On my Inability to Discuss Spirituality with my Peers

Naturalism

The term “naturalism” has no very precise meaning in contemporary philosophy. Its current usage derives from debates in America in the first half of the last century. The self-proclaimed “naturalists” from that period included John Dewey, Ernest Nagel, Sidney Hook and Roy Wood Sellars. These philosophers aimed to ally philosophy more closely with science. They urged that reality is exhausted by nature, containing nothing “supernatural”, and that the scientific method should be used to investigate all areas of reality, including the “human spirit”

Naturalism, post on Stanford’s Plato website

Ever since high school, I found that more and more of my peers were identifying themselves as agnostic or atheist. I found it quite interesting, given I was raised in a religious household and viewed that as the default position for most people. The stance of atheism itself never quite made sense to me, but my friends never really seemed to care all that much to talk to me about it.

In my freshman year of university, I enrolled in a class called “The Theory of Knowledge'' with Philip Atkins, and there we learned about epistemology. Talking to my peers, roommates, and other general acquaintances I made throughout freshman year and in the class, I realized that most people were apatheistic, and naturalist in the ontological sense. What I mean by this is that the question of whether God exists, or whether there is a spiritual world that the human self can interact with exists, does not matter. Or rather, those questions are entirely irrelevant.

Empiricism

Empiricism, in philosophy, is the view that all concepts originate in experience, that all concepts are about or applicable to things that can be experienced, or that all rationally acceptable beliefs or propositions are justifiable or knowable only through experience.

Encyclopedia Britannica

The idea that everything that exists can be measured by science was apparently a belief that many of my friends had. I think this idea that empiricism is the “highest” source of knowledge stems from science classes in the K-12 public education system. Students in public schools are taught about the history of scientific achievements, how we went from thinking that the four main elements composed all that existed to atoms being the foundation of all material things. The idea with science in school was that everything we needed to know could be tested and discovered through a scientific method.

David Hoffman

This idea, however, is erroneous. Science, however good a tool it may be, only brings us closer to what we perceive to be correct. This point about perception is key. I was talking to my roommate the other day about work, and I brought up the topic of a project I was working on for my senior year capstone project. It was a simple dungeon crawler game, but this sparked some interest in him. At some point as we were talking, he asked me if I knew who David Hoffman was. He suggested I listen to the Lex Fridman podcast where David Hoffman was apparently a guest. I later decided to listen through it, and in the introduction he says:

“So the technical question that I and my team asked was: what is the probability that natural selection would shape sensory systems to see true properties of objective reality? And to our surprise, we found that the answer is precisely zero.”

Lex Fridman Podcast #293

Thanks to Alex for bringing this guy up to me, the podcast was really enlightening overall. David Hoffman is a Cognitive Science professor at the University of California, Los Angeles. He and his team ran a variety of simulations and did some probabilistic analysis and found that our capacity to learn information about what really is “true” is actually completely limited to whatever sensory capabilities we have evolved to have. What that means is we can only really see what we are capable of seeing. That might seem obvious, but it does present a problem to anyone who thinks that everything that is real can be observed or measured by humans.

Donald Hoffman’s belief about natural selection and human capability is just one approach to dealing with empiricists and naturalists. Going even deeper than human perception, we can get to the topic of science itself. Let’s get into a brief 101 about inductive and deductive reasoning. Inductive reasoning is a type of reasoning wherein the truth of the premises makes the conclusion potentially more likely but does not guarantee its truth. The foundation of science is built upon induction- we establish hypotheses and then continually test them. Induction is an ampliative style of reasoning. That means that the conclusion overextends the information found in the premises. A simple example could be that for a European scientist, all observed swans are white (all swan species in Europe are white), therefore all swans are white. This is false, as there are black swans in New Zealand. In deductive reasoning, which is non ampliative, there is no more information found in the conclusion than in the premises, and this guarantees the truth of the conclusion. The classic case would be: all men are mortal, Socrates is a man, therefore Socrates is mortal.

