

NATURALISM- A PHILOSOPHY OF NATURE

Dr. Suraksha Bansal

Department of Education

Gandhi Institute of Professional & Technical Studies

Meerut

Running through most of the literature today one finds a dominant thread. The central theme of this thread is expressed in such terms as ‘continuous progress,’ ‘the perfectibility of mankind’ and ‘perpetual betterment through scientific advances.’ The underlying philosophy of this outlook is signified by the term ‘naturalism’. As a philosophy of life (perhaps the oldest one) it maintains that nature is the only reality worthy of the serious consideration of man, and that man himself is the apex of this reality.

Naturalism is a concept that firmly believes that ultimate reality lies in the nature of the matter. Matter is considered to be supreme and mind is the functioning of the brain that is made up of matter. The whole universe is governed by laws of nature and they are changeable. It’s through our sense that we are able to get the real knowledge. The senses work like real gateways of knowledge and exploration is the method that helps in studying nature.

BASIC CONCEPT OF NATURALISM

The meaning of the name naturalism is strongly implied in the word itself. It is the view point which regards the world of nature as the all in all of reality. Naturalism, commonly known as materialism, is a philosophical paradigm whereby everything can be explained in terms of natural causes. Physical matter is the only reality-everything can be explained in terms of matter and physical phenomena. Naturalism, by definition, excludes any Supernatural Agent or activity. Thus, naturalism is atheism. Naturalism’s exclusion of God necessitates moral relativism.

Naturalism is an artistic movement advocating realistic description: in art or literature, a movement or school advocating factual or realistic description of life, including its less pleasant aspects.

Naturalism has strong belief in religious truth from nature: a belief that all religious truth is derived from nature and natural causes, and not from revelation.

HISTORICAL RETROSPECT OF NATURALISM-

Ancient period

Naturalism appears to have originated in early Greek philosophy. The earliest pre-socratic philosophers, such as Thales, Anaxagoras or most especially Democritus, were labeled by their peers and successors ‘the *physikoi*’ *physikos*, meaning “natural philosopher,” borrowing on the word *physis*, meaning ‘nature’) because they sought to explain everything by reference to natural causes alone, often distinctly excluding any role for gods, spirits or magic in the creation or operation of the world.

Thales The father of western philosophy (640B.C.-550B.C.) was a mathematician, astronomer, and businessman. For Thales, “**The principle of all things is water; all comes from water, and to water all returns**, the principle of things is water, or moisture, which should not be considered exclusively in a materialistic and empirical sense. Indeed it is considered that which has neither beginning nor end—an active,

living, divine force. It seems that Thales was induced to proffer water as the first principle by the observation that all living things are sustained by moisture and perish without it.

Anaximander (611B.C.-547B.C.) was probably a disciple of Thales according to him ‘**The principle of all things is infinite atmosphere, which has a perpetual vitality of its own, produces all things, and governs all things.**’

For Anaximander, the first principle of all things is the “indeterminate”. There are no historical data to enlighten us as to what Anaximander may have meant by the “indeterminate”; perhaps it was the Chaos or Space of which physicists speak today. All things originate from the Unlimited, because movement causes within that mysterious element certain quakes or shocks which in turn bring about a separation of the qualities contained in the Unlimited.

The first animals were fish, which sprang from the original humidity of the earth. Fish came to shore, lost their scales, assumed another form and thus gave origin to the various species of animals. Man thus traces his origin from the animals. Because of this, **Anaximander has come to be considered the first evolutionist.**

Jean Jacques Rousseau in his *A Discourse on Inequality*, an account of the historical development of the human race, distinguished between “natural man” (man as formed by nature) and “social man” (man as shaped by society). He argued that good education should develop the nature of man. Yet Rousseau found that mankind has not one nature but several: man originally lived in a “pure state of nature” but was altered by changes beyond control and took on a different nature; this nature, in turn, was changed as man became social. The creation of the arts and sciences caused man to become “less pure,” more artificial, and egoistic, and man’s egoistic nature prevents him from regaining the simplicity of original human nature. Rousseau is pessimistic, almost fatalistic, about changing the nature of modern man.

