

## NATURALISM AND THEISM: SOME LOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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Evangelicals will readily agree that contemporary naturalism has serious weaknesses as a philosophy of life. Naturalists incorrectly deny God's existence, they have false beliefs about the future course of human history, and they tend toward an unjustified optimism in unredeemed human nature. Naturalism is weak because it has the facts wrong.

Naturalism is also, however, often accused of having broad philosophical weaknesses that go beyond such errors of fact. Some Christians claim that naturalism cannot make sense of ethics, perhaps not even of nature itself. Whether naturalism does have such broad philosophical weaknesses is a question that is important for at least two reasons.

First, if naturalism does have such broad weaknesses, Christian apologetics will obviously benefit by exposing them.

Second, if naturalism does not have such broad weaknesses, it is conceivable that a Christian philosophy could accommodate some of naturalism's central tenets. For example, we might reject naturalism's factual errors and yet agree with its contention that all of reality is in a certain sense continuous. (Naturalists tend to maintain that all of reality can be known by methods that are not fundamentally different from the methods of natural science. As a result they also tend to hold that there are no unbridgeable differences between kinds of things. A Christian application of this principle might yield the view that there is no sharp discontinuity between the physical order and the spiritual order.)

As I indicated above, the theist is apt to maintain that the naturalist has no satisfactory account of ethics. My problem is that I am not convinced that the theist is any better off than the naturalist on the question of the foundation of ethics. Indeed I suspect that in the end the theist may actually have to accept what is, at core, a naturalistic account of right and wrong. I will not argue here that my suspicion is correct. My more modest goal is twofold: to make the issues clearer, and to explain why those issues are ultimately related to one's view of logical truth and logical necessity. With this second point I hope to provide support for Theodore Schoen's claim that significant issues about the relationship between Christian theology and naturalism (or physicalism) hinge on settling questions about logical theory that are currently under discussion by philosophers.

Theism is sometimes seen as being philosophically superior to naturalism because it can give a kind of foundation for ethical truth and a kind of explanation for the nature of the physical world that naturalism is in principle incapable of providing. The central difficulty in naturalism on this account may be put thus: At certain crucial points naturalism requires us to accept certain truths as brute facts—facts for which no further rational explanation is possible. I will now develop this criticism in more detail and show how it hinges on a certain conception of logical truth.

Naturalism typically wants to rest ethics on human nature. Because we hu-

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mans are built in a certain way, we desire or value certain kinds of things. From our complex system of (sometimes conflicting) desires come our values. We reflect on specific cases of valuing and on the likelihood of conflicts between our values, and from these reflections come the general principles that make up our ethical systems. In slogan form, naturalistic ethics might be put thus: The good is what is valued by reflective humans. Though this is an oversimplification of naturalistic ethics, it does emphasize an important fact about it. Ultimately such ethics rests on accepting human nature as a brute fact. Human nature is accepted as the foundation of ethical standards and is not itself assessable in ethical terms. Many theists see this as the fatal flaw of naturalistic ethics. Their criticism can be made clearer by contrasting human nature with other possible kinds of natures.

Consider demonic nature, for example. Presumably demons desire things that by our moral standards are wrong. Perhaps a Christian would explain this by saying that demonic desires are perversions of God-given angelic desires. If a naturalist were to believe in demons, however, he would apparently have to say that a demon's desires are just as natural to him as human desires are to humans. In other words the naturalist apparently must give the same account of demonic values as he gives of human values. A human sees the good in terms of what humans typically desire, and a demon sees the good in terms of what demons typically desire. Whose values are really right, a human's values or Satan's? Apparently the naturalist must deny that there is anything that is "really" right. There is "right" as seen from the human point of view, and there is "right" as seen from the demonic point of view, and that is the end of the matter. There is no ultimate right in such a case—only conflicting systems of desires.

Of course the typical naturalist does not believe in demons. But the problem I have been discussing can be stated more philosophically without using demons as illustrations.

