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# From Empiricism to Equality: Implications of Worldview Naturalism

ReasonFest

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# Overview

1. Building a worldview
2. The challenge to libertarian free will
3. Progressive implications of naturalism
4. Social policy and personal applications
5. Existential concerns
6. Tough questions for naturalism

# Building a worldview

- Worldview: the big picture of reality and human nature that puts things in an ultimate context – a cognitive tool that makes sense of our situation and helps guide behavior, morally and practically.
- 6 questions a worldview should answer:
  - How do we know what's real? – epistemology
  - What exists? – metaphysics
  - Who are we, essentially? – human nature and agency

# Building a worldview

Worldview elements, continued:

- ❑ How ought we behave? – ethics
- ❑ How can we best solve our problems? – practical applications
- ❑ What's it all about? – existential concerns
- Atheism not a worldview, reason not a worldview
- Christianity, Buddhism, Islam *are* worldviews
- Worldview naturalism: nature is what there is, and nature is enough.
- Tagline: “*connection, compassion, control*”

# Worldview Naturalism

- Epistemology: empiricism, public evidence
- Metaphysics: nature is what exists, no evidence for the supernatural
- Human nature: we are evolved, physical creatures, completely *within* nature – *connection*
- Ethics: progressive, humanistic and egalitarian – *compassion*
- Practical applications: based in a causal understanding of behavior – *control*
- Existential concerns: at home in a *wild* universe

# Epistemology: empiricism

- Question: How do we know what's real?
- Personal experience, intuition, and faith are unreliable, so must have public evidence available in principle to everyone. This is empiricism.
- Example of alien abduction: need public, intersubjective evidence to corroborate one's experience of abduction.
- We should rationally be empiricists, exemplified by science, when deciding *any* matter of fact.

# Epistemology: empiricism

- Science and empiricism have no rival in giving us reliable factual knowledge.
- There is no factual domain in which faith, intuition or tradition have special expertise or credibility, e.g., the nature of reality, existence of God.
- On the assumption we want reliable knowledge, we are rational to be empiricists.
- To be empirical is to be epistemically responsible.

# Metaphysics: nature

- Question: What exists?
- Science and empiricism provide evidence for the natural world – a single, causally interconnected realm of existence.
- No reliable evidence for the supernatural, e.g., gods, ghosts, souls; no reason to suppose they exist.
- Nothing supernatural plays a role in any evidence-based explanation or scientific theory.
- Conclusion: nature is all there is.

# Cognitive humility

- But: we could be wrong, since we can't rule out the possibility of evidence supporting the supernatural.
- Naturalism as a metaphysical claim is an empirical *best bet* about the nature of reality, it isn't *necessarily* true.
- We are cognitively humble and non-dogmatic in holding our metaphysical position because it is evidence-based.
- We reserve the right to be wrong!

# Human nature: natural beings

- Question: Who are we, essentially?
- Naturalism, based in science, says we are fully natural, physical beings.
- No evidence for immaterial souls or indwelling mental agent that controls the brain and body.
- The physical brain and body do it all by themselves!

# Human nature: *connection*

- We are fully caused beings: *we are completely products of conditions we didn't choose.*
- We are not self-caused: ultimate self-causation is a logical impossibility.
- Brain, body, beliefs and desires all completely caused by genetics and environment.
- Example: our political beliefs are completely a function of innate personality traits interacting with life experience, peer group and current situation.
- Probability and randomness at the micro level.

# The challenge to libertarian free will

- Determinism: since all is caused, only one possible future given the current situation and the laws of nature.
- Determinism is *false* at the micro level because of quantum indeterminacy.
- But: determinism (reliable cause and effect regularities) is a very good approximation when explaining human development and behavior at the macro level. So...
- We couldn't have done otherwise in an actual situation – if replay the same causes, we'd get the same effects.
- We don't have libertarian, contra-causal free will (CCFW) – no causally exempt decision-maker.

# The challenge to libertarian free will

- The *feeling* that you could have done otherwise isn't good evidence for it! No public, scientific evidence that we have CCFW.
- Randomness doesn't help make us the authors of our acts, doesn't give us control – chance is *not* free will.
- Dennett, Dawkins, Sam Harris, Steven Pinker, others all debunk CCFW: no causation-transcending agent.
- Harris: “No human being stands as author to his own genes or own upbringing, and yet we have every reason to believe that these factors determine his character throughout his life. ” *The Moral Landscape*, p. 109.

# Moral responsibility and agency survive!

- Warning – determinism is *not* a universal excuse! Just because bad behavior is fully caused doesn't *justify* it. No running amok: you *won't* be excused!
- We remain moral agents, responsive to moral norms and social sanctions. We still want a safe, peaceful society.
- Causality doesn't negate responsibility! We can and must hold each other responsible as a way to *cause* each other to behave ethically and responsibly.
- We remain rational agents, able to make choices. You are not out of control!
- We remain causally effective, powerful agents, just as causally effective as the factors which create us.