MIDDLE AGES TO MODERNITY

With the rise and dominance of Christianity and the decline of secular philosophy in the West naturalism became heretical and eventually illegal, thus making it difficult to document the history of naturalism in the middle Ages. When the Renaissance reintroduced numerous lost treatises by Greek and Roman natural philosophers, many of the ideas and concepts of naturalism were picked up again, contributing to a new Scientific Revolution that would greatly advance the study and understanding of nature then a few intellectuals publicly renewed the case for naturalism, like Baron d’Holbach in the 18th century.

FORMS OF NATURALISM

Naturalism in the broad sense has been maintained in diverse forms by Aristotle, the Cynics, the Stoics, Giordano Bruno, Spinoza, Thomas Hobbes, Auguste Comte, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, William James, John Dewey, and Alfred North Whitehead, philosophers who differ widely on specific questions. Some, like Comte and Nietzsche, were professed atheists, while others accepted a god in pantheistic terms. Aristotle, James, and Dewey all attempted to explain phenomena in terms of biological processes of perception; Spinoza and the idealists tended to emphasize metaphysics; later thinkers of all schools have placed emphasis on unifying the scientific viewpoint with an all-encompassing reality. This amalgamation of science and an overall explanation of the universe in naturalistic terms is the source of much of contemporary philosophic thought

THEORETICAL RATIONALE OF NATURALISM

Metaphysical position-

Concept of God-

Many naturalists do not use the term God, but surprisingly there are Naturalists who talk about God, and although they do not advance classical arguments for His existence they go on to give some definition of His nature. According to Weismann, the renowned Naturalist God is not within Nature .He is not all nature nor more than nature .He is that particular structure of nature in nature which is sufficiently limited to be described as making possible the realization of value and as the foundation of all values.

God is that process within Nature which is a kind of open door to all who would grow in richness of life and at the same time God is the stable ground in Nature which sustains and constitute the values by which life is enriched, Because of this, God, the structure of value itself, is the greatest of all values, the most worthy in human experience to which man must adjust if he is to grow in the possession and enjoyment of value.

THE CONCEPT OF SELF

Two important aspects of the query about man are whether he has a soul and whether he is good or bad. For Naturalists they are not much interested in the soul of man and his moral conditions. According to Naturalism, man is a child of nature; yet, nevertheless, he is a most significant child .For in the evolutionary processes that have been at work in the universe so far, man is on the very crest of the wave. He has capacities and has achieved heights common to no other child of Nature True enough, he has selfhood of a sort; but there is such a remarkable gamut of refinement in the achievements in selfhood of different men that it is difficult to say what it is that men possess in common as a self, or, traditionally as a soul .The self seems to be an organization of experiencing .Such a description is quite far from those which state that man is made in the image of God. The human self is seen by naturalism as an offshoot of Nature, and not as springing from beyond Nature.

CONCEPT OF UNIVERSE

The family of naturalists becomes exceedingly large, especially in modern times, when one the label of naturalism to denote a person who denies (implicitly or explicitly) the existence of anything above nature, or those who disregard the supernatural. Thus Rousseau, who was a deist, fits into this category, even though he believed that God had created the world. Spencer, the agnostic, falls into the same class since he believed that even if the supernatural realm existed man could know nothing about it.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL POSITION

Naturalists highlight the value of scientific knowledge the scientific knowledge acquiring through specific observation, accumulation and generalization. They also lay emphasis on the empirical and experimental knowledge. Naturalists also lay stress on sensory training as senses are the gateways to learning.

