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Is religion natural? Religion, naturalism and near-naturalism

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ABSTRACT

In this article I argue that the kind of scientific naturalism that tends to underwrite projects of naturalizing religion operates with a tacit conception of nature which, upon closer inspection, turns out to be untenable. I first distinguish an uninteresting modest naturalism from the more ambitious and relevant scientific naturalism. Secondly I survey three different kinds of attempting to naturalize religion: naturalizing the social aspect of religion, naturalizing religious experience, and naturalizing reference to the transcendent. Thirdly I argue that these projects operate with a conception of nature which is insufficiently clear. I suggest three ways of charitably explicating that tacit conception of what is natural before arguing that neither of these three positions works. Lastly I offer an irenic proposal: we would do good in giving up the scientific naturalism that underlies projects of naturalizing religion in order to embrace Lynne Rudder Baker's recently proposed notion of near-naturalism which allows the naturalist to retain a 'science first' attitude while avoiding problematic, overly restrictive notions of what is natural.

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1. Introduction

One of the most pervasive cultural issues in parts of the Anglophone world, most notably the USA (and to a lesser extent the UK), is the intellectual conflict between a broadly atheist or agnostic naturalism championed by the liberal left and a politically motivated, conservative Christian creationism. This conflict is actualized in different shapes. In its most abstract form, this conflict is about the existence of God as such. In one of its more concrete, political iterations it takes the shape of the questions whether creationism ought to be taught in schools alongside evolution. This wider cultural debate can be viewed to serve as a backdrop for the philosophical question whether or not religion can be 'naturalized'. The question whether religion can be naturalized is an aspect of the debate within academic philosophy of 'naturalism' versus (the more rarely adopted) 'non-naturalism'. For better or worse, 'naturalist' has become the standard label or identification for a majority of large and important philosophy departments with departments like Notre Dame, Pittsburgh, or Chicago constituting perhaps some major exceptions. The term 'naturalist' or 'naturalistic', however, is not only used to take a stance on questions regarding philosophy of religion or creationism, but is more widely used as a means of

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self-identification and used to express support of a ‘naturalistic’ approach to philosophy of mind, language, ethics, meta-ethics, and other areas.

Neither naturalism nor non-naturalism, however, imply the existence of God: ontological forms of naturalism are by design incompatible with God’s existence, non-naturalism (without further specification) is not committed to the existence of God. Throughout most of this article, the relevant form relevant to this issue is conceived of as scientific naturalism which features an ontological and a methodological aspect.

Yet, some scientific naturalists may be concerned that a rejection of naturalism, or even minor deviations or softening of naturalism, on the philosophical plane may open the door for the conservative social standpoints. Some naturalist philosophers, however, aim to undercut the debate in a clever move by arguing that religion as a whole can be *naturalized*. Religion, some may argue, is itself not natural qua reference to transcendent, supposedly supernatural entities, yet can be made natural by (re-)integrating it into the concept of nature by demonstrating that religion as a whole is nothing ‘over-and-above’ entities which are amenable to natural-scientific research¹.

However, such naturalistic approaches commonly leave open what exactly the operative conception of nature is. Yet, the conception of nature in question determines which parts of religion (those deemed transcendent) actually count as ‘supernatural’, and would therefore be in need of naturalization. I argue that there is no such conception of nature readily available which is sympathetic to naturalist convictions and the naturalist could use to naturalize the transcendent aspects of religion. If it turns out that a scientific-naturalistic conception of nature is untenable, then it is doubtful that naturalization projects are successful, including the naturalization of religion. If it is unclear what is natural, it is also unclear what is supernatural. And if it is unclear what actually is supernatural, then asserting that supposedly supernatural aspects of religion make religion not natural loses its bite.

In what follows, I will first distinguish a modest version of naturalism from the more ambitious, in this context more relevant form: scientific naturalism. Secondly, I shall differentiate two notions of what it means to offer a naturalization of religion, and argue that both ways presuppose a tacit, undefined conception of nature. I shall thirdly construe three ways in which this tacit conception of nature can be spelled out and argue that all three such attempts face serious challenges. Given that the presupposed concept of nature is untenable, I outline a version of non-reductive naturalism – near-naturalism – offered by Lynne Rudder Baker. The conception of nature offered by near-naturalism extensionally enlarges the concept of nature to include religious practice as such while retaining a quietist position on whether transcendent or supposedly supernatural things exist. I shall conclude with an irenic suggestion: we can have the best of two worlds, namely the enthusiasm for the sciences and a sensible, not overly restrictive ontology. This is by no means a novel or original idea. It is rather part of a general form of life adopted by many. Yet, current philosophical debates seem to sometimes warrant a reminder about some obvious options which may have been forgotten or overlooked.

2. Modest naturalism and scientific naturalism

It is difficult to find a phrasing of naturalism that is substantial and captures both the intuitions of card-carrying naturalists and their opponents. It helps to delineate two

kinds of naturalism: modest naturalism and scientific naturalism. Modest naturalism can be characterized by three different commitments:

- (i) a certain ‘respect’ for science,
- (ii) rejection of philosophical foundationalism,
- (iii) rejection of supernaturalism.

