

## Spirituality Without Faith

*What would it mean to naturalize spirituality? How can naturalism inspire spiritual experience and provide us with a satisfying cognitive context within which to address our ultimate concerns? By avoiding the dualism of many spiritual traditions, naturalism shows our complete connection with the world and its natural wonders, among which are to be counted ourselves. These remarks are based on a talk given for the [Humanist Association of Massachusetts](#) in June of 2001 and were published in the [Humanist](#), January, 2002.*

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To what extent can secular humanists be spiritual? Can those of us with a more or less naturalistic view of the world, one that doesn't involve spirits, gods, or ghosts, legitimately seek spiritual experience? There seems a *prima facie* difficulty here since traditional notions of spirituality often posit a non-physical realm categorically separate from the world described by science. Such dualism is of course the antithesis of naturalism, which understands existence to be of a piece, not split into the natural and supernatural. If for humanists the ultimate constituents of the world don't include immaterial essences, souls, or spirits, then it might seem that spirituality is off limits.

If you look up the etymology of the word "spiritual," you'll find that it derives from the Latin "spiritus," meaning "wind" or "breath." Standard dictionary definitions of *spiritual* contrast it with *physical* or *material*, so dualism is more or less built into the ordinary conception of spirituality. But I will argue that just as we can be good without God, we can have spirituality without spirits. Even within the monistic view of the cosmos entailed by a commitment to scientific empiricism, we can avail ourselves of spiritual experience and take an authentically spiritual stance when appreciating our situation as fully physical creatures embedded in a material universe. I hope to show that in its dualism, the traditional notion of spirituality in effect *sets up* problems of existential alienation and cognitive dissonance that religions have wrestled with, more or less unsuccessfully, for millennia. At a stroke, naturalism cuts these problems off at the root, providing an emotionally satisfying and cognitively unified basis for feeling completely at home in the

world.

Many humanists, of course, will not necessarily want to access what I will call the "spiritual response." Even if I persuade them that there's nothing conceptually incoherent about a naturalistic spirituality, they might be constitutionally disinclined to indulge in emotions or practices that even temporarily disengage the rational mind set. I won't argue against such reluctance, since each of us has his or her own tastes in aesthetic experience, and varying "comfort levels" in letting go. But the spiritual response is there for those who wish to experience it. It's intrinsically rewarding in its own right, and a valuable resource in getting us through tough times.

What would it mean to *naturalize* spirituality? What precisely would a naturalistic spirituality look like? Before turning to these questions, I want to briefly touch on some basic aspects and functions of spirituality, whatever its type, and then see how traditional spirituality fulfills (or *tries* to fulfill) these functions. This will set the stage for exploring how naturalism might work as well or better in grounding spiritual experience and in addressing our ultimate concerns.

### **Characteristics of Spirituality**

Authentic spirituality involves an *emotional response*, what I will call the spiritual response, which can include feelings of significance, unity, awe, joy, acceptance, and consolation. Such feelings are intrinsically rewarding and so are sought out in their own right, but they also help us in dealing with difficult situations involving death, loss, and disappointment. The spiritual response thus helps meet our affective needs for both celebration and reconciliation. As Richard Dawkins puts it in his book *Unweaving the Rainbow*, we have an "appetite for wonder," an appetite for evoking the positive emotional states that are linked to our deepest existential questions.

But what might evoke these states? Spirituality often involves a *cognitive context*, a set of beliefs about oneself and the world which can both inspire the spiritual response and provide an interpretation of it. Our ideas about what ultimately exists, who we fundamentally are, and our place in the greater

scheme of things form the cognitive context for spirituality. By contemplating such beliefs we are temporarily drawn out of the mundane into the realization of life's deeper significance, and this realization generates emotional effects. But equally, the spiritual response thus generated is itself interpreted in the light of our basic beliefs; namely, it is taken to reflect the ultimate truth of our situation as we conceive it. The cognitive context of spirituality and the spiritual response are therefore linked tightly in reciprocal evocation and validation.

