

Why Naturalism Is False (or Irrational)

by Carson Weitnauer

“Why Naturalism Is False (or Irrational)” is a talk given to student organizations at both Harvard University and Boston College Law School in April 2013. The following notes reflect the substance of my talk after introductory comments:

Our first task tonight is to define naturalism. What idea is it that I believe is false or irrational?

What is Naturalism?

There are certainly different varieties of naturalism. Words can be defined in different ways. So to be clear, I will identify a particular definition for naturalism and use this definition throughout my talk tonight. If you find some or all of these arguments successful, but believe another version of naturalism is still an intellectually legitimate option, it is important that you clearly define what *you* mean by ‘naturalism’ so that we use our primary terms in a consistent manner.

One source for popular, mainstream perspectives on how a word is used is Wikipedia. The Wikipedia entry on [Metaphysical Naturalism](#) reads:

Metaphysical naturalism is a philosophy which maintains that nature encompasses all that exists throughout space and time. Nature (the universe or cosmos) consists only of natural elements, that is, of spatiotemporal physical substance—mass—energy. For example, astronomer Carl Sagan, an agnostic, described the cosmos as “all that is or ever was or ever will be.” Non-physical or quasi-physical substance, such as information, ideas, values, logic, mathematics, intellect, and other emergent phenomena, either supervene upon the physical or can be reduced to a physical account. The supernatural does not exist, which is to say, only nature is real.

Is this Wikipedia definition the standard one? I think it fairly summarizes the position of many prominent naturalists.

For instance, Kai Nielsen, a former professor at NYU and the University of Calgary, says,

Naturalism denies that there are any spiritual or supernatural realities. There are, that is, no purely mental substances and there are no

supernatural realities transcendent to the world or at least we have no good ground for believing that there could be such realities.... It is the view that anything that exists is ultimately composed of physical components.
 [ref]Quoted in Stewart, Goetz; Charles Taliaferro. *Naturalism* (Kindle Locations 150-152)[/ref]

Likewise, Dr. Alex Rosenberg, the chair of the philosophy department at Duke University, explains the naturalist position:

What is the world really like? It's fermions and bosons, and everything that can be made up of them, and nothing that can't be made up of them. All the facts about fermions and bosons determine or "fix" all the other facts about reality and what exists in this universe or any other if, as physics may end up showing, there are other ones.

Today I'd like to explain why I believe that naturalism is false (or irrational). This might sound surprising, because naturalism has come to feel like an 'obviously true' idea in our culture.

For instance, in 2007, Oxford University Press published a collection of essays titled *Philosophers Without God*. One of the contributors, Georges Rey, wrote an essay called "Meta-Atheism: Religious Avowal as Self-Deception." He opens by saying,

I'm not a professional philosopher of religion and have no special knowledge of theology. However, I regularly teach an introductory course in philosophy in which I discuss the standard arguments for the existence of God. The exercise has produced in me a certain incredulity: I have come increasingly to wonder how such extremely smart people, like Aquinas or Descartes, could advance such patently bad arguments, as I think most philosophers (even those who claim to "believe") would take those arguments to be.[ref]Accessible at
[HTTPS://philosophytalk.typepad.com/blog/files/MetaAtheism.pdf](https://philosophytalk.typepad.com/blog/files/MetaAtheism.pdf)[/ref]

So what is his thesis?

Despite appearances, most Western adults who've been exposed to standard science and claim to believe in God are self-deceived; at some

level they know full well the belief is false.

This is amazing. In a book published by Oxford University Press, a contributor admits he doesn't know much about theology or religion, but nevertheless believes that naturalism is so obviously true that even people who say they are religious don't believe in that nonsense!

Or as [Richard Dawkins](#) concludes, in an article for The Huffington Post,

We explain our existence by a combination of the anthropic principle and Darwin's principle of natural selection. That combination provides a complete and deeply satisfying explanation for everything that we see and know. Not only is the god hypothesis unnecessary. It is spectacularly unparsimonious. Not only do we need no God to explain the universe and life. God stands out in the universe as the most glaring of all superfluous sore thumbs. We cannot, of course, disprove God, just as we can't disprove Thor, fairies, leprechauns and the Flying Spaghetti Monster. But, like those other fantasies that we can't disprove, we can say that God is very, very improbable.