As a catch-all term, ‘modest naturalism’ describes a cluster of ideas or a stereotype view, meaning that not all philosophers who consider themselves naturalist will, when prompted, elaborate and overtly endorse all three aspects. I shall shortly deal with these three aspects in turn, arguing that none of them (either alone or in conjunction) can be used to underwrite a notion substantial enough to make sense of what a naturalization of religion could amount to. Note that this construal of modest naturalism combines both methodological and ontological aspects, albeit in a modified, less demanding form, which figure as defining features of scientific naturalism introduced afterwards.

Firstly, some philosophers will assert that being a naturalist just means having proper respect for the results and workings of the (natural) sciences. Consider Colyvan’s programmatic statement from an anthology on the so-called *Canberra Plan*:

So what are the fruits of naturalism? First, the scientific enterprise has a remarkably successful history, and naturalism is little more than a statement of our continued support for that enterprise. After all, rejecting naturalism amounts to claiming that sometimes we ought not accept our best scientific theories.²

Colyvan suggests that naturalism just requires a modicum of subservience to the best scientific theories available. If this construal was correct, we would have difficulties explaining why philosophers are uneasy with naturalism. Most self-identified non-naturalists have no discomfort expressing support for the scientific enterprise, or accepting the truth of the best scientific theories. Therefore, we must look to construals of naturalism that bear more potential for controversy.

Secondly, traditional philosophical foundationalism conceives of philosophy as an *a priori* inquiry into the nature of reality, and stands in a foundational relation to the sciences. For example, Kant and Descartes are sometimes attributed the view that philosophy provides the epistemological and metaphysical basis for science. Note that this rejection of foundationalism is also a negative claim about what the relation between philosophy and science is not, but not a positive claim about how to conceive this relation.

The third aspect of modest naturalism is the rejection of supernaturalism. Naturalism shuns supernatural entities from philosophy. Supernaturalism is the belief that ‘there are entities that lie outside of the normal course of nature’³. Supernatural entities are those ‘whose existence cannot be countenanced by (natural) science’⁴. Uncontroversial examples for such supernatural entities are: ghosts or goblins or fairies or other kinds of things connected to magic or witchcraft. But it also includes ‘immaterial minds or souls, vital fluids, angels, and deities’⁵.

Each of these three aspects face difficulties. Regarding the third aspect, the concept of supernaturalness *prima facie* does not seem to be clear-cut in a way that makes it interesting for philosophy. For example, although some of the latter examples (like

ghosts) are immaterial phenomena, supernatural entities cannot be identified with immaterial things since numbers and governments are also immaterial, but not supernatural in any sense that either naturalists or non-naturalists would be willing to assert. Someone wanting to classify numbers and governments as supernatural (because they are not physical), would have to offer substantial argument to make this view plausible. Most philosophers, including self-identifying naturalists, will somehow want to account for at least some abstract, immaterial entities rather than deem them merely supernatural. The simple point is that being material in and of itself is not sufficient to serve as a criterion for what counts as natural. A working, substantial notion of naturalism needs to provide a criterion of naturalness. Something being supernatural presupposes some other things being natural. I shall argue in section 3 why any such endeavour faces difficult challenges.

The other two aspects feature a similar problem: both anti-foundationalism and respect for scientific achievements are largely uncontroversial, hence too weak, to figure as a criterion which separates naturalists from non-naturalists. Most self-identified non-naturalists have no discomfort expressing support for the scientific enterprise, or accepting the truth of the best scientific theories. Again, it is difficult to find philosophers in the 20th and 21st century who assert that philosophy has authority over the sciences as some medieval and early modern philosophers may have believed. Instead, virtually any philosopher will assert that the sciences work well without philosophical guidance. In the current environment, it seems indeed hopeless to defend the claim that philosophy is in a position to dictate to the sciences commands *ex cathedra*. Nevertheless, even avowed non-naturalists like John McDowell, Thomas Nagel or Timothy Williamson⁶ can be taken to endorse these two aspects of modest naturalism. Therefore, if modest forms of naturalism were representative of the issues at stake, there would be no controversy or philosophers rejecting the label ‘naturalist’. Any engagement with the doctrine of naturalism at this level of depth remains almost unsatisfactory. Therefore, it seems that the debate of naturalizing religion presupposes a stronger form of naturalism.

This stronger, more substantial form of naturalism is scientific naturalism. Scientific naturalism implies modest naturalism such that one who endorses scientific naturalism thereby endorses modest naturalism. Yet, conversely, one can be a modest naturalist without being a scientific naturalist. Following others⁷, scientific naturalism is characterized by an ontological and a methodological aspect.

2.1. Ontological aspect

The only things that fundamentally exist in the world are the basic entities that might be possibly countenanced by (the methodologies and practices of) natural science. All other phenomena must be in some way related to scientifically respectable entities in a suitable way.

In other words, the only ontological commitments we adopt are the ones derived from the sciences. The science most scientific naturalists take to be foundational is physics such that everything will be reducible to physics in a future-ideal form of physics. Hence, the ontological aspect is often, in essence, just a form of physicalism in the sense that everything there is ultimately has to be grounded (whatever that may mean) in physical entities posited by an ideal, future science.

The ontological aspect creates what has been called placement problems⁸, insofar as certain things like normativity, the mind or religion, are hard to place in the ontological view of scientific naturalism. Such phenomena are hard-to-place in a scientific image of the world. Reductionism aims to establish suitable metaphysical relations between these hard-to-place phenomena and entities countenanced by the natural sciences (most notably physics). Reductive theories of naturalization explain away the phenomenon in question by demonstrating that is nothing over and above the reductive basis. Reductionism is usually employed by scientific naturalists in dealing with analogous issues about normativity and mental properties.

