

The «Morbid Fear of the Subjective». Privateness and Objectivity in Mid-twentieth Century American Naturalism.

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1 Introduction

It is clear: there was a geological time in which human experience did not exist and there will be a future age in which it will disappear. Besides this perpetual evidence - asserted by Marvin Farber in '49 - there is another one: «experience is in nature and not nature in experience».¹ There is a brutal fact to consider when it comes to experience: the independence of the world with respect to the knower.²

In the Forties, the Husserlian phenomenological tradition was beginning to take its first steps in the U.S. (thanks to Farber), but the concern was already clear: naturalism was the only ground to its possible absorption. Phenomenology had to be immediately 'naturalized' to prevent in advance every possible idealistic shift, or worse, a drift towards metaphysics. Its guidelines would permit no allowances: «experience is in nature and not nature in experience».

In the United States things had been going on like that for some decades. That ontological realism was a sort of precondition of philosophical discourse had been more or less clear to the most distinguished members of its Academies since the beginning of the century. Roy Wood Sellars, for example, in a key-text of the first American naturalism (*Evolutionary Naturalism*, 1922), had stated it in capital letters:

The objects of knowledge do not depend for either their being or nature upon our knowledge of them. To know is not to *form* the reality known out of *a priori* and *a posteriori* material of a mental provenance, as Kant held, but to gain information about it as it exists in its own circle of being.³

In short: «being is one thing and knowledge is quite another sort of thing».⁴ The passage is crucial. To know an object does not mean 'forming' it. Sellars judged such transcendental perspective hazardous, because it transforms the 'real' world into a world of 'appearances' and metaphysical *noumena*. It undermines the realist axiom and it is interpreted by him as the antechamber of metaphysical transcendence.

For this reason, Marvin Farber opened the essay previously quoted by declaring: «If one begins with the mind, he rarely gets beyond it», intending that if one starts from the mind, access to the real world is precluded from the outset.⁵

However, according to Farber, phenomenology was not a form of idealism, and because of this Husserl and his philosophical approach must be recovered. Nonetheless, his philosophical outlook had to be naturalized. The way it was formulated, Husserl's

¹FARBER 1949, 549.

²FARBER 1949, 549.

³SELLARS 1922, 22.

⁴SELLARS 1919, 421.

⁵FARBER 1949, 592.

theoretical analysis gave a sense of strong opposition to naturalism. Phenomenology, on the contrary, had rather to be structured in a not-idealistic way. Each phenomenological statement, in other words, can and must be rewritten in the context of a 'narrow' naturalistic perspective.

The key-point to understand the interplay between 'experience and subjectivism' (which was also the title of Farber's paper) consists in a preliminary clarification of the pivotal concept of 'naturalism'. Only this will make it at least possible, if not to justify, to understand the twist that Farber gave to phenomenology and the consequent naturalization of its survey procedures.

2 Which naturalism? The historical background

In the Forties, Naturalism in the United States was more than just a philosophical doctrine. It was a movement that had become a definite 'manifesto'. There were even two programs that shared the stage: one was the aforementioned materialistic-program signed by Farber (together with Roy Wood Sellars and Vivian Jerauld McGill in 1949); the other one was represented by the pragmatic approach of *Naturalism and the Human Spirit*, published by a large group of Columbia scholars in 1944.⁶

It was a style of thinking that went far beyond its content, since naturalism was ultimately a scientific 'mood'. It presented itself like the 'dominant temper' of mid-century American philosophical culture.

Naturalism, thus, was a plural event, stemming from a common root. From a historical and also sociological point of view, it could be described as a liberating movement, as a process of secularization of American society, which breaks its ties with the old social, cultural and religious archetypes of Puritan society.⁷

Also because of this, the element of 'realism' was so strong, although in some of its manifestations it appears to have been a bit *naive* (notably in the so-called '*New Realism*' movement, against which Roy Wood Sellars argued on several occasions). The refinement of proofs did not matter, what really did was to build a solid bulwark against those theological-evangelical infiltrations that still contrasted the formidable modernist boost of the country. 'Metaphysics' in the United States of the early twentieth century was synonymous with 'theology'. And this meant political, institutional, and academic conservatism.⁸

This (often forgotten) historical connection between naturalism and society is important. It was formed at the starting point of the movement's history, at the very beginning of the century, when 'realism' and 'naturalism' formed a (yet) indistinct blend within pragmatism. And, again, at the time of its greatest splendor, during the Forties, when it became the cornerstone for any academic discipline that strived to be labeled as 'scientific' (including, as we have seen, phenomenology).

At the time, naturalism was more than a philosophical 'ism'. These were the years when Sidney Hook was pondering on '*Naturalism and Democracy*' about the possibility of justifying the liberal-democratic creed, also theorized by Roosevelt, on the basis of a 'naturalized' model of rationality, founding therefore the political dimension on the practice of public talks.⁹ In those years, he was not the only one thinking like that.¹⁰

⁶See KRİKORIAN 1944 and SELLARS *et al.* 1949.

⁷See the analysis of LARRABEE 1944, 324.

⁸LARRABEE 1944, 324.

⁹HOOK 1944, 40-64.

¹⁰See, by the others, SOMMER ROBINSON 1946, 277-297; J. W. COHEN 1947, 477-485; TEN HOOR 1947, 510-529; KRUSÉ 1948, 307-329; and, for a slightly different perspective, MURPHY 1947, 374-389.

The bond with natural sciences, for instance, was fundamental and, at the same time, instrumental. The two things were held together. On the epistemological side, scientific methods offered a guarantee of realism, so that 'objectivity' became the right tool to get rid of the old metaphysical dreams, of their theological legacies and also of their social implications. In short, science gave the possibility of building a new world, even in terms of civil duties.