And the famous philosopher John Searle, who teaches at U.C. Berkeley, has written,

There is a sense in which materialism is the religion of our time, at least among most of the professional experts in the fields of philosophy, psychology, cognitive science, and other disciplines that study the mind. Like more traditional religions, it is accepted without question and it provides the framework within which other questions can be posed, addressed and answered.[ref]Quoted in Stewart, Goetz; Charles Taliaferro. Naturalism (Kindle Location 156)[/ref]

So far, we've noted that naturalism is a dominant viewpoint today.

And we've defined what we mean by the term: the position that "Nature (the universe or cosmos) consists only of natural elements, that is, of spatiotemporal physical substance—mass—energy," "that anything that exists is ultimately composed of physical components," that the world is "fermions and bosons, and everything that can be made up of them, and nothing that can't be made up of them."

THE START OF THE ARGUMENT

So why do I think that naturalism is false? With our definition in place, let's consider the argument against naturalism.

My first point is very simple: there are no good arguments for naturalism.

I am unconvinced that there are any premises which are true and that validly conclude, "Therefore, naturalism is true." Perhaps someone who is here today will offer a good argument in favor of naturalism. But as long as there are no good arguments for naturalism, we have a reason to think that it is false or at least that it is an idea not worthy of our acceptance.

As I see it, the main kinds of arguments that are given for naturalism are:

1. The power of science to explain things,
2. The lack of good arguments for theism, and
3. The problem of evil.

As for the power of science to explain things, I will argue that our very ability to reason is best explained on theism, but is inexplicable on naturalism. I also note in passing that naturalism cannot explain either the existence of the universe nor its design. Why is the universe law-like? And why is it comprehensible to us? Further, the capacities of science are well beyond what is needed for the survival of our species or, in some cases it might be argued, of the scientists themselves.

As for the weakness of theistic arguments, I will mention in passing a variety of good arguments for theism, though the substance of my case against naturalism will also, as will become clear, function as an implicit argument for theism.

And as for the problem of evil, in all of its various forms, I will argue that any affirmation of evil's reality and existence makes sense only if theism is true.

Responses to these points aside, the issue is that these points need considerable development to become arguments for naturalism. Consider them in their bare form:

Argument #1:

1. There is gratuitous, pointless evil in the world.
2. Therefore, the universe or cosmos consists only of natural elements, that is, of spatiotemporal physical substance—mass—energy

Argument #2:

1. Methodological naturalism, as developed within various programs of scientific research, is the most reliable way of understanding the world.

2. Therefore, “anything that exists is ultimately composed of physical components.”

Argument #3:

1. There are no good arguments for theism.
2. Therefore, the world is “fermions and bosons, and everything that can be made up of them, and nothing that can’t be made up of them.”

But perhaps these are straw men versions of what could become quite powerful, logically valid, evidentially rigorous arguments for naturalism? As I see it, there are no good premises available to link the start and end point of these arguments. However, I look forward to hearing attempts to do so during our discussion.

It is also worth mentioning that I find the idea that naturalism is the “default” or “obvious” view to be a very weak position. If it is so obvious, what arguments support its truth? If it deserves to be the “default” position, what are the incredibly strong reasons that so clearly prove it to be true?

So my first point is that there are no good arguments for naturalism.

My second point is that if theism is true, then naturalism is false.

There are many good reasons to think that theism is true.

As [Richard Swinburne](#), a famous professor of philosophy at Oxford University, has summarized:

Why believe that there is a God at all? My answer is that to suppose that there is a God explains why there is a world at all; why there are the scientific laws there are; why animals and then human beings have evolved; why humans have the opportunity to mould their characters and those of their fellow humans for good or ill and to change the environment in which we live; why we have the well-authenticated account of Christ’s life, death and resurrection; why throughout the centuries men have had the apparent experience of being in touch with and guided by God; and so much else. In fact, the hypothesis of the existence of God makes sense of the whole of our experience, and it does so better than any other explanation which can be put forward, and that is the grounds for believing it to be true.

But I will not rest my case against naturalism on these points today. I merely mention them to show how broad the range of arguments are in favor of theism, and therefore, against

naturalism. If any one of these arguments for theism is successful, then it would follow that naturalism is false.

THE ARGUMENT DEVELOPED

The substance of my argument tonight is that naturalism is false because it cannot account for fundamental features of reality within its naturalistic ontology. In other words: there are real things that are not physical things.