2.2. Methodological aspect

Proper philosophy ought to be restricted by the methods and results of the natural science.⁹

The methodological aspect is much more difficult to pin down. Two of its key formulations are found in Quine's assertion that philosophy is 'continuous with science'¹⁰ and Sellars' *scientia mensura* statement 'In the dimension of describing and explaining the world, science is the measure of all things, of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not'¹¹. Either of these statements can, however, be interpreted in different ways. For example, Mario De Caro compiles a dozen readings of differing strengths of the methodological aspect¹². The methodological aspect as stated above seems, however, to accomplish two things: first, it can capture the broad naturalist intuitions regarding the relation of philosophy and natural science and yet, second, presents a substantial, controversial position. Note that this principle is perhaps best formulated as a prescription. A descriptive phrasing would state that only a kind of philosophy which is suitably restrained by scientific practice is acceptable, ruling out a whole number of philosophical traditions (traditional metaphysics, Critical Theory, hermeneutics or transcendental philosophy).

3. What would it mean to naturalize religion?

With this outline of scientific naturalism in mind, what does it mean to offer a naturalistic account of religion? I will first broadly distinguish three different aspects of religion as a phenomenon which are crucial in this context. Then I shall differentiate two different ways in which a naturalist may want to account for these three aspects.

The three aspects of religion relevant here are: (i) religion as a social practice, (ii) religious experience, (iii) religion as reference to the transcendent. I shall suggest that especially the second and the third aspect pose problems for a full 'naturalization' of religion.

Firstly, religion is undeniably a *social phenomenon* which can be (and indeed is) researched by the social sciences (e.g. religious studies, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, parts of theology). Crucial religious practices (e.g. rites, prayer, worship, sacraments) are social in nature. Being part of a religion usually means being part of a social order of some sort (e.g. a church, a group, a cult), certain more 'private' religious practices, like certain forms of meditation, mysticism or even divination, notwithstanding.

Secondly, at least some forms of religion involve *religious experience*, presumably a *sui generis* type of first-personal experience had by a certain believer under adequate circumstances. Religious experiences can be characterized as subjective mental states said to be caused by divine sources and therefore ultimately beyond the explanatory scope of the natural sciences¹³. Religious experiences, for example a feeling of ‘absolute dependence’¹⁴, are specifically apt to ground belief in God¹⁵.

Thirdly, religion typically includes some reference to the transcendent (e.g. God, gods, angels, transubstantiation, spirits, afterlife, reincarnation). Transcendent aspects of religion are as a matter of principle beyond sensory experience in some way; things like the afterlife are beyond the scope of the (natural) sciences for principled reasons.

There may be more fine-grained, perhaps equally valid ways of carving up religion as a whole phenomenon. For questions regarding the naturalization of religion, this three-fold distinction is apt, however. In any case, at least the aspect of religious experience and reference to transcendent entities are unsavoury to the scientific naturalist. The social aspect of religion poses a lesser issue although social terminology is arguably not part of the natural-scientific vocabulary. All of these aspects present hard-to-place phenomena. Hence, the scientific naturalist will employ the general strategy: naturalization through reduction or elimination. I shall give an overview of what specific forms this general strategy takes when applied to the social aspect, the aspect of religious experience, and the transcendent aspect respectively.

Regarding the social aspect, a scientific naturalist can take a reductive stance. Naturalism about religion may aim to explain the social aspect of religion through the aforementioned social sciences and biology. Perhaps the most prolific approach to naturalizing religion is the so-called evolutionary explanation of religion¹⁶. It aims to integrate religion as a genuine phenomenon in the world into a framework amenable to natural-scientific explanation. It does so by attributing religion certain evolutionary functions in terms of selective advantages. For example, religious beliefs may have positive effects on health¹⁷, happiness¹⁸, community bonds¹⁹, thus resulting in a higher chance to pass on one’s genes²⁰. The scientific naturalist will have to supplement this explanation with a larger reductive explanation of social phenomena as such since social phenomena themselves do not figure in natural-scientific explanations.

Regarding the aspect of religious experience, naturalists typically take a reductive stance, suggesting that religious experience is nothing over-and-above some functions of the human body which are apt for natural scientific explanation. The most common approach seems to be to reduce states of religious experience to brain states, a form of inquiry most tightly connected to the neuroscience of religion²¹, or to view them as nothing over-and-above a cognitive by-product²².

Regarding the transcendent aspect, the scientific naturalist can take either take a reductive or an eliminative stance. For example, in a Humean vein, a reductive-naturalization account of miracles may argue that miracles are nothing over and above subjective mental states of agents (nothing ‘in’ the world) as mere putative observations of divine interventions, mental states which themselves can perhaps be reduced to brain states. Such an account can be complemented by related approaches to religion in psychology and the cognitive sciences of religion. A naturalist relying on these fields of inquiry may still want to account for two further things: why do people tend to *believe* in transcendent entities, i.e. God or Gods? And how can so-called religious experience be

accounted for through the natural sciences. Part of the answer will be, as just mentioned, that people gain certain evolutionary advantages in doing so. Approaches in cognitive sciences aim to give that another level of nuance, however. One the most common explanatory strategies is to characterize the human mind as a hyperactive agent detection device²³ or by-product of certain other evolutionary adaptations²⁴. This hypothesis states that the belief in God, Gods or otherwise 'supernatural' entities are a by-product of the capacity of the human mind to discern agential or personal characteristics in certain events or states of affairs. Furthermore, unlike phenomenological approaches²⁵, 'naturalistic' approaches aim to explain religious experience, presumably about transcendent entities, in terms of expressions which are part and parcel of the cognitive sciences²⁶. This explanatory approach is essentially reductive in character because it implicitly or explicitly claims that there is nothing more to religion over and above its evolutionary functions, social functions and/or those mental features which can be accounted for by the cognitive sciences.