From a philosophical point of view, all this was summed up by a charming and enchanting slogan: *explaining nature with nature*. This meant understanding the natural world just through the information that natural sciences provided. It was about reimagining nature at a human scale, no longer believing in disembodied metaphysical forces (like angels or entelechies), no longer considering nature as a mystical deity, but rather dealing with it through the vocabulary of secular science. The great scientific organ of information of the late nineteenth century was the 'Naturalist'. And Darwinism was, obviously, the unavoidable reference for people who were interested in the secularity of the natural world.¹¹

In summary, then, the common grounds on which every good form of naturalism should be based are faith in the scientific knowledge repudiation of metaphysics, forbiddance of any theory of design (because the step from design to the designer is short and smells of theology), adherence to ontological realism as a precondition to any philosophical discourse, distrust of cognitive virtues of philosophy (science alone is explanatory of the world), the primacy of empirical evidence (natural events are only those that are spatio-temporally distributed), and last but not least, a certain *vis polemica* against European philosophy (particularly evident in Hook and Sellars, but not exclusively), accused of metaphysical fanaticism (Heidegger) or, at best, of excessive intellectualism (logical neopositivism).¹²

Put like that, naturalism seems to have an altogether homogeneous and well defined program, at least in its fundamental points. There is a limited ontological commitment, a vigil method of investigation, a firm adherence to empirical evidence and a strong trust (also in political and social terms) in the positive virtues of naturalized research programs. All this combined with national pride, including the awareness of having a new international and cultural leadership, to be defined in the delicate arena of international politics.

Yet, this apparently homogeneous picture shows us only the surface of things. The internal folds of the debate, on the contrary, tell us another story, characterized by such strong controversies, that even within the same (and apparently shared) epistemic perspective, sometimes irreconcilable disagreements emerged.

The most prominent chasm took place in the Forties. In the golden age of naturalism, a conflict arose between two antithetical manifestoes: the pragmatist-oriented *Naturalism and the Human Spirit* and its physicalist variant of *Philosophy for the Future. The Quest of Modern Materialism*. In those years a far from peaceful rupture between 'methodological' naturalism (heir of the great pragmatist tradition) and a more strict version of it (into which phenomenology was likely to be absorbed, at least in Farber's intentions), focused mainly on 'ontological' contents, took place.

This involves, in the first case, ontological innocence (the 'logic without ontology' of Ernest Nagel) and the practice of a liberal attitude towards natural sciences, while in the second case a definite reconversion of philosophy into epistemology, and an unconditional adherence to ontological materialism (with some Marxist nuances).

¹¹See the editorial contained in the first issue of the review 'The American Naturalist', 1/1 (1867), pp. 1-4. On the early scientific and editorial affairs of the 'Naturalist', see CONKLIN 1944, 29-32.

¹²On the anti-European controversy, see HOOK 1930, 141-160; SELLARS 1944b, 543-544; SELLARS 1944a, 694.

The 'Dewey Group' believed, in fact, that a too strong adherence to materialism entailed the loss of important parts of the human experience of the world (by sacrificing the qualitative phenomena of consciousness, aesthetic and religious experiences, etc.). Sellar's group, instead, believed that only a complete adherence to the protocol of natural sciences might provide a complete understanding of the human self.

Between these two extremes there was a wide range of intermediate positions, which also include - somewhat surprisingly - some strong forms of criticism. There were those who accused naturalism of instantiating a 'power' ideology (Murphy). Some scholars accused it of anthropomorphism (Morris Cohen, Gotshalk). There were those who criticized the definition of 'proof' and of 'scientific method' (Sheldon). There were also those who condemned it for the adoption of a policy of mere 'success' (Bouwsma). And finally, those who accused it of conceptual inconsistency (Donald Oliver).¹³

But one thing is especially important and should not be forgotten. The bifurcation between 'methodological naturalism' and 'ontological naturalism' was constituted precisely by a different attitude towards the problem of subjectivity. The very notion of 'human experience' represents, in fact, the chief element around which different strategies of theoretical comprehension arise. The main criticism of the naturalistic model comes from something similar. Despite the specific differences, the idea is that naturalism is condemned to be a form of reductionism due to a fundamental incompleteness, revealed through the problem of 'subjectivity'.

3 The «Morbid Fear of the Subjective»: episode one

An analysis of the early stages of the American naturalist debate enables us to grasp many genuine elements that will become manifest in the following decades' discussions. In particular, there is one essential question that already then was pointed out as the most difficult of all: is naturalism a form of reductionism?

In a 1934 essay entitled *What is Materialism?*, Sydney Hook asked explicitly if there was too high a price to pay by identifying naturalism with a form of materialism (today we would speak of physicalism). While it is intuitively plausible to argue that all material entities are also 'real' entities, the idea of excluding from the number of real things immaterial events such as the consciousness of a feeling or the intimate experience of a joy sounds less convincing. More generally, it seems implausible to cut off all those qualitative facts of private nature that in those same years Clarence Irving Lewis denominated '*qualia*'.¹⁴

According to Hook, naturalism is not necessarily a form of materialism, as it is placed outside the debate, often set incorrectly, between idealism and materialism. Its actual target consists in the denial of supernaturalist assumptions, like the belief in cosmic-design theories.

These claims made by Hook marked the beginning of a bitter controversy with Roy Wood Sellars that lasted for a good fifteen years and that eventually involved a vast portion of American academic philosophers. Let us try, then, to examine the arguments of the New York philosopher.

For him, naturalism was neither a form of idealism (and this is intuitively clear), nor a form of materialism (this requires further explanation).

¹³See M. R. COHEN 1940, 196-228; MURPHY 1945, 400-417; GOTSHALK 1946, 152-157; SHELDON 1945, 253-270 and SHELDON 1946, 197-209; BOUWSMA 1948, 12-22; DONALD 1949, 608-615.

¹⁴LEWIS 1929, 121.

According to Hook, materialism is a *naïve* philosophical theory, characterized by a poor definition of terms. Saying that only matter is 'real', leaves in the uncertainty the concept of matter as well as that of reality. In fact, although many things can be understood when it is assumed that «only matter is real», this claim is usually linked to a previous identification of reality with a sort of space-time determination. This way, the first statement «only matter is real» is translated with: «only what has space-time configuration can be considered as existing and real».¹⁵ According to Hook, we have produced an empty tautology.

Since matter is classically defined by its space-time individuation, this statement inherently means that only what can be spatio-temporally determined (i.e., 'matter') comes to be considered as existing space-temporally (i.e., 'reality'). A simple tautology.