A third essential component of spirituality is what is ordinarily called spiritual *practice*. Since the intellectual appreciation of fundamental beliefs alone may not suffice to evoke a particularly deep experience, various non-cognitive techniques can help to access the spiritual response. Activities such as dance, singing, chant, meditation, and participation in various rituals and ceremonies all can play a role in moving us from the head to the heart. And it is in the heart, or gut, after all, where we find the most powerful intrinsic rewards of spirituality, as profound as its cognitive context might be.

Although the emotional content of the spiritual response - feelings of connection, significance, serenity, acceptance - is common to all spirituality, the background beliefs and specific practices vary tremendously. Almost all of us have the biological capacity to feel spiritually transported, but the cognitive context of those moments and the techniques to induce them are a matter of our culture. A fascinating variety of spiritual traditions have arisen, ranging from the rigorous, ascetic regimes of Zen meditation to the ecstatic communal celebration of a Sunday morning gospel service, and each tradition has its own conception of the world and the individual's place in it. Stemming from these beliefs there are a multiplicity of spiritual objects of veneration, of deeper realities to be encountered: God, Earth, Nature, Emptiness, angels, devils, ancestors, previous incarnations, the Force, you name it (for a current, pop-cultural sampling of these, visit [Beliefnet](#)). For each tradition, spiritual experience is taken to be the direct appreciation of the ultimate *truth* about the world, a way to transcend one's limited everyday perspective in the quest for meaning, unity, and serenity.

## Traditional Spirituality

Many, if not most of these traditions, as well as some "New Age" beliefs, involve the idea of a distinct spiritual realm, something set apart or above the everyday physical world (some types of Buddhism being notable exceptions, of which more below). The varieties of spirituality are thus to a great extent varieties of dualism, at least in their cognitive contexts (belief systems). But why should this be the case? What drives the intuition that we and the world we inhabit are of two natures, one physical and one immaterial?

Part of the answer lies in our instinctive fear of death, which many religions allay by positing an immortal soul or spiritual essence which survives bodily dissolution. We gain ultimate security by virtue of being, in our true selves, something other than the physical, something that joins with a larger, non-physical and changeless realm after death. Overcoming death, pain, and loss is thus the emotional driver of traditional religious spirituality. We want *cosmic reassurance*, to be exemptions from mere material, changeable nature, and our spiritual nature functions to connect us with that which is changeless and immortal. Thus the fear of death and its standard religious solution produce the dualism of body and spirit, of the natural and supernatural. Such dualism, of course, is central to religious traditions such as Christianity, Islam, and Judaism which have held sway for millennia in much of the world. (It should be noted, however, that some contemporary theologians have questioned this dualism, reaching nearly naturalistic conclusions about human nature, if not God's. See, for instance, *Whatever Happened to the Soul?*, edited by Warren S. Brown, Nancey Murphy, and H. Newton Malony, Fortress Press, 1998.)

Not just religion, but the Western philosophical tradition too has shaped the more or less commonsense view that we exist as bodies inhabited by souls, spirits, or mental agents. Cartesian mind-body dualism, although widely rejected in the current academic philosophical and scientific communities, is still the norm in lay culture. Such secular dualism comports well with the comforting tenets of religion, even if it no longer has a scientific basis. Moreover, it has to be conceded that it certainly *feels*, at first blush, as if we are more than strictly material creatures. Who is it, after all, that is looking out at the world, having feelings, thinking thoughts, and making choices? Surely it can't just be my physical brain that does all *that*. Given these

historical and psychological factors, it's perhaps not surprising that varieties of dualism still dominate in both the secular and spiritual arenas.

Another salient characteristic of traditional spirituality (Christianity, for instance) is that it reads *purpose* into the universe: existence has a goal or teleology which gives us a role to play. The cosmos has been designed by a purposeful agent (God), and by dutifully fulfilling our mission in his cosmic drama we discover life's ultimate meaning. Given our tendency to look for agents and intentions in ordinary life, to figure out who's doing what and what things are for, it's natural that we might seek to assign a purpose or intent behind all of creation, and this we do by supposing, literally, that it has been created. Part of the cognitive context of Christianity is that there is something essentially personal or agent-like in (or above) nature, something that has us "in mind," so as we suffer in this vale of tears we find consolation in knowing we're part of the grand design. Life has meaning, finally, because a supernatural agent *endows* it with meaning.