What are some of the things which we know to be real, but which are not physical entities? The list is large and varied, but I think it includes at least the following five features:

- Consciousness
- Free will
- Purpose
- Reason, including mathematics and science
- Objective moral facts, including universal human rights and the reality of evil

As a preliminary note, it does no good to say “science will explain that one day.”

There are at least five reasons to reject the “science will explain this” response:

First, this is a “science-of-the-gaps” explanation. Structurally, it is an argument from silence. What *reasons* do you have that science will explain it? That’s what we need. To say, “I’m so convinced that naturalism is true, it must be the case that science will prove it is true” is to beg the question. That’s a dogmatic naturalism, not a rational, evidence-based naturalism. To say, “the past ability of science to explain things like lightning and earthquakes means it can also explain consciousness and reason” is no better.

Second, if science does explain some of the features I mention, that will be a self-defeating exercise. For instance, if science can one day provide us with a fully physical account of our reason, in doing so, it will eliminate rational causation from our view of the world. Saying that “science can explain that” means, at least in some instances, “science can explain that away, so we don’t need to think it is real.”

Third, many if not most of the scientific discoveries have no bearing on whether or not theism or naturalism is true. The additional data about, say, how the brain works confirms neither theism nor naturalism. Confirmation bias might lead some to conclude, ‘we’ve got an improved scientific theory about how memory works in the brain, therefore, naturalism.’ But caution is in order. The same data might fit equally well (or better) within a theistic framework. The supposed worldview confirmation needs to be rigorously critiqued.

Fourth, if past performance is a good guarantee of future performance, and science has only or even primarily validated naturalism to this point, than I have some stocks and bonds to sell you. Would you be willing to invest your money the same way you defend your ideas? The past performance of science to validate naturalism does not imply that it will always do so.

Finally, let's say that kind of argument is good. Well, then it is equally legitimate to argue that science will further strengthen the theistic case in the future. Why not say, "one day science will prove the theists right?" We can argue, 'Theism has rightly predicted the start of the universe, the uniformity of nature, the existence of consciousness, the transcultural nature of morality, and so much else, that surely science will continue to validate theism.'

If you are uncomfortable with a God-of-the-gaps argument, intellectual fairness means you should equally reject a science-of-the-gaps approach.

THE FUNDAMENTAL DIFFERENCE

The fundamental kind of argument that I will offer tonight is based upon a widely accepted principle known as the 'indiscernibility of identicals.' In their work *Naturalism*, Stewart Goetz and Charles Taliaferro explain the relevance of this principle for our discussion tonight:

It is common today for philosophers to hold a principle called the indiscernibility of identicals. Given that water is H₂O, then whatever is true about water is true about H₂O (to drink water is to drink H₂O). But if something is true of consciousness that is not true of the physiology and various events and processes that are supposed to be identical with consciousness, then consciousness is not in fact identical with the proposed physical phenomena. The problem facing broad naturalism is that it appears you can have the physical phenomena and not have consciousness. Even if the two are always correlated, if there is reason to think you could have one without the other, you have a reason to deny their identity.[ref]Stewart Goetz; Charles Taliaferro. Naturalism (Kindle Locations 956-961)[/ref]

The kinds of things I've mentioned are categorically distinct from the kinds of things that naturalism says exist. They are real parts of our world which are NOT reducible to physical cause-and-effect. If we can discern differences between these features of our world and the physical world, then the two are not identical. And if they are not identical, but both are real, then naturalism is false.

Again, here's the list of features which I suggest are not reducible to 'fermions and bosons.'

- Consciousness
- Free will
- Purpose
- Reason, including mathematics and science
- Objective moral facts, including universal human rights and the reality of evil

This is the nature of my argument against naturalism.

Let's look at each feature in turn:

CONSCIOUSNESS

What is consciousness? In their introduction to *The Blackwell Companion to Consciousness*, Max Velmans and Susan Schneider begin their description of consciousness as follows:

Listen to the sound of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, taste the flavor of a strong espresso, or feel the heat of a summer day. There is something that it's like to have these experiences; something that it's like to be conscious. Indeed, anything that we are aware of at a given moment forms part of our consciousness, making conscious experience at once the most familiar and most mysterious aspect of our lives.[ref]Available online at HTTPS://www.blackwellreference.com/public/tocnode?id=g9781405120197_chunk_g97814051201971[/ref]

What are the features of this awareness, of this experience? There are many, but here are four specific components of consciousness:

1. A first-person perspective on the world; that of being a *subject* and not an object.
2. Private beliefs and feelings which are inaccessible to others without us revealing them
3. The experience of "qualia": to use a technical term, for instance, the 'ouchiness' of pain.
4. Intentionality. The ability to deliberately direct one's attention to various features of one's inner life or of the outer world.