But it is even worse, because a description of material entities always involves an unavoidable reference to quality, properties and relations, which are not necessarily reducible to space-time determinations. Qualitative states of consciousness, for instance, are not 'material', but can hardly be considered outside the realm of existence. There are many attributes of matter that cannot be placed automatically in a space-time dimension. A materialist philosopher, for example, needs non-material elements such as words, sentences and meanings to express his theory. Likewise, the logical syntax of language is not reducible to pure space-time determination.¹⁶

Right or wrong, Hook (like Dewey), had an intuition. Linking naturalism too closely with materialism could cause the exclusion of too many elements from the 'real' world, elements, such as conscience, culture, education, social events, intentional acts, and so on, that a 'good' naturalist should not give up so easily.

But there is something more. Some properties of the mind are absolutely peculiar, as they refer to establishing purposes and to the predictive capacities of the subject. In Hook's words: «the ability to initiate an intelligent action in accordance with certain goals and values» reveals a possible reference to the teleological dimension of nature - which is not easy to frame in epistemological terms.¹⁷ What kind of capacity are we talking about? Are we dealing with an organism's material or non-material (that is, 'spiritual') faculty?

Should we conclude that the behaviour of molecules might have a teleological dimension and that even the laws of nature could reveal a hidden cosmic finality? And yet, if these teleological qualities refer to some form of spiritual principle (read: 'supernatural'), then the risk is to break the principle of causal completeness of nature and to restrict the explanatory virtues of natural sciences. Once the teleological exception is introduced, it is in fact reasonable to ask how far it extends, whether it belongs only to human beings or if it is one of matter's properties since the very beginning of its cosmological history.¹⁸

The stakes are very high, as we can see. Admitting teleology means, in Hook's view, to introduce a form of theism and to recognize the presence of some 'disembodied spirits' acting somewhere in nature. On the other hand, however, if the ability to accomplish a goal-oriented behaviour does not contain any extra-natural references, it becomes necessary to purify the scientific lexicon. To describe a fully naturalized system, in fact, one should adopt just functional (i.e., mechanical) concepts, eliminating

¹⁵Hook 1934b, 236.

¹⁶Hook 1934b, 236-237.

¹⁷Hook 1934b, 240.

¹⁸As is well known, these will be the assumptions formulated by Hans Jonas in *The Phenomenon of Life. Towards a Philosophical Biology*, when he provocatively argues that «if man was the relative of animals, than animals were the relatives of man». See JONAS 1966, 57.

any kind of finalistic, or also metaphorical, reference - which is very difficult for certain kinds of behaviours.

The teleological behaviour represents the true dividing line between materialism and idealism. According to Hook, this explains why, on the one hand, metaphysical idealism and theism have always gone together, while, on the other hand, it explains why materialism has almost always been synonymous to atheism. From the acknowledgment of a pervasive design in nature to the admission of a super-designer the step is short and apparently 'natural'.

Thus, for an 'overwhelming evidence', the core of the dispute between idealists and materialists leads to an unresolved tension between naturalism and supernaturalism: among the possibility of giving credit to the argument of design (which, according to Hook, is the only possible way to infer the existence of God) and the decision of stopping at the critical threshold of epistemological probability.¹⁹

Compared to these two extremes, the standpoint of Hook rests on the grounds of what we would call today a 'liberal' (or antireductionist) naturalism and excludes the only argument that for him was really uncomfortable, that of the cosmic design, which would lead him straight to assume a supernatural position.

The cultural option carried out by Hook therefore seems to serve a dual purpose: to free nature from metaphysical forms and human condition from possible forms of reductionism.

No transcendence and no reductions. Thus human nature is so restored to its full dignity.

4 The «Morbid Fear of the Subjective»: episod two

If the arguments presented by Hook may not always seem consistent, the purpose was, all the same, noble and, above all, shared by a large part of academic-circles of the Columbia (*Dewey in primis*).

In those years, however, other scholars had different ideas on the subject. In two penetrating articles respectively entitled *Is Naturalism Enough?* (1944a) and *Does Naturalism need Ontology?* (1944b) Roy Wood Sellars tried to dismantle Hook's thesis by shooting straight to the big target. By overthrowing the cornerstone of Hook's argument and without beating about the bush, Sellars found the weak point of his pragmatism in what he defined a «morbid fear of the subjective».²⁰

Sellars' overall argument was the following. For a good naturalist, being consistent and epistemologically coherent necessarily means to agree with what we are taught by natural sciences. Yet, gaining this consistency implies the employment of a truly realistic epistemology, which nonetheless can be afforded only by a physicalist ontology.²¹

Let us analyze the details of his argument. Sellars took up the central thesis already exposed in *Evolutionary Naturalism* (1922) and argued that the first notion to be acquired was that of 'critical realism'. The basic idea was that the cognitive activity of the subject, though intertwined with conceptual and symbolic characters, stated the objective features of things.

Perceptions, namely, react to sensory stimulation and decode the informative content of it by developing a dense network of conceptual (or symbolic) elements. At

¹⁹HOOK 1934b, 241.

²⁰SELLARS 1944b, 534.

²¹Epistemology and ontology are interconnected, Sellars says, like 'Siamese twins'. See SELLARS 1944a, 689.

the end of this cognitive pattern, a «differential correlation» is established with our starting item. The stimulus, in a manner of speaking, has thus been fully 'objectified'. The output of cognition, in other words, is not the presentation of the simple 'primitive' object (as was thought by Neo-realists, like Montague), but it is 'as if' this happened, because the cognitive content of our representations constantly expresses the *real* characteristics of the intentioned-object.²²

Sharing this epistemological-realistic approach, Sellars argued, makes it unnecessary to talk about 'things in themselves' or 'private' mental spheres as opposed to physical ones. Critical realism vanquishes the fear of subjectivity and is therefore the only appropriate form of support for the model of naturalism that Hook should have also converged to.²³

The following step is a direct consequence of the first. Something like a pure 'ego' or a 'disembodied' consciousness does not exist: things like that are just cultural myths.

