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RELIGIOUS NATURALISM AND NATURALIZING MORALITY

by Ursula Goodenough

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Abstract. I first offer some reflections on the term “religious naturalism.” I then outline how moral thought might be configured in the context of religious naturalism. It is proposed that the goal of morality is to generate a flourishing community, and that humans negotiate their social interactions using moral capacities that are cultivated in the context of culture. Six such capacities are considered: strategic reciprocity, humaneness, fair-mindedness, courage, reverence, and mindfulness. Moral capacities are contrasted with moral susceptibilities, fueled by self-interest and brought to the fore in times of stress and humiliation.

This essay will be in two parts. I will first respond to Jerome Stone’s query as to the nature of religious naturalism. This is followed by the text of my presentation in the “Religious Naturalism Today” session at the 2001 AAR meeting in Denver.

RELIGIOUS NATURALISM

Naturalism, as Stone reminds us, is a philosophical position. In this intellectual lineage, religious naturalism then becomes a theological position. My colleagues in this session, being theologians, have largely responded in this vein, considering such questions as how concepts of God can or cannot be rendered coherent within such philosophical boundaries.

Unaware of this usage, I adopted the term religious naturalism in my book, *The Sacred Depths of Nature* (Goodenough, 1998), to best describe its overall perspective. That perspective does not, however, include much theology. I articulate a Covenant with Mystery in the presence of apparently unanswerable questions, such as why is there anything at all rather than nothing, and then proceed to describe my non-theistic religious orientation in the natural and aesthetic world.

The wild card here seems to be the adjective religious. As I have developed elsewhere (Goodenough, 2001), and others have certainly noted as well, religions can be said to have three strands: theological, dealing with God concepts, Meaning, Purpose; spiritual, dealing with subjective experiences of the sacred; and moral, dealing with how best to be good. A mature religious tradition interweaves these in the context of a unifying story or Myth, but each can nonetheless be teased out and analyzed separately.

The religious naturalism of my book, therefore, might more accurately be described as spiritual naturalism; I tell of our scientific understandings of who we are and how we got here, and I respond with such sensibilities as belonging, communion, gratitude, humility, assent, and awe. It follows that we might as well speak of theological naturalism and, awkwardly, moral naturalism or, less awkwardly, ethical naturalism, the term used by Arnhart (1998). Such distinctions may be useful in discourse, but I would

suggest that they not be belabored and that all of us voicing religious responses in a naturalistic framework, be they theological, spiritual, or moral, feel comfortable using the term religious naturalism to describe the overall project.

Many traditions have, of course, responded to nature with deep reverence and gratitude, an orientation that is often called pantheism. Paul Harrison (1999) offers a lucid historical summary of this religious perspective, and goes on to propose the term “scientific pantheism” to describe his deeply felt pantheistic orientation in the context of our current scientific understandings of nature. Phillip Hefner has on occasion referred to his orientation as “Christian naturalism.” If the overall concept of religious naturalism proves to be a fertile one, then it will be expected to generate many manifestations with many names.

There is another matter of terminology to consider here, which is that “naturalism” and “naturalist” have quite different connotations: whereas the pragmatist can be said to espouse pragmatism and the empiricist empiricism, the naturalist is not necessarily someone who espouses the philosophical position of naturalism. Rather, we think of the naturalist, often quite romantically, as someone at home in the natural world, and a person who espouses philosophical naturalism is more likely to be described as a (radical) materialist. “Materialist,” however, carries a particularly large amount of baggage, from anti-communist propaganda to consumerism to the cold and calculating. To call oneself a “religious materialist” sounds at best peculiar, whereas “religious naturalist” invokes our positive valence towards the naturalist, including the naturalist in each of our selves.

Whether, then, the religious naturalist in fact espouses philosophical naturalism or has developed some other orientation vis à vis questions of Ultimacy becomes, to my mind, of secondary importance. That is, I see no inherent conflict between calling oneself a religious naturalist and experiencing some transcendent relationship with God, be it a quite abstract God or a traditional personal God. These relationships, I have discovered in conversations with persons of faith, are often not buttressed by a great deal of theological infrastructure; they are often ineffable. Ineffability is by definition a difficult starting point for theological discussion, even as theologians are keenly aware that it steeps the religious life; nevertheless, it characterizes the theism of many persons who consider themselves theistic religious naturalists. I would regard as unnecessarily constrained a definition of religious naturalism that disallows theistic concepts considered incompatible with philosophical naturalism.