Consider these two questions: (A) What do humans typically desire? (B) What ought humans to desire? Question A is a question about fact; it is a question about what humans actually want. Question B, however, is a question about values; it is a question about what humans ought to want. Our earlier problem with naturalistic ethics can now be restated in this way: Naturalists apparently confuse question B with question A. They are supposed to be explaining what is actually good, what humans ought to desire, and instead they are explaining what humans typically do desire. They try to define what ought to be desired in terms of what actually is desired. Some philosophers have thought that naturalists are so confused on this point that the confusion deserves a name. These philosophers call confusing question B with question A "the naturalistic fallacy." To commit the naturalistic fallacy is to try to define what ought to be the case in terms of what actually is the case.<sup>1</sup>

Christian thinkers in particular have often urged that naturalistic ethics must be rejected for the reasons discussed above. Those who have read extensively in C. S. Lewis, for example, will recognize his many variations on this theme.

This criticism of naturalism has the merit of being forceful and apparently conclusive. What bothers me, however, is whether the theistic position can sur-

<sup>1</sup>It probably goes without saying that naturalists do not agree that they are confused. Naturalists want to claim that ultimately "oughts" have to be derived from certain kinds of "facts."

vive the theist's own criticism. I am not sure that it can. The theist evidently has two options in trying to connect his belief in God to his belief in right and wrong. Either he can take God as being the source of all value, the foundational standard of what is good, or he can believe in a foundational moral standard (call it "the moral law") that exists independently even of God and which God measures up to perfectly. Some theologians have elected one of these alternatives and some the other. As I will now argue, however, either view is susceptible to the same kind of criticism that theists have used to attack naturalism.

Suppose we say that the word "good" simply means "what God values." Our critic may then reply that we are committing the naturalistic fallacy. We are trying to reduce an ethical question (What is good? What ought everyone, including God, to value?) to a factual question (What does God, as a matter of fact, value?). It is mainly this problem that has driven some theologians to believe that there exists an objective ethical law that stands above even God.

Suppose, then, that there exists a moral law that says what is right and what is wrong, and suppose that God conforms perfectly to this law. Our critic will reply that this view also commits the naturalistic fallacy. We are still trying to reduce an ethical question (What is good? What ought a good law to say?) to a factual question (What does this particular moral law actually say?).

Thus theistic ethics can apparently be criticized in a way that is exactly parallel to the standard Christian criticism of naturalistic ethics. Each sort of ethics in its own way appeals to an ultimate brute fact as the standard of ethical values. And that brute fact—whether it is human nature, divine nature, or some sort of higher law—is itself simply unassessable in moral terms.

The parallel difficulties faced by naturalistic and theistic ethics can be stated also in a less abstract way. The naturalist appeals to human nature to establish ethics, even though we can imagine other sorts of beings with very nonhuman natures (demons, vampires, goblins, trolls). How then can the naturalist justify setting up merely contingent human nature as an absolute ethical standard? Parallel to the naturalist, the Christian appeals to divine nature to establish ethics even though the naturalist can imagine many different sorts of gods, each with his own nature and own ethics. How then can the Christian justify setting up a merely contingent divine nature as an absolute ethical standard?

Of course Christian theologians have long had an answer to this question, an answer that makes use of the concept of necessity. They have denied that God is a mere happenstance, a mere contingent being by whom—luckily enough for us—the universe is ruled. Instead they have said that God is an absolutely necessary being (a logically necessary being). This means that it is not just an accident that God has the nature he has, for it is nonsensical to suppose that he might be fundamentally different than he is. (Similarly, the number two has a logically necessary nature. It is not just an accident that two has the properties it has, for it is nonsensical to suppose that it might be dramatically different than it is. Two just could not be a multiple of five, for example.) We did not just get lucky with our God, for no other sort of God is possible. Once one understands that God's nature is absolutely necessary, these theologians say, one can see how God can himself be an absolute standard for right and wrong. If God himself is an absolutely necessary being, and if we ground ethics in his character, then ethics is also absolutely necessary. We can thus avoid the problems facing the naturalist. The naturalist has to say that murder is wrong merely because human nature (which might

easily have been different than it is) opposes it. The theist can say, however, that "murder is wrong" is a necessary truth grounded in God's necessary character. The wrongness of murder is not determined by anyone's whim (not even by God's whim) but rather by the absolutely necessary character of God. If a being of some sort (a demon) were to say that murder is good, he would not just be taking a different ethical position than God takes. He would be talking logical nonsense, much as if he had said that three might be an even number.<sup>2</sup>

