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J. Wesley Robbins

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IS NATURALISM IRRATIONAL?

J. Wesley Robbins

Alvin Plantinga's epistemological argument in the last chapter of *Warrant and Proper Function*, to the effect that it is self-defeatingly irrational to believe the combination of naturalism and evolutionary theory, is seriously flawed. It presupposes that beliefs are subjective states intrinsically specifiable without reference to what is going on in the world around their holders. Evolutionary naturalists, most notably pragmatists, who reject that conception of beliefs in favor of a holistic one, are untouched by Plantinga's argument.

Alvin Plantinga titles the closing chapter of his book *Warrant and Proper Function* "Is Naturalism Irrational?"¹ He answers that it is. More precisely, he claims that anyone who is aware of the epistemological argument that he presents in this chapter has an unavoidable reason to doubt the combination of naturalism (according to which there is no God as conceived of in traditional theism) and evolutionary theory (according to which our cognitive capabilities are the products of blind processes operating on genetic variations). But then, he says, anyone who still accepts these propositions is irrational because it is irrational to accept a belief for which one knows there are unavoidable reasons to doubt.

More generally, Plantinga suggests that people who believe in naturalism and evolutionary theory are propelled in the direction of skepticism by those very beliefs. Whereas theists, in contrast, supposedly have no such skeptical trajectory built into their beliefs. There is nothing in what theists believe, so Plantinga says, that would lead them to doubt either that our cognitive capacities are for apprehending truth or that by and large they do so.

I believe in both naturalism and evolution as Plantinga describes them. I am also aware of his epistemological argument, having heard him present a version of it and having discussed it with him during a series of meetings with philosophy students and faculty at Indiana University South Bend. I am, thus, a prime candidate for his charge of irrationality.

Nonetheless, I demur. Plantinga's epistemological argument poses a problem, at most, only for a certain sort of evolutionary naturalist. There is another sort to whom it does not apply at all.

The skeptical trajectory that Plantinga attributes to evolutionary naturalism actually is a function of the philosophical conception of beliefs as subjective states that are intrinsically specifiable without reference to what is going on



in the rest of the world. This is a conception which Plantinga shares with some, but not all, evolutionary naturalists. The cure for skeptical doubts about the reliability of our cognitive capabilities is to resist this conception of what beliefs are, not to replace naturalism with theism, as Plantinga suggests. Taking this cure requires only that one repudiate claims, made in the name of the epistemic primacy of the subjective, that the philosophical conception of beliefs is entitled to priority over our common sense notion of beliefs as holistic states that are specifiable only in connection with their subject's surroundings.

This is the tack that pragmatists from Peirce to Rorty take in their accounts of human intelligence. Influenced by Darwin, pragmatists construe beliefs as transactional states between organisms and their environment which, like any other organic state understood in evolutionary terms, can only be specified and understood with reference to their possessor's surroundings. The result is a version of evolutionary naturalism that is untouched by Plantinga's epistemological argument.

Plantinga puts his argument in terms of the probability of the proposition that our cognitive capabilities are reliable, and thus produce largely true beliefs, given naturalism, a theory of evolution, and a list of those capabilities. In order to ascertain this probability, he sketches a series of five scenarios featuring hypothetical creatures whose cognitive capabilities were formed by blindly operating evolutionary forces. Plantinga's hypothetical creatures have beliefs. But, their beliefs are respectively (1) not causally connected with their behavior at all; (2) causally connected with their behavior, but only as effects of it or of other proximate causes; (3) causally connected with their behavior, but only in virtue of the beliefs' physical realization and not their content; (4) causally connected with their behavior in virtue of both physical realization and content, but maladaptive; and (5) causally connected and adaptive in systems, indefinitely many different ones of which can produce the same behavior.

Plantinga assigns a probability to the proposition that these creatures' cognitive capabilities are reliable, and thus their beliefs largely true, for each of these possibilities. The probability that their cognitive capabilities are reliable, and their beliefs largely true, overall, given naturalism and evolutionary theory, then, is the combination of the probabilities for each of these possibilities. This latter probability, Plantinga claims, is either low or unknown.

Since, Plantinga argues, we might be the creatures in these scenarios, the probability that our cognitive capabilities are reliable and that our beliefs are largely true, given naturalism and evolutionary theory, is also either low or unknown. Thus, evolutionary naturalists must admit that, for all that we know about the reliability of our cognitive capabilities, any belief of ours stands a good chance of being false, including our beliefs in naturalism and evolu-

tionary theory, respectively. Evolutionary naturalism, Plantinga concludes, is self-defeating. Its adherents are caught in the epistemologically irrational circle of accepting beliefs about the truth of which they have reason to be doubtful by their own lights.

