

More on Naturalism:  
Naturalism, Atheism, Materialism, Humanism, Secularism

## I. Introduction

Definitions and distinctions:

**Naturalism:** In recent usage, naturalism is a specie of philosophical monism according to which whatever exists or happens is natural and can be explained, as modeled in the natural sciences, by means of the scientific method. Naturalism is a *methodological monism* rather than an ontological monism and as such repudiates the view that there exists any entity or event which lie beyond the scope of scientific explanation. Technically, naturalism is not to be confused with materialism or atheism and thus it leaves room for a variety of ontologies including dualism, idealism, materialism, atheism, theism. Here are a few of the leading propositions of naturalism.

- a. The entire knowable universe is composed of natural objects—objects that come into and pass out of existence as a result of natural causes.
- b. A natural cause is a natural object or episode in the history of a natural object which brings about a change in some other natural object. A natural process is any change in a natural object or system of natural objects which is due to a natural cause or system of natural causes.
- c. The natural method is (1) explaining natural processes through the identification of the natural causes responsible for them and (2) testing any given explanation with regard to consequences that must hold if it is true.
- d. Nature is intelligible based on the fact that natural processes are regular and predictable and hence knowable. The natural method as such seeks to establish natural laws.
- e. Reason is the consistent application of natural methods and natural science is the purest example of reason. Hence, knowledge of the world at any given time is what science says it is (positivism).
- f. The universe has no moral character except that it contains human beings that pursue values and purpose. Human beings are integral though unique parts of nature and are not reducible to nature except in the sense that like the rest of nature are explainable by the methods of natural science.

**Atheism:** an atheist is a person who believes [atheists are believers too, in their atheism] that there is no God or gods of any kind, anywhere, and that the proposition "God exists" is a false proposition in that it does not correspond to reality. The cosmos is all there is, ever was ever will be. Obviously, atheism is the antithesis of theism or any other model of God. Atheism must also be distinguished from agnosticism which says that God is unknowable or at least unknown (to the person). In theism God is the infinite-personal Creator and Sustainer of the cosmos. In deism God is "reduced"; he begins to lose his personality, though he remains Creator and (by implication) sustainer of the cosmos. In naturalism God is further "reduced"; he loses his very existence. There are several ways to understand atheism:

- a. Traditional atheism: holds that there was not, is not, and never will be a God (Ludwig Feuerbach, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, Jean-Paul Sartre, Schopenhauer, Baron d'Holbach, Anthony Flew, etc.)
- b. Mythological atheists: holds that the myth or legend of God's existence by which western culture lived for so long has died—killed by the advancement of modernity's science, philosophy, and culture (Friedrich Nietzsche announced this cultural death of God to the modern world)
- c. Dialectical atheism: the short-lived view that God was once alive, but died in the incarnation and crucifixion of Christ (J. J. Thomas Altizer).
- d. Semanical atheism: this view says that talk or language about God is dead since all language about God is meaningless (Paul van Buren).
- e. Nuances of atheism: existential atheists (Sartre), marxists atheists (Marx), psychological atheists (S. Freud), capitalistic atheists (Ayn Rand), behaviouristic atheists (B. F. Skinner).

**Materialism:** This view says that whatever is, is material. It is a name given to a group of beliefs concerning the nature of the world which give to matter a primary position and accord to mind or spirit a secondary, dependent reality, or none at all. Hard materialists assert that the real world consists of material things, varying in their states and relations and nothing else. Consciousness, purposiveness, aspiration, mind, desire, etc. are manifestations of the movement of matter and there are therefore no incorporeal souls or spirits, gods or goddesses, spiritual powers or agencies, angels, devils, or demiruges,etc. Thus everything that can be explained can be explained on the basis of laws involving antecedent material and

physical conditions (naturalism as a methodology and materialism go hand in hand). Traditionally, materialists are determinists in that there is an inescapable natural or material cause for every event (though quantum theory has abrogated this notions to some extent). People have embraced materialism because it allegedly offers a comprehensive, unified account of reality which is economical, intelligible, and comports well with the natural sciences. Here are the leading exponents of materialism, historically:

- a. Classical period: Thales (water), Anaximander (boundless), Anaximenes (air), Parmenides (absolute being), Heraclitus (fire), Leucippus and Democritus (atomists), Empedocles (earth, water, air, fire), Anaxagoras (plurality of elements), Epicurus, Lucretius (*De Rerum Natura*).
- b. Seventeenth century: Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655—rehabilitated Epicureanism) and Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679—all things were bodies in motion)
- c. Eighteenth century: *Ame materielle* (1692-1704 an anonymous mss. explaining mental functions along Democritean lines), Dr. Maubec's *Principes physiques de la raison et les passions de l'homme* (1709, materialist vision of man in panpsychic terms), Denis Diderot's *Le Reve de D'Alembert* (heredity, growth, animal behavior in terms of interior motions of living bodies), Julien de la Offray Mettrie (1709-1751—medical doctor who saw man as a self-moving machine, *L'Homme machine*), Jean Cabanis (1757-1808—treats brain as analogous with the digestive system, "the brain secretes thought as the liver secretes bile," *Rapports du physique et du moral de l'homme*), Paul Heinrich Dietrich d'Holbach (1723-1789—*Systeme de la nature*, 1770, the Bible of all materialism, arguing antireligiously that nothing is outside of nature), Joseph Priestly in England and Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier in France (in the 1770s- 1780s, established chemistry as a strictly physical science all of whose explanations appeal only to substances and their natural interactions).
- d. Nineteenth century: Ludwig Büchner (*Kraft und Stoff*, 1855, makes the claim that materialism is a generalization of a posteriori discoveries), Jacob Moleschott, Karl Vogt, Emil Du Bois Reymond, Hermann Helmholtz seek to establish the physiological basis of mental functions and progressively undermine the barrier between physical systems and living organisms and thus soften resistance to materialistic theses.

The following men and their books establish a plausible, empirically, or scientifically ground basis for these two basic planks of materialism: (1) that the organization of living things into forms admirably suited for survival and reproduction can be explained scientifically without appeal to immanent, transcendent, or religious causes or purposes; (2) that man is a part and product of the natural world. Since then, most scientists and medical doctors have proceeded along thoughtful materialist lines

- 1.) Charles Darwin—*Origin of Species*, 1859, and *Descent of Man*, 1871.
- 2.) T. H. Huxley—*Man's Place in Nature*, 1863.

e. Contemporary materialism: Twentieth century materialism has almost completely eliminated vitalist or supernatural views of life. The mental and vital functions of living organisms are explainable by physical processes. Furthermore, cybernetics threaten the idea of a special status of mental activity. Neurology shows how artificially induced changes in the electrochemical state of the nervous system produces changes in the subject's mental activity. Psychology has despaired of investigating mental states as key to behaviour and instead turned to the study of behaviour itself as the key to the understanding of the human psyche and person. Three contemporary schools of thought emphasize materialism:

- a. Logical positivism: Led by Rudolph Carnap and others, this group espoused a materialist epistemology that asserted that for any statement to be meaningful it must be empirically verifiable.
- b. Analytic behaviorists: In particular, Gilbert Ryle seeks to show that intentions, intelligence, choice, desire, excitement, fear etc. are the consequences of a disposition to behave in a certain way in suitable circumstances and that the dispositions was assumed to be a state of the body.
- c. Physicalism: Mental states that cannot be explained dispositionally turn out to be states of the central nervous system, though this is unknown to the person experiencing it (Paul K. Feyerabend, Hilary Putnam, J. J. C. Smart, etc.)

**Humanism:** Humanism, like the term "religion," is extremely fluid and can have many meanings. In this context, humanism is any philosophy which recognizes the value or dignity of humanity and makes him the measure of all things or somehow takes human nature and its limits, interests, and abilities as its theme. Many brands of theism are non-theistic if not anti-theistic (coalescing into what is known as secular humanism), but this is not necessarily the case. However, humanists may acknowledge God in a variety of ways whether that be deistically, pantheistically, or theistically. Here is a typology of humanism.

- Evolutionary humanism: Julian Huxley, *Religion without Revelation*
- Behavioral humanism: B. F. Skinner, *About Behaviorism, Beyond Freedom and Dignity*
- Existential humanism: Jean Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism, Being and Nothingness*
- Pragmatic humanism: John Dewey, *A Common Faith*
- Marxist humanism: Karl Marx, *Communist Manifesto* (with F. Engels), and *Das Kapital*
- Egocentric humanism: Any Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness, For the New Intellectual*,
- Cultural humanism: Corliss Lamon, *The Philosophy of Humanism*
- Christian humanism: Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Henry Newman, Jacques Maritain, C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams, J.R.R. Tolkien, Francis Schaeffer.

**Secularism:** [Latin, *secularis*, "belonging to an age" and *saeculum*, "generation or age"] This very common term was first used by G. J. Holyoake (1817-1906) and now denotes a system of thought that seeks to interpret and order life on principles taken solely from this world without recourse to revelation, belief in God and a future life. All possible knowledge is limited to this world according to a thorough-going secularism. Secularism, while not technically atheism, slides into atheism easily. Apart from its general negative attitude toward Christianity and religion in general, secularism advocated social progress and the betterment of material conditions for the working classes. The term is now used more generally of the modern tendency to ignore, if not to deny, the principles of supernatural religion in the understanding of the world and human existence.