So, returning to the three-stranded view of religion: If we say that religious naturalists can hold many theological orientations, including those offered here by my colleagues, and if we say that spiritual naturalism has been invoked by a long lineage of persons who hold in reverence the splendor that materiality hath wrought, including the splendor of our evolutionary history and the human spirit, then we are left with the third facet of religion: morality. My current work is focused on the question of how one might consider morality in the context of our scientific understanding of nature. It is proving to be a very challenging question to work with, but here is where I am coming out so far. It is important to state at the outset that after writing this article I was introduced to Arnhart’s excellent book, *Darwinian Natural Right* (1998), which articulates many of the ideas herein and gives a thorough and thoughtful account of the intellectual history of ethical naturalism.

MORALITY IN RELIGIOUS NATURALISM

Any religious orientation worth talking about is also concerned with morality. . . As theologian John Haught recently remarked (Haught, 2001): “I would say that in this recent flurry of news about brain and religion, what is often left out is that religion means much more than a state of mind or an ecstatic or mystical mood. It’s a commitment over a lifetime to what a person considers to be good.”

So how do we talk about moral thought and moral action as religious naturalists? What do we say to our children about how best to be good, and on what basis do we ground what we say?

My starting premise, working with understandings developed by Foot (2001), Hursthouse (1999) Woodruff (2001), and their school of contemporary ethicists, is that morality describes that which allows humans to flourish in community. And given the relentlessly social context of our lineage, it is vital that we generate flourishing communities.

Most organisms have no mandate to flourish in community. For most organisms, their purpose can be said to survive to produce offspring. To say that the purpose of life is to survive to produce offspring is, for some, an uninspiring and perhaps even bleak and depressing notion. For others of us, however, it is freighted with wonder and meaning. That there is life at all, that it is so poignantly purposive, is foundational to the matrix of my own religious life.

That being said, we in fact need not use such a minimalist word as “survive”. For the mandate is not so much to survive as to flourish. An organism that manages to eke out survival and reproduction in a given ecosystem is far less likely to be the ancestor of a large lineage than an organism that flourishes and produces flourishing progeny in that ecosystem. “Flourishing” is not a synonym for that old misunderstanding of “fittest”. To flourish is to be well adapted to the particular environmental circumstance in which one finds oneself, to be healthy and resilient and resourceful. We can also introduce here the word “good.” A flourishing bacterium or tree or mouse can be said to be a good bacterium or tree or mouse. A good willow maximizes the potential for willowness in all its manifestations: bark quality, disease resistance, pollen production, and so on.

So to return to morality. Most organisms, like bacteria and willows and mice, carry out their purpose – to flourish – with adaptive traits and behaviors, but their biological mandate is carried out in the context of self-interest. The project is an individual project or, in the case of sexual organisms, individuals and their genetic offspring who require some sort of nurture (seed coats, egg shells, nests, milk).

Social animals like ourselves (and unlike the social insects¹) remain self-interested, but we also cooperate in various vital activities such as food acquisition or protection from predators. Therefore, the mandate is both to flourish as an individual and to flourish in community. A good wolf is a flourishing animal and a member of a flourishing pack; he is genetically scripted both to take care of his own needs and to cooperate with others in the hunt. A good schooling fish participates in schooling; a good bird joins others in chasing off the circling hawk. In flourishing social lineages, adaptive genetic scripts navigate the tensions between self-interest and group cooperation.

Genetic scripts can specify “instinctive” behaviors, such as schooling, but they can also specify the capacity to learn adaptive behaviors. That is, the evolutionary process does not “care” whether behavior is hardwired or learned; it only “cares” about an adaptive outcome. For primates, whose brains undergo profound transitions from immaturity to maturity, much of what is inherited is in the form of capacities. Of interest to us here are capacities for morality, capacities that, when cultivated, allow the individual to flourish in community. These capacities are cultivated in the context of learning, that is, in the context of culture, and religious traditions have served as important cultural venues for moral education throughout human history.

The human who cultivates his or her moral capacities can be said to be a good human. But it is of course not that simple. Always lurking in the wings of our nature are what we can call moral susceptibilities, susceptibilities that emanate from the robust self-interest that we also bring to the project of being alive.

Today I will briefly consider six moral capacities that undergird our ability to flourish in human community, namely, strategic reciprocity, humaneness, fair-mindedness, courage, reverence, and mindfulness. I will argue that these have arisen during our evolutionary history and have acquired vast additional import and complexity in the context of our human mentality, a mentality that allows us to engage in symbolic language and hence to formulate abstractions. These moral capacities stand in tension with our susceptibilities to greed, hubris, self-absorption, fearfulness, xenophobia, and prejudice, behaviors that overwhelm us in the face of prolonged stress when we hunker down and engage not in community but in self-interested survival patterns, the default behavior of all creatures¹.