I have been discussing one reason that has led some theologians to appeal to the logical necessity of God's nature. By appealing to such necessity they hope to provide a kind of foundation for theistic ethics that they think is lacking for naturalistic ethics. I now want to turn, however, to the swirling philosophical controversy that today surrounds the concept of necessity.

Part of that controversy is familiar to those of you who know the ontological argument. That argument claims to provide a purely logical demonstration for God's existence. Many philosophers have replied that it is impossible to provide a purely logical demonstration for the existence of any being. Notice, however, that one does not have to accept the ontological argument in order to believe in God's necessity. In other words one may believe that it is absolutely necessary that God exists, but one may not think that that can be proved on purely logical grounds. Perhaps one must rely on Scripture, or perhaps one must already know that God exists before one can show that God's existence is logically necessary. This was the position of Aquinas, who held that God's existence is absolutely necessary but that this fact cannot be proved by purely logical means. Echoes of this position are found in some contemporary philosopher-theologians, including C. S. Lewis. In other words some theologians have thought they could accept God's necessity and ground ethics in it while sidestepping the controversy over the ontological argument for God's existence.

Within this century, however—especially in the past twenty years—a new problem has appeared about the notion of a necessary God. Traditionally philosophers have at least agreed that there is such a thing as absolute logical necessity, though they may have disagreed over whether this concept could be applied to God. Today, however, the notion of necessity itself is under attack. There are philosophers of logic who maintain that there is no such thing as a necessary truth, there is no such thing as a truth that could not be false. This seems, on the face of it, to be a rather drastic position. I shall now explain a few of the reasons that more and more philosophers are coming to accept this position. Let us do

<sup>2</sup>In the text I take logical necessity to be the sort of necessity that God's character would possess. There are other kinds of necessity: causal necessity (if you drop something it necessarily falls, because gravitation causes it to fall); psychological necessity (my psychology is such that it is necessary to hold such and such a belief); and what some philosophical theologians have called "factual necessity" (something is factually necessary if its nonexistence is conceivable but if there is nothing that could actually cause it not to exist). These kinds of necessity must be distinguished from logical or absolute necessity. Something is logically necessary if it is conceptually impossible (nonsensical) for that thing not to exist. Unless God's nature is logically necessary, it is conceptually possible that there be a god with a different character than ours. Such a god would have different moral standards than ours. If it is even possible for there to be such a god, then the theist is back with the problem facing the naturalist.

As I read Aquinas, if his view on this question were to be stated in contemporary terminology it would root God's perfection in his logically necessary nature. See *Summa Theologica*, Ia, 6, 3, and compare this with his indication in Ia, 2, 1 that "God exists" is an analytic (logically necessary) proposition.

E. J. Carnell explicitly grounds ethics in the necessary character of God. See his "Becoming Acquainted with the Person of God," *The Case for Biblical Christianity*, 70-73.

some common-sense reflecting about logic.

An essential part of being able to reason is being able to classify things. When we classify something we group it with one sort of thing rather than another. For example, when we classify something as living we think of it as belonging to a group of things that includes plants and excludes rocks. To classify something is simply to decide whether or not it possesses a particular property (e.g., we decide whether something possesses the property of being alive).

Now it is a fundamental principle of logic that for any object and for any property, either the object possesses that property or it does not. We use this obvious principle in classifying all sorts of things: people, books, numbers, words, and so on. Let us look at a simple case of classifying words.

Some words, such as "bake," are classified as monosyllabic words because they have only one syllable. Other words, such as "father," are classified as polysyllabic words because they have more than one syllable. Applying the fundamental principle of logic mentioned above, obviously any word will have to be either monosyllabic or polysyllabic.