Spiritual experience, in Christianity and other non-naturalistic traditions, is interpreted as putting the individual in direct contact with the agent/creator, or with at least some aspect of the spiritual realm. The feelings that arise during spiritual practice are construed as evidence of the realm's existence; they are the quasi-perceptual apprehension of God or Spirit. Thus, in this traditional cognitive context, spiritual experience is taken to be a *special way of knowing* ultimate truths about the world, a way quite different from ordinary empirical modes of knowing. The individual sees directly the face of God, and needs no further corroboration. Nor could any be forthcoming via normal sensory channels, since after all these are only capable of detecting physical appearances.

### **Difficulties with Traditional Spirituality**

As much as the characteristics of traditional spirituality provide answers to the questions of death and meaning, two major drawbacks are evident. The problem of death is solved by splitting ourselves into two substances - one material and perishable, the other spiritual and immortal - but as a result the material becomes inherently inferior in its changeability. The physical

becomes the *merely* physical - it assumes a second class metaphysical status. This in turn leads to alienation from our physical selves and indeed from the material world as a whole. Gross matter is denigrated in comparison to subtle spirit, and the material only has value to the extent that it is animated and directed by spirit. It can't accomplish anything of significance on its own. But of course we *are* embodied, and our world *is* material, so from this alienated perspective most of our lives is an unfortunate entanglement with crass physicality while awaiting the better, immaterial world to come.

Added to the dualism of substance is the dualism of having two types of knowledge, ordinary empirical knowledge derived from the senses and confirmed intersubjectively (e.g., as in science) and the knowledge gained from the personal revelations of spiritual experience. Despite the arguments of some, such as Stephen J. Gould in his book *Rocks of Ages*, that these constitute "non-overlapping magisteria" which can't conflict since they have fundamentally different concerns, the fact remains that both sorts of knowledge make claims about what ultimately exists *and* they reach different conclusions. Science gives us no reason to believe in the supernatural (there is no scientifically admissible evidence for such a realm), while the firm intuition of spiritual experience, as interpreted within its traditional, non-naturalistic cognitive context, is precisely that a separate immaterial reality indeed exists. If I make use of both methods of knowing, then eventually it is likely I will confront some basic cognitive dilemmas: which method, and therefore which conclusion, is correct? In deciding the momentous question of what fundamentally exists, on what grounds do I choose science over spirituality, or *visa versa*? When do I stick with my spiritual intuitions, and when do I stick with science?

The upshot is that these two dualisms, one metaphysical, one epistemological, put adherents of traditional spirituality in a poor position to achieve, in *this* world, the apprehension of fundamental unity, even if they are promised salvation in the next. And unity, of course, is the essence of spirituality. Being of two natures and two minds, the traditional spiritualist is torn between the physical and immaterial world and unified with neither. Naturalists, I believe, suffer no such handicaps in their approach to ultimate concerns.

## Naturalism

To see how naturalism might improve on traditional religious and secular dualism as a basis for spirituality, I want first to outline briefly its essential characteristics. Standard definitions of naturalism often contrast it with supernaturalism, meaning simply that naturalism denies the existence of a separate, categorically different supernatural realm that exists outside the natural world. As seen above, the supernatural realm often is taken to involve an agent, or agency, that acts as a first cause. Such an agent is *causally privileged*, in that from its supernatural vantage point it gets to influence events in the natural world (e.g., create it) without being at the effect of that world. God, typically, is unconstrained by the physical laws and constants that we find everywhere in nature. Naturalism denies that there are any such causally privileged agents or entities; rather, anything that exists is entirely embedded among other existents which account for its origins and characteristics. Nothing gets to cause without being caused in turn; nothing gets to be unconstrained by its context. In Buddhist philosophical terminology, this is called "dependent arising": all phenomena are ineluctably relational, there are no causally independent monads at any level of being.

This of course rules out the traditional Christian God and his supernatural cousins of other religious traditions, but it also rules out any *personal* spirit, soul, or inner agent that possesses a special originative capacity not found elsewhere in nature. There is, as philosopher Gilbert Ryle put it in *The Concept of Mind*, no *ghost in the machine* of the human body, nothing mysteriously spiritual or mental that rides above the physical. Naturalism is fully inclusive of human affairs, even in their most complex manifestations.

