

REA ON NATURALISM

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Abstract:

In a recent book, Michael Rea aims to weaken the grip that he takes naturalism to have on the philosophical profession.¹ In pursuit of this aim, he argues for a series of theses some of which may strike some philosophers as incredible: that naturalism must be viewed as a “research program” (73), rather than as a substantive philosophical thesis; that naturalism “cannot be adopted on the basis of evidence” (6–7); that naturalists cannot be justified in accepting either realism about material objects, or realism about other minds, or materialism (8), these commitments constituting a powerful pragmatic case against being a naturalist; that these commitments can be avoided through the adoption of a supernaturalist research program that “legitimizes belief in *some* sort of supernatural being” (213–14); that “except in the case of objects that are the products of design, proper functions are not empirically detectable” (111); and that Plantinga’s evolutionary argument against naturalism not merely succeeds, but can also be extended to tell against intuitionism (182–99).

My goal in the three sections into which this paper falls is to provide critical discussion of Rea’s case for just three of the theses mentioned above: (1) that naturalism must be viewed as a “research program”; (2) that naturalism “cannot be adopted on the basis of evidence”; and (3) that naturalists cannot be justified in accepting realism about material objects. I shall argue that in no instance is Rea’s case, though undoubtedly worthy of further discussion, a clear success.

I

Rea construes naturalism, not as a thesis, but as “a research program” (73), where, by “research program,” he means, roughly, a particular set of methodological dispositions; that is, dispositions to “trust certain ways of acquiring information with respect to various topics and to distrust others” (2). Specifically, he construes a naturalist as someone whose methodological dispositions amount to treating “the methods of science and those alone as basic sources of evidence” (67). Rea construes naturalism as a research program because doing so is the most charitable way of specifying the heart and soul of naturalism given that, as he argues in chapter 3, “naturalism . . . cannot be formulated as a substantive philosophical thesis” (52).

Two comments. First, Rea’s claim that naturalism cannot be formulated as a philosophical thesis turns out on closer examination to be less striking than initially appears. For if you want to endorse one of many theses that have sometimes been labeled “naturalism” (for example, that the world is a single system of events governed by impersonal laws; that every empirical phenomenon is, or supervenes upon, some phenomenon treated in some branch of science; or that there is no way of certifying the methods of science prior to employing those methods), then nothing in Rea’s chapter 3 shows, or even purports to show, that you cannot coherently do so. What Rea’s chapter 3 does purport to show is that you cannot properly treat any of these claims as an articulation of *naturalism*.

Why not? Rea’s answer is that to treat any of these claims as articulating a thesis of naturalism would conflict with the intuitive core of naturalism, which is *attitudinal*: “Naturalism is motivated by a high regard for scientific method,” says Rea (52); and “naturalists respect the natural sciences as absolutely authoritative with respect to what there is” (55). But—and here is my second comment—the resulting argument for construing naturalism as a set of methodological dispositions isn’t entirely convincing. One trouble is that it appears to beg the question. For Rea argues that naturalism must be construed as a certain set of methodological dispositions because it cannot be formulated as a thesis, and he argues it cannot be formulated as a thesis because being a naturalist is at bottom a matter of having a high regard for scientific method. But a high regard for scientific method sounds just like a complex of methodological dispositions. So Rea’s most basic premise sounds awfully like his conclusion.

Another trouble is that there is really no good reason to think, all things considered, that there even exists a single thing, naturalism, that has a heart and soul to be characterized in the first place. Admittedly, we should probably presume that any term in ordinary language is univocal unless there is evidence to the contrary; but I doubt that such a presumption is legitimate for terms in contemporary philosophical discourse, where stipulative definition of pre-existing terms is such a common practice. And even if a presumption of univocality exists also for philosophical terminology, it could only be a very weak presumption; and the lack of agreement on the defini-

tion of “naturalism,” to which Rea draws attention, provides evidence that in this case the presumption is false.

II

Rea holds that “there is no basis for saying that [naturalism] is the sort of program that everybody . . . ought to adopt” (7). And he does so because he claims that research programs in general, whether naturalist or not, “cannot be adopted on the basis of evidence” (6–7). Now Rea’s claim that no research programs can be adopted on the basis of evidence is striking because it sounds as if Rea is going to defend a sophisticated version of the popular suggestion that a commitment to science is really just a secular faith, no better off epistemically than any standard religion. So what does Rea say to support it? The gist emerges clearly enough from the following remarks:

. . . the reason why research programs cannot be adopted on the basis of evidence is that evidence can only be recognized as such from within a research program. . . . We cannot say that [a research program] is supported by evidence that is somehow generated and recognizable as such independently of the program. (6)

Since a research program is the *totality* of one’s methodological dispositions, Rea clearly has a point: we could not justify *all* of our methodological dispositions simultaneously, since doing so without circularity would require activation of at least one methodological disposition that we were not trying to justify, and by assumption there is no such disposition. But this is just the familiar point—often stressed by naturalists—that one cannot simultaneously replace all the planks of Neurath’s raft. What is distinctive about Rea’s position, however, is the conclusion he infers from this familiar point:

So when it comes to rejecting one program in favor of another, the decision to adopt the favored program must be made on pragmatic grounds, broadly speaking, rather than evidential grounds. (6)

But this striking conclusion does not seem to follow, for even though we cannot justify a whole research program, we might still be able to argue that one research program should (evidentially) be favored over another.