Plantinga wants his evolutionary naturalist opponents to focus with him on the probabilities of the five possibilities that he outlines, accepting without question the belief-entities that figure in those scenarios. I want, instead, to focus on the belief-entities that Plantinga ascribes to his hypothetical creatures and, by extension, to us. It is a crucial presupposition for all five of Plantinga's scenarios that beliefs, and their experiential grounds, are specifiable intrinsically, without reference to what is going on in the world around whomever holds the belief. Consequently, it is possible for someone's beliefs and what is going on in the world around them to vary in complete independence of one another and thus for their beliefs to be largely and wildly false.

That certainly is not the case with the beliefs that we commonly ascribe to one another. Nor is it how people who are influenced by Darwinian biology view beliefs. When we ascribe beliefs to one another, we typically do so by correlating what we say and do with what is going on in the surrounding environment. Pragmatists, influenced by Darwin, follow the same course. Human intelligence and its products, including beliefs, are treated as states that are located in causal interactions between organisms and their surrounding environment, as habits of action, for example.

It is not possible in either instance, whether viewed commonsensically or in Darwinian terms, for beliefs to vary independently of their subject's surroundings, and thus be largely false, in the ways that Plantinga's scenarios presuppose. Consequently, for those of us who view beliefs in this holistic way, the scenarios over which the probabilities that Plantinga wants to talk about range are not even possibilities in the first place and thus pose no epistemological problem worth taking seriously.

Plantinga claims that the entities he ascribes to his hypothetical creatures are appropriate for a critique of naturalism because they are the very things that are true or false. But, that all depends. They are the things that philosophers since Descartes, who posit the independent knowability of subjective states, insist on calling true or false. They are not the things that we consider to be true or false in our day-to-day dealings with one another, where the philosophical posit of independently knowable subjective states plays no role. Nor are they the things that philosophers who look at human intelligence in Darwinian terms, and in whose accounts that posit also plays no role, consider to be true or false. It is sheer bravado on Plantinga's part to claim that naturalists have no alternative but to accept his notion of beliefs as intrinsic states.

Consequently, the fact, if it is a fact, that the likelihood of Plantinga's hypothetical creatures' "beliefs" being largely true is either low or unknown

is supremely irrelevant to questions about the reliability of our cognitive capabilities and the truth or falsity of our beliefs. This is not because what those poor creatures believe is so very different from what we believe. It is because they don't have beliefs. Whatever may be the case about the variation of their intrinsically specifiable states from their environment, that simply does not translate over to the holistically specifiable states that we ascribe to one another in our dealings with fellow humans and other animals.

Plantinga's epistemological argument against naturalism is severely limited in its scope to only those naturalists who happen to agree with him that beliefs are intrinsically specifiable states. There are such naturalists. Willard van Orman Quine, for example, treats beliefs as posits based on the irradiations of one's nerve endings, and the latter, since it is one's ultimate evidence, as specifiable independently of what is going on in the surrounding world.

But there are other naturalists who part company with modern philosophical epistemology in this respect. Donald Davidson and Richard Rorty, for example, both reject what Davidson calls the dualism of scheme and content and with it the whole idea that the ultimate evidence for one's beliefs, along with the beliefs themselves, are intrinsically specifiable without reference to their subject's surroundings. Plantinga's epistemological argument doesn't even touch naturalists of this latter sort.

Plantinga's argument has neither the power nor the scope that he supposes it to have. I remain a believer in both naturalism and evolutionary theory, having heard and reflected on Plantinga's epistemological argument. On my view of beliefs, none of his scenarios in which "beliefs" are liable to be completely at variance with what is going on in the world around their holder, and thus largely false, is even possible in the first place.

When I consider the usefulness of beliefs holistically conceived for predicting behavior in everyday, and scientific, contexts and for avoiding philosophical problems about knowledge of the external world, I am not even tempted to take Plantinga's scenarios or his labyrinthine musings about their likelihood seriously. Consequently, my acceptance of evolutionary naturalism flies in the face of no considerations that have any intellectual purchase for me, or that I am under any epistemic obligation to accept, Plantinga to the contrary notwithstanding.

There are two morals to this story. First, starting with the intrinsic specifiability and thus the independent knowability of subjective states, including beliefs, leads inexorably to skepticism about the external world regardless, whether one is a theist or a devotee of the Great Pumpkin. Second, epistemology is a poor choice of subject matters in terms of which to weigh the respective merits of naturalism and theism.

NOTES

1. Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).