The atheist philosopher David Chalmers explains the conundrum well:

It is undeniable that some organisms are subjects of experience. But the question of how it is that these systems are subjects of experience is perplexing. Why is it that when our cognitive systems engage in visual and auditory information-processing, we have visual or auditory experience: the quality of deep blue, the sensation of middle C? How can we explain why there is something it is like to entertain a mental image, or to experience an emotion? It is widely agreed that experience arises from a physical basis, but we have no good explanation of why and how it so arises. Why should physical processing give rise to a rich inner life at all? It seems objectively

unreasonable that it should, and yet it does. (Originally found at consc.net/papers/facing.html)

Or as T.H. Huxley, known as “Darwin’s Bulldog,” once remarked:

how it is that any thing so remarkable as a state of consciousness comes about as the result of irritating nervous tissue, is just as unaccountable as the appearance of the Djinn when Aladdin rubbed his lamp. [ref]Quoted at [HTTPSs://www.nyu.edu/gsas/dept/philo/faculty/block/papers/harder.htm](https://www.nyu.edu/gsas/dept/philo/faculty/block/papers/harder.htm)[/ref]

Furthermore, if the natural world is able to account for consciousness in terms of the fundamental laws of physics, then, given a full description of reality, and the physical particles that exist in the arrangements they have, it must be necessary that consciousness exists. There would be a law-like occurrence of consciousness.

But it seems that we can imagine the world existing as it is, but there not being consciousness. If consciousness is contingent, then it is not the result of law-like forces in the physical world.

Most acutely is that there are profound differences between the natural world and the reality of consciousness.

An atom is only an ‘object.’ We can study it with scientific tools. But our first-person experience, as a subject, that can choose to study the atom is categorically distinct.

The atom can hide nothing from us – whatever it is, with the right tools, we can learn about it. But a conscious actor is able to have private beliefs.

If a scientist fully understood the neurological underpinnings of pain, and had read copious research on the subject, but never experienced pain personally, she would learn something new the first time a bowling ball dropped on her foot. The experience of ‘ouch, that hurts!’ is different from an objective, third-person understanding of which neurons are firing.[ref]See Stewart Goetz; Charles Taliaferro. Naturalism (Kindle Locations 586)[/ref]

And in the natural world, everything is a passive object that makes no choices, yet in our conscious experience, we are aware of our ability to make intentional choices.

I submit to you that we have better reason to believe we are conscious subjects than to conclude, within the scope of our conscious experience, that everything is natural.

FREE WILL

After consciousness, one of our most basic experiences is the ability to make choices. But this capacity cannot be real if naturalism is true. Naturalism implies determinism.

The [Center for Naturalism](#) explains the connection between naturalism and determinism:

We don't have free will in the sense of being able to choose or decide without being fully caused in our choices or decisions. Instead, as individuals we are part of the natural unfolding of the universe in all its amazing complexity.

Not only does naturalism imply determinism, but naturalist philosophers have carefully articulated how deterministic processes have generated the illusion of free will. For instance, both Daniel Dennett at Tufts University and Owen Flanagan, a professor of neurobiology at Duke, have both argued that we think we have free will because we are ignorant of the nonmental, physical causes of our beliefs and behavior.

As Dr. Rosenberg, also at Duke, argues,

Then there is the fact, discovered by Libet, that actions are already determined by your brain before you consciously decide to do them! (As for determinism and the denial of real free will, that is a conclusion which, so to speak, goes without saying for scientism.) We have to add to these illusions of the will and sensory experience, robust experimental results which reveal that we actually navigate the world looking through the rear-view mirror!

