

Dewey, Nagel and The Challenges of American Naturalism

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Abstract: This essay addresses a specific issue concerning the history of naturalism in America. It begins by discussing the socially progressive stance of Dewey's pragmatic naturalism and its place within the larger movement known as Columbia University naturalism. Given the centrality of this conception of naturalism during the 1930s and 1940s, it wonders how a label commonly associated with Dewey's influential social-moral project could later represent the asocial philosophical vision of Quine in the 1960s? It argues that part of the answer is found with Ernest Nagel's criticisms of Dewey's naturalism in the 1950s, where he rejects the view that scientific reasoning can serve in the selection of human ends and values. Nagel's critical remarks indicate an important shift away from a socially engaged conception of naturalism concerned with promoting a proper empirical study of moral value towards the more specialized empirical projects exemplified in later forms of naturalism. More generally, these changes indicate a profound divergence along social and moral dimensions with regard to the central import underlying the naturalist's use of continuity, and they further highlight the lack of social and moral perspective that was typical of Cold war conceptions of the philosophical profession.

'Naturalism' is a word with all kinds of meanings. But a naturalism which perceives that man with his habits, institutions, desires, thoughts, aspirations, ideals and struggles, is within nature, an integral part of it, has the philosophical foundation and the practical inspiration for effort to employ nature as an ally of human ideals and goods such as no dualism can possibly provide.

John Dewey

1. Introduction

Roughly 45 years ago, discussing what he calls the 'challenge' of American naturalism, Robert Roth laments the lack of interest in the issues raised by this movement but closes with this optimistic and prophetic statement: "...naturalism will emerge stronger than it was before, enriched by the current interest in analytic philosophy" (1964, 584). It did not take long for this prediction to come true. Approximately 5 years later, we were introduced to Quine's 'Epistemology Naturalized' (1969), which spawned a renewed interest in naturalism that continues to exert a wide influence in contemporary philosophical circles. Roth's prediction is then easily confirmed, many analytic philosophers have adopted naturalism as the proper

philosophical perspective from which to address their respective problems. However, there remain unresolved questions concerning whether this recent naturalist turn or *return* should be understood as an enrichment, or continuation of this movement, especially as it was represented in the work of earlier American philosophers.¹ This is perhaps most readily seen with the moral orientation of John Dewey's naturalism, which presents science as a vehicle for moral and social progress, and the divergent conception of naturalism found with Quine's emphasis on greater scientific perspective within philosophy, one that caters to the solution of technical and largely professional problems.

This difference points to the main historical issue addressed in this paper. The moral and social dimensions of Dewey's naturalism was not atypical or unique, but represented the general outlook of a group of philosophers sometimes referred to as Columbia University naturalism. They argued that nature was all-inclusive and sufficient, and further promoted scientific method as an appropriate model for philosophical inquiry. But they did not conceive of their perspective as simply promoting a technical philosophical project, but as an active reply to those religiously minded philosophers who claimed that naturalism was a threat to American society. Importantly, this indicates the larger cultural significance of their position, and how the naturalists represented those philosophers who saw science as a vehicle for moral and social progress in America.

The centrality of this conception of naturalism and its cultural import during the 1930s and 1940s should, I think, cause us to wonder how it could be co-opted as a label for Quine's rather different view in the late 1960s. More specifically, we should ask how 'naturalism', a label commonly understood in terms of Dewey's influential social-moral project could later represent the technical philosophical vision of Quine's in the 1960s? The historical account