STRATEGIC RECIPROCITY

We can begin with the capacity for strategic reciprocity, which is a salient behavior in social primates and also, curiously, in vampire bats, but undescribed in other social animals. Strategic reciprocity, also known as reciprocal altruism, refers to behavior that we can summarize as “I’ll scratch your back if you scratch mine.” Self-interest remains paramount – my back will be scratched, my coat will be groomed, my status in the social hierarchy will be protected – and in exchange I will groom you and form an alliance to protect your social status. The cultivation of strategic reciprocity entails elaborate acts of cognition – I must remember who reciprocates and who cheats or defects, I must burnish my reputation for being a cooperator, and so on – and humans are astoundingly good at it. Our economic, political, and legal systems are heavily grounded in strategic reciprocity, and it is of vast importance in structuring communities that flourish. But in the end, strategic reciprocity is a game, a calculus, and indeed computers can be programmed to be astoundingly good at it as well. After we finish teaching our children that they should be good at strategic reciprocity if they are to flourish in community, it feels like we still have much left to say to them about morality.

THE VIRTUES

So we can next turn to four moral capacities which, when cultivated, acquire the status we often call virtues. Two of these we can designate as pro-social or valenced virtues in the sense that their cultivation assures the flourishing of community. The first is humaneness, which generates such responses as compassion, agape, benevolence,

and charity, and the second is fair-mindedness, which generates such responses as justice, honesty, and trustworthiness. Primatologists have documented manifestations of these traits in nonhuman primates, who are observed to engage in consolation, in reconciliation, and in affection for one another and for one another's offspring. I also find most attractive the thesis, argued by Geoffrey Miller in his book *The Mating Mind* (2000), that just as we favor humaneness and fair-mindedness in our choice of mates, so did both capacities come to be reinforced by sexual selection during the 5 million years of hominid evolution. Importantly, our ability to form abstract concepts, which develops with maturation and education, allows us to enlarge these capacities such that we come to extend humaneness and fair-mindedness to other human groups, thereby tempering our susceptibility to xenophobia, and then as well to other species, to ecosystems, to the planet itself. We come to care about suffering and injustice in all its manifestations. There are no more promising antidotes than these for our susceptibilities to greed and hubris.

The other two cardinal virtues – courage and reverence – are more complicated. First let's consider what they are.

When we speak of courage, as opposed to reflexive acts of self-defense or defense of kin, we are speaking of the capacity to hold a large idea, a large passion, as being more important than one's own safety. So – the mountain climber is courageous because conquering the mountain trumps her fear of falling; Martin Luther was courageous because his religious conviction trumped his fear of papal authority. Courage, I believe, is essential to human creativity: the passion to break new ground, solve a problem, write a poem, is fueled by courage and defeated by fearfulness.

When we speak of reverence, which is celebrated in a new book of that title by philosopher Paul Woodruff (2001), we are speaking of the capacity to carry the sense that there are entities larger than the human being, and hence larger than the self, to which one accords awe and gratitude and to which one develops obligation and commitment. Theistic persons traditionally offer reverence towards a supernatural deity or deities, whereas the nontheistic religious naturalist locates reverence in the natural world, the material world, in all its wondrous manifestations and evolutionary history. We speak of reverent family life, reverent leadership, reverent community. Reverence, in whatever context, endows us with humility and hence defeats our susceptibility to self-absorption.

The reason that courage and reverence are complicated virtues is that they are inherently neutral, inherently unvalenced. Courage can be displayed in the name of any ideal, and reverence can be held for any ideal, as we so tragically witnessed on Sept. 11. Courage and reverence can make bounteous contributions to the flourishing of community, but they can also sabotage community and hijack the good.

This dilemma brings me to the final moral capacity on my list, the capacity for mindfulness, which has been considered at length in a recent essay in *Zygon* co-authored with Paul Woodruff (2001). The paragraphs below are taken from that essay.

MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness represents the human capacity to take in understandings of reality without the distortions introduced by need, bias, and prejudice. Rigidity, dogmatism, and

fundamentalism are antonyms to mindfulness -- mindfulness is constantly evolving, ready for surprise.

Wisdom and knowledge are entailed by mindfulness, but mindfulness demands more of us. It is knowledge or wisdom that pulls the mind-and-heart of the knower towards a connection with the way things are in all their exciting particularity. You cannot be mindful and know things in a purely academic way; as you become mindful of something, your feelings and your behavior towards it are transformed.

