1 Liberal Naturalism and God

Fiona Ellis

1.1 Introduction

In my book *God, Value, and Nature*, I defend a form of liberal or expansive naturalism. The naturalist dimension of my position is pretty orthodox from the point of view of contemporary Anglo-American philosophy, for naturalism is the dominant programmatic approach, and it is made clear that this is what we ought to be. Why? Because it is the only way of avoiding the metaphysical and epistemological difficulties of the opposing supernaturalist position. Supernaturalism involves the postulation of weird entities and/or realms of being – things like immaterial souls, Platonic forms and divine beings, all of which stand outside the natural world, and cannot be understood to be a part of it. The naturalist protests that there is no way of explaining how this supernatural realm relates to our ordinary familiar world, that there is an equal mystery of how we gain knowledge of it, and that we can explain what needs to be explained without making this problematic metaphysical detour.

Naturalism is a form of anti-supernaturalism in this respect: the natural

world is the only world there is, and there is nothing beyond it – no God, no Platonic form of goodness, no heaven, above us only sky.⁴

I defend a form of naturalism that can accommodate God. That is to say that on my position, the natural world is God-involving. This is highly unorthodox from the point of view of naturalistic philosophy, for most naturalists (and many theists too!) take these positions to be logically incompatible.⁵ By contrast, I want to say that they can both be true – that one can be a naturalist and a theist. The naturalism at issue here takes us beyond the scientistic paradigm which has defined the position until more recently.⁶ That is to say, it involves a rejection of the contestable idea that there is no more to the natural world than what the scientist can comprehend. It counts as liberal in this respect, and the world thus understood is a value-involving world. The non-liberal naturalist will see this as a covert way of reintroducing supernaturalism, but Iris Murdoch describes such a position as true naturalism, claiming that “the true naturalist…is one who believes that as moral beings we are immersed in a reality which transcends us and that moral progress consists in awareness of this reality and submission to its purposes.”⁷ Murdoch is a true naturalist in this sense, she describes her position as a form of Platonism, and contemporary liberal or expansive naturalists – myself included – are indebted to her vision.

The typical liberal naturalist – Murdoch included – opposes theism and does not engage with the question of the relation between naturalism and God – understandably so if theism and naturalism are logically incompatible. I shall argue that such an attitude presupposes a contestable conception of God, and an equally contestable conception of the moral reality which, on my position, has a theistic dimension. This much casts doubt upon some prevalent assumptions amongst naturalists and atheists, but my position invites equal worries from the theist’s camp, and I shall take as my focus two related objections which were articulated and discussed at a recent workshop on naturalism and supernaturalism.⁸

The first objection – expressed by Lynne Baker – is that if any form of naturalism is true, then there is nothing outside the natural world. This means that “reality stops with the mundane” and “nothing is transcendent.” The

---

⁴ Clear statements of this anti-supernaturalist dialectic are to be found in Stroud, “The Charm of Naturalism,” 3, and Dupré, “How to be Naturalistic.”
⁶ See De Caro and Macarthur, “Introduction,” for a detailed exposition of scientific naturalism and some responses to it. See also my God, Value, and Nature, Ch. 1.
⁸ This workshop – which took place at Heythrop College in October 2017 – was part of a project entitled Supernaturalism and Naturalism: Beyond the Divide, which I directed with Mario De Caro. Lynne sadly passed away during this time, and her paper – “Beyond Naturalism” – was presented by Kate Sonderegger.
second related objection comes from John Cottingham who objects that on my position I’ve got to deny that there is anything “external” or “transcendent,” whereas he wants to say that “even after discarding silly ideas of ‘another place’ or a destination where we will be issued with harps (or pitchforks), we still need something external.” He then refers to the “radical immanentalism” of my own position, distinguishing it from his own commitment to a kind of “divine externality.”

I’ve said already that naturalism, as I understand it, can accommodate God. I take this to mean that it can accommodate the transcendent. Yet, if Baker is right that “nothing is transcendent” on the naturalist picture, then we have a justification for Cottingham’s claim that I am committed to “radical immanentalism,” and that radical immanentalism excludes God, assuming that God requires reference to the transcendent. I shall argue that this objection presupposes a contestable metaphysical framework, and that a properly theistic position must reject it. We shall see that there is a knife-edge between theism thus conceived and Murdoch’s true naturalism. There are important implications here for an understanding of the limits of liberal naturalism, assuming that true naturalism in this sense comes under its umbrella.