The naturalist rejected the role that intellect or reason play in the knowing process and put forth the claim that the only valid form of knowing process and put forth the claim that the only valid form of knowledge is that derived from experience. For the early naturalists, “experience” chiefly meant that mode of acquiring knowledge based on direct contact of the organism with the physical world thought the senses. The more sophisticated naturalists included the refined modes of knowing used by the empirical sciences. Both, however, imply a denial of reason as a source of knowledge. In practice, both types of experience are evident in naturalistic theory.

THE LOGIC OF NATURALISM

There are two general observations to be made concerning the logic of naturalism which will help to describe the setting for its more specific discussion. The first is that, most generally considered, formal deductive logic such as was mentioned briefly in the introduction has a minor place in the methods of logic approved by naturalism. The second observation is that great variation in the methods of logic employed by naturalists. The logic of the earlier and more naïve naturalism is the simple material logic of induction. In modern naturalism, greater place is given to deductive logic because of the confidence placed in the independence of relations by realists.

AXIOLOGICAL POSITION

Naturalism believes that “A refined moral life is just as much a work of Nature as much a work of Nature as is a coarse and vulgar immorality. You are wrong in implying, first of all, that a natural life is an immoral life. And furthermore; your religious experience that a power from beyond yourself is sustaining you in doing good is a natural phenomenon. Nature is versatile. This experience is no doubt a valid one. You are being sustained in living a good life. For it is in harmony with Nature, when it is inclusively, to do well and avoid evil”

To naturalists, values arise from the human beings’ interaction with the environment .Instincts. Drives and impulses need to be expressed rather than repressed. According to them, there is no absolute good or evil in the world. Values of life are created by the human needs. The first principle has to do with the general character of values. It is that Nature is the kind of order that just simply possesses values. According to naturalism, the values which people commonly enjoy, as well as others yet to be possessed, are resident in Nature; they do not transcend Nature. Stated from a frame of reference other than the natural versus the supernatural source of values, this principle also means that Nature has a qualitative aspect as well as an existence aspect; and when we experience the qualitative elements in Nature, we are experiencing its values. Nature is not just a machine in the sense that it merely functions, and also in the sense that man, being a part of Nature, therefore functions within it as a cog in a machine. Nature is more than a machine in that there are overtones of enjoyment and suffering which go along with this functioning; and these overtones are qualitative, they are values which are enjoyed or endured, as the case may be, concomitantly as the functioning goes on.

The second principle has to do with the way in which the most desirable values are to be realized, according to naturalism. This principle is that the way in which an individual can get the most value out of life is to harmonize his life as closely as possible with Nature. This principle was foremost; it will be recalled, in the thinking of Democritus, Epicurus, and Lucretius. All of these men shared In common the desire to find a life which was as free as possible from pain and suffering. And accordingly they tried to harmonize their lives as closely as possible with the rhythms of Nature, because in this harmony they felt was their greatest peace.

ETHICAL VALUE

Ethics of naturalism is hedonistic, as long as this characterization is accompanied by the caution that in the conscious though at least of many naturalists the highest good is the most highly refined and abiding pleasure.

Pleasure is easily discerned as the highest good in the thought of the ancient naturalists. It is not hard to feel what they must have felt when they desired quietude and freedom from struggle, pain and fear as the predominant inner possessions continuing uninterrupted through as many of their experiences as possible. Most of us share their desire for this same peace and happiness, although we may not make it such a supreme value hat we will sacrifice all other possible values for it. The important thing to note about this highest moral good, first of all, is a thing to be enjoyed; it is something, more on the feeling side of experience, which the person who possesses it undergoes and enjoys as contentment or satisfaction. To a person so

framing his conception of moral values, the pleasure ethics of naturalism may seem weak and selfish, because private enjoyment, even though it may be in no way contrary to convention, is placed prior to all other considerations.

AESTHETIC VALUE

The principles enunciated above regarding the ethical values of naturalism hold also for aesthetic values. They, too, are rooted in nature and do not depend on any source outside nature for their validation. Nature itself provides the criterion for beauty there is no need to call upon universal principles such as unity and proportion to judge beauty. A landscape is beautiful simply because it is nature. A painting is beautiful because it reflects nature, not because it elevates man above nature.

