this sort is a species of another general metaethical approach – the ideal judgment theory." (p. 30,31)
- "Alternatively, a naturalist can argue that welfare need not be defined in terms of valuation or desire in order to be a natural phenomenon. When we think of a plant as flourishing or prospering and of various things being good or bad for it, the properties we attribute to the organism are certainly natural.... Human welfare might also consist in natural facts about a person's condition and prospects." (p. 31)
- "A common way [to argue that morality can be vindicated naturalistically] is to define morality by a distinctive perspective (the moral point of view)—namely, that of equal, impartial regard for all human (or perhaps all sentient) beings.... Morality presents itself as a kind of law, a moral law, by which we are inescapably obligated and whose authority is categorical—independent, that is, of our desires and interests." (p. 33)
- "Like Locke, [John Stuart] Mill saw morality as a set of rules that serve a useful purpose; but Mill viewed these rules as *our* instrument rather than God's. We enforce moral rules in our social practices, and these rules define right and wrong when their existence is desirable from a moral point of view (when, that is, they promote the general happiness). An action is wrong, therefore, if it has the following complex natural property: being a violation of a (perhaps hypothetical) rule that, *were* it established in our social practice, *would* promote the greatest general happiness." (p. 33)
- "'Good' could still refer to a natural property, and ethics might itself be an empirical discipline. This is what nonreductive ethical naturalists believe.... Convergence in ethical thought is explained in the same way that convergence in scientific thought is—namely, as the result of continuous interactions with the natural world, including, of course, those we have with one another." (p. 36, 37)

6) Some Christian philosophers do not support the NINI argument. For example, Richard Swinburne has argued (quoted from lecture notes, Baylor University, 2006): "God makes no difference to the fact that there are moral truths about which actions are morally good or morally bad. There are necessary moral truths such as 'all actions of promising breaking (except in circumstance *C*) are wrong'; and contingent moral truths (such as 'your telling him that *p* is wrong'). God makes no difference to what are the necessary moral truths. [We discover necessary moral truths as we discover other necessary truths, such as mathematical truths,' through experience and reflection.]" Swinburne adds, "But God makes a great difference to what are the contingent moral truths.... God makes a great difference to the seriousness of morality.... God issues commands in order (1) to give us further motivation to do what is obligatory anyway, (2) to coordinate good actions by more detailed specification, (3) to ensure that certain good (but otherwise non-obligatory) actions which it is important that humans should do are done; and (4) to help us form a very good character suited for Heaven."

7) My primary concern that many versions of the NINI argument which I have seen have been poorly argued, ignore important distinctions, and rely on some theologically problematic assumptions. I am not defending any particular moral theory. I certainly believe that God and divine revelation are central to our understanding of morality. My concern is that poorly argued versions of NINI do more harm than good.

- **Some versions of the NINI argument are tautologies.** They start with the usually unstated assumption that in order to have objective morality and real knowledge, they must have some supernatural basis. The authors then write many paragraphs writing that self-evident principles, reason, community, and nature are not an adequate basis for objective morality or knowledge. However, their conclusion was already contained in how they implicitly defined the terms in the first place
- **Most versions of the NINI argument assume that naturalism = reductive naturalism.** In reductive naturalism, the only ontologically real things are mindless matter doing mindless things, and everything can be reduced to that. However, there are other versions of naturalism such as emergent naturalism. In some of these views, things like minds, persons, values, and societies, as well as things like mathematical truths and moral truths, have real ontological status and properties. They might be independent of, or they might be nonreducible emergent properties of, material things.
- **Confucianism** provides an interesting case study. It emphasizes a proper ordering of society and relationships. There is ongoing scholarly debate about the role of the supernatural in the foundation and practice of Confucianism. But many versions of Confucianism, including very early versions, strongly deemphasize the supernatural as a source for insight or authority. Many well-educated, careful-thinking people over many generations practiced Confucianism in this way, without concluding that the presuppositions of their moral philosophy must logically lead to moral nihilism.

Two final questions for discussion:

Does the NINI argument, as presented by many Christians, rely on too low a view of God creation, God's general revelation, and God's common grace? The NINI argument seems to make the following claim: "Unless God exists and specially reveals his will for our lives, we have no compelling reading to do good rather than evil." But consider the following question: *If a group of people have not received special revelation from God, and they only resources they have are what is available in God's general revelation and common grace – including the natural world, observation and reason, conscience, social order – would such people have no reason to choose good or evil, or lots of reasons to choose good over evil?* When I have asked this questions of Christians, most have answered (with scriptural support), "lots of reasons to choose good over evil." This answer implies that God – by common grace – has provided human beings with lots of reasons to reject moral nihilism outside of special revelation – reasons which can be learned from reason, self-evident principles, community, and nature.

The NINI argument is used by some Christians as an apologetic and evangelistic tool. Is it productive, or counter-productive? Apologetics based on MINI says, "If you don't believe in God, you should be a moral nihilist. If you don't want to be amoral nihilist, then you should believe in God." But the audience of the argument might respond, "I don't believe in God, so I guess I should be a moral nihilist." That would be counter-productive; it would drive people away from God. I believe a better strategy is to discuss and celebrate with non-Christians all of the abundant reasons for choosing good over evil – reasons learned from self-evident principles, reason, community, and nature. Then, we can point to what belief in God and God' special revelation adds to make the picture of morality and altruism even fuller and more beautiful.