Consider now a less familiar way of classifying words. Some words give correct descriptions of themselves. For example, the word "polysyllabic" is itself a polysyllabic word, for it contains more than one syllable. Some words, however, do not correctly describe themselves. For example, the word "monosyllabic" does not correctly describe itself, since it contains more than one syllable. Let us give a name to this way of classifying words. If a word gives a correct description of itself, call it "autological." If it does not, call it "nonautological." Applying the above-mentioned logical principle, obviously any word will either be an autological word or a nonautological word. It will either describe itself or it will not.

Consider now the word "nonautological." What kind of word is it? It must either describe itself or not. Here, however, surprise awaits us: If the word "nonautological" correctly describes itself, then it does not, while if it does not correctly describe itself, then it does.<sup>3</sup> I hope you find that puzzling. We are in the presence of a contradiction. We have been applying a perfectly ordinary principle of classification to perfectly ordinary things—words—and we have reached a contradiction. What went wrong? I am not sure that anyone really knows.

This contradiction is known as Grelling's paradox (after the person who first discovered it in 1908). It is a serious paradox because there is no obvious logical mistake of any sort in the reasoning. What the paradox shows is this: There is something wrong with our common-sense way of classifying things, something wrong with our logic. Since 1908 no logician has been able to devise a way of handling the paradox that really satisfies common sense. For example Bertrand Russell, a brilliant logician, suggested that we must give up the idea that words can apply to themselves. This, however, is a very unsatisfying suggestion, for the

<sup>3</sup>A more complete explanation of the contradiction is this: Suppose we try to maintain that the word "nonautological" does correctly describe itself. It then follows that the word "nonautological" is nonautological. But if it is nonautological it does not correctly describe itself, for that is just what "nonautological" means. In other words if the word "nonautological" does correctly describe itself, then it does not. On the other hand, suppose we try to maintain that the word "nonautological" does not describe itself. It then follows that it is itself a nonautological word (because it does not describe itself). But if the word "nonautological" is itself a nonautological word, it does describe itself after all. So if the word "nonautological" does not describe itself, then it does. Thus no matter which way we try to classify the word "nonautological," we wind up contradicting ourselves. Yet our fundamental logical principle of classification assures us that the word must be classified one way or the other.

word "polysyllabic" surely is itself polysyllabic.

As I said, the paradox is a very serious one even though it only seems to be about words. It is serious because it shows that there is something wrong with the logical principles that for centuries have been used in classifying things. For centuries it has been accepted that for any object and any imaginable property, either the object has that property or it does not. It is essentially this principle that causes the contradiction.

A long-accepted truth of logic—a truth that seemed so obvious that it just could not possibly be false—has actually turned out to be false in at least one case. This has also happened with many other supposed necessary truths. It happened with Euclidean geometry, which was for centuries thought to be necessarily true. Einstein showed that Euclidean geometry is probably false. In the very foundations of mathematics the logician Bertrand Russell turned up a contradiction very much like Grelling's paradox, discussed above. Some logicians have even suggested that quantum physics may require us to revise certain laws of logic.

Now many philosophers think that these problems about logic mean that we must begin to think of logic in a new way. At one time logical truth was identified with logical necessity—that which simply must be true. Supposedly we perceive a logical necessity by its obviousness or by its logical connections with what is obvious. If something just obviously has to be true, we say that it is logically necessary. We can no longer, however, depend on obviousness as a guarantor of logical necessity, because what was obvious in the past has so often turned out to be wrong. If you were to examine a book of advanced logic today, you would discover that some of the currently accepted foundational principles of logic are far from obvious. How then are the foundational principles of logic discovered by logicians?

W. V. Quine, a Harvard philosopher, is probably the most renowned philosopher of logic and language in the United States today. He has led the attack on the notion of logical necessity. He has suggested that we must look at logical truth in a new way. His suggestion is that we approach our understanding of logic in exactly the way we approach our understanding of the world. What follows is a very rough description of his position.