The underlying unity and causal interconnectedness of all phenomena under naturalism is a direct consequence of the naturalist's commitment to scientific empiricism as a mode of knowing (a commitment I won't try to defend here; see my *Humanist* articles "[Faith, Science and the Soul](#)" and "[Relativism and the Limits of Rationality](#)" for more on this). In building up knowledge about the world, science inevitably situates objects of understanding in a wider, relational context. To understand things, whether neurons or supernovas, *just is* to delineate their place in this context. Although there are many scales of

description within science, from the sub-atomic, to the human, to the cosmic, the world *in toto* is of a piece, a naturalistic whole that includes whatever entities and laws science discovers to exist. As an epistemology, therefore, scientific empiricism guarantees an underlying unity or interconnection of phenomena and so places all things within a *single* world, quite the opposite of traditional supernaturalism. The ultimate constituents of this world are those described by the standard model of particle physics, and although the scientific conception of these constituents may change as physical theory progresses, the necessity of their inter-connection will not, since the demonstration of such connection is what science *does*. This is why, as much as Intelligent Design theorists argue otherwise, science will never countenance "theories" that posit a separate supernatural realm containing causally privileged entities. As Stephen Schaferman puts it in his essay of the same title, "naturalism is an essential part of science and critical inquiry;" see <http://www.freeinquiry.com/naturalism.html>.

Given its inherently unifying mode of knowing, we can understand science as the history of *naturalizing* one phenomenon after another, of bringing within the orbit of empirical understanding things that used to be explained by supernatural agency, special powers, or special immaterial stuff. Cosmic origins have been naturalized by understanding them as the sudden expansion of a space-time singularity, not an intentional act of intelligent design. The origin of species was naturalized by Darwin as being the outcome of the differential survival of organisms with varying inherited traits, not the deliberate creation of biological orders and phyla *ex nihilo*. Recently life itself was naturalized by the discovery of the mechanics of DNA, which once and for all spiked the notion of *elan vital* or protoplasmic essence, thought by some as necessary to animate inanimate matter. Today, work proceeds apace on the project of naturalizing *ourselves*, that is, seeing how both consciousness and behavior can be explained without recourse to an inner, supervising agent-homunculus with special non-physical powers.

In all these examples, the project of naturalization inherent in science has demonstrated (or aims to demonstrate) that these phenomena consist entirely of the ultimate constituents of the universe described by physics, organized and elaborated via empirically derived laws at several distinct levels of description into astoundingly complex patterns, some of which are persons. In none of these cases, and nowhere in science, is there a need to posit any

essence, agency, spirit, or "spooky stuff" to make things happen. Rather, everything, down to the last detail, is a matter of functions and operations on basic elements, functions and operations that happen *on their own, without supervision*. This is the remarkable fact at the heart of naturalism (remarkable, at least, when compared to supernaturalism): there is *no need* for intentional agency or spirit as an explanatory postulate. The physical world is, on its own, sufficient to generate the marvels of life, consciousness, and human culture. From this perspective, to bring in a spirit or deity to do any explanatory work seems like a cheap trick, an easy out, and only vitiates the wonder of the fact that, to repeat, all these phenomena *arise on their own*.

Since naturalism rules out the existence of entities, like God, that are causally privileged, it also rules out the possibility that the universe could be the intentional creation of a being or agency that stands outside it in some respect. This means that under naturalism the universe can't be construed as having an ultimate purpose or goal attached to it – it exists, strangely enough, for *no reason*. Suppose we found evidence that we are indeed artifacts of some super-being's intentional design (see the last page of Carl Sagan's novel *Contact* for a scenario in which it's discovered that the expansion of *pi* contains a message from the Cosmic Architect). Immediately, questions would arise about the characteristics and origins of *this* being, and were we lucky enough to interview It, we could sensibly ask "Why are *you* here?". Even if It had something in mind in creating us, the question of ultimate meaning still arises for It and the larger universe of which we and It are a part. It turns out, then, there is no possibility of discovering a final goal or teleology to the universe, precisely because we can always legitimately conceive of it as *including* any presumptive creator.

