

ENCOUNTERING NATURALISM

A Worldview and Its Uses



Thomas W. Clark

Center for Naturalism

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Introduction & Overview

Most of us have a worldview – a set of beliefs about what exists, how reality is organized, and how we fit into it. Whether explicit or not, a worldview helps to shape our goals and actions; it’s an overarching cognitive framework that helps to make sense of things, practically, ethically and existentially.

The aim of this short book is to introduce you to the science-based worldview known as naturalism. If you’re interested in the big questions of human nature, human purposes and how we might best flourish here on Earth, naturalism is worth exploring.

In a nutshell, the naturalism I’ll present holds that there is a single, natural, physical world in which we are completely included. There isn’t a separate supernatural or immaterial realm and there’s nothing supernatural or immaterial about us. Acknowledging this gives us power and self-acceptance, while keeping us compassionate, unself-righteous and open to profound experiences of meaning and connection.

Naturalism takes science, and more broadly a rational, evidence-based empiricism, as the most reliable means for discovering what exists. If we stick with science, the world is united in our understanding, not divided into the natural versus the supernatural. Science shows that each and every aspect of a human being comes from and is completely joined to the natural world, which encompasses culture as well as biology.

This naturalistic view of ourselves is of course very different from traditional religious or supernatural understandings. For example, we don't have non-physical souls that carry out our mental operations and that survive after death. Instead, the material, mortal brain is what feels, thinks and chooses. Further, scientific findings increasingly suggest that we are fully determined by our environment and genetic endowment to become who we are, and act as we do. Although we are rational agents that make real choices and have real freedoms, we don't have free will that's independent of causality. Rather, our character, choices and behavior are traceable to factors that precede and surround us in time and space. As individuals and as social beings we are completely integrated into the unfolding of the universe in all its amazing complexity.

Because it challenges the traditional dualism of body vs. soul, and because it denies the existence of any sort of supernatural being or realm (god, devil, heaven, hell, or New Age Shangri-la), naturalism upends much Western conventional wisdom about human nature and existence. It therefore has profound implications for our personal lives, for social and planetary concerns, and for the existential questions ordinarily addressed by faith-based religions. Seeing that we're fully caused, naturalism highlights our intimate connection with the world: we are completely at home in the cosmos. It also leads to a compassionate understanding of human faults and virtues, and gives us more control over ourselves and our circumstances. The watchwords of the naturalism described here are thus *connection*, *compassion*, and *control*.

By understanding the causal factors that shape us and our lives – factors such as genetic endowment, upbringing and social environments – naturalism draws attention to *what works* in getting what we want. This increases individual self-efficacy and supports effective social policies in areas such as criminal and social justice, behavioral

health and the environment. Further, since we understand we aren't the ultimate originators of ourselves or our behavior, we can't take ultimate credit or blame for who we are and what we do. This reduces unwarranted feelings of moral superiority, pride, shame and guilt, while encouraging self-acceptance. And since we see *others* as fully caused, for instance substance abusers, criminal offenders, the destitute and homeless, we might become less blaming, less punitive, and more empathetic and understanding. People don't create themselves, so responsibility for their character and behavior isn't ultimately theirs, but is distributed over the many factors that shaped them. Were we given their environmental and genetic lot in life, we would have become who they are and acted as they did: *there but for circumstances go I*. This challenges head-on the radical individualism of Western culture that imagines we are literally self-made. It also grounds a naturalistic ethics of compassion that guides personal behavior and motivates progressive social policy. This is an unapologetically humanistic naturalism.

The naturalistic worldview has roots going back to the Buddha and ancient Greeks, and a recent history that includes some of our most celebrated scientists and thinkers. It is the philosophical heart of movements such as the Enlightenment, secular humanism and freethought, and is the cognitive framework taken for granted by many scientists and philosophers. But for the most part naturalism has not been explicitly named as the comprehensive worldview that it is. Nor have its basic elements and implications been described in ordinary language for a wider audience, some of whom might find it a plausible and effective alternative to faith-based worldviews. That said, I recommend Richard Carrier's book, *Sense and Goodness Without God*, as a comprehensive defense of naturalism for the philosophically inclined. For other recommended readings, see Appendix C.

Thus far, public awareness of naturalism has been driven mostly by debates about atheism and atheists, the faults and virtues of faith-based religion, and whether we can have meaning and morality without god (we can, I will argue). But the denial of god is just one naturalistic conclusion we reach if we take an evidence-based view of the world. A thorough-going naturalism is much more than the negative thesis of atheism, so in what follows I won't spend much time debunking deities. Others such as Julian Baggini, Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and Victor Stenger have explored this territory to good effect; see their books listed in Appendix C. My goal here is to explain naturalism as a positive, comprehensive worldview in which god, among other supernatural phenomena, plays no role.

This book, then, aims to advance in short compass the public understanding and appreciation of naturalism. I'll sketch the basis for naturalism, summarize its conclusions about the world and ourselves, and cover its psychological, practical, ethical, and existential consequences. The discussion in many cases is cursory, but I hope suggestive of the resources naturalism has to offer. I strongly recommend perusing Appendix A if you want further reassurances on common concerns about naturalism (it also gives considerably more detail on some issues), while Appendix B provides quotes from well known thinkers and statesmen who were skeptical about free will. For those wanting to explore naturalism further, Appendix C lists websites and further readings that go into far greater depth than is possible here. I've also put web links at the end of some chapter sections which direct you to online articles on specific topics, most of which are at Naturalism.Org.

I hope that this brief encounter with naturalism will prove useful and inspiring to you. Nature, it turns out, is enough.

Praise for ENCOUNTERING NATURALISM

“This little book takes all those deep questions about life, meaning, purpose and death, and shows how you don’t need religion to make sense of them, indeed how the naturalist way of thinking about the deepest issues is kinder and truer.” – Dr. Susan Blackmore, author of *The Meme Machine* and *Conversations on Consciousness*.

“Packed with insights about naturalism and its implications for social and political issues. A must read for anyone wanting a fuller and deeper understanding of this important philosophical perspective.” – Dr. William R. Murry, author of *Reason and Reverence: Religious Humanism for the 21st Century*.

“A wonderfully readable plunge deep into the implications of a thorough going naturalism. The naturalistic surface, with its rejection of miracles and mysteries, is well-mapped; but for anyone who wishes to explore the questions, perils, opportunities, and vistas far beneath that surface, there is no better or more engaging guide than Thomas W. Clark.” – Dr. Bruce Waller, author of *The Natural Selection of Autonomy*.

Encountering Naturalism explores the science-based worldview known as naturalism – a comprehensive and fulfilling alternative to faith-based religion and other varieties of dualism.

Taking empirical science as the route to reliable knowledge, naturalism holds that we inhabit a single, natural world; there is no separate supernatural realm. We are fully physical beings whose origins lie in cosmic and biological evolution. We are entirely at home in the universe.

By understanding and accepting our complete connection to the natural world, naturalism provides a secure foundation for human flourishing – an effective basis for achieving our purposes and addressing our deepest concerns. We don’t need belief in the supernatural to sustain us.

Nature, it turns out, is enough.

Thomas W. Clark is founder and director of the Center for Naturalism and creator of Naturalism.Org.

www.centerfornaturalism.org
www.naturalism.org
info@naturalism.org