In contrast an eliminative account of transcendent aspects can just outright reject the existence of miracles without further explanation (for they are impossible on this view) or postulate a kind of fictionalism or error theory about them. This is trivially the case due to the *methodological atheism* of the natural sciences. Methodological atheism is the constitutive research constraint for natural sciences to assume the non-existence of God such that no explanation of any given object of inquiry can make reference to God, angels and the like. For the scientific image of the world, such transcendent entities are anathema, as only those things exist which are natural since natural science gives us the most complete picture of reality, as it were. The transcendent aspect of religion does not sit right with either the ontological or the methodological aspect of scientific naturalism. And since a naturalist will want to maintain the methodological atheism implicit in natural scientific inquiry, the transcendent aspect has to be bracketed.

In summary, so-called naturalistic approaches to religion are perhaps best off in pursuing the following strategy: reject the transcendent aspect, reductively explain the aspect of religious experience, and focus on the social aspect. More specifically, naturalists about religion may typically claim that covering the social aspect and the experience aspect of religion is all there is needed to be explained, and that this explanation can – in the future – occur in terms which are entirely congenial to natural scientific explanation. Thus, giving a social-evolutionary explanation of religion leaves no questions open, as it were, allowing one to sideline religion's transcendent aspects. The wider contention is: religion itself seemed, at first, like an 'unnatural' phenomenon because it does not fit right with the scientific image of the worlds²⁷; yet after sufficient reductive and eliminative work, it can be seen as integrated into the scientific image. Religion thereby becomes an explainable, 'innerworldly' phenomenon which can be sufficiently accounted for with exclusively referencing social practices. It may suffice for such accounts not to overtly rejecting the existence of God, angels, Gods and other transcendent things, but to instead keep quiet about such matters, purporting to have naturalized religion by account for it as a set or sets of certain social and cultural practices.

4. The concept of nature in scientific naturalism

So far, we have surveyed strategies of making aspects of religion natural. ‘Naturalizing’ roughly means making natural (again) or making something part of the extension of the concept of nature. What exactly, however, is the concept of ‘nature’ (or the meaning of ‘natural’) implicit in such operations? This section is supposed to bring out a tacit naturalist commitment about the conception of nature under scrutiny.

It is, unfortunately, unclear what exactly makes transcendent parts of religion unnatural or supernatural beyond an intuitive understanding of what that means. A recourse to the term ‘transcendent’ to clarify ‘supernatural’ does not suffice: if ‘supernatural’ is defined as ‘transcendent’, then it is still unclear what ‘immanent’ or ‘non-transcendent’ would mean. If ‘transcendent’ is just defined as ‘supernatural’, then a characterization of ‘supernatural’ has to include some explanation of ‘natural’. ‘Natural’, however, cannot be simply defined as ‘not supernatural’ on pain of being uninformative and circular despite its perhaps *prima facie* intuitive plausibility. The meaning of the terms ‘transcendent’ and ‘supernatural’ are simply in too close a proximity in order to elucidate one another. Furthermore, the word ‘supernatural’ is perhaps misleading because virtually no serious philosopher is actually committed to the existence of witches, ghosts, goblins or ectoplasm which are sometimes touted as examples of ‘supernatural’ things. Yet, there may be a number of theistic philosophers who believe in angels, the soul, and God, i.e. entities which a scientific naturalist would want to put into the same group as goblins and ectoplasm. The term itself suggests that potentially unproblematic philosophical terms, like ‘soul’ or ‘God’, are lumped together with ghosts, goblins, and deities which have no place in philosophical or theological debate. Hence, the term ‘supernatural’ does not seem to be sufficiently clear and discriminatory.

Therefore, the scientific naturalist requires a substantial account of the concept of nature in order for the naturalization of religion to have more than merely intuitive appeal. Unfortunately, naturalists themselves rarely take the initiative to provide an at least *prima facie* uncontroversial example of naturalness in order to substantiate the view that the concept of nature can easily sort different phenomena into natural and non-natural things. The term ‘natural’ cannot ‘by itself’ sort entities into natural and non-natural without further clarification. However, speaking on behalf of the scientific naturalist, we can construe three ways to substantiate the claim to a criterion for what is natural which seem in line with scientific-naturalist sensibilities. These three possible criteria are: (i) naturalness as materiality, (ii) naturalness as the subject matter of the sciences, (iii) naturalness as causal efficacy. I do not suggest that this list is exhaustive. However, it is notoriously difficult to find written passages in which scientific naturalists reveal what they endorse as criteria of naturalness. In compiling these three candidates, I have chosen three candidates which ought to present palatable options to the scientific naturalist. The rest of this section demonstrates why these options, despite their desirability for the scientific naturalist, face challenges so difficult that it seems not expedient to subscribe to them. As a result I shall conclude that the project of naturalizing religion is a non-starter unless a substantial, working notion of the concept of nature is supplemented.