1.2 Liberal Naturalism

The naturalist denies that there is anything beyond nature, and it is a common enough refrain amongst naturalists that this world is the only world there is. Thus, John Hermann Randall, writing in 1944, claims that “naturalism” can be defined negatively “as the refusal to take ‘nature’ or ‘the natural’ as a term of distinction.” “Nature,” he continues, has become “the all-inclusive category.” In Randall’s hands, this is a reductive claim, for he commits to an exclusively scientific conception of nature. This is scientific naturalism, and it is unclear what reason could be given for insisting that nature is to be measured in these terms alone. As John McDowell puts it, “scientism is a superstition,” and we should “discourage this dazzlement by science” which leads us to suppose that “genuine truth is restricted to what can be validated by their methods.”

9 Cottingham’s worries were expressed in an email exchange following the relevant workshop.
10 Randall, “Epilogue,” 357.
11 Randall, “Epilogue,” 358. As he puts it:

[t]here is no ‘realm’ to which the methods for dealing with nature cannot be extended. This insistence on the universal and unrestricted application of “scientific method” is a theme pervading every one of these essays [in the volume for which his essay was the epilogue].

McDowell defends a form of liberal naturalism which rejects the offending scientistic strictures, and it promises to accommodate the idea that there are values in the world which make normative demands upon us. It is similar to Murdoch’s “true naturalism” in this respect, and it involves nothing spooky or other-worldly, except in so far as we have moved beyond the limits of the world as scientistically conceived. We might even go so far as to describe moral reality as “supernatural” in this respect, “supernatural” being the logical complement of “natural” in the scientific sense.

Liberal naturalism in this sense involves a form of moral realism, and the moral judgements we make in this context are assessable as true or false. This is not to deny that there will be genuine dilemmas and conflicts, and Murdoch talks of the slowness of moral change and achievement, and of the “infinite difficulty of the task of apprehending a magnetic but inexhaustible reality.” She refers in this context to the clear vision which comes from imagination, effort, and attention – a vision in which the will becomes a matter of “obedience,” and reality is revealed “to the patient eye of love.” Her aim is to articulate a moral philosophy in which “the concept of love...can once again be made central,” and she talks in this context of an “ideal limit of love or knowledge which always recedes.”

Some of this imagery sets Murdoch apart from McDowell, and there is a question of whether she has erred in the direction of a more suspect supernaturalism. But what does it mean to be appropriately suspect in this context? It is not enough to say that the offending position involves reference to a weird realm of being, for the liberal naturalist commits this error from the viewpoint of the scientific naturalist, and scientific naturalism is itself suspect. So there’s nothing weird to the idea that there are dimensions of nature which elude science, and which count as supernatural in this innocuous sense, and contemporary expansive naturalists are adamant that the natural world is the only world there is. Witness James Griffin:

> [v]alues do not need any world except the ordinary world around us ... An other-worldly realm of values just produces unnecessary problems about what it could possibly be and how we could learn

---

16 In any case there is nothing weirder than the things discovered by science. As Mark Platts puts it: “The world is a queer place. I find neutrinos, aardvarks, infinite sequences of objects, and (most pertinently) impressionist paintings peculiar kinds of entities; but I do not expect nuclear physics, zoology, formal semantics or art history to pay much regard to that” (“Moral Reality and the End of Desire,” in *Reference, Truth, and Reality*, ed. Mark Platts (London: Routledge, 1980), 72).
about it. All that seems right to me right. But to defend it, one does
not have to adopt a reductive form of naturalism.\textsuperscript{17}

What of Murdoch's claim that moral reality has an infinite elusive
character, and that we face the task of apprehending a magnetic but
inexhaustible reality? After all, Murdoch is a Platonist, and Platonism
involves reference to a realm of forms which is grounded in the ultimate
form of goodness. McDowell defends Plato against the suspect superno-
naturalist charge by describing him as a naturalist “with a penchant
for vividly realised pictorial presentations of his thought.”\textsuperscript{18} He dis-
tinguishes this down to earth Platonism from the “rampant” variety in
which moral reality lies in some inaccessible beyond.\textsuperscript{19}

The implication here is that Plato’s position can be shorn of the pic-
ture-thinking, and that it is equivalent to a liberal form of naturalism in
this respect. But how are the limits of such naturalism to be understood?
What if the picture-thinking has a point which goes beyond the purely
ornamental? And what if the so-called rampant variety is itself just a pic-
torially vivid way of making this point? I am thinking here of the idea –
so important to Murdoch (and Plato too) – that the truths at issue in this
context lie at the blurry limits of our capacity to comprehend. There is
no obvious reason for insisting that such epistemic humility is suspect;
nor does it require reference to another world except in so far that such
talk is just a vivid way of giving expression to our limitations.\textsuperscript{20}

McDowell uses the imagery of darkness to refer to that which exceeds
the limits of his own liberal conception of nature, he makes clear that
“natural” as he understands it is “not supernatural (not occult, not mag-
ical),” and adds:

There is no need for me to take a stand on whether \textit{everything} is
natural in that sense (thereby, among other things, giving needless

\textsuperscript{17} James Griffin, \textit{Value Judgement: Improving our Ethical Beliefs} (Oxford: Clarendon
Press, 1996), 44.