Likewise, consider [Richard Dawkins](#), as he explained the tension in an interview:

What I do know is that what it feels like to me, and I think to all of us, we don't feel determined. We feel like blaming people for what they do or giving people the credit for what they do. We feel like admiring people for what they do. None of us ever actually as a matter of fact says, "Oh well he couldn't help doing it, he was determined by his molecules." Maybe we should... I sometimes... Um... You probably remember many of you would have seen Fawlty Towers. The episode where Basil where his car won't start and he gives it fair warning, counts up to three, and then gets out of the car and picks up a tree branch and thrashes it within an edge of his life. Maybe that's what we all ought to... Maybe the way we laugh at Basil

Fawlty, we ought to laugh in the same way at people who blame humans. I mean when we punish people for doing the most horrible murders, maybe the attitude we should take is “Oh they were just determined by their molecules.” It’s stupid to punish them. What we should do is say “This unit has a faulty motherboard which needs to be replaced.” I can’t bring myself to do that. I actually do respond in an emotional way and I blame people, I give people credit, or I might be more charitable and say this individual who has committed murders or child abuse of whatever it is was really abused in his own childhood.

Manzari: But do you personally see that as an inconsistency in your views?

Dawkins: I sort of do. Yes. But it is an inconsistency that we sort of have to live with otherwise life would be intolerable. But it has nothing to do with my views on religion, it is an entirely separate issue.

And from a critical perspective, Angus Menuge, a Christian philosopher, has explained:

For our purposes, one of the most important claims of naturalism is that all causation is passive, automatic, event causation (an earthquake automatically causes a tidal wave; the tidal wave responds passively): there are no agent causes, where something does not happen automatically but only because the agent exerts his active power by choosing to do it.

...

Indeed, before we can talk of being responsible for our decisions, we need an account of why those decisions belong to us. But the trouble is, on a naturalistic view, there is no entity that can plausibly own any mental states, there is simply a plurality of parallel, impersonal processes in the brain.
[ref]In ‘Libertarian Free Will and the Argument From Reason,’ available at [HTTPS://www.reasonsforgod.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Libertarian-Free-Will-and-The-Argument-From-Reason1.pdf](https://www.reasonsforgod.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Libertarian-Free-Will-and-The-Argument-From-Reason1.pdf)[/ref]

I submit to you that we have better reason to believe that we, as conscious subjects, may freely choose our course in life, than to conclude, as a free choice within the scope of our conscious

experience, that everything is natural. If any conscious agent has ever made a free choice, than naturalism is false.

PURPOSE

To have purpose is to have a teleology, a goal, or an end in mind. Purposefulness is related to intentionality. But clearly physical objects and energy have no goals or intentions. They simply are what they are. And so leading naturalists deny that there is any purpose; there is only the illusion of purpose.

Alex Rosenberg:

“If the physical facts fix all the facts, however, then in doing so, it rules out purposes altogether, in biology, in human affairs, and in human thought-processes.”

Richard Dawkins:

More fundamentally, to say that the purpose of all life is to pass on their DNA means that all living things are descended from a long line of successful ancestors, where success means they have passed on their DNA. So, they are all very good at passing on their DNA and they all contain organs, apparatus, which can best be understood as fulfilling a purpose of propagating DNA. It doesn't mean that anybody actually sat down and thought that purpose out...There is no purpose other than that.

If there is no purpose, then there is no point to naturalism, to science, to your studies, to your life, to society, to the cosmos. If you have a purpose in believing or doing anything, then you have a reason to think that naturalism is false. But the denial of purpose creates problems for naturalism for our next feature of reality:

REASON

Because naturalism leads to the denial of consciousness, free will, and purpose, it also denies our capacity to reason. But it also denies reason because of other features which are necessary for reason to exist.

C.S. Lewis has articulated well the basic problem of reason on naturalism:

If minds are wholly dependent on brains, and brains on biochemistry, and biochemistry (in the long run) on the meaningless flux of the atoms, I cannot understand how the thought of those minds should have any more significance than the sound of the wind in the trees.[ref]C.S. Lewis, The Weight of Glory, "Is Theology Poetry?"[/ref]

The issue is broader than this. For reason to be possible, there must be:

1. Propositions – nonmaterial, spaceless ‘ideas.’ Reason inherently involves the weighing and considering of propositions as true or false, likely or unlikely.
2. Intentionality – “aboutness”. When reasoning, a free agent considers which ideas to consider, to see how they relate to one another, and so on.
3. Rational causation – if everything is caused by material causation, then there is no room left for a ‘reason’ to cause something. The event is already fully explained in terms of the matter-energy and the laws of nature.
4. Unity of the self – instead of parallel, impersonal neurological processes, there must be a unified self, across time, that can comprehend the entirety of the argument, as well as each part of it, as a whole, in order to rationally evaluate it.
5. Normativity – Reason requires normativity. What we ought to believe and what we ought not to believe. If we think “2 + 2 = elephant” is this irrational? If we answer “4” is that rational? By what standard? The descriptive picture of naturalism does not allow us to account for the normativity inherent in the rational project. There is no purpose to having true beliefs or false beliefs.
6. The axioms of reasoning themselves – “principles of logic, mathematics, and metaphysics (the principle of causality).”[ref]From [HTTPS://www.leaderu.com/offices/koons/docs/chrphlec03.html](https://www.leaderu.com/offices/koons/docs/chrphlec03.html)[/ref] None of these axioms are physical. As Goetz and Taliaferro explain, “Perhaps biology can account for the emergence of logicians, but the laws of logic (such as the law of identity: A is A, or everything is itself) are not themselves laws of biology.”[ref]Stewart Goetz; Charles Taliaferro. Naturalism (Kindle Locations 1159-1160)[/ref]
7. Memory. Where is memory stored? Who accesses it? Who owns these memories? The sensations and feelings that are associated with memory – recollecting the ‘what it was like’ of the first kiss or the acceptance letter into college.

Or as the naturalist Dr. Alex Rosenberg says:

Perhaps the most profound illusion introspection foists on us is the notion that our thoughts are actually recorded anywhere in the brain at all in the form introspection reports. This has to be the profoundest illusion of all, because neuroscience has been able to show that networks of human brain cells are no more capable of representing facts about the world the way conscious introspection reports than are the neural ganglia of sea slugs!

The real challenge for neuroscience is to explain how the brain stores information when it can't do so in anything like the way introspection tells us it does—in sentences made up in a language of thought... the brain can't store or manipulate information in words and sentences of any language, including mentalese... If there literally are no beliefs and desires, because the brain can't encode information in the form of sentences, then there literally is no such thing as linguistic meaning either. It's just a useful heuristic device, one with only a highly imperfect grip on what is going on in thought. Consequently, there is no point asking for the real, the true, the actual meaning of a work of art, or the meaning of an agent's act, still less the meaning of a historical event or epoch.

Not only are these statements self-refuting, but clearly such a viewpoint makes reason impossible!

If reason is undermined by naturalism, then so is all human activity built on reason. This certainly encompasses science, which is often thought to be one of the main arguments in favor of naturalism.

Again, quoting C.S. Lewis,

All possible knowledge, then, depends on the validity of reasoning. If the feeling of certainty which we express by words like 'must be' and 'therefore' and 'since' is a real perception of how things outside our own minds really 'must be,' well and good. But if this certainty is merely a feeling in our own minds and not a genuine insight into realities beyond them—if it merely represents the way our minds happen to work—then we can have no knowledge. Unless human reasoning is valid no science can be true."

I submit to you that the commitments of naturalism make reason and science impossible. So we inevitably have a more reasonable position to accept the validity of reason than to believe that naturalism is true. Therefore, again, we should conclude that naturalism is false.

OBJECTIVE MORAL FACTS

Having considered consciousness, free will, purpose, and reason, we turn to the final feature: objective moral facts, universal human values, and the reality of evil.

What is an objective moral fact? It is a truth about right and wrong that is independent of human perception.

For example: Even if no human being thinks it wrong, it is objectively wrong, as Joseph Kony does in Uganda, to order child soldiers to bite to death another child who is trying to escape. Think about being a ten year old who is using your mouth to tear the flesh off of another child in order to kill him. To use the fear of a similar death to coerce children into committing murder is objectively wrong, even though Joseph Kony would disagree with us. (Originally found at [cbsnews.com/8301-18560_162-57579213/hunting-african-warlord-joseph-kony/](https://www.cbsnews.com/8301-18560_162-57579213/hunting-african-warlord-joseph-kony/)).

The question is: are there moral facts that we can be right or wrong about – or do we just have opinions about morality, none of which are right or wrong?

The analogous example is to ask are there facts about the physical world we can be right or wrong about – or do we just have opinions about the world, none of which are right or wrong?

The temptation to describe our morality as objective is very powerful, even among naturalists.

