

### Debunking naturalism: Plantinga

**NATURALISM.** At a first approximation we say:

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(4-1) Naturalism = Negation of *supernaturalism*: No God, no afterlife, no freedom (unless reinterpreted in a minimalist way—like compatibilism).

Plantinga's claim is this:

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(4-2) It is unreasonable to believe both naturalism *and* the evolutionary theory.

**FACULTIES.** We have various capacities: perception, memory, a priori intuition/reasoning, sympathy, moral sense (let's not argue here over whether they are separate and independent). Each such capacity has *its own* reliability conditions:

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(4-3) A capacity  $X$  is reliable iff  $X$  is in a state  $\phi$ .

*Example 1.* My memory is reliable iff what I remember actually happened. My vision is reliable iff what I see actually exists.

*Remark 2.* Refine the reliability conditions just given. Provide conditions for other faculties.

**DARWIN'S DOUBT RESTATED.** Humans are evolutionarily close to mammals, apes in particular. Their common evolutionary descent is supposed to account for many similarities in their genotype and phenotype—in their overlapping DNA, developmental characteristics, physiology, behavioural traits, and psychological dispositions. There is one feature sharply separating humans from apes. Humans are supposed to know many facts about the universe. Apes can claim no such thing, or at best not to any significant extent. Other mammals, also close to humans on the evolutionary tree, can claim no such knowledge to any extent whatever. Moreover, humans have acquired this body of knowledge chiefly in the past few hundred years, a few thousand years at most. Also, their knowledge was acquired, until recently, by several hundred, at most several thousand individuals.

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But this situation defies belief. How could one species, owing its characteristics to the evolutionary process, get so far ahead of all other species in a minuscule span of time, certainly by evolutionary standards? Because it is so surprising, some assumptions or intermediate claims involved in this argument must go.

Hence, Plantinga infers:

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*Reliability premiss* Given the conjunction of naturalism and the Darwinian evolutionary theory, our faculties are likely not reliable:  $P(R \mid N \ \& \ E) \ll 1$ .

*Remark 3.* The claim  $P(R \mid N \ \& \ E) \approx 0$  would be much stronger than the Reliability premiss, though Plantinga eventually claims to show just that.

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**NATURALISM AND MATERIALISM.** To see how naturalism gets in trouble with reliability, we need to spell out naturalism a bit further. Plantinga's first claim is:

(4-4) Naturalism + Darwinism = Materialism.

The clearest argument for this equation is given by Dawkins. Supposing that there are immaterial souls, how did they ever evolve in the course of evolution? This seems impossible. If they didn't, then this should undermine the evolutionary theory. Hence materialism: not the view that electrons and fields must count as 'material' on a par with cabbages and kings, but rather the rejection of the idealism and dualism of traditional theology: no souls, no free will.

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Plantinga's further claim is: Beliefs have neuro-physiological (NP) properties, but they also have contents. This latter fact may be registered as the 'possession of content properties'. How are these two classes of properties related?

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There are two options to consider:

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*Reductive materialism* Content properties just are NP properties.

*Non-reductive materialism* Content properties supervene on NP properties.

*Remark 4.* A quick explanation of supervenience...

Plantinga's argument will come in two flavours, dealing with non-reductive and reductive materialism, respectively.

**DEBUNKING NON-REDUCTIVE MATERIALISM.** We aim to defend the Reliability premiss. Let's agree on the basic outline of the evolution of capacities. Ignoring random mutations, genetic drift and possibly other irregular phenomena, we might say:

*Natural selection* For every species  $x$ , there is a type  $y$  of ecological factors, and there is a capacity ('indicator')  $z$ :  $z$  has evolved in  $x$  to cope (reasonably, most of the time, sort of) well with  $z$ .

Well, supposing that our 'indicators' are reliable, and that behaviour is adaptive, this still provides no evidence for the reliability of beliefs—namely, that beliefs are *true*. Evolutionary adaptations need only progress as far as ensure that beliefs ('cognitive equipment' generally) are 'good enough' to contribute to survival and reproduction. Hence, though the probability of NP properties being reliable is much higher than  $\frac{1}{2}$ , the probability of beliefs being reliable is, by the principle of indifference, just  $\frac{1}{2}$ . Now to the reliability  $R$  of faculties: they should produce, say,  $\frac{3}{4}$  of true beliefs to count as reliable. But since the probability of each belief being true is just  $\frac{1}{2}$ , then the Reliability premiss follows (actually, something stronger:  $P(R \mid \dots) \approx 0$ ).

**PLANTINGA'S ARGUMENT SUMMARISED.** If our capacities, including cognitive ones, have evolved to assist us with survival and reproduction, then there is no warrant for the reliability of our beliefs with regard to truth. But if our beliefs, as a rule, are not so reliable, then the beliefs in evolution and naturalism aren't reliable either. So if you believe both in naturalism and in evolution, then your beliefs are inconsistent in this sense, that as soon as you acquire these beliefs, you also acquire their 'defeaters'. Hence:

- (i) Assuming naturalism and evolutionary theory, our beliefs are likely unreliable: the Reliability premiss.
- (ii) If we accept naturalism and evolutionary theory ( $N \& E$ ) and the premiss (i), then we have an undercutting defeater for  $R$ .
- (iii) To have a defeater for  $R$  is also to have a defeater for  $N \& E$ .
- (iv) If accepting the conjunction  $N \& E$  leads to having a defeater for it, then  $N \& E$  can't rationally be accepted.
- (v) Hence  $N \& E$  can't rationally be accepted.

*Remark 5.* Let's compare rebutting and undercutting defeaters...

**POSSIBLE REACTION.** Reactions to Plantinga's argument would take the form of a polylemma:

- (i) There is *ab initio* nothing surprising why the epistemic capacities of different species should diverge (i.e. the argument doesn't get off the ground; also: fine-tuning considerations).
- (ii) Wrong conditionalisation!
- (iii) Spurious conception of truth: no distinction between the reliability of NP properties and of content properties.
- (iv) Humans are not evolutionarily close to apes or mammals: they stand outside of evolution.
- (v) The universe is simple.
- (vi) The puzzle is sufficiently explained by a certain mutation that gained humans an extraordinary advantage from the get-go (=language, with cumulative knowledge as a result).
- (vii) Scepticism and a *reductio* of the evolutionary theory: the universe is nothing like we think it is, and we have no knowledge of it (or at most *very little*).