offered here argues that a key intellectual development that prompted this change concerns the perceived difficulties associated with articulating a scientific and empirical account of moral evaluation. Ernest Nagel's work from the 1950s is introduced as providing a striking illustration of this development. His criticisms of Dewey's emphasis on the continuity between value and nature result in his further rejection of the fundamental claim that scientific reasoning can help in the selection of human ends and values. The implicit upshot of this critical response is that Dewey's use of continuity fails to adequately address the key challenge of providing an empirical account that preserves the objectivity of value judgments.² This further suggests a tension in Nagel's own work between his Deweyan endorsement of the use of scientific intelligence in morals, and his rejection of continuity between nature and value. It also highlights the intellectual struggles naturalists faced in the attempt to address Dewey's challenge of extending scientific method to moral reasoning. Naturalists would eventually reject the need to meet this challenge; the tension seen in Nagel's view would later yield Quine's outright rejection of the empirical objectivity of moral judgments. By charting these developments, we gain a fuller account of the reasons why naturalism came to represent such starkly opposed viewpoints in the work of thinkers such as Dewey and Quine.

2. Dewey and Columbia Naturalism

The kinds of projects developed under the banner of 'naturalism' in the first half of the twentieth century promoted a different understanding of the relations between philosophy and science and a corresponding difference in their social and moral orientation. No where was this more evident than with Dewey's naturalism from this period, where his use of continuity seeks to bridge the gap between science and morals.

Dewey's overarching philosophical concern is with the relations between science and

human value, and he views the rupture or gap between scientific knowledge and moral reasoning as the major philosophical issue of his time.³ Bridging this gap is thus the key concern of his attempt to reconstruct philosophy. He thus explains: “The reconstruction to be undertaken is...to carry over into any inquiry into human and moral subjects the kind of method (the method of observation, theory as hypothesis, and experimental test) by which understanding of physical nature has been brought to its present pitch” (1948, ix). Standing in the way of this project were the various dualisms that had formed a fundamental part of modern philosophy. One pertinent example concerns the dualism between human nature and physical nature where each are taken to be enclosed realms working according to their own separate type of laws. The objective realm of nature consisted of matter in motion devoid of value, while human experience was essentially subjective, standing as a veil between subjects and the objective physical world. This conception of experience makes human value entirely subjective, and consequently takes events in nature as having no implications for human value. Consequently, in order to understand how scientific method can be applied to the case of moral evaluation, we need a new conception of the ontological relationship between value and nature.⁴

It is through emphasizing continuity between human experience and nature that Dewey attempts to radically revise this dualist picture of humanity’s place in nature. In doing so, he defends a more expansive notion of ‘experience’ as the dynamic interactive context between human creatures and their environment. Experience is viewed as an ongoing process involving the interaction of a creature with other factors and features of its environment. This process finds the organism undergoing change and striving to respond by exhibiting a degree of control over this change.⁵ This evolutionary-biological account of experience is meant to illustrate what earlier accounts could not, namely the continuous interactive relationship between nature and

human experience. If human beings are not viewed as detached from their environment, but as intimately connected to their surroundings, then values and valuation must also grow out of our activities within nature. Human nature and value are then depicted as products of processes that include both organisms and their environment. For Dewey it follows that all valuation is intrinsic to human experiencing and that dealing with various experienced ‘problematic’ goods and qualities requires reestablishing a settled and integrated situation.

It is here that we can note a further continuity between experience now conceived as an, in part, value laden activity, and scientific endeavours. Dewey takes science or what he more generally calls ‘the scientific attitude’ (Dewey 1938, 38) as the strategy involved in attempting to exert intelligent control over problematic situations, whether we are dealing with mundane daily activities, or the more refined situations found in empirical science. Science is not then devoid of valuations, since it too is involved in the selection of specified ends, or what Dewey calls ‘ends-in-view’, in the pursuit of the solution to its problems (1939, 33). For Dewey then, science or organized intelligence, is an instrument for relating means to ends as well as in the selection of those specific ends that we might follow, and then is viewed as “an instrument of critically determining what is good or bad in the way of acceptance and rejection” (1929a, 423).