The first option is to understand the concept of nature through the concept of matter (i). On such an understanding, only those things are natural which are material.

While this might seem attractive to some at first glance, there are two reasons why a naturalist cannot entitle herself or himself to this reading. The first problem is that the concept of materiality itself can be put under scrutiny: what have we gained by explaining the term ‘natural’ through the expression ‘material’? How can the expression ‘material’ be further explained to a satisfactory degree? One such option is to think of ‘material’ as meaning ‘spatially extended’. However, Moser and Yandell²⁸ convincingly, in my view, argue that the notions of ‘material’ and ‘spatially extended’ are too co-dependent on one another to the effect that this explanation would be viciously circular. Moreover, even in the case that one could successfully reduce ‘material’ to ‘spatially extended’, it is unclear how far such a solution could carry the naturalist. This is because the natural sciences involve at least some concepts which are not obviously material in the sense of spatially extended. For example, forces, like gravity, themselves are not spatially extended but one would obviously want to grant that gravity is natural even on the most restrictive physicalist ontology. In order to avoid this issue, the naturalist would have to supply a kind of metaphysical explanation of forces, e.g. gravity, that either reduces forces to or grounds them in otherwise material phenomena. While this may be intuitively clear to some, it is not exactly certain how such a reduction or grounding-relation would look like in detail. Such an account pending, construing ‘natural’ as ‘material’ remains unsatisfactory.

The second, related option would be to retreat from materiality as a criterion for naturalness (ii), and assert that simply the subject matter of the natural sciences is what counts as natural in the proper sense. But this is not without pressing challenges either. Firstly, it is not very informative to explain naturalness through the subject matter of the sciences. The reason is that it seems equally difficult to provide a comprehensive and uncontroversial definition of the subject matter of the sciences. So by deferring the solution to the question what is natural to an assumption about the subject matter of the natural sciences seems unsatisfactory insofar it would explain the unclear through the equally unclear. Furthermore, this deferral would require the naturalist to determine which sciences are to be counted as authoritative or foundational for the subject matter of the natural sciences. And it is not a trivial or obvious matter where the line is to be drawn. Most naturalists would presumably concur that physics, chemistry and biology are indubitably natural sciences. But does, for example, psychology count as a natural science, too? If no, why is the line to be drawn between biology and psychology? If yes, would the social sciences also be counted among the natural sciences? It just seems that the deferral to the subject matter of the natural sciences incurs more problems than it solves, and hence would come at a serious explanatory price for the naturalist.

Secondly, it is in principle possible to apply scientific methods in order to *investigate* (not necessarily explain) the existence of supposedly ‘supernatural’ entities using the methods of the empirical sciences²⁹ – in such a case, the subject matter would include, albeit negatively, some supernatural concepts which the naturalist would want to have shunned. Ansgar Beckermann³⁰, for example, has compiled a few examples of cases where scientific methodology was used to investigate spontaneous recoveries in religious contexts and alleged ghost sightings, in an attempt to argue that the natural sciences can qua their methodological breadth be used to investigate those things which seem to fall outside their scope. Furthermore, it is doubtful whether transcendent aspects of religion can be naturalized at all for the following principled reason: if the natural sciences include

methodological atheism as a constitutive principle, the natural sciences can perhaps not be utilized to reject the existence of God and the transcendent at all. Methodological atheism itself does not assert the non-existence of God or the transcendent as such, but simply the irrelevance of such entities for scientific investigation. If this was not the case, then it would be impossible for any natural scientist to hold religious beliefs at all.

A third and last option is to explain understand the property of ‘being natural’ as ‘being causally efficacious’ (iii). Call this *causalism*. According to causalism, something is natural if and only if it can in principle be part of a causal chain, either causing something or being caused by something. Causalism means that the world is a causally closed, spatiotemporal structure in which everything is governed by causal laws. Causality on this picture is usually restricted to the specific notion of *causa efficiens*³¹. The concept of *causa efficiens* describes a thing’s disposition to enact change and to begin or halt motion. In a physicalist framework, this kind of causality is often (though not always) ultimately conceived in terms of *microbangings*: force transferred by one small material particle bumping into another. One entailment of conceiving as causality exclusively in terms of *causa efficiens* is that other phenomena like norms or reasons, for example, cannot truly cause anything or be caused by anything since the force of norms is not enacted by the transference of physical force.

The introduction of causalism begs the question about a potentially even more complicated concept: causality. Causality is one of the most highly contested concepts in metaphysics. Taking a reasoned stance on this debate transcends the scope and aims of this article. However, if the notion of causal efficacy is to be turned into a working criterion for naturalness, the scientific naturalist would have to provide an account of causal efficacy which is restrictive enough to render supposedly supernatural entities to be non-causal while simultaneously not qualifying, say, mental properties as supernatural. As such, the scientific naturalist would most likely be precluded from adopting a neo-Aristotelian notion of agent causality, but could be open to modal or regularity-based notions of causality. Further clarification pending, it seems not sufficiently clear how causal efficacy could be fleshed out to provide a notion of naturalness for the scientific naturalist.

A defender of scientific naturalism may object at this point³²: accounts of naturalizing religion (and other phenomena) can press on without having an unproblematic notion of naturalness, and therefore has not to respond to the worries I developed above. For example, the meta-scientific discipline of investigating and exposing pseudo-science operates successfully without providing a clear-cut definition of what counts as scientific. A full treatment of this issue is beyond the scope of this paper as it delves deep into questions most central to the philosophy of science. However, there are reasons the scientific naturalist should be concerned, after all, with the lack of a coherent notion of naturalness.