# Ethical implications of naturalism

- Question: How ought we behave?
- No freely willing self to take ultimate credit or blame – responsibility is *distributed*.
- No one ultimately chooses their character, abilities, circumstances – all the luck of the draw.
- *Empathy*: there but for circumstances go I. I coulda been a conservative, but for my genes and environment. So I cut conservatives some slack.

# Ethical implications: *compassion*

- Seeing we don't have CCFW helps to undercut reactive emotions such as anger, blame, and contempt, whether directed at ourselves or others.
- Spinoza: "This doctrine [determinism] teaches us to hate no one, to despise no one, to mock no one, to be angry with no one, and to envy no one." Darwin, Einstein and others agree.
- Strong affinities with Buddhism: the insight of dependent arising, no substantial self – we are all equally *caused* beings. No superior selves or souls.
- We become more *compassionate* in our attitudes and how we hold each other responsible.

# Political differences on free will

- Conservatives, more than liberals, believe human beings can transcend causation, bootstrap themselves into success: Ayn Rand, Reagan, Pataki, libertarians.
- Conservatives use CCFW to assign ultimate blame and withhold assistance. If you don't succeed, it's all *your* fault! You could have tried harder and your circumstances *don't explain* your choice not to.
- Progressives and liberals more likely to accept the role of luck and causation. Gov. Mario Cuomo: “It was all luck. Luck and nothing else.” – *New York Times Magazine*, 4/10/11

# Egalitarian implications of naturalism

- Naturalism offers no support for traditional, often faith-based, unscientific prejudices against women, minorities, gays, atheists, etc.
- No science-based grounds for unequal rights or privileges, e.g., for white males. All classes are equally deserving of all rights and opportunities.
- It's no coincidence that scientific naturalists tend to be progressive, humanistic liberals in their policies and personal lives.
- Empiricism tends toward *equality*: universal human rights is an achievement of scientific enlightenment.

# Progressive social policy

- Criminal justice reform: retribution untenable since offenders don't ultimately *deserve* to suffer. Should use least punitive means possible to protect, deter, and rehabilitate.
- Sam Harris: "The urge for retribution...seems to depend upon our not seeing the underlying causes of human behavior." *The Moral Landscape*, 109
- Reducing economic inequality: no naturalistic justification for supposing the poor *deserve* poverty or the rich *deserve* their riches. The lucky should help the unlucky via taxes, and social programs.
- Addiction, mental illness, obesity: behavioral problems not failures of will, so compassion is in order.

# Naturalism and personal liberties

- Abortion: science-based naturalism provides no evidence for ensoulment at conception, so no over-riding right to life of the fetus that trumps the interests of women.
- Right to die: no naturalistic justification for limiting the right to choose a good death. No obligation to live until the bitter end.
- Gay rights: no naturalistic justification for denying equal rights, including marriage.

# Effective social policy: *control*

- Question: How can we best solve our problems?
- Understanding and accepting science and causation gives us *power and control*.
- What *causes* crime, addiction, obesity, lack of motivation, social inequality, climate change, etc.?
- To suppose that something about us transcends cause and effect is *disempowering* since prevents understanding the actual causes of behavior.

# *Intentional* social policy

- Behavior tech: applying what we know about behavior in service to progressive goals, e.g., less violent society, economic equality, population, climate, sustainability.
- Design *optimum environments* for personal and social flourishing – prevention, not punishment.
- Motivation: create *political will* for sustainability and progressive action; exert collective self-control.
- Foster *personal autonomy* by educating about susceptibility to marketing and manipulation, learn how to exert counter-control, e.g., regulating advertisers.

# Personal and interpersonal apps

- *Self-compassion*: discarding CCFW alleviates unnecessary and excessive self-blame, guilt, shame.
- *Self-control*: understanding your behavior permits effective control of your situation to bring about desired changes.
- Understanding and accepting that we are fully caused can improve interpersonal relations.
- Empathy and compassion *for others*: there but for circumstances go I - there are no self-caused monsters or heroes.

# Personal and interpersonal apps

- Defuse anger and gain knowledge by answering the rhetorical question: “Why does that idiot (husband, girlfriend, teacher, roommate) keep doing that!!!?”
- Weight loss naturalism: a deterministic process of gaining self-control – calories in vs. calories used.
- Worldview cognitive therapy: correcting false assumptions about free will can foster self-compassion, self-efficacy, and behavior change.

# Existential concerns: nature is enough

- Question: What's it all about?
- The wild universe: no god in charge, no discernable purpose to existence.
- Grand, spectacular, strange story of science – inspiration!
- Astonishment, puzzlement, wonder as natural responses to our situation.
- Naturalism can evoke feelings of self-transcendence and belonging: we are at home in the wild universe.
- Death: no afterlife, but no nothingness either!

# Tough questions for naturalism

- Protecting the open society: irreducible tension between worldviews, some of which seek hegemony.
- Moral dilemmas: no scientific solution since competition between basic values, e. g., self-interest vs. altruism, liberty vs. security.
- The hard problem of consciousness: how does phenomenal experience fit into the natural world?
- What's your tough question for naturalism?

Thanks!