This points rests on Dewey’s key claim that the value of means and ends are reciprocally determined (Anderson 2005, Dewey 1939). We do not simply begin with a specific end-in-view, which we must then only find a way to implement. Rather, we lack an adequate conception or understanding of a specific end until we have understood how we can achieve it. Making judgments concerning the value of an end are then bound up with our judgments concerning the costs of its implementation. Means are never merely means to an end, but help to define and constitute that end. Moreover, ends themselves are never simply ends, but serve also as means

for the furthering of other ends (Welchman 1995, 191). For Dewey then, these considerations concerning the structure of practical reasoning show that the use of experimental method as exemplified in science can help determine both means and ends within the realm of moral value. It can provide us with strategies for furthering perceived goods and offer a methodological model for more careful reflection concerning what goods we ought to pursue us. A proper understanding of the continuities between human experience and nature, locates human value within the transactional context between humans and their environment circumstances. And a clear understanding of the structure of practical judgment indicates that scientific reasoning is capable of being extended to those problematic situations where we are concerned with the selection of possible ends for moral decision and action.

The larger social significance of these remarks is brought out in Dewey's paper 'Anti-Naturalism in Extremis', his contribution to the 1944 manifesto of Columbia University Naturalism, *Naturalism and the Human Spirit*. In this essay, Dewey seeks to respond to those non-naturalists and supernaturalists who blame the world's problems and tragedies on philosophical naturalism. He responds in part by making explicit the assumptions about the natural world that underpin the anti-naturalist rebuke of naturalism, where the baselessness of nature and natural knowledge informs their condemnation of naturalism as the source of the ills that plague the modern world. In response to such accusations, Dewey emphatically notes that naturalism is not devoted to a dangerously utopian view of human nature, but is attentive to the facts that indicate humanity's capacity for 'non-social' behaviour and cooperation. But what is central for the naturalists is not taking such facts as final but as indicating further tasks to be completed. This requires looking to the natural world itself as the sources of materials for instituting change in the world:

A philosophic naturalist cannot approve or go along with those whose beliefs and whose actions (if the latter cohere with their theories) weaken dependence upon the natural agencies, cultural, scientific, economic, political, by which a more humane and friendly world can alone be built. On the contrary, to him the present tragic scene is a challenge to employ courageously, patiently, persistently and with wholehearted devotion all the natural resources that are now potentially at command. (Dewey 1944, 16)

This response to his wartime antinaturalist critics highlights several important features of the way Dewey's understands the importance of naturalism. First, it is presented as a philosophy with a larger social mission in attempting to carry out positive changes in the world. Second, it indicates the harmful affects of those forms of thinking that encourage a separation, or a more general weakening of our connections to natural resources and agencies. And lastly, it hints at something we have already seen, that the effective change and progress needed within our societies requires a philosophical framework that presents society, nature, and humanity as continuous aspects of our common world. That is, the effective transformation of our societies needed to address contemporary problems requires noting the continuity between our projects and the natural resources at our disposal. It is within the moral and social dimensions of his philosophical naturalism that we should locate the source and significance of Dewey's appeal to continuity between science, value and nature.

3. Nagel's Naturalism and the Trouble with Continuity

This social and moral orientation of naturalism begins to change in the 1950s when philosophers offered conceptions of science and philosophy that were at odds with the socially informed projects promoted by Dewey.⁶ Ernest Nagel's conception of philosophical naturalism from this period provides an interesting example of this trend, since it contains a central tension

that illustrates the ongoing struggles naturalists confronted in attempting to deal with Dewey's challenge of providing a scientific and empirical account of moral evaluation. As we will see this tension is between his acceptance of scientific intelligence as a means of reaching moral ends, and his further rejection of scientific reasoning in helping us formulate the possible ends of human conduct.