\textsuperscript{19} John McDowell, \textit{Mind and World} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994),
21.

\textsuperscript{20} McDowell seems to concede this point when he tells us that: “The remoteness of the
Form of the Good is a metaphorical version of the thesis that value in not in the world,
utterly distinct from the dreary literal version that has obsessed recent moral philo-

sophy. The point of the metaphor is the colossal difficulty of attaining a capacity to cope
clear-sightedly with the ethical reality that \textit{is} part of our world. Unlike other philosophi-
cal responses to uncodifiability, this one may actually work towards moral improve-
ment; negatively, by inducing humility, and positively, by an inspiring effect akin to
that of a religious conversion.” He adds in a note that this view of Plato is beautifully
offence to people who think respect for modern science is compatible with a kind of religious belief that preserves room for the supernatural). 21

He seems to be suggesting that the relevant mysterious dimension, such as it is, can have no bearing upon an understanding of the natural world and our natural human being. It is, after all, “occult” and “magical,” and seemingly sealed off from anything to which we could be receptive by virtue of our natural human being, including, of course, the moral reality with which we engage at this level.

The implication here is that there is nothing intrinsically mysterious about moral reality, 22 and that any darkness should be relegated to that which is supernatural in a more suspect sense. We are to suppose that it is in this context that we ascend to the level of religious reality. The idea that moral reality is unmysterious takes us some distance from Murdoch’s true naturalism, and Murdoch takes herself to be defining and defending an authentic form of religion in this context—religion without God as she sees it. 23 So both McDowell and Murdoch are in the business of articulating an atheistic liberal naturalism, but Murdoch takes the moral reality at issue to be infinite in its mystery, depth, and religious significance, whereas McDowell seems to want to relegate any mystery to the realm of the supernatural, the supernatural in this context having a religious significance which has no bearing upon morality.

The assumption here is that religious reality takes us into the realm of suspect supernaturalism, and that it does so by committing us to a second, supernatural, realm in addition to the natural world. The charge is familiar, as is the response, for we can ask again whether there isn’t a more sympathetic way of interpreting the idea that religious reality is supernatural, and, equally to the point, what the argument is for insisting that it is to be dualistically opposed to the moral. Murdoch herself insists that moral philosophy should attempt to retain a central concept which has all of the characteristics traditionally associated with God, where God “was (or is) a single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessarily real object of attention.” 24 This concession is significant and the ambivalence palpable, but Murdoch agrees that suspect supernaturalism is to be avoided, reserving the complaint for theism. Theism counts as such in the sense that its defining beliefs involve reference to supernatural phenomena (God is a supernatural person, heaven is a

22 But see the caveat in note 20.
24 Murdoch, The Sovereignty of Good, 55
supernatural place), and this supernaturalism is problematic not only because it detracts attention from what really matters (i.e., morality), but because it points in the opposite direction. It does so by pandering to our egoistic desires, when, for example, we are motivated to be moral for the sake of heavenly rewards. This is a clear argument for concluding that theism stands opposed to the moral, but Murdoch’s egoistic interpretation can be contested, and her aspirations for moral philosophy pose a challenge to the idea that a properly moral life must dispense with God.

1.3 Rethinking God

I have sought to question the idea that the God/nature and God/morality distinctions are as absolute and unambiguous as the typical naturalist assumes. Murdoch makes a move in this direction by defending a type of naturalism in which the transcendent plays a fundamental role. However, she dissociates this naturalism from theism, identifies theism with suspect supernaturalism, and recommends that we believe instead in “the unique sovereign place of goodness or virtue in human life.” Goodness in this context is the “magnetic centre towards which love naturally moves,” and it is in this sense that we have a moral philosophy in which the concept of love is central.