There are two main reasons why providing a clear-cut and *prima facie* unproblematic criterion of naturalness is important. First, there has been an active debate surrounding what stands in need of explanation in the sense of naturalization. Neo-Aristotelians and Wittgensteinians like McDowell³³ have criticized reductive approaches to normativity and the mind by questioning the need for ‘naturalizing’ such phenomena as they are already part of *second nature* insofar as human beings are genuinely natural (cf. section 4.). In good dialectical fashion, the scientific naturalist would need to provide a criterion of naturalness that proves the need for naturalization beyond an intuitive impulse. If the

scientific naturalist has enduring difficulties in doing this, as I have argued, then it seems that naturalization projects either need to provide further argument or ought to stop. An explication of what makes things natural seems to be mandatory on pain of potentially irrational practice in the sense of not providing good reasons for one's practice when asked for those reasons.

Secondly, taking up to example from pseudo-science, the case of one controversial example helps shed light on the current issue. The perhaps most relevant case of 'exposing' a discipline of pseudo-science is found in the enduring debate about the status of psychoanalysis as a science. Popper has most famously doubted that psychoanalysis can count as a science. One of the reasons is that psychoanalytic theories are not sufficiently exclusive in their explanatory and predictive power. This critique at least partially rests on explicating the criterion of what counts as scientific in order to argue that psychoanalysis does not qualify as a proper science. Popper bases this criticism on the criterion of falsification or falsifiability, with the result that psychoanalytic explanations are not properly falsifiable in the way, say, explanations in chemistry are. Thus, amending or rejecting the criterion of falsifiability as the mark of science thereby rationally allows one to argue for the classification of psychoanalysis as a science. Transposed to the current context of scientific naturalism, this example can demonstrate that even while the notion of what counts as scientific is equally as difficult as the notion of what counts as natural, any account of exposing a discipline as pseudo-science or, conversely, arguing for the naturalization of a certain phenomenon, requires one to be explicit about the reasoning of disqualifying one from being a science and the other from being natural. And if the operative criterion (in either case) is found to be defective, the project based on that criterion can reasonably be called into question. In this case, doubting that falsifiability is the mark of science does not completely discredit the endeavour of separating science from pseudo-science – it does call in question, however, what the proper mark of science is.

In summary, there is no readily available criterion of naturalness a scientific naturalist could easily adopt, further justification pending. Therefore, it is necessary to be at very least skeptical of any tacitly assumed conception of nature at play in any project of naturalizing religion just because it is not clear what it would even mean to make religion a natural thing of the kind scientific naturalists would like to countenance. It just seems that none of the three conceptions of nature a scientific naturalist may want to countenance is apt to provide a basis for the desired 'naturalization' of religion.

5. Religion as *nearly-natural* – an irenic proposal

The argument so far has been: naturalistic accounts of religion aim to naturalize religion by reducing or eliminating its seemingly problematic (transcendent? supernatural? non-natural?) aspects, thereby aiming to make religion fit an implicit conception of nature. Any notion of what is deemed supernatural has to answer about what is natural, however. I demonstrated that three common ways of conceiving of the concept of nature compatible with scientific naturalism which underwrites naturalization attempts fail. These three options turned out to be uninformative, circular, untenable or in need of further argument. As it stands, the scientific naturalist cannot comfortably rely on either of them. What is then to be done? In this section I motivate an irenic proposal: there is a form of

naturalism apart from scientific naturalism which captures the unproblematic appeal of naturalist notions while simultaneously proposing a conception of nature which avoids the problematic ontological restrictions of scientific naturalism.

Recent decades have seen sparse, yet steadfast resistance to the near-orthodoxy of scientific naturalism. This resistance largely consists of three heterodox conceptions of nature, namely three distinct non-reductive naturalisms: liberal naturalism³⁴, subject naturalism³⁵, and near-naturalism³⁶. In order to resolve the stalemate between the scientific naturalism and the seeming genuineness of religion, I am going to suggest that Baker's recently proposed idea of near-naturalism is to be adopted.

Scientific naturalism implies a strong criterion for something to be real: the world is just as the natural sciences describe it. Non-reductive naturalisms weaken this criterion. Liberal naturalism just asserts that everything, which the natural sciences deem to exist, is natural, with the addendum that normativity and the mind are part of nature, too, and do not require naturalization. Mario De Caro characterizes liberal naturalism as the conjunction of a liberalized ontological tenet and a liberalized methodological tenet³⁷.

Liberalized ontological aspect:	There are non-supernatural entities which are irreducible to and ontologically independent of entities which are solely explainable by science.
Liberalized metaphilosophical aspect:	There are issues of inquiry about which philosophy is not continuous with science.

It is important to point out that the liberalized ontological aspect of liberal naturalism states that the entities deemed problematic by the scientific naturalist are both natural (i.e. non-supernatural) and at the same time ontologically irreducible to entities amenable to natural-scientific inquiry. Different forms of liberal naturalism have been proposed under different titles³⁸.