As much as we are driven to discern or impute purposes, to ask the teleological question "why?," we will always find that question unanswerable when applied to the largest scale of things. Naturalism also leaves us with the irreducible mysteries of why things should be precisely the way they are and not some other way, and why there should be something rather than nothing. Steven Weinberg addressed these topics in the *New York Review of Books* in a May, 2001 article entitled "Can Science Explain Everything? Anything?" (at <http://www.nybooks.com/nyrev/WWWarchdisplay.cgi?20010531047F>) :

Finally, it seems clear that we will never be able to explain our most

fundamental scientific principles. (Maybe this is why some people say that science does not provide explanations, but by this reasoning nothing else does either.) I think that in the end we will come to a set of simple universal laws of nature, laws that we cannot explain. The only kind of explanation I can imagine (if we are not just going to find a deeper set of laws, which would then just push the question farther back) would be to show that mathematical consistency requires these laws. But this is clearly impossible, because we can already imagine sets of laws of nature that, as far as we can tell, are completely consistent mathematically but that do not describe nature as we observe it.

Without a supernatural creator conveniently by to justify his handiwork, there is literally *no reason* for the universe to have the characteristics it does, or for anything to exist at all. For better or for worse, naturalism inevitably frustrates our ambition to make ultimate sense of things.

While traditional faiths hold that spiritual experience answers ultimate questions of meaning, naturalism holds that such experience is simply a function of brain states or processes, not contact with a non-material realm. Considerable research is underway to pin down the neural correlates of the spiritual response, for instance by imaging the brains of meditators and describing the neural effects of hallucinogenic (or "entheogenic") drugs in generating experiences of ecstasy and unity. Researchers in Canada have successfully induced psychological states akin to cosmic consciousness in laboratory subjects using a device which stimulates the brain using magnetic pulses. Preliminary findings suggest that the sense of trans-personal connection arises when neural networks responsible for our sense of orientation in the world are shut down, and the sense of deep significance and conviction seems to have a neural correlate in the temporal lobe. In their book, *Why God Won't Go Away*, Andrew Newberg and Eugene D'Aquili describe several "association areas" in the cerebral cortex they believe are the neural basis for cosmic consciousness.

All in all, the spiritual response (what Newberg and D'Aquili call the sense of "Absolute Unitary Being") can be accounted for, naturalistically, as an experience which is at bottom *identical to* specific sorts of brain activity evoked by various sorts of stimuli. Understanding spiritual experience to be physical in this sense is just a special case of the reigning naturalistic

hypothesis that drives current consciousness research: the mind and brain are one thing, not two. Furthermore, under naturalism the subjective sense of deep conviction characteristic of spiritual experience is not evidence for the truth of any belief. However special such experiences may seem, they are not a reliable way of knowing or of establishing facts about what exists; that privilege is accorded only to scientific empiricism and its *intersubjective* method of corroboration via experiment and evidence. Experiences, including spiritual experiences, are quite real of course, but they don't necessarily *refer* to anything real, however much it may seem they do when we have them. They are data to be explained and incorporated into our theories.

At every turn, it seems, naturalism denies just those things that give most comfort to the traditional spiritualist and that appear, at first glance, most necessary for a viable spirituality. There exists no personal soul or spirit, no supernatural God or creator, no purpose that can be attached to existence, no ultimate meaning to life, and no special first-person way of knowing that puts the individual in direct contact with a deeper reality. The most profound experiences available to us are, like the most trivial experiences, a matter of brain states, nothing more. From the traditional perspective, all this seems a crushing blow to our existential hopes, a catastrophic leveling of the transcendental ambition to escape from the mundane into the exalted and eternal. But as we have seen, the traditional perspective has deep flaws inherent in its dualism, and although naturalism can't give us everything we might wish, it hardly represents a catastrophe for spirituality, in fact rather the opposite.