Consciousness is an 'organic-self', i.e. something which is embodied in the actions that the psychophysical organism continuously plays. The unity of the conscious 'self' is not just a reflection of a single brain function, because the role of the perceiving-subject is always played by the organism as a whole. As Sellars himself said, alongside Farber and McGill, by writing the Foreword to the physicalistic-manifesto of *Philosophy for the Future*: «no mental process occurs without its appropriate neural patterns».²⁴

This is a crucial point. The theory of embodied consciousness enables the thorny issue of subjectivity to be restored, by shifting it within the palatable framework of scientific materialism or, in other words, allows consciousness to become fully 'naturalized'. It is indeed wrong to consider introspection as a form of privileged access to the self, because the latter is a specialized form of knowledge, whose target is based on the environmental relations of the individual to his/her external world. Introspection also involves an 'external' side, which is always formed by the body's response to the environment it is in.²⁵

The consequences are significant. Consciousness is no longer a mysterious or inaccessible state, but becomes something that critical epistemology is able to account for in a scientific way. Thus it is possible to give an intersubjective report of it. Descartes and Cartesianism in general have failed, because they dualistically considered the self as opposed to a foreign matter. Conversely, the way in which the subject refers to itself is structurally homogenous to the way in which it refers to the world of experience. The external world and the organic reactions to it are both caught by a process of 'self-observation'. Therefore, as the mind deals with 'real' objects when it addresses the world, in the same way the output is equally 'real' when it focuses the attention to itself. Once more the inaccessibility, or transcendence, of the pure-ego is dissolved.

The choice of materialism, according to Sellars, basically has to do with the identification of the self with the body.²⁶ On the contrary, by neglecting the exact (i.e. biological) origin of the existential status of consciousness, Dewey's pragmatism finds itself in trouble. Dewey proposed a form of experientialism that was more ingenuous than any kind of innocent realism and, as a matter of fact, he cannot even

²²William Pepperell Montague (1873-1953) was one of the leading figures of the so-called school of the *New Realism* (along with Holt, Perry, Spaulding and others).

²³SELLARS 1944b, 535-537.

²⁴SELLARS *et al.* 1949, viii.

²⁵SELLARS *et al.* 1949, 536-538. This is the reason why Husserl's phenomenology is welcomed by Marvin Farber. Provided its naturalization.

²⁶'Materialism depends upon this identification of the self with the organism'. SELLARS *et al.* 1949, 539.

be considered a true realist. But a naturalist who is not strictly consequential will have great difficulty in relating to the data provided by natural sciences and, therefore, will not find it easy to describe himself as what he would really like to seem.

In conclusion, physical realism and theory of embodied consciousness are, according to Sellars, two preliminary issues of materialism and, by mediation, even of naturalism. *Tertium non datur*.

5 Humanism, Anthropomorphism and weak ontology

The controversy between Hook and Sellars has the advantage of enlightening the strong polarity that animates the naturalist debate from the inside.

What is important to emphasize here is that from the disputed match not a single winner comes out and in the following decades both options (epistemological physicalism and pragmatic or methodological naturalism) would be practiced.

In any case, the problem of subjectivity remains the obscure source from which all the frictions between the two parts begin. It is not just the alternative between taking care of all human aspects of experience and reducing the self to its biological matrix. The match between the two parts is not only an epistemological one, as if it were a clash between the safeguarding of *qualia* vs. a neuroscientific conception of the self. This is not the case because both alternatives spring from a common premise: the assumption of scientific practices as the only method of reference.

All this of course makes things more complicated. On the one hand, in fact, some argue that science should be done without being trapped in the suffocating perimeter of physicalist ontology and without losing sight of the fact that science is a human affair (and that man is indeed its most enigmatic object). On the other hand, others answer that science is primarily a matter of epistemology and nobody should pretend to ignore the ontological assumptions implied by a realistic epistemology.

In other words, this tension is completely internal to the methodological and common-shared root of naturalism, because it directly involves the concept of science, which turns out to be split in two contrasting dimensions: an empirical (bottom-up) conception of it and a more conceptualized (top-down) interpretation of its theoretical framework. The conflicting result is even more evident in the oblique concept of 'natural science'.

But there is more. Naturalism, as was noticed, presents itself as a sort of methodological 'antidote' against supernaturalism, because it expresses a properly 'human' perspective on things. In other words, it counts as a philosophical precondition for any rational discourse concerning human beings or other natural elements in the context of a secularized nature. In this sense, naturalism and humanism find a rallying-point. In particular, in Dewey's belief that 'human experience' and 'natural experience' constitute the terms of a reciprocal relation.

As it was acutely noticed by Santayana, Dewey's concept of experience indicates indeed a more public level of social facts than an pure theoretical dimension. In this sense, the idea of a reversibility between 'nature' and 'experience' is somehow confirmed. The world of nature is always a world of 'natural experience'; it is a place defined by the very presence of human beings and that can be described in the shape of a 'social world' that we experience daily.²⁷

As was said in Santayana's conclusion, naturalism presents itself as a kind of iconoclastic theory. It is a movement that wants to wipe out supernatural idols (God,

²⁷SANTAYANA 1925, 680-681.

spirits, souls etc.), but that itself ends up producing other symbolic (we may say 'anthropic') icons.²⁸

Obviously, it was easy for Dewey to refute these kinds of allegations. The alternatives to naturalism, he argued, do not coincide with an appeal to the totemic myth of nature, or with the thrills of metaphysical irrationality, or even worse with the recall of some supernatural theology.

Nevertheless, the tension engendered by the issue of 'humanism' remains. This results from the consideration of a double impasse that was detected, on the one hand, by those who argue that naturalism is after all a sort of 'anthropomorphism' and, on the other hand, by those who think, on the contrary, that the value of its supposed 'humanism' is depreciated precisely by the incompleteness of its ontology. The (under-)determination of the ontological status of human being represents, according to this line, the weak point of each naturalism.

In both cases, what is criticized is the slippery relation between man and nature. According to Morris Cohen, for example, this is a pivotal issue that, however, remains unsolved. The link between man and nature, in fact, can be read in a sense of continuity, for example taking profit of Darwinism to purify philosophy from any sort of 'theocentric' temptation and to ban the supernatural theme of the cosmic (or ontological) 'beginning'.

In this case, however, the risk is to marginalize the differences that do exist between human being and nature and to innervate physics with categories distinctive of 'social life'. This amounts to transform physics, biology and cosmology in a kind of 'anthropic' interpretation of the universe; besides, it is not at all certain that the use of social categories could be successfully applied to the whole range of natural entities.