In his presidential address to the APA entitled 'Naturalism Reconsidered' (1954), Nagel describes a shift in philosophy's self-understanding of the scope and nature of its proper projects:

We have come to direct our best energies to the resolution of limited problems and puzzles that emerge in the analysis of scientific and ordinary discourse, in the evaluation of claims to knowledge, in the interpretation and validation of ethical and esthetic judgments, and in the assessment of types of human experience. (4)

Here, Nagel is describing a philosophical profession becoming more analytic in orientation, however, he recognizes the importance of explaining the more general commitments that color the pursuit of specialized problems, and he then seeks to make explicit the commitments that comprise his understanding of naturalism.

For Nagel then, naturalism "embraces a generalized account of the cosmic scheme and of man's place in it, as well as a logic of inquiry" (6). This includes the claim that all events, qualities and processes, including the behaviour of individuals, depends on the organization of spatio-temporally located bodies, and a further thesis that emphasizes the plurality and variety of things as an irreducible feature of the universe. It is within this general perspective that naturalism, for Nagel, "envisages the career and destiny of man" and he is especially sensitive to how this philosophical position "views emergence and the continuance of human society as dependent on physical and physiological conditions that have not always obtained and that will

not permanently endure” (10). But he continues by expressing concern over those philosophers who “make a fetish of continuity” by insisting on a continuity between human traits and those found in biology or physics (10). Nagel suggests that such an overextended use of continuity can lead to an inappropriate anthropocentric standpoint that views nature from an exclusively human perspective, and that the existence of this continuity remains an open empirical question.⁷ For both these reasons, Nagel remains puzzled concerning how humanity’s place in the universe is made more secure or intelligible by the appeal to this overarching principle of continuity. He concludes that a mature naturalism will seek to avoid an overemphasis on the continuity between humanity and nature:

Without denying that even the most distinctive human traits are dependent on things which are nonhuman, a mature naturalism attempts to assess man’s nature in the light of *his* actions and achievements, *his* aspirations and capacities, *his* limitations and tragic failures, and *his* splendid works of ingenuity and imagination (11).

While rejecting an unrestrained enthusiasm for the importance of continuity between humans and nature, Nagel is also concerned with those same social and moral issues that animated Dewey’s conception of naturalism. He emphasizes the way naturalism seeks to criticize existing institutions in order to exhibit both their failings and possibilities for addressing human problems and goods (11). However, he draws the further conclusion that moral conflicts cannot be addressed using scientific forms of reasoning. “Moral problems” he explains “arise from a conflict of specific impulses and interests. They cannot, however, be effectively resolved by invoking standards derived from the study of nonhuman nature” (11). Elsewhere, the importance of a naturalist, scientific perspective on moral and social concerns and the rejection of scientific standards for the resolution of moral disputes are brought together:

...human aspirations are expressions of impulses and needs which, whether these be native or acquired, constitute the ultimate point of reference for every justifiable moral judgment. The adequacy of such aspirations must therefore be evaluated in terms of the structures of human capacities and the order of human preferences. Accordingly, though the forces of nature may one day extinguish the human scene, those forces do not define valid human ideals, and they do not provide the measure of human achievement. But an indispensable condition of the just definition and the realization of those ideals is the employment and extension of the method of intelligence embodied in the scientific enterprise. (1954, 308)⁸

This passage illustrates that Nagel sees scientific intelligence as necessary for the 'realization' of human ideals, but because natural forces do not define human ideals, science alone cannot determine valid human ideals. Put more succinctly, Nagel sees science as a useful means for the realization of human ideals, but not for the selection of those ends themselves. While Nagel's naturalism places humans fully within nature and as capable of being understood in naturalistic terms, he cannot fully accept Dewey's attempt to locate of human ideals and values within experience and nature. The result is his further rejection of Dewey's claim that scientific inquiry can help us in the selection of ends for human conduct.