Rea’s conclusion recalls Kuhn’s incommensurability thesis that no dispute between rival paradigms can ever be resolved rationally because integral to each paradigm is a unique set of standards for evaluating hypotheses, while no supra-paradigmatic standards exist to which paradigm-independent appeal might be made. Now the best response to Kuhn’s thesis is that although rival paradigms might not incorporate *exactly* the same standards for evaluating hypotheses, there might well be, and usually will be, sufficient standards *common* to both paradigms to make possible the construction of an argument for one paradigm over the other that is found acceptable to advocates of both paradigms. Likewise, I suggest, in the case of rival research programs in Rea’s sense. Allow that two rival research programs do not incorporate exactly the same methodological dispositions, and

that there is no methodological vantage point independent of a research program; but insist that two distinct research programs might *share* sufficiently many methodological dispositions for advocates of both programs to reach rational consensus about those methodological dispositions that are not shared. Such a possibility shows that the decision to reject one research program in favor of another need not be made on merely pragmatic grounds, despite the absence of an Archimedean point from which to justify research programs.

Let me illustrate with a pertinent example. The *naturalist's* methodological dispositions are precisely those characteristic of science; by contrast, the *supernaturalist's* methodological dispositions include (or might include) those of science plus a disposition to treat *religious experience* as a basic source of evidence (68). Accordingly, the naturalist and the supernaturalist share many methodological dispositions. Appeal to these shared dispositions could rationally lead one or the other to modify his research program. For since a disposition to treat the overall coherence of one's theoretical and methodological positions as relevant to their truth is surely a component of both naturalism and supernaturalism, there are ways to evaluate the inclusion in one's research program of a disposition to treat religious experience as a basic source of evidence that the naturalist and supernaturalist could both employ. For example, the deliverances of religious experience could be scrutinized for *internal* coherence; that is, coherence, including logical coherence, with one another; the deliverances of religious experience could be scrutinized for *external* coherence; that is, coherence, including logical coherence, with the deliverances of other sources of evidence accepted as such by naturalists and supernaturalists alike; and religious experience could be assessed for the likelihood of our discovering a theoretical account of its origins and reliability. Since such inquiries would be acceptable to naturalists and supernaturalists alike and could yield an epistemic reason to favor either naturalism or supernaturalism, the admitted impossibility of justifying a whole research program all at once cannot entail that disputes between rival research programs are resolvable only by appeal to pragmatic considerations.

III

Rea's most provocative claim, however, is that naturalists are not justified in accepting realism about material objects (for example, 8, 78). Since Rea clearly regards this claim as his main (albeit only pragmatic) objection to being a naturalist, his reasoning to support it is the most important in his whole book. Though elaborate, it can, I hope, be summarized without excessive caricature as follows:

Material substances, such as dogs, have persistence conditions, conditions which are necessary and sufficient for their continued existence over time. So, if a material substance exists, it has persistence conditions. But persistence conditions involve the possession of modal, and in particular, *essential* properties; that is, properties that it not merely *does* but *must* possess. So,

if a material substance exists, it possesses certain essential properties. And, of course, these essential properties must themselves be mind-independent, and hence intrinsic, if a material substance that possesses them is itself to exist mind-independently, as robust realism about material objects requires.

Suppose now that naturalists are to be *justified* in holding that some material substance exists. Then, since the existence of any material substance requires that the substance possess intrinsic essential properties, reflective naturalists who are fully alert to their situation must also be justified in holding that the material substance in question possesses intrinsic essential properties.² However, naturalists cannot justify any attribution of intrinsic essential properties to any material substance. For naturalists are disposed to treat the methods of science and those alone as basic sources of evidence. These methods include only observation plus theoretical inferences from premises supported by observation; but observation, which is only ever of what is *actually* the case, can therefore only justify the belief that a material substance *does* possess, never that it *must* possess, a given property; and it is hard to see how attributions of intrinsic essential properties could be supported on the ground that they provide the best explanation of any class of observable phenomena. But since naturalists cannot justify the attribution of intrinsic essential properties to any material substance, it follows that naturalists cannot justify their belief in the existence of any mind-independent material substance; which is to say that naturalists, precisely because of their defining methodological commitments, cannot justify realism about material objects.

Two lines of reply might allow naturalists to avoid the predicament with which this imaginative reasoning faces them. The first denies the connection that Rea must assert between persistence conditions, on the one hand, and essential properties, on the other. Rea's argument needs the possession by a material substance of persistence conditions to *require* the possession by that material substance of *essential* properties. Although Rea never details the connection he envisages between persistence conditions and essential properties, perhaps it is this:

[PC1] Some dog persists from t_1 to t_2 iff some dog possesses certain essential properties at t_1 and does not lose any of these essential properties between t_1 and t_2 .