Therefore, by neglecting the dimension of discontinuity that also subsist within nature, the result of this would make the same intuitive distinction between 'natural' and 'supernatural' problematic.

It is as if, Cohen argued, we would have to rely only on the principle of continuity, while in a multi-dimensional universe, which is composed of multiple elements, it would be a mistake to neglect such differentiation.²⁹ This is also because, as Arthur Murphy observed when reviewing *Naturalism and the Human Spirit*, if the definition of what is 'natural' should be «whatever man encounters in whatever way» (RANDALL 1944), the risk would also be including in it those supernatural entities that had been banned and that for a lot of people, instead, represent the most significant part of their everyday experience.³⁰

Once again, the 'subjectivity' factor would risk turning into a kind of legendary Arabian phoenix for the naturalist discourse. This is due to the difficulty of its being absorbed in a single conceptual framework.

This was also observed by Dilman Walter Gotshalk in an intense article of 1946 (*The Paradox of Naturalism*), which incorporated some of the key points that had already been discussed by Cohen. The idea was that, if naturalism wanted to aspire to a prominent cultural leadership, it must also be capable of producing a more significant ontological conception of human being than the one so far presented. The strength of traditional supernaturalism consisted in the overall strategic plan under which human being was the essential element of a unified cosmology, rather than in the appeal to a metaphysical world of souls, or supernatural deities.

For a lengthy phase of modern metaphysical thought, in fact, man was considered

²⁸SANTAYANA 1925, 688.

²⁹M. R. COHEN 1940, 201.

³⁰MURPHY 1945, 402.

as an integral part of a natural (cosmic) project, whose apex was acted by a supernatural deity.

The seduction of this cosmological model was evident. There was an inherent consistency between the privileged position of man and the supernatural principles that supported the entire system: everything was connected to everything.³¹

A small shift in the notion of 'truth' was not sufficient to shatter this model of perfect integration. We are all aware, Gotshalk observed, that in contemporary scientific theories there is more truth than in the metaphysical theories of the past, but this epistemological shift is not in itself enough to sweep away the debris. It takes much more to achieve this goal. An overall redefinition of man/nature relations, with an implicit cosmological reevaluation of the category of 'human', is required. Thus, despite the great confidence placed in anthropic categories, the paradox is that their application diminishes indeed the role of humans in nature, making them a fringe element of a mere stochastic process.

The argument might not be strictly consistent, yet it seems to grasp at least some fundamental weakness of the naturalistic programs. Gotshalk cited the case of Russian naturalism (quoting Lenin's *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*). In that case, he argued, the conception of nature was not solved in a pure materialistic perspective, since those arguments were combined with an 'activist theory of history'. Man was not simply regarded as a well-adapted ape, but as the hammer of history, «capable of extending the dialectic process of cosmos by virtue of his awareness of the basic plan of history».³²

That form of naturalism, in other words, was able to give man a central position in the scheme of things. This line of credit balanced its raw materialism allowing the doctrine to impact in a formidable way in the world of society, in its structures, social arrangements and so on. As observed by Gotshalk, the American model was lacking precisely a clear and precise conception of man's place in nature and in history.

In other words, an ontological counterweight, which could eventually be able to balance a naturalized image of the world, was not put in place. One cannot believe in meliorism of science and at the same time have a weak conception of man. The absence of an organic vision of the ontological role of human being within nature will make common people continue to undergo the supernaturalistic appeal, just in force of the higher degree of its cosmological orderliness. In short, a definitive word on the ontological status of man within the scale of evolution in animal biology is still lacking.³³

6 Exorcising subjectivity: the triumph of objectivity

Naturalism, on the one hand, enhances the myth of 'humanism', while, on the other hand, constantly tries to exorcise the private dimension of the subject. The latter carries a potentially irrational dimension, which must be made explainable by introducing objective categories. The basic assumption of early American naturalism consisted, in fact, in a clear assumption of realism. Things are not reducible to mental thoughts and a concrete sphere of things existed. The latter, besides, are not reducible to thoughts because they have their own objectivity that is independent of the fact of being conceived or perceived.

³¹GOTSHALK 1946, 156.

³²GOTSHALK 1946, 154.

³³As noted above, Hans Jonas will resume such topics in his *The Phenomenon of Life* (1966), that contains a series of essays written starting from the Fifties and which owes much to the naturalistic American debate.

A good naturalist must know that categories do not form things and do not structure empirical contents. He should also know that good theories must adopt conceptual tools (as neutral as possible), because the deforming mirror of natural language must be avoided. It is therefore important to prevent language from altering the real status of its own objects. Words do not have to alter with their semantic content the objective properties of things.

Claims like these were stated by William Dennes in a very dense article, entitled *The Categories of Naturalism* (1944). Its main argument was that categories do not affect, as it was believed by the metaphysical tradition, the 'essence' of things. They do not alter their objective properties because the reign of physical entities, as such, is independent of the subjective way we consider them.

The focal point of Dennes' essay concerns, generally, the relation between categories and experience. It aims to demonstrate that the former do not predetermine the latter, at least in a genuinely naturalist perspective.³⁴ This remark is important and, in fact, the article is one of the most widely read and publically discussed among those collected in *Naturalism and the Human Spirit*.

The categories of naturalism (such as 'events', 'qualities' or 'relations') do not intend in any way to deduce physical reality from the supreme elements, on which everything eventually relies. The unpleasant feeling of artificiality caused by a stratification of natural processes in 'high', 'low', or possibly 'emerging' levels disappears to the extent that there are no more 'genetic' intentions and that there is no more interest in establishing an 'ultimate' level of reality.³⁵

Naturalism is epistemologically descriptive and not ontologically prescriptive. This is its largest accomplishment: naturalism is not interested in producing foundational assumptions, because it merely describes empirical relations between what is concretely observable. Drawing a further distinction between different levels of reality is legitimate, but only if it simply responds to a classificatory need and not to evaluative or ontological purposes.

According to Dennes, in short, naturalistic grammars, unlike traditional philosophical languages, which are so heavily saturated by supernaturalistic elements, are neutral. And it is precisely due to this reason that naturalism remains so adherent to reality.