Murdoch’s true naturalism poses a challenge to morally deficient forms of religion and theism, and we can agree – as many theologians have agreed – that the conception of God as a supernatural person raises difficulties, and that God thus understood is easily sidelined when set against the intra-worldly loving relations which are so obviously central to a properly human life. Yet those who take such a conception seriously can insist that we are up against the limits of language in this context, and that the description is not intended to be taken in these literalist terms – as if God is an infinitely remote super-being with no bearing upon our loving relations with others. The point is familiar from my previous defence of picture-thinking, but there is a more interesting response in this context – one which grants the relevant conceptual obstacles whilst insisting that there are better and worse pictures in this context, and some which can help us to make better sense of the idea that God and nature (and hence, God and morality) are inextricably tied.

This diagnostic approach is to be found in John Robinson’s famous 1963 book Honest to God. Robinson’s book is indebted to various German theologians, all of whom seek to move beyond dualistic supernaturalism and reductive naturalism. The naturalist critique of

supernaturalism allows us to tear down an idol – namely, the idea of God as a distant supernatural being – whilst theism allows us to “challenge the naturalist’s assumption that God is merely a redundant name for nature or for humanity” and to safeguard God’s transcendence. But what does it mean to introduce a transcendent God? Robinson answers this question with the help of Paul Tillich. Tillich tells us that:

To call God transcendent [...] does not mean that one must establish a “superworld” of divine objects. It does mean that, within itself, the finite world points beyond itself. In other words, it is self-transcendent.

Robinson takes this “great contribution to theology” to involve:

the reinterpretation of transcendence in a way which preserves its reality while detaching it from the projection of supranaturalism [Robinson’s term for suspect supernaturalism]. “The Divine,” as he sees it, does not inhabit a transcendent world above nature; it is to be found in the “ecstatic” character of this world, as its transcendent Depth and Ground. Indeed, as a recent commentator has observed, supranaturalism for Tillich actually represents “a loss of transcendence.”

The themes, claims, and images are familiar from Murdoch’s true naturalism, and Robinson likewise gives centre stage to the concept of love, taking as his starting point Ludwig Feuerbach’s claim that the true atheist “is not the man who denies God, the subject; it is the man for whom the attributes of divinity, such as love, wisdom, and justice, are nothing.” Robinson grants that this is very near to his own position in the sense that he is wanting to interpret theological assertions as assertions about human life, but he insists that this is not a form of atheism, for love thus understood is grounded in God. It is in this sense that we can agree with Dietrich Bonhoeffer that “God is the “beyond” in the midst.” As for the worry that this picture involves a denial of God’s transcendence, the proper response is to point out – with Tillich – that it is the opposing dualistic picture which carries this implication. It does so by reducing God to this-worldly categories – he becomes “one object

29 Robinson, Honest to God, 32.
30 Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology, vol II, 8. Quoted in Honest to God, 34.
31 Robinson, Honest to God, 34.
32 Robinson, Honest to God, 30.
33 Robinson, Honest to God, 32.
among other objects” as Karl Rahner put it – and on a level with any other thing in this respect.\textsuperscript{34}

The idea of God as love has been developed more recently by Paul S. Fiddes.\textsuperscript{35} Fiddes argues that it offers a real alternative to the offending dualistic picture, for it allows us to say that God’s being is irreducibly relational, and that we partake in this reality when we stand in loving relations to others. Understood from this perspective the distinction between God and world is no longer to be modelled on two externally related items between which there is an insurmountable gap. The picture is rather of a circle within a circle – the large circle corresponding to God’s infinite love, and the small one capturing the sense in which we ourselves are capable of partaking in this love by standing in loving relations to others. Fiddes adds that it is an implication of this position that “the presence of God will always be hidden in the sense that it cannot be observed or known as an object of perception, but can only be participated in... God is not the object of desire but the one in whom we desire the good.”\textsuperscript{36}

I am gesturing towards a position that requires extensive thought and elucidation, but what little I have said suggests that its structure offers a way of avoiding a conjunctive conception of the God/world relation, and that it has much in common with Murdoch’s true naturalism. We are immersed in a reality which transcends us, love is central to this framework, and love is that by virtue of which we move – however falteringly – towards this infinite reality. As for the worry that Murdoch’s Goodness is too impersonal to admit of theistic characterization, it should be clear from what has been said that there is a real and unresolved issue concerning what it means to describe God in personal terms, and whether those terms are admissible. We are reminding here of Feuerbach’s important point that the true atheist “is not the man who denies God, the subject; it is the man for whom the attributes of divinity, such as love, wisdom, and justice, are nothing.”