Near-naturalism, on the other hand, is closely related to liberal naturalism and offers a second alternative to scientific naturalism. The crucial difference between liberal naturalism and near-naturalism is that near-naturalism brackets questions regarding religious entities and posits a "natural reality", which includes entities, properties and kinds that came into being through the processes of nature or through the intentions of human beings³⁹. In other words: near-naturalism remains quiet about at least certain things which the scientific naturalist conceives as 'supernatural', specifically God, and does not reject their existence *a priori*. Apart from this, near-naturalism retains the same metaphysical picture as liberal naturalism, firmly rooted in the manifest image (to use the Sellarsian term). In other words, the main difference between near-naturalism and liberal naturalism is that 'supernatural' is not a problematic term for Baker's near-naturalism as long as it pertains to God and related entities. This is in contrast to liberal naturalism's attempt to deem those entities as part of nature which scientific naturalism views as non-natural, and hence problematic. Unlike scientific naturalism and liberal naturalism, Baker's near-naturalism holds that entities deemed non-naturalistic are *ipso facto* not problematic or in further need of explanation.

Why might near-naturalism then be preferable for a naturalistically minded philosopher? The main reason is that, first, near-naturalism avoids the problems scientific naturalism faces while, secondly, simultaneously retaining the broadly naturalist intuition that may push some people to embrace scientific naturalism in the first place. So first,

the main challenge for the scientific naturalist is to demonstrate how certain things (e.g. normativity, the mind) can be thought of as a genuine part of the world by positing metaphysical relations to entities respected by the scientific naturalist (like sub-atomic particles). Near-naturalism avoids this issue in two steps: on the one hand, it drops the need to view only those things as natural which are amenable to natural-scientific inquiry; on the other hand, near-naturalism posits a quietism about those ‘supernatural’ entities relevant to religion, most notably God such that those entities are not taken to be in need of naturalization. Hence, near-naturalism allows religion as a social practice to be part of an ‘enlarged’ concept of nature while keeping quiet about the ‘supernatural’ aspects of religion. In this sense, near-naturalism aims to undercut projects of naturalizing religion by making them obsolete.

Secondly, adopting near-naturalism allows the naturalist to retain the main motivational pull behind adopting a naturalism of any kind in the first place. The main motivational pull behind scientific naturalism does not seem to consist in this or that specific formulation of how exactly philosophy is to be informed by natural sciences or how ontological restrictions are to be aligned with the natural sciences. It rather seems that doctrines like scientific naturalism are motivated by the desire to be ‘on board’ with the natural sciences, and not against them, given the enduring triumphant procession of the sciences over the last few hundred years and their enduring, undeniable importance and success. While reasonable, this desire to be ‘on board’ with the sciences does not have to be manifested in such all-too strict ontological convictions of scientific naturalism. Near-naturalism is equally on board with the sciences while avoiding overly problematic ontological restrictions. This helps to satisfy the need to be ‘on board’ with the sciences, yet lightens the problematic explanatory commitments a scientific naturalist has to undertake in reducing or eliminating entities deemed non-natural.

All things considered, it does not ‘cost’ the naturalist much to accept near-naturalism (or liberal naturalism for that matter). Accepting near-naturalism simply means to expand the extension of the concept of nature ever so slightly by accepting a few further existence statements about entities which are decidedly not supernatural in any substantive sense (e.g. statements like ‘normativity exists irreducibly’). This small ontological ‘pinch’ makes the naturalistically minded philosopher immune to the problems outlined above (most notably the placement problems); near-naturalism is therefore a vaccine worth taking for the naturalist. Simultaneously, near-naturalism does not require one to assert the existence of God – it merely demands a form of *quietism* about the existence of God, perhaps as a form of intellectual humility. Hence, even a liberally minded atheist or agnostic can accept near-naturalism without having to subscribe to theism.

Furthermore, near-naturalism seems to suffer from the same problem as scientific naturalism: Baker seems to presuppose a notion of ‘natural’ and ‘non-natural’ which is unprincipled. As argued above, the available notions to underwrite ‘natural’ as either ‘material’, ‘being the subject matter of the natural sciences’ or as ‘causally efficacious’ seem to fail. The concept of nature is among the most difficult in philosophy. However, near-naturalism is better equipped to deal with this difficulty than scientific naturalism. Scientific naturalism requires a clear delineation between what is natural and what is not natural to get the explanatory project (e.g. reduction, supervenience, or elimination) off the ground. As indicated (cf. section 3.), naturalization projects need to be able to cite a coherent criterion for naturalness which is also acceptable to critics (e.g. liberal

naturalists such as John McDowell or Mario De Caro). Baker's near-naturalism, on the other hand, can sidestep this issue since it asserts that, even on the most restrictive criterion for naturalness, whatever religious entities one counts as supernatural merit a quietist treatment rather than elimination or reduction. As such, near-naturalism is not dependent on a proper criterion for naturalness as the scientific naturalist is.

My push to replace scientific naturalism with something like Baker's near-naturalism is therefore an irenic proposal: Near-naturalism upholds a cheer for science, yet allows religion to be a genuine phenomenon not in need of reduction or elimination. In this sense, religion is natural in any reasonable sense on Baker's near-naturalist view insofar as it is compatible with scientific accounts of religious experience and religion as a social practice, yet resists the third sense of naturalizing religion, i.e. explaining away the transcendent. This mirrors the practice of many people who are, in fact, 'on board' with the sciences, yet hold religious beliefs. What is meant by being 'on board' with the sciences consists in giving credence and priority to science where it is due. This is best made clear with the help of a timely example: a growing number of people in the Western world is 'skeptical' of the efficacy of and need for certain potentially life-saving vaccinations. Such 'skeptics' may cite either debunked pseudo-scientific studies or examples relating to their own family history. Being 'on board' with the sciences in this context means accepting that whether or not one should vaccinate their children is answered by relying on the best science available, and not one's own 'personal' beliefs or tradition. This irenic proposal thus simply restates a very reasonable position: One can vaccinate one's children *and* take them to church without any contradiction or paradox.