Natural properties of objects are safeguarded by naturalism, which is not engaging itself in a metaphysical description of reality, but is allowing nature to be researched for what it really is, without ontological overlapping or conceptual duplications of it.

Again, a methodological attitude emerges, not a body of theories. Therefore it is not by chance that Ernest Nagel's *Logic Without Ontology* turns out to be one of the greatest essays of the founding manifesto of *Naturalism and the Human Spirit*.³⁶

Nonetheless, behind the apparent neutrality of the surface, there is something hidden and far more subtle in terms of ideology. What really took shape in those years, in fact, was not just the adoption of a new policy of investigation. What emerged was the idea that 'naturalism' is synonymous to 'rationality', because it coincides with the meaningfulness of empirical practices. The real commitment is therefore not ontological, but in a way a *procedural* one. A much more insidious commitment that

³⁴DENNES 1944, 277-279.

³⁵DENNES 1944, 285.

³⁶Brutally summed up, the thesis of Nagel argues that logic deals with propositions and not with existent objects. It is therefore wrong to interpret its statements in an ontological sense, because its purpose is not to establish the empirical validity of scientific theories. Logical justifications and empirical justifications are expression of two distinct worlds. See NAGEL 1944, 219-220.

draws a clear demarcation line. Anyone outside naturalism, Arthur Murphy wrote in 1945, would automatically become a «crypto-fascist», that is to say, an «enemy of free inquiry».³⁷

In spite of its claims of neutrality, naturalism is thus likely to become the bearer of an ideology that is far from being neutral, rather being, so to speak, 'all-encompassing'. The meaningfulness of its rational methodology slowly provides the absorbability in its domain for philosophical speculations. No alternatives to the process of naturalization of knowledge are thus conceivable, because those who oppose it are immediately labelled as enemies of science or, generally, as enemies of 'rationality'.

7 The nature of naturalism and the nature of philosophy

An important feature, not always noticed by scholars, is that the powerful debate of the '30s and '40s was accompanied by an equally massive debate on the nature of philosophy. *A posteriori* it seems obvious. Naturalism by portraying itself as a new form of rationality - capable of freeing from the old metaphysics and, thus, refreshing the decrepit Puritan society - brought into play the problem of philosophical rationality. One of the most important sides of the debate consisted precisely in clarifying this issue and bringing it to public importance.

To be clear, in 1939 the institutional session of the *American Philosophical Association* was opened - by the President of the Eastern Division, Curt John Ducasse - with an addressing speech regarding the problem of the relation between philosophy and natural science. The talk gave rise to a strong controversy that we shall soon examine. In the following years, other presidents of the APA discussed *The Role of the Philosopher* (Marten ten Hoor, at the meeting dedicated to *The Present Status of Naturalism*), the problem of *What Contribution can Philosophy Make to World Understanding?* (Cornelius Kruse, Presidential Address hold in the second Inter-American Congress of Philosophy), the perspective of the *Philosophy for the Atomic Age*, the *Philosophy for UNESCO*, but also the *Philosophy in General Education* and much more (including a presidential speech held by Hans Reichenbach entitled *Rational Empiricism: an Inquiry into the Roots of Philosophical Errors*).

All this was probably not a coincidence. It does not seem accidental that the debate on the nature of naturalism was accompanied by a need to redefine the role and the overall finality of philosophy. And, furthermore, that this requirement concerned not only the relation with scientific knowledge, but also the delicate issue of the relation between 'knowledge' and 'democracy'. During the years of World War II, philosophy could not only be contemplative, but had to promote social action, democratic ways of thinking, realize educational models and make a whole system of 'western' values effective.

The great equation established between philosophy and naturalism exercised, in this large cauldron of discussions, all its power. In the many discussions related to the problem of 'philosophy' (what it is, what it is for, and so on), naturalism was always a kind of 'stone guest' of the talks, because, as a matter of fact, it represented the basin of all possible cognitive debates.

This intense dispute on the nature of philosophy can be easily articulated along three main topics:

(I) the definition of 'philosophy' in relation to the topic of 'scientific' knowledge.

³⁷MURPHY 1945, 404.

The issue at stake here is that of delimitation, and in some cases of transformation, of philosophy into natural sciences. This kind of approach might be called 'theoretical';

(II) the finality of philosophy might be defined in relation to its educational role within a democratic society (as the centre of an educational program based on 'values'). This kind of approach is therefore 'educational' and, at least indirectly, 'political' or 'social';

(III) the relation between philosophy and the globalization of democratic values (see the programs of 'philosophy for UNESCO'). The approach is, in this case, 'political' or 'international'.

These threads are closely intertwined and their arguments are in many cases largely overlapping. In any case, they represent the common denominator of a vast historical debate, the consequences of which far exceed the scope of the issues we are here discussing.³⁸ For our purposes, it will be sufficient to refer to the first one, in which the theoretical dimension of philosophical knowledge is discussed.

As a starting point we can move from a general consideration that was carried out by Nagel in an interesting essay of 1956 (*Naturalism Reconsidered*). In broad terms, his thesis was that what happened in American academies in the early twentieth century was a gradual erosion of confidence in philosophical knowledge. The trust in the cognitive virtues of philosophy declined, while at the same time other scientific disciplines were more widely acknowledged. It may be interesting to quote the following passage:

For we became persuaded that spatio-temporally organized bodies are the only agents of causal change; that there is an irreducible plurality of things, qualities and processes in the world; that the various patterns of change discoverable in the world are not fragments of a directive organized, rationally integrated developmental schema; that the human scene is but a passing incident in the history of cosmos; that the validity of moral standards is a function of their congruence with the *de facto* physical, biological and social needs of human beings; and that the moral worth of an ideal is determined by its capacity to organize and liberate human energies, and not by its origins.³⁹

What we have here is a shared evidence. Only natural sciences are considered to be informative on the real properties of things. Scientific disciplines have taken a leading position in cognitive domain by virtue of their *predictive* power, their capacity of *control* over nature and the empirical *verifiability* of their method, which is homogeneous and potentially replicable by each scholar.

