



THE BLOG

Where Can Naturalism and Religion Agree?

The core messages of religion and naturalism do not sound so different, really. Should it be a surprise that they can converge on a morality designed for the essential needs for life?

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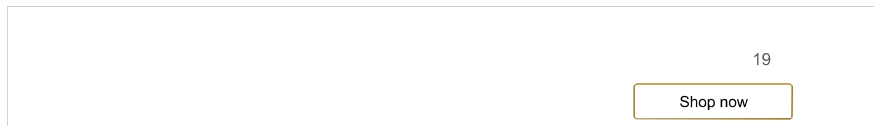
Surprisingly, naturalism and religion can inspire a common humanistic spirit and ethics of responsibility. The contest between science and religion has been going on so long that the battles lines seem fixed. Religion's complaints against naturalism are so familiar by now. We often hear it said that naturalism could never support essential human needs, human aspirations and human ideals. We also hear that a humanism grounded on the cold reality of science could never nourish the vital spirit of morality. Is a naturalism without God only able to support a modest humanism reduced to the scale of earthly matters and merely human frailties? Is naturalism unable to inspire us, guide us or console us? I wonder whether these are fair complaints to make against naturalism. By all means, judge human nature harshly. We are still unworthy of our marvelous habitat and we have not lived up to our natural potential. But judging nature is another matter and deserves more care. And it is only fair to judge us as a living part of nature. As our knowledge of nature's secrets has grown, haven't we been growing right along? We are made greater, for our knowing how much greater is our natural home. A serious perspective on life takes a fair and proportionate measure of a life. Stand up straight and let a mark be made, to show how tall you can stretch, to a height worthy of a human being. From that height now, survey all you can see, everything for which you care, that tiny sphere of what you call your life. Now, let's lift our eyes even higher from worldly diversions toward the eternal whole. Mounting up upon



different from religion's? If the spirit common to religions had but a few propositions, they would sound something like this:

- That life is ultimately about a relationship, a connection with what is most supreme.
- That there are two worlds, one seen and one unseen.
- That the unseen world is the supreme world, and it holds the true power and destiny of all.
- There is something essential in us that can survive in new lives.
- That what survives of us is what is truly best in us.
- That what rightly survives of us is the nobility of virtue, knowledge and wisdom.
- That we should not prize the dark peculiarities of personality and ego, but the lasting light that shines through us.

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So might the religious spirit speak if it had but few words. What can our knowledge of nature say on these matters? A natural perspective can tell us similar things:

- That every life is interrelated, woven and composed of nature's vibrant cords.
- That the unseen world of nature's energies shape life and life's beauties in endless new forms.
- That your essential energy cannot be lost or destroyed but only recycled with perfect efficiency.
- That there is a kind of afterlife, as the consequences of your conduct has influences far into the future of life.
- That our virtue, knowledge and wisdom are inherited from prior generations, and we can pass them on to next generations.
- That our spark of consciousness dims when the body dies, yet the finer part of our character can be woven into new lives.



shortness of life, and the smallness of self-importance besides the immensity of the whole.

The core messages of religion and naturalism do not sound so different, really. Should it even be a surprise that they can converge on a morality designed for the essential needs for life? But we may be forgiven for failing to hear such harmonious chords. By fighting over knowledge for so long, religion and naturalism have stopped talking about wisdom. Indeed, both religion and naturalism themselves make a great show by distracting us with claims that only it can provide what the other cannot. But life is rarely a zero-sum game in the long run. Does a religion's claim that you must desperately want your personal immortality, lest you be selfishly immoral, really make sense? Does a science's claim that you must sternly regard morality as illusory, lest you be irresponsibly foolish, really make sense? It is time to wisely take a stand on what we all can know to be our common responsibility. We must at least take care of the genuine human needs of life, this one life that we know we share. And what can we all know? Like the essence of religion, nature's deep ways tell us that you are more than you may appear, even to yourself. Nature shows how its supreme reality recycles everything and preserves what is necessary. Nature reveals how its real powers are available for you to conduct what is best through you into the future where everything must go. Nature tells you that you can have all of the meaningful life to which you are deserving, but not an ounce more, for the energies of life must be distributed fairly. And you waste your natural energies at your peril, for your selfish pursuits only rob you of your rightful destiny. These are humbling messages, but they are reassuring. Together they say that you have arrived into the world where you belong and that you belong to the world that produced you. That you have no right to hope for a better afterworld until you have made this world better. That you are not entitled to fear death until you have feared to fail at life. This is truly a message of responsibility and purpose worthy of everyone. We might call it "A Natural Faith," if only we weren't so reasonably sure of its promise. And we'd all be wiser for making it a promise to keep.

The views expressed are those of the author, and not necessarily shared by the Center for Inquiry or its staff.

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