Mindfulness is a central concept in Buddhism, where it is lifted up both as a mental state and as a practice. The mindful person, Buddhism tells us, assumes the attitude of pure observation, freed from all false views, and apprehends a reality that is not only objective but also becomes subjective. The mindful person really really sees.

Mindfulness is also described as a path, a work in progress, rather than an endpoint or achievement. This is because the mindful person is prepared to perceive each particular situation in its uniqueness and respond to it appropriately.

In the broadest and deepest sense, the “naturalism” part of religious naturalism is all about mindfulness. Scientists, trained in a particular kind of “pure observation,” have provisioned us with stunning understandings of the natural world, and these understandings then provision the religious naturalist with countless substrates for mindful apprehension. So, for example, mindfulness of the body is no longer just about breathing and walking as in the original Buddhist practice; we are now able to contemplate as well the molecular and genetic underpinnings of the body and its evolution from simpler forms.

The religious naturalist is called to be mindful of the following understandings from biology:

- Mindful of our place in the scheme of things
- Mindful that life evolved, that humans are primates
- Mindful of the dynamics of molecular life and its emergent properties
- Mindful of the fragility of life and its ecosystems
- Mindful that life and the planet are wildly improbable
- Mindful that all of life is interconnected
- Mindful of the uniqueness of each creature
- Mindful of future generations

And from psychology and anthropology:

- Mindful that our thoughts and feelings are neural

- Mindful of the evolutionary continuity between our minds and other animals' minds
- Mindful of human diversity, including diversity of temperament
- Mindful of human creativity and its wondrous manifestations
- Mindful of the influence of ethnic and family roots and tribal connection
- Mindful that children best flourish when loved and nurtured
- Mindful of the human need for personal wholeness and social coherence

Similar lists can be drawn from the physical sciences and the earth sciences, from cultural history and imaginative literature, and so on. All such lists are expected to be incomplete and open-ended. They are offered to remind us of what is at stake.

And now, a central claim. I would suggest that virtues, and particularly the neutral virtues, will generate flourishing communities only to the extent that they are mindful virtues. Mindfulness is a precondition for virtue and hence for morality, or, rather, the cultivation of mindfulness and the cultivation of virtue must go together as an essential collaboration if we are to attain moral maturity. The attacks of September 11 may have been executed in the name of reverence and courage, but it was neither mindful reverence nor mindful courage.

MORAL SUSECPTIBILITIES

We can conclude by circling back to our moral susceptibilities. How do we go about stacking the decks of our psyches, and our children's psyches, so that mindfulness trumps fundamentalism, mindful courage trumps fearfulness, humaneness trumps hubris and xenophobia, fair-mindedness trumps greed, and mindful reverence trumps self-absorption?

One way to stack the deck is through mindful moral education. From my perspective, this is robustly feasible in the context of religious naturalism. Nor is the project defeated by the naturalistic fallacy: our "Is" is that we are social animals; our "Ought" is that we be good social animals. Importantly, religious naturalists are not constrained to describing and celebrating moral concepts in the context of evolutionary biology alone. The moral capacities and susceptibilities of which I speak are, needless to say, embedded in the stories and rituals of all the major traditions – indeed, their universality is yet another testimonial to their centrality to human nature – and there are many ways to convey the rich meanings of these traditions to ourselves and our children in naturalistic contexts.

A second way to stack the deck, obviously, is to ameliorate the conditions wherein humans are physically or emotionally impoverished, threatened, defeated, abused, humiliated, lonely, and insecure. Such conditions of prolonged stress induce us to hunker down and render us vulnerable to fundamentalisms that promise deliverance.

HOPE

Hope is another one of those complicated human capacities, complicated in that it can so often be elicited by false promise. But mindful hope, if we can speak of such a thing, is perhaps what we most need in these times of ours.

FOOTNOTE

¹ The wasps and ants are an informative exception. An ant colony can be analogized to a multicellular organism, such as a human, where individual worker ants are, to a first approximation, the equivalent of individual somatic cells. The ants, and the cells, are genetically identical and individually sterile; their mandate is to cooperate in ensuring the viability and reproductive success of the queen/germ line. A self-interested cell in a human, focused only on its own replication, might generate a malignancy, but not another human. A human has far more tenuous obligations to cooperate with other humans in her/his community than a cell (or ant) to cooperate with other cells (ants): human self-interest has not been discarded in the name of sociality.

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