### **Naturalistic Spirituality**

From the description of naturalism offered above, it's perhaps not all that difficult to see how it might serve as a basis for spirituality, both to inspire the spiritual response and to provide a plausible cognitive context for our ultimate concerns. First, it is clear that under naturalism *connection with the world* is built in to every aspect of our being, not a hoped for eventuality in the life to come. We're joined to the cosmos and the everyday world as described by science in countless ways: the elements composing our bodies are the products of the Big Bang and stellar evolution; most of our DNA is

shared with other beings; our perceptions and sensations are all mediated by processes involving photons, electrons, ions, neurotransmitters and other entirely physical entities; and our character and behavior is fully a function of genetics and environment. We are, therefore, fully linked with our surroundings in time, space, matter/energy, and causality. In fact, no more intimate connection with the totality of what is could be imagined. So, from a naturalistic perspective, there is an empirically valid referent for the sense of cosmic consciousness encountered in spiritual experience. The feeling of unity generated by (actually, identical to) the quieting of the orientation mechanisms in the brain mirrors the objective state of our complete interconnection with the world.

Second, in its denial of ultimate meaning and purpose, naturalism, strangely enough, may equal traditional faiths in its capacity to inspire the spiritual response. When we confront the startling fact that existence isn't subsumable under any overarching interpretation, but simply *is*, we are left with an irreducible mystery about why we are here, or exist at all; and mystery serves at least as well as purpose to inspire spiritual experience. Unable not to ask questions about ultimate purpose and meaning, but rebuffed by the logic which shows such questions unanswerable, we are caught in a cosmic perplexity, a state of profound existential astonishment. The realization that existence inevitably outruns our attempts to assign meaning and purpose can have the impact of a true revelation, stunning the discursive mind in the manner of a Zen koan. Like a koan or other practices in which thinking confronts its own limitations, such a cognitive impasse can serve as the gateway to the direct, non-discursive experience that the present is sufficient unto itself. After all, there is no place to get to, no goal toward which Being is moving. In her book, *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, Ursula Goodenough expresses this eloquently:

The realization that I needn't have answers to the Big Questions, needn't seek answers to the Big Questions has served as an epiphany. I lie on my back under the stars and the unseen galaxies and I let their enormity wash over me. I assimilate the vastness of the distances, the impermanence, the *fact* of it all. I go all the way out and then I go all the way down, to the fact of photons without mass and gauge bosons that become massless at high temperatures. I take in the abstractions about forces and symmetries and they caress me like Gregorian chants, the meaning of the words not mattering because the words

are so haunting.

This response is quite different, obviously, from that of the Sartrean existentialist, for whom the discovery of no ultimate intrinsic purpose makes the universe "absurd." The absurdist interpretation mistakes the absence of meaning for meaninglessness, failing to see that the universe necessarily transcends the meaningful/meaningless distinction. (This is why Stephen Weinberg was mistaken to say "The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it seems pointless.") Instead of sliding into existential angst or ennui, we can savor the surprise and excitement of participating in an *unscripted drama*, one in which meaning is created locally against an inscrutable cosmic backdrop. This, I submit, is a far more interesting fate than the boring security of being a bit player in an end game scripted by God. (Some might say all *too* interesting, as in that understated Chinese curse, "May you have an interesting life".)

Besides connection and mystery, naturalism leads to *wonder*. It's truly a marvel what matter and energy can do when left to their own devices. It's a marvel that the lifeless, insentient elements of creation give rise - via mechanisms, operations, and functions - to life in all its astounding variety and to consciousness in all its sensory and emotional richness. Somehow, the concatenation of neural activity in our brains ends up constituting awareness, intelligence, and wonder itself. To see, transparently, how highly organized matter and mind are precisely *one thing*, not two, is the spiritual significance of the mind-body problem. To penetrate it would be to leave behind the last vestiges of dualism. No longer could we be alienated from matter as "mere" matter, rather its properties and susceptibilities to organization are, wonderfully, the basis for all that we are as bodies and minds. And of course, far beyond our parochial selves lies the incalculable vastness of the cosmic arena from which we spring. Wonder, although not the only possible response when contemplating the immense scale of matter, space, and time, is surely appropriate once we realize we belong to something so very far beyond us. Such naturalistic wonder and awe counts as deeply spiritual, even though no spirits are involved. (I highly recommend Chet Raymo's book, *Skeptics and True Believers*, for an engaging account of how wonder and science are not in the least at odds. It's [reviewed](#) on this site.)