Specifying a connection between persistence conditions and essential properties in this way is not entirely happy (for the RHS of the biconditional seems to presuppose rather than constitute the persistence of a dog), but at least it explains how persistence conditions might be thought to *require* essential properties.

However, there may be other ways of understanding persistence conditions that do *not* imply that persistence conditions require essential properties; and if so, then naturalists can evade Rea's argument against naturalism by denying that persistence conditions do require essential properties. Here, then, is a possible alternative account of persistence conditions:

[PC2] Some dog persists from t_1 to t_2 iff some dog-stage (or instantiation of doghood) at t_2 is R-related to some dog-stage (or instantiation of doghood) at t_1 .

Obviously I have not said what the crucial R-relation is; but so long as it does not involve essential properties—and why should it?—this alternative account of persistence conditions seems to show how one could believe in persistence conditions for material substances without commitment to naturalistically inaccessible essential properties.

Rea might question whether truths like PC2 are any more naturalistically accessible than the attributions of essential properties that PC2 is designed to avoid. But I am inclined to answer that PC2 is true in virtue of our dog-concept's in fact picking out a sequence of R-related dog-stages, a psychological fact that is quite accessible naturalistically given a physicalist account of the determination of concept-content. Perhaps Rea would reply that such an answer makes dogs, or thoughts about dogs, objectionably mind-dependent. But I do not see how that would follow. Our dog-concept is certainly *our* dog-concept; but given that we have it, whether anything in the world answers to it (i.e., whether there are any dogs) seems a fully objective matter.

The second possible line of reply to Rea's argument consists in *out-smarting* him; that is, cheerfully accepting the apparently unacceptable consequence to which naturalism leads. That would amount, I think, to conceding that in fact there are no material substances, *given* that claiming their existence commits you to persistence conditions and hence to intrinsic essential properties. How high a price for naturalists to pay would this concession be? Perhaps not high at all—or so I will suggest.

At first hearing, admittedly, a commitment on the part of naturalists to the non-existence of material substances sounds like an appalling liability, because of its extreme implausibility. And the commitment certainly is extremely implausible if the alternative view envisaged is that regions of space usually thought to contain dogs or other material substances are just *empty*. But naturalists are not committed to that alternative. For disbelief in material substances can be combined with continued belief in property instances; that is, instantiations of properties in regions of spacetime. Thus, for example, even if naturalists, compelled to disbelieve in dogs, cannot hold that any dog persists from t_1 to t_n , they can still hold that doghood is instantiated in a certain region at t_1 , and again at t_2 , and again at t_3 , and so forth, where “doghood” is so understood as to avoid commitment to persisting dogs. So, naturalists can allow that a certain spacetime region usually thought to contain a dog or other material substance really does contain *something*; they merely insist that the something is a sequence of property instances rather than a persisting material substance.

And this insistence is far from being obviously false. To see this, consider how you might persuade naturalists that in repudiating material substances (while retaining property instances) they had made an obvious mistake. You could hardly appeal to the evidence of their senses, since they could plausi-

bly reply that their substance-free account of the world accounts for all the appearances: after all, the sensory appearance of a world with dogs might be exactly the same as that of a world without dogs but with appropriate instantiations of doghood. And you could hardly complain that their obvious mistake was to omit all mention of intrinsic modal properties, since this omission is hardly an *obvious* mistake, and, from a naturalist perspective, it is no mistake at all.

But even if a naturalist repudiation of material substances involves no obvious mistake, does it not still entail—implausibly—that ordinary folk are in error when they use material-substance concepts or terms to think about or describe the world? Not necessarily. For the folk's application to the world of material-substance concepts could perhaps be interpreted, or reinterpreted, in *projectivist* fashion. That is, we could claim that the folk are disposed, by instinct or convention, definitely to apply a given material-substance concept to a region of spacetime if a sequence of property instances there meets certain conditions (for example, if the property instances in the sequence are appropriately related to one another); and also disposed definitely not to apply the same material-substance concept to a region of spacetime if a sequence of property instances meets certain other conditions. However, because there could be actual or possible sequences of property instances which meet neither set of conditions, and hence which trigger neither disposition, applications of material-substance concepts, like utterances of "Have a nice day!," would have assertibility conditions but not truth conditions. This, of course, is the crudest sketch of a view. But if a projectivist interpretation of the folk's application to the world of material-substance concepts can be satisfactorily developed along anything like these lines, then the folk need be guilty of no error in employing material-substance concepts. Indeed, naturalists can happily join them in employing such concepts, notwithstanding their denial of the existence of material substances.³

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NOTES

1. Michael Rea, *World Without Design: The Ontological Consequences of Naturalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). All in-text references in this article will refer to this book.

2. My vague reference to "reflective naturalists who are fully alert to their situation" conceals the delicate question whether a true closure principle for epistemic justification can be found that meets the needs of Rea's argument here.

3. This discussion is exactly what was presented at the Eastern Division APA in 2003. Much material in it, however, was then published in a review of Rea's book in *Mind*, 113, 451 (2004): 575–81. Readers of the present discussion might still wish to consult this review, since it was significantly reworked to respond to the comments Rea made on the present discussion at the APA.