We form theories of the world—or world views, if you prefer—in order to account for our experience of the world. But our possible theories of the world are underdetermined by our experience of the world. This means that we can explain our experiences by many different sorts of theories. For example, we all accept what we might call the common-sense theory of the world, which says that we are surrounded by other objects and people and that these objects and people go on existing even when we are not experiencing them. This common-sense view, however, which everyone accepts in practice, is not the only possible theory of the world. You might instead think that all of your experience is an illusion created by an evil god in order to deceive you. Or you might accept the philosopher Berkeley's view that material objects do not exist. He said that the world we experience is really a group of ideas in God's mind.

I do not see how any of these theories can be disproved by appealing to experience. That is what I mean by saying that they are underdetermined by experience. If you are familiar with the philosophy of science, you will know that scientific theories are also underdetermined by scientific experience. How then are we

to decide between theories? We cannot appeal merely to experience, because different theories are compatible with all of our experiences. Quine argues that in such cases we should be guided by systematic simplicity. In other words we should accept a theory of the world that presents all of our experiences in the simplest and most systematically understandable way.

Moreover, Quine suggests that we treat our theory of logic in the same way we treat our theories of the world. He admits that logic seems very much steadier than science. It is hard to think of logic as being a "mere theory." Still, there are very obvious logical principles that lead to contradictions. We saw one example of that earlier in Grelling's paradox. Quine suggests that even though logic is a sort of theory, it seems so much steadier than scientific theory because logic is more central than science to the way we think. Being more central, if we give up a truth of logic we will probably create complications in all our theories, and this will make them more difficult to understand and therefore harder to believe. Nevertheless, sometimes it is simpler to quit believing a logical principle than to go on accepting it. Now that Grelling's paradox has been discovered we must either change our logical beliefs about classification or we must accept a contradiction. It is hard to change our logical beliefs about classification, but it would be even harder to accept a contradiction because then it would be difficult to distinguish between truth and falsehood. That would make our theories very complicated indeed.

So sometimes we decide to change our theories for the sake of simplicity, and sometimes we even do this with our theory of logic. Here there is an important point to notice about logic and necessity. A necessary truth is supposed to be one we have to accept, no matter what theory we hold. But Quine replies that there is not anything we have to accept. If we are willing to complicate our theory enough, we can give up any belief. By making a moderate complication in my common-sense theory I can believe that everyone is a hallucination. By making a more drastic complication of my common-sense theory I can change some of my logical beliefs. So, according to Quine, there is not any truth that we have to accept. No truth is necessary. This can also be put in a reverse fashion. In a sense you can make any truth a necessary truth. Pick any belief you wish. You can hold it true no matter what happens—provided you are willing to complicate your theory enough.

Quine's view, then, may be summarized in this way: In the end it is simplicity and not necessity that helps us decide on the content of our theories. Talk of necessity is senseless. Everything and nothing is necessary. Of course this bare sketch of Quine's views does not begin to do justice to his attack on necessity.

We have moved a great distance in the course of this paper, so let me conclude by pulling everything together. If Quine is right about necessity, it is senseless to talk about the necessity of anything. Therefore it is senseless to talk about God's necessity. But this means that we cannot appeal to a necessary God in order to provide an absolute foundation for right and wrong. If this is so, then Christian ethics will resemble naturalistic ethics more than some Christian apologists have believed. The Christian may appeal to God or to a higher law as the foundation of right and wrong, while the naturalist may appeal to human nature. Still, if we give up the notion of necessity the Christian will have to appeal to brute fact just as the naturalist does. So if Quine is right, Christians had better be careful about some of their attacks on naturalism. We may share more with naturalists than we

thought.

Is Quine right? I personally find his arguments more compelling than those of his critics, but the issue is far from being settled. My goal here has not been to settle that issue but rather to provide an illustration of a point made by Schoen: There are important questions about how Christianity relates to naturalism (or physicalism), and answers to those questions hinge upon some very difficult questions in the philosophy of logic. The task of the Christian apologist may therefore be more difficult than he has thought.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Thanks are due Robert Roberts, Theodore Schoen, James Spiceland and Ronald Veenker for reading and commenting on this paper. Special thanks are due my wife, Becky, who spent several hours discussing both substance and style with me.