Because naturalism conceives of experience as identical to some sort of

material organization (consensus on just what sort of organization may be decades away), spiritual experience doesn't count as a special way of knowing, but rather a special way of *being*. Knowledge about what ultimately exists is a matter of reaching intersubjective consensus via theory and experiment grounded in our fallible capacities for perception, whether aided or unaided.

The intrinsically rewarding sense of ultimate unity, awe, and significance isn't a perception, it's a *feeling*, one of a near infinity of possible brain states of which we are capable. Nevertheless, this feeling reflects the scientific facts of our embeddedness in nature. Naturalism doesn't have to posit a special route to the spiritual truth which could conflict with scientific empiricism, rather it understands spiritual experience as a materially instantiated non-cognitive affirmation of what is actually the case. Thus naturalism is entirely monistic in its interpretation of spiritual experience: there is one world and one way of knowing it. By avoiding metaphysical and epistemic dualism, naturalism *naturalizes* spirituality, and in so doing provides a cognitive context for spiritual experience that reinforces its essential non-dual quality.

### **Limitations of Naturalistic Spirituality**

As much as naturalism delivers us from dualism, alienation from the body, and cognitive dissonance, and as much as it can inspire us with the concrete reality of connection and the marvels of physical processes, it obviously cannot give us the prize of personal immortality promised by traditional spiritualities. Naturalism cannot rectify, as some faiths claim they can, what seems the root injustice of being creatures with desires that necessarily outstrip their fulfillment. As naturalists, we must accept, as do Buddhists, the basic reality of impermanence, change, suffering, and death as the end of the person. There is no *cosmic reassurance*, rather we are enjoined to make accommodation with the facts of life, not to escape them in dreams of disembodied transcendence. This is the price (rather high, some would say) we pay for cognitive consistency and metaphysical monism.

So naturalism is tough-minded in this respect, and thus not a route many are likely to take in addressing ultimate concerns. But the argument could be put

that in acknowledging impermanence, naturalism actually reveals the source of value to us. If we knew for sure that we had immaterial souls and would live forever, would we place as much value on being? Isn't it rather that we value things, including our own moments on earth, precisely because we know full well they *don't* last forever? Endless life, if it existed, would be like plastic flowers: permanent, yes, but something we quickly take for granted. As much as we dread our own extinction, therefore, immortality might not be quite the prize we suppose it is. In his book of the same title, Alan Watts called this the "wisdom of insecurity": we can't have both the ultimate security of the soul *and* true excitement and passion for life.

In discarding the possibility of a life hereafter, our values necessarily shift to *this world*, not the next. Our projects involve the joy and suffering inherent in being embodied creatures situated on a finite planet, facing the pressing challenge of material sustainability. We must create meaning for ourselves using our capacities for compassion, creativity, and aesthetics applied in situations that demand the utmost gravity and those that invite the most self-forgetful indulgent play. Naturalism, in denying our dualistic transcendental ambitions, gives us just one world and therefore assigns it greater value than do its supernaturalistic competitors. Since the intuition of significance is central to spiritual experience, naturalism heightens the spiritual possibilities inherent in everyday life by adding greater significance and weight to our existence *at this very moment*.

## **Spiritual Practice**

Once we let go of traditional definitions of spirituality, naturalism becomes a powerful resource in evoking the spiritual response and providing a unified cognitive context within which it can be interpreted. By abjuring spirits and ghosts we discover our true place in the cosmos, in which Existence replaces Purpose, function replaces essence, and surprise replaces security. It turns out we are of one nature, not two, a nature shared by all we see and know.

But how, practically speaking, are we to *feel* all this? Abstractions are all well and good, but we might want the direct experience of connection simply because it's intrinsically rewarding, a refreshment from our ordinary ego-

centered, goal-driven state of mind. Naturalism can help inspire us, but to substantially change how we feel we may need to participate in some sort of spiritual practice.

An explicitly naturalistic spiritual practice must evoke the spiritual response in the cognitive context of naturalism. Traditional religion has linked this response to sacred liturgies, with all their supernatural connotations, using music, theater, incense, architecture and other ritual elements that generate feelings of connection and wonder. There is no reason why such a link cannot be forged between naturalism and such feelings; it's simply a matter of finding (or designing) rituals and practices which pair these feelings with expressions of naturalistic beliefs. In his television series *Cosmos*, Carl Sagan accomplished this by telling a naturalistic creation story, set to some exceptionally beautiful music and stunning visual panoramas of the heavens.