For example, Daniel Dennett of Tufts has said,

I have sacred values – in the sense that I feel vaguely guilty even thinking about whether they are defensible and would never consider abandoning them (I like to think!) in the course of solving a moral dilemma. My sacred values are obvious and quite ecumenical: democracy, justice, love, and truth (in alphabetical order) Stewart Goetz; Charles Taliaferro. Naturalism (Kindle Locations 1194-1198)).

Richard Dawkins has likewise wavered between his naturalistic commitments and his moral awareness:

As an academic scientist, I am a passionate Darwinian, believing that natural selection is, if not the only driving force in evolution, certainly the only known force capable of producing the illusion of purpose which so strikes all who contemplate nature. But at the same time as I support Darwinism as a scientist, I am passionate anti-Darwinian when it comes to politics and how we should conduct our human affairs (In Stewart Goetz; Charles Taliaferro. Naturalism (Kindle Locations 1112-1115)).

(In another place): If somebody used my views to justify a completely self-centred lifestyle, which involved trampling all over other people in any way

they chose roughly what, I suppose, at a sociological level social Darwinists did – I think I would be fairly hard put to it to argue on purely intellectual grounds. I think it would be more: “This is not a society in which I wish to live. Without having a rational reason for it necessarily, I’m going to do whatever I can to stop you doing this.” (Originally found at damaris.org/content/content.php?type=5&id=102)

But other naturalists are more consistent.

Rosenberg:

People have also sought moral rules, codes, principles which are supposed to distinguish us from merely biological critters whose lives lack (as much) meaning or value (as ours). Besides morality as a source of meaning, value, or purpose, people have looked to consciousness, introspection, self-knowledge as a source of insight into what makes us more than the merely physical facts about us. Scientism must reject all of these straws that people have grasped, and it’s not hard to show why. Science has to be nihilistic about ethics and morality.

Michael Ruse and E.O. Wilson, articulating an evolutionary ethics:

[It is] easy to conceive of an alien intelligent species evolving rules its members consider highly moral but which are repugnant to human beings, such as cannibalism, incest, and love of darkness and decay, parricide, and the eating of feces.... Ethical premises are the peculiar products of genetic history, and they can be understood solely as mechanisms that are adaptive for the species which possess them.... No abstract moral principles exist outside the particular nature of individual species” (186). [ref]In Stewart Goetz;Charles Taliaferro. Naturalism (Kindle Locations 1093-1096).[/ref]

As Goetz and Taliaferro put it, “it is not clear how one can establish normative values on the basis of processes that are ultimately thoroughly unconscious, nonnormative, and contingent in nature.”[ref]Stewart Goetz;Charles Taliaferro. Naturalism (Kindle Locations 1197).[/ref]

Again, I submit to you that we have more reason that ordering child soldiers to bite another child to death is a grave and real evil, or that cannibalism, incest, parricide, and so on – are objectively wrong acts – than to conclude that naturalism is true. If there are any objective moral values, then naturalism is false.

IN CONCLUSION

If the universal human experience of consciousness, free will, purpose, reason, and objective moral facts are all illusory, and are explained away by a deterministic, naturalistic, ‘scientific,’ explanation of who we really are, we must ask ourselves: how can we trust that our brains are giving ‘us’ the ‘true’ and ‘reasonable’ answer in this one particular domain of scientific research, but failing us in every other domain that we depend upon for all of our lives, including when we are doing science?

If our universal human experience is fundamentally flawed, as naturalism would lead us to believe, then the naturalistic picture of reality is no better than **brain-in-a-vat scenarios**. This is a thought experiment that, as in *The Matrix* movies, we could possibly all be brains in a vat, whose neurons are being stimulated so we *perceive* that our existence is just as it is. But, in actual fact we are just brains in a vat.

The brain-in-a-vat scenario leads to a global skepticism about all of our beliefs: how can any of them be trusted, since they are all produced by evil scientists or artificial computer programs? Yet, if we cannot trust any of our beliefs, then we cannot trust the ‘brain-in-a-vat belief’ either. Such complete skepticism leads to self-refutation.

But if naturalism is no better as a working hypothesis of the world than brain-in-a-vat scenarios, it is irrational to think it is true. At worst then, this talk shows that if naturalism does happen to be true, it would be irrational for us to think that our brains reliably informed us that naturalism is in fact true. Therefore, the rational choice is to *think* that naturalism is false.

And at best, if you can reasonably affirm that any one of these features of our world is inexplicable on naturalism, then you have even stronger reason to believe that naturalism is false.