Now, while Nagel does not explicitly point to the source of these conclusions, we have seen reason to locate them within his criticism of the continuity between human experience and nature as both leading to an overly anthropocentric conception of nature and an insufficiently empirically grounded hypothesis about the nature of human beings. We have seen Dewey emphasize a continuity between human experience and nature in order to stress how all valuation emerges out of human activity within nature. Dewey draws the further conclusion that the

scientific organization of experience yields not only the means to realize human ideals, but also helps in the selection of human ends. The establishment of these points then rests on Dewey's attempt to clarify this all-important continuity between experience, value, nature and science. Nagel's qualified denial of this continuity between human experience and nature undermines the central philosophical objective of Dewey's naturalist project, since it leads to his further rejection of the view that nature contributes to the forming of human ideals and values. Without this continuity between nature and human value, scientific method is rendered incapable of modifying or helping determine the ends of human action.

From Dewey's perspective Nagel's separation of value from nature is contrary to an adequate conception of naturalism, since it deprives intelligence any positive role in social and moral matters, the very charge he earlier made against his antinaturalist opponents in the 1940s. Nagel's hesitancy over the natural status of human value makes it difficult to make sense of his further emphasis on the realization of human ideals through the method of scientific intelligence. If science plays no positive role in the selection of human ends, then they may be selected by subjective preferences, thereby seemingly depriving human intelligence any place within moral life.⁹ With Quine's work we see this perspective come to full fruition, since he too advocates a discontinuity between value and nature because of his increasing emphasis on the methodological shortcomings of ethics in comparison to science.¹⁰ However, unlike Nagel, this does not exhibit a tension between an advocacy of scientific intelligence in moral matters, and its inability to select moral ends, since Quine accepts the latter as an indication for why the former is not possible. With Nagel's naturalism we thus witness the beginning of the eclipse of Dewey's socially engaged conception of naturalism by the more analytic, and empirical exacting studies that were to become prevalent in post-war American philosophy. The tensions within

Nagel's naturalism over the proper place of scientific reasoning within moral life indicate the very intellectual conditions that resulted in Quine's promotion of an even more morally and socially detached conception of philosophical naturalism in the 1960s. This brief historical sketch then illustrates some of the intellectual pressures that have lead to what I see as two divergent cultures within American naturalism, the first representing the social perspective of Dewey and Columbia naturalism, and the second pointing to the general attitude prompted by Quine's naturalized epistemology. It provides us with a better understanding of how naturalism has come to represent such different philosophical perspectives, and can perhaps also serve as an invitation to rethink the challenges present in this history, and readdress the problem of providing a more scientific and experimental account of moral judgment and evaluation.

NOTES

¹ Both Giere (1996) and Murphy (1990) portray Quine's project as a return to Dewey's pragmatism and naturalism. Richardson (2002) stresses the differences between these projects, highlighting the sort of historical error that philosophers fall prey to when they assume that terms such as 'naturalism' or 'pragmatism' pick out a shared set of commitments and motives that span a period as short as thirty years.

² For continuity as a defining feature of naturalism, see Capps (1996, 2000), De Caro and Macarthur (2004), Maffie (1990) and Rouse (2002).

³ See Thayer (1981, 165-6). Dewey's *The Quest for Certainty* provides a clear statement of his interest in the relation of science and value, see (1929b, 204).

⁴ This paragraph is indebted to Gouinlock's useful discussion of these points in his "Dewey's Theory of Moral Deliberation" (1978, 221).

⁵ For a fuller account of Dewey's view of experience, see Dewey 1929a and Campbell (1995, 68-75).

⁶ For more on the development of the philosophical profession in the postwar era, and its import for postwar conceptions of philosophy and science see Howard (2003), McCumber (2001), and Reisch (2005). McCumber gives Quine a prominent, largely negative role in this development.

⁷ Nagel makes similar criticisms of this use of continuity in his 'Logic Without Ontology' (1944, 228-9) and 'Notes Towards a Naturalistic Conception of Logic' (1956b, 50).

⁸ For this reference and my discussion of Nagel's view I am indebted to Howard (2003).

⁹ Howard also makes this point (2003, 60-61).

¹⁰ See Quine 1981.

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