This leads to a lack of confidence in the existence of a 'basic plan' in nature. This is a highly significant point: American philosophical naturalism is characterized, and in some ways most importantly, as a rejection of teleological practices (having pre-established the equation that identifies teleology and theology). Another consequence, emphasized in Nagel's essay, is the primacy of empirical evidence. This is a fundamental character of the naturalistic method represented by its appeal to the sphere of empirically verifiable evidence. Only spatio-temporally distributed natural events are considered as such or, in better words, only insofar as they can give rise to some causal differences in regards to the space-time world.

All of this hit the heart of the mid-century naturalist paradigm, because the great strategic program operated by the 'reconversion' of philosophy gives the possibility of naturalizing the 'spirit'. Barriers between *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften* must finally be thrown down, in order to let *nature* and *spirit* rediscover the basis of

³⁸See NUNZIANTE 2012, 141-191.

³⁹NAGEL 1956, xi.

their common ground. The same method must be applied to their investigation, as well as an identical ontological consideration. Spirit is not something else from nature, but as Darwin taught, it can and must be fully diluted in its biological components.

It does not matter that the category of 'natural' is not well-defined, or if it is simply taken for granted. What really matters here is the point outlined by Nagel's first observation: natural sciences must teach us what nature is, not philosophy. The definition of nature is shaped by the whole of the academic disciplines that deal with natural events (i.e., biology, chemistry, physics etc.). The very informational pattern of the natural world comes from the result of their findings, their predictive capabilities, their application. One refers to this solid basis of operational control when considering imagining nature as infested with spirits, souls, entelechies and other such things as prohibited.

At this stage of the American debate, the term 'spirit' was therefore closer to the imaginary world of 'spiritism' than to the concrete manifestation of the natural world. Curt John Ducasse, in his 1939 Presidential Speech at the *American Philosophical Association*, faced a problem of no easy solution that sprang from these issues: that of the relation between philosophy and natural sciences.

The core of the problem lies in the definition of 'philosophy,' the enucleation of its peculiarities in comparison to other human enterprises and the eventual aptness of its method of investigation. It is commonly said, in fact, that philosophy is concerned with 'general issues', while sciences analyse 'specific facts' of nature, but this argument seems rather a hoax. Besides the fact that philosophy is completely devoid of predictive power, the idea that there is a sort of super-general epistemology is misleading. By definition every epistemological reflection has to do with some specific existing relation between observable «facts» and «cognitive structures».⁴⁰

On the other hand, philosophy cannot be understood either as a narrative or poetic way of thinking, or as an article of faith. It must be assessed for what it actually is and it really aims to be, that is as something that has to do with a «knowledge-seeking enterprise».⁴¹

If philosophy wishes to deal with knowledge, it is unavoidable for it - as it was for Naturalism as a philosophical movement - to get into a sort of cognitive showdown. Indeed, we should ask ourselves what the epistemological status of philosophy is and what is the precise object of its investigation.

Surely, one could adopt the strategy of European philosophers, as done by Carnap for example, and argue that the domain of philosophical problems is represented by the issues gravitating around the logic of science and that philosophy is thus primarily concerned with the language of science's syntax. Nonetheless, there is something unpleasant about this proposal, because in the ordinary world different types of languages exist (the language of art, of religion, law, morality, and so on), each of which has its own syntax, not necessarily reducible to that of science. In short, the boundaries of philosophical languages are wider and do not coincide with the scientific syntax. But what still remains undetermined is the specific object of the philosophical discourse.

On the market of theories, of course, there is always a pragmatist choice like the one intended by Dewey: philosophy must relocate its centre of gravity on 'human' affairs and on the social dimension of their action. Yet, even this does not seem a convincing answer, because it pretends to forget that even philosophers, after all, are humans and that their theoretical problems are in all respects 'human', despite

⁴⁰DUCASSE 1940, 122.

⁴¹DUCASSE 1940, 123.

their abstraction. The same can be said of the problems reported by mathematicians, astronomers, physicists and poets.

Where to find an alternative? Where can philosophy's proper objects be found? According to Ducasse, one could try and recover its starting assumption. Namely, that philosophy, in a more or less imperfect way, has to do with *knowledge*. In other words, the philosophical discourse has nothing to do with metaphysical views or articles of faith, but should always be devoted to the production of 'knowledge'. And what is more, philosophical knowledge, like other natural sciences, aspires to a *scientific* degree.

Ducasse's argument is very interesting, because it is revealing not only of his private opinions, which may affect it up to a point, but of a more widespread way of thinking, perfectly consistent with the naturalistic spirit of the time. The issue of 'philosophy' seems to be a problem of a placement rather than a matter of theoretical reflection. In the great theatre of cognitive disciplines what is then the stage reserved to philosophy?

The problem is not easy to solve, because the seats are almost all occupied. Yet, according to Ducasse there might be a way out of this impasse, which has to do with the domain of mental phenomena. Having established that natural sciences deal with 'public' facts, one must consider that there are other factors accessible only through introspection. It is the great realm of the 'mind', which has already been largely occupied by psychological studies, but in which a place for philosophy could still be found. Unlike psychological studies that almost exclusively deal with physiological conditions of mental events, philosophy could actually take into account a wider range of issues. It could investigate the relations that subsist among mental states (considered apart from their correspondence with brain events) and, most importantly, it could investigate the status of those particular entities that we call 'opinions', 'beliefs' or 'appraisals'. Ultimately, in Ducasse's opinion, philosophy should occupy those portions of territory uncovered by behaviourist psychology (we must not forget that this was in 1939), therefore taking refuge on the grounds of those mental acts (actually constituted by 'ratings', 'judgments' and so on) in which mind expresses its own peculiar nature.⁴²

Immediate objections to Ducasse's theory naturally arose, one of which can be immediately discussed. Apart from the obvious opposition of psychologists to the significant subtraction of their territory, the point was that not only had philosophy dealt in the past with mental issues, but it had also engaged in metaphysical problems related to the very essence of 'nature' and of 'reality' in general. Ducasse's counter-argument, however, was rather sharp. First of all, metaphysics indulged on things that were so 'vague' and badly defined that did not even deserve the title of 'knowledge'. Secondly, the ontological issue of 'reality' had to do exactly with an interpretative attitude of a mental kind (a sort of judgment). In this way, it was possible to re-include in the science of mind what had been previously banned, namely ontology.