For naturalists, as could be surmised, aesthetic experience and the values it yields are both purely natural in character and do not involve any spiritual or supernatural factors. First of all, according to naturalism, the subject who is engaged by aesthetic experience is a child of Nature. While it takes a high degree of development to yield the kind of complex nervous system which can communicate with words and other symbols, and retain meanings long enough to interrelate them in such a way as to yield aesthetic enjoyment of an object, yet that is what Nature has yielded in man. "A pattern of responses of high complexity of co-ordination is possible." Vivas say, "Because in the process of evolutionary development a nervous system, highly centralized, came into being." Man, the subject who has aesthetic experiences, is a sentient organism developed by Nature, which is capable of centering his meanings in such a way as to experience aesthetic values. These values, therefore, do not transcend Nature; they are events in the experience of this highly developed organism which is the result alone of evolutionary processes at work in Nature.

There is also a minor sense in which aesthetic values are natural. This is that they are not superior values which only a few select people are capable of enjoying. They are values which touch areas where we all live; they are natural because they are "native in the ordinary experience of all men."

RELIGIOUS VALUE

The religious life for naturalism is the kind of life which is so lived in the breach between present actual fact and future possible value as to replace circumstances which destroy value with circumstances which destroy value with circumstances which possess and conserve value. It is not possible, therefore, to enumerate or more specifically characterize some values and designate them as the religious values of naturalism. The chief religious value of naturalism is that aspect of Nature which makes it possible to realize values and which sustains values which are worth-while. Since all other possible values stem from this element in Nature, it is the most wrathful object that there is a greatest value above all others. The most significant life that can be lived is the life which is committed to the achieving of values in one's own life and in the world. So that the prime imperative of a naturalistic religion is that its adherents ally themselves with the value-realizing force in Nature and help to bring into existence values which are not actual in the present.

SOCIAL VALUE

Society is therefore considered less organic in naturalism than in pragmatism, as well as in idealism. It is an aspect or portion of Nature, not so much an organism that has rhythms and patterns which, while not contrary to or above Nature, are yet its own rhythms and patterns. Individual man is therefore considered as Nature's offspring, not a child of society or a segment of society whose very being depends upon the social organism. Although dependent upon Nature, he stands on his own feet, more or less, as far as his relations to society are concerned. There are what might be called certain necessities which make it expedient for him to relate himself somewhat effectively socially; but these are not necessities arising from the operation of

society as an organism, so much as they are accidents or exigencies to be avoided by working out some kind of social organization to correct them.

Rousseau's naturalism rooted man in Nature rather than society. So much did he regard man as a child of Nature, as over against society, that he proposed in his Emile to keep Emile away from society until adolescences? In his Social Contract he reveals how the problem of social organization is complicated by the importance of the freedom of man. Individual man, he contended, is not a man unless he is free; if he is in bondage, he is less than a man. Yet unbridled freedom is neither in harmony with his own welfare nor the welfare of society. Evidently some social organization is needed, but one which preserves for man his freedom. This is a rather big order, but one which can be filled rather satisfactorily by democracy. For in democracy, although individual man sacrifices his own individual freedom by participation in the decisions which determine what the will of the state is to be.

EVALUATION OF NATURALISM

However, evaluations of naturalism from other than the supernaturalism point of view are possible. The notion that man is innately good appears too optimistic in the light of events of the past century. One might argue that man has become less human as he becomes more advanced in his evolutionary development. The cruel wars, injustice toward minorities, and many of the ills of modern man hardly suggest such optimism. From various points of view naturalistic epistemology is too limited. To reduce knowing to experience precludes many possibilities of knowing about ethical and aesthetic values and the realm of the metaphysical. By designating experience as the sole source of knowledge naturalism limits itself to one methodology and to a narrow curriculum divested of much of the knowledge acquired by past generations as well as of the many artistic production of the human race.

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