There's much to choose from in terms of existing spiritual practice that might be adapted for a naturalistic spirituality. Some Unitarian services come close to an entirely naturalistic celebration of community, despite the fact that they often use theistic hymns and take place in buildings that look suspiciously like churches. Naturalists must infiltrate these congregations, form committees over coffee, and lobby for less God and more naturalism in the liturgy. The musicians and lyricists among them must collaborate on new, more explicitly naturalistic anthems (having tried this myself, I know it's damned difficult, but someone's got to do it). Sunday school must teach ethics and respect and humility before the mysteries of life without resorting to stale and incredible biblical tales. Rather, parents must search the literature (and the Web) for the Sesame Street and Zoom of secular spirituality, should it exist. If not, they must create it themselves. And as for venues, those with planetariums nearby might investigate the possibilities for creating a participatory naturalistic service, with sound and lighting effects. Finding out what works and doesn't work in all of this, is, of course, a matter of experimentation.

For those not inclined to communal practice, there are more private means of altering one's consciousness, meditation chief among them. Meditation, although not often advertised as such, can work dramatic changes on the brain via concentration or the non-judgmental awareness of mental contents. When thinking quiets down and sensory input is at a minimum, very

different sorts of feelings can arise, some of which are extraordinarily unlike normal waking consciousness. Although meditation is not an easy art, the potential rewards are great for those who have the knack and put in the time. The states of consciousness accessed, naturalistically understood, are just more brain states, but they can have directly felt qualities of unity and acceptance that mark them off as subjectively quite special, and that correspond to empirically-grounded cognitions. Because many varieties of Buddhism are inherently naturalistic and emphatically this-worldly, humanists interested in exploring meditation could do worse than joining a local Zen center or vipassana (insight meditation) group.

A naturalistic spiritual practice, of course, need not announce itself. Rather, it can shade into and blend with ecstatic and artistic pursuits in which no mention or thought arises of any philosophy or world view. The point is simply to gain the sense of connection, joy and immediacy, that the moment is sufficient unto itself. In my own experience, I've found such moments in the silence of a Quaker meeting, in Zen retreats, drumming with friends on New Year's Eve, in the heat of a sweat lodge in Arizona, star-gazing in the dead of winter, in singing, running, and composing music. Such activities can be more or less passive, but some demand skill. As with meditation, which only comes through practice, arts such as dance, music, singing, chant, and yoga should be taught so that each of us has some basic techniques with which to engage the moment. Whatever their origins, we can adopt such skills and techniques without necessarily adopting the tradition within which they arose, unless, of course, we find that tradition to our liking.

Drugs, whether legal or illicit, are of course another route to altered consciousness. In their swift modification of perception and cognition they are proof of the pudding that mind and brain are one. Many spiritual traditions have made and continue to make use of drugs to induce transcendental states, and I see no *a priori* moral problem with this, as long as no significant health or social problems result. The difficulty, however, is that direct, repeated chemical impingements on the neural substrates of consciousness often *do* entail unwanted side-effects, after-effects, or long-term health consequences. Although it may take more work, behavioral routes to unitary states are a good deal safer (especially if you want to repeat the experience often), and because they require some effort, the end result may have more subjective value and be taken less for granted than drug-induced

ecstasies.

There are, then, many choices available to the naturalist in discovering a congenial spiritual practice. Most, if not all of the practices mentioned above are ideologically neutral (or can be made so), and thus consistent with a naturalistic cognitive context for spirituality. By opening ourselves up to the spiritual response from time to time, we get a taste of what it feels like to be what we truly are: creatures fully integrated at every moment into the greater scheme of things. Yes, we are also fully individuated human beings living out our separate fates, but the realization of a deeper connection is necessary to set an authentic stage for our personal and collective strivings. Naturalism provides an all-encompassing perspective that can sustain us as well as any to be found in traditional spirituality, and it leaves behind the dualisms that can obscure the intuition of unity. Should we ever want recourse to the transpersonal, naturalism is there for us, not just as a philosophy, but as an inspiration to feel truly at home in the universe.

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