\textsuperscript{35} Fiddes defends this conception of God in his “The Quest for a Place Which Is ‘Not-a-Place:’ The Hiddenness of God and the Presence of God,” in \textit{Silence and the Word}, eds. Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 35–60. His more recent “God is love: Love is God. A Cutting-Edge Issue for the Theology of Love” raises some important issues for the epistemological points I shall be raising. This paper can be found at https://loveinreligion.org.files.wordpress.com/2017/02/fiddes-god-is-love.pdf, accessed July 19, 2021.
\textsuperscript{36} Fiddes, “The Quest for a Place,” 55.
1.4 Responding to Baker and Cottingham

I have made theistic sense of Murdoch’s true naturalism, and I want now to spell out the implications for an assessment of the objections advanced by Baker and Cottingham. Baker’s worry is that, if any form of naturalism is true, then there is nothing outside the natural world. She takes this to mean that “reality stops with the mundane” and “nothing is transcendent.” Cottingham protests in similar vein that the naturalist has to deny that there is anything “external” or “transcendent,” and that all that remains is a “radical immanentism.”

Naturalism in the sense with which I am concerned is to be distinguished from radical immanentism as Cottingham understands it, for Cottingham’s radical immanentism is a form of atheism, whereas the natural world as I understand it involves God. Furthermore, it involves God in a sense that should be acceptable to Cottingham, for I agree with him that there are intimations or traces of God to be found in the natural world, and that they are manifest, for example, “in the compelling power of our moral sensibilities.” Cottingham objects that a naturalist has to deny that there is anything “external” or “transcendent,” whereas he wants to say that “even after discarding silly ideas of ‘another place’ or a destination where we will be issued with harps (or pitchforks), we still need a kind of divine externality.” This suggests that Cottingham agrees with me that God is not externally related to the world in the way that things within the world are spatially related, but he thinks that a liberal naturalist picture cannot accommodate divine externality. That is to say, Cottingham thinks that on my position God is reducible to the world.

I have explicitly denied that God is reducible to the world, and have argued that the proposed framework offers the prospects for safeguarding God’s transcendence rather than eliminating it. It does so by guaranteeing that God is irreducible to any finite measure, and allowing that God’s infinite reality has depths which exceed our powers of love and knowledge. We are immersed in a reality which has an ever-receding limit in this respect, and, being so immersed, we must give up on the idea that the relation between God and the world is a conjunctive relation – as if God and the world add up to two, as Herbert McCabe puts it in the context of making a similar anti-dualistic point. Indeed, I am happy to describe this liberal naturalism as a radical immanentism, provided that it is made clear that the force of “radical” in this context, rather than signifying a thoroughgoing athe-

ism, serves to capture the position which becomes available once the transcendent/immanent dualism has been put to rest. This, I would contend, is the truly radical approach.

What I have said addresses Baker's worry that naturalism fails to accommodate transcendence, and it also offers a response to her objection that if naturalism is true, then there is nothing outside the natural world. Certainly, there is nothing outside the natural world if this involves denying that God lies beyond the natural world or is somehow in competition with it. As I've made clear, however, it does not follow from this denial that God is reducible to the world, and to suppose that it does is simply to propagate the offending dualistic framework – one according to which God must either be out there in the manner of a supernatural being or squeezed out of the picture altogether. Neither of these pictures can accommodate God's transcendence.

What of the worry that if naturalism is true then reality must stop with the mundane? Liberal naturalists like Griffin make a point of describing the natural world as “ordinary” and “familiar,” no doubt to fend off the worry that the position involves anything remotely weird. Perhaps there is a similar motive at work in McDowell’s unwillingness to allow that moral reality could be mysterious in a religiously significant sense. McDowell’s position is open to challenge in this respect, and from a purely phenomenological view it seems absurd to deny that the world can be strange, extraordinary, enchanting, terrifying, ecstasy-inducing and all of the other things which are excluded if we settle for no more than the ordinary and the familiar. Perhaps the limits of the ordinary and the familiar are suitably expanded in Griffin’s more liberal scheme of things, but I take it that Baker’s reference to the mundane is intended to confine us to a disenchanted nature, and the naturalist can resist these terms of debate.

1.5 Moving Ahead

I have defended a conception of naturalism which is inspired by Murdoch’s true naturalism, but which is to be comprehended theistically. I am not suggesting that this position is mandatory; the point is simply that it is worth taking seriously, and that some standard objections to it can be overcome. The pliability of the term ‘naturalism’ should be clear from all that has been said, and although the orthodox liberal approach is atheistic, this atheism is premised upon a contestable and highly problematic conception of God. I have argued that we should reject the offending conception, whilst allowing (with the typical liberal naturalist) that the reality in which we are immersed is a value-involving world. The idea that it points in the direction of God becomes infinitely less weird if we remind ourselves that this does not mean that there is a
weird super-being at the end of the journey. As a wise man once put it, perhaps we are already deep in God.39

Bibliography