However, two problems with relevant implications still need solving.

The first aspect concerns the 'non-verifiability' of subjective facts of a private nature, i.e. the problematic nature of a mind-philosophy focused on pure introspection. The objection has its point of strength in the indirect and inevitable comparison with the world of widely intersubjective facts of natural sciences. This is an issue that cannot be avoided by anyone wanting philosophy to remain on a strictly naturalist ground.

The second problem is possibly even harder. In short, it can be put as follows:

⁴²DUCASSE 1940, 137.

does the mind fall within the category of natural phenomena? If mind is itself fully 'natural', why set up a domain of detached epistemological events? Are natural sciences (neurophysiology, biology, experimental psychology and so on) not enough to approach the vast horizon of mental phenomena? Or should we instead assume that behind this epistemological demarcation hides an ontological fracture? Is mind something that supposedly can be considered separate from nature?

All in all, Ducasse's strategy was not wrong. By saving a portion of autonomous territory for the philosophical inquiry, he hoped to repopulate it reintroducing the traditional problems of ontology (declined in the form of assertions, judgments, etc.). The problem was that the naturalist perspective undermined this kind of attempt. The fact is that when facing the stark question of whether the mind belongs or not to the natural phenomena, the answer cannot in any way be negative (Carl Bogholt would be the one to make this type of objection).⁴³

But if this is so, returning under the razor of the cognitive primacy of natural sciences is inevitable. Once again, are psychology (in its different addresses) and natural sciences (led by the neurobiology) not enough to investigate the mind's territory, or are separate ontological domains, with the antiquated dichotomy between 'spirit' and 'nature', conceivable? But at this height the road taken by Ducasse's answers is unfortunately interrupted.

It is evident that what is left is that the age of great cosmologies, of the great myth of the beginning, and thus the idea of a global 'philosophical system' is definitely over. Ernest Nagel's exhortation remains as final warning and as prelude to the new-emerging analytical season. Philosophy can and should only deal with «limited problems» and «restricted, but manageable questions», leaving aside foundational attempts and the effort of building great metaphysical systems.⁴⁴

8 Conclusions

According to a remark made by John Herman Randall Jr., naturalism seems to represent the final point of convergence of both history of science and history of philosophy. By concluding the manifesto of *Naturalism and the Human Spirit*, Randall was describing the fatal outcome of a process in which the deeper issues of world culture (religion, philosophy, morality, art) were finally ended by a 'human' horizon of comprehension, thus within a fully *rational* horizon of understanding.⁴⁵ At the bottom line, this was the good news emerged from naturalism. Naturalism is synonymous of 'rationality'. This is the pre-theoretical root shared by most of the topics discussed so far and that keeps them together despite their differences.

After all, it was an observation that had already been acutely carried out by Santayana at the dawn of the debate: naturalism represents itself as the prototype of *meaningfulness*. One cannot help, but agree with it, because it is simply set up as the antidote to all mysticism, metaphysics and irrationality. Not only (and not so much) does it represent the meaningfulness of daily common sense, but also that of science. This amounts to the incontrovertibility of empirical evidences, to the certainty of intersubjective control, to the possibility of sharing verifications, and making predictions. All this contrasts with metaphysical fanaticism and, what is more, with the viruses of anti-democratic ('irrational') forces, that at the time were

⁴³BOGHOLT 1941, 625-626.

⁴⁴NAGEL 1956, 4.

⁴⁵RANDALL 1944, 372-382.

devastating Europe. In short, it is the rationality of the 'criteria' that safeguards the reliability of a sensibly shared world.

The most powerful idea of the emerging paradigm seems therefore the following: naturalistic meaningfulness can be criticized, but it can no longer be replaced with other models of rationality. Indeed, from now on it represents a pattern for what should simply be considered 'rational'.

What is then left if, as claimed by its detractors, we eliminate naturalism, reject the objectivity of its methods, refuse the transparency of public control? What is the alternative? The irrational mysticism of metaphysics? The non-verifiability of theological statements? Private intuitionism? Dictatorial fascism? This is a high price to be paid, compared to the epistemological insurance guaranteed by a bounded, but 'liberal' rationality.

Yet, in its need of redefinition, it is interesting to note that in this compact and slightly autarchic world of American naturalism of mid-Century, a point recurs constantly. It is the idea of a 'natural world' or, rather, the intuition that substantiates the very notion of 'naturalness'. Namely, the issue concerns the description of experience within the context of a presupposition of the world as 'natural'. On the one hand, this has to do with the above-mentioned dogmatic thesis of Farber, regarding «the independence of the world, with respect to the knower». On the other hand, this relates to its inevitable corollary, namely to the fact that «experience is in nature and not nature in experience».

What is 'natural' is the precondition to all experience. Nonetheless it is also what can be represented only through its 'experience'. This is the closing point of empirical insights, but at the same time this is the point where the issue is re-opened by introducing a new phenomenological element. In those years phenomenology was assumed (even by a 'hard' naturalist as Farber was) as an 'empirical method' capable of providing a description of our natural experience of the world. Thus the idea was that what is 'natural' could be experienced through a pre-theoretical process and also be described phenomenologically.

This is a crucial matter and there is no need to talk about an eventual distorted shape of Husserl's phenomenology or that, according to Farber, the phenomenological method should open itself toward conceptual tools that come from a kind of materialistic sociology (i.e., by taking into account material, social and environmental factors). What matters here is the theoretical problem that, consciously or not, is introduced into the beating heart of naturalism.

If at the bottom of the naturalistic debate there is the methodological question of 'evidence' (i.e., the primacy of *empirical* evidence reported by Nagel), phenomenology's appearance in this golden age of American naturalism marks a decisive difference. Apparently, the instrumental use of the phenomenological approach, which allegedly describes the 'natural' experience of the world, closes this circle of issues, showing once again how 'empirical' evidence is paramount to any scientific investigation of nature. But this is only a deceptive closure, because the last ring of the chain, 'evidence', is phenomenologically more of a problem than a solution.

From a phenomenological point of view, the very notion of 'evidence' that comes from experience is an *explanandum* rather than an *explanans*. This way we have a kind of methodological short-circuit, where the beginning of the survey is swapped for its (apparent) end.

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