6. So is religion natural after all?

I have argued that common attempts to naturalize religion are problematic insofar as it is not sufficiently substantiated what would or would not make religion fall under the conception of nature tacitly implied by scientific naturalism. I have suggested that, instead of searching for fixed criteria of naturalness, we can simply consider religion to be near-natural once we give up the unnecessarily strong ontological restrictions of scientific naturalism. Since scientific naturalism is fraught with problems regarding its assumed restricted notion of naturalness, the most reasonable course of action is to adopt a more inclusive conception of nature, making religion a part of it.

If there is anything to Richard Rorty's contentious, infamous assertion that philosophical disputes and ideas gain their relevance in relation to social, cultural and political issues of their time, then a scientific naturalist will simply not be convinced to jettison her convictions because there are theoretical problems plaguing her presuppositions (in this case, the conception of nature). Perhaps the scientific naturalist will stand her ground, come what may. What is instead needed, it seems, is to demonstrate that the problematic scientific naturalism can be surrendered without remorse because it does not necessarily require the naturalist to abandon her broader convictions, namely the resistance to a politically motivated theism. If the naturalist can hold on to these convictions, replacing the problematic scientific naturalism with a near-naturalism becomes very palatable. Scientific naturalism does face serious issues⁴⁰, yet by acknowledging the untenability of this doctrine one does not automatically hold that, say, creationism should be taught in schools. Being against scientific naturalism does not mean being for creationism being

taught in school, just like being anti-abortion does not imply thinking that abortions are a beautiful thing⁴¹. I have suggested that in this case we can have the best of two worlds: one can lessen the overly ambitious ontological restrictions of scientific naturalism while simultaneously be 'on board' with the sciences. The resulting near-naturalism is a naturalist conception that renders religion as part of nature⁴².

Notes

1. This neglects, of course, panentheistic religions about which some may argue that the entities they assume are not transcendent.
2. Colyvan, "Naturalizing Normativity," 307.
3. Dupré, *Disorder*, 36.
4. Rydenfelt, *Naturalism*, 115.
5. See note 3 above.
6. Williamson, "What is Naturalism?"
7. De Caro and Macarthur, "Introduction"; Rydenfelt, "Naturalism"; Tetens, "Der Naturalismus"; Moser & Yandell, "Farewell"; and Papineau, "Naturalism".
8. Price, *Expressivism*; or location problems; and Jackson, *Metaphysics*.
9. Note that the 'methodological aspect' is different from 'methodological atheism'. Methodological atheism simply states that science ought not make any explanatory reference to God, angels, transsubstantiation etc.
10. Quine, *Word and Object*, 209.
11. Sellars, *Empiricism*, §41.
12. De Caro, "Varieties," 369f.
13. James, *Pragmatism*; and Swinburne, *Existence*.
14. 'Schlechthinniger Abhängigkeit'; Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, §4.
15. Alston, *Perceiving*.
16. Dennett, *Breaking*.
17. Holt et al., "Religious Involvement."
18. Levin, "Religious Behavior."
19. Power, "Social Support."
20. Peri-Rotem, "Religion and Fertility."
21. McNamara, *Neuroscience*; and De Cruz and De Smedt, *Natural History*.
22. Atran and Henrich, *Evolution of Religion*.
23. Gould, "Exaptation."
24. Boyer, "Religious Thoughts"; and Atran, *In Gods*.
25. e.g. James, *Pragmatism*; Otto, *Das Heilige*; Schaeffler, *Phänomenologie*; and cf. also Spiegel, "Religion."
26. e.g. Taves, *Religious Experience*.
27. Sellars, "Philosophy."
28. Moser & Yandell, "A Farewell," 4.
29. It is, of course, very controversial what 'the method' or 'methods' of the empirical sciences amount to. I endorse a pluralism about the methods of the empirical sciences (following Fodor, *Special Sciences* and Dupré, *Disorder of Things*) and hence reject a reductive view according to which all sciences ultimately follow one methodology.
30. Beckermann, "Naturwissenschaft," 7f.
31. Aristotle, *Physics*, II 3, 194b29.
32. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for bringing this objection to my attention as well as providing the example from pseudo-science.
33. McDowell, *Mind and World*.
34. McDowell, *Mind and World*; and De Caro, "Two Forms."
35. Price, *Expressivism*.

36. Baker, *Naturalism*.
37. Mario De Caro, "Two Forms," 73f.
38. by Strawson, *Skepticism*; McDowell, *Mind and World*; Hornsby, *Simple*; Macarthur, "Naturalizing"; "Liberal Naturalism"; Stroud, "Charm"; De Caro and Voltolini, "Possible"; and De Caro, "Beyond Scientism."
39. Baker, "Idea," 348.
40. Spiegel, "Naturalismus."
41. To use an example by Clifford Geertz, see Geertz, "Anti-Anti Relativism."
42. I am indebted to Simon Schüz and Winfried Lücke as well as three anonymous referees for helpful comments on earlier versions.

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