The case of swans, if expanded on its scope, does actually apply to the general principle of science, which is that our beliefs in science are generalized by trials we are capable of performing. A person might argue that scientific inquiry being limited to human capacity isn’t problematic because we will eventually develop the tools to gain a better understanding of things later on in the future, but that would still fail to address the point Hoffman was making about natural selection only giving us the ability to see what is advantageous for our species to see.

The attitude of students throughout K-12 persists even into college. I find that many of my peers have all but lost any sense of belief in the metaphysical. Science has the answer, or will find the answer, they say. If you ask for a discussion with them, it’s always some sort of circular appeal to authority where they outsource everything they know to scientists whose works they have never read. It’s easy to believe in science because the majority of people believe in science and the stance of empiricism is essentially mainstream in society at this point. I’m not saying people should reject science, but they certainly shouldn’t outright base their whole belief system on it without realizing that it has major flaws. I’m not even getting into the various problems of induction and issues with falsificationism. There is so much baggage to deal with when it comes to taking empirical fact as the pinnacle of knowledge.

School

This discussion of the K-12 education system is based on my personal experience at school. John Dewey was mentioned as one of the most famous proponents of naturalism, and his contributions to American education are not minor by any means. I have much respect for him after taking “The Socio-Cultural Foundations of Education in America” at Temple, but I cannot help but notice how there is a naturalist lining in the way education is taught. Obviously, someone who went to a private or religious school would have a different perspective, but in my experience, the way scientific knowledge is taught in schools is very simple: we write down a hypothesis based on what we know, and then we perform an experiment. The results we get, should they conform to the current scientific paradigm (Read: Kuhn’s “The Structure of Scientific Revolutions”), can be accepted. If the results don’t make sense, then we either have a crisis, or the student probably just made a mistake in the execution of the experiment. But either way, the point is that science is something that is testable and absolute in the K-12 education system. My science teachers not once attributed any natural thing to God; they taught us that everything we know through science is testable and true.

Getting back to the main topic of discussion, I can’t seem to have a decent conversation with anyone about our spirit. Whenever the topic of religiosity or limitations of science come into discussion it’s always a “interesting that you believe that” or “I don’t really agree”, and it never goes deeper than that. There was no prying into the minds of the people I would talk to, as there was always a barrier when it came to this point of discussion. Is it because they’ve never been challenged when it comes to the topic of their belief in science and the spiritual? Even so, I am here, presenting a challenge for them. The scourge of apathy toward theism begins corrupting the minds of youth from the moment they can read, and it has shackled people from having any interest in learning about what lies beyond what can be experienced. These peers who have been challenged take that discussion we had and sort of forget about it. Nobody else is going to challenge them for being apathetic because nobody else cares either. A once in a blue moon discussion isn’t enough to prompt them to dig deep and learn more about why some people have such strong conviction in that which cannot be seen.

The Inevitability of Faith

“Atheists waged a 70-year war on religious belief in the Soviet Union. The Communist Party destroyed churches, mosques and temples; it executed religious leaders; it flooded the schools and media with anti-religious propaganda; and it introduced a belief system called “scientific atheism,” complete with atheist rituals, proselytizers, and a promise of worldly salvation.”

Paul Froese, Forced Secularization in Soviet Russia: Why an Atheistic Monopoly Failed

The USSR would convert places of worship to “atheist churches” and there they would promote worldly salvation to all of its followers. Stalin and other leaders of the USSR believed that with the erasure of capitalism from society, religiosity would likewise disappear. Despite seven decades of effort to remove religion from society and promote atheism, atheists now make up just 5% of the Russian population.

J. D. Unwin

Talking to some of my classmates, it seems like they believe the very concept of religion itself is antiquated and ought to be a thing of the past. Atheism is obviously the correct stance because God and spirits are not measurable. Religion and spirituality have existed since the man began to walk, and erasing that would be like removing a foundational part of his being. Given the case of the USSR, is it really realistic to believe that religion is going to go away any time soon? J. D. Unwin, who wrote *Sex and Culture*, a research document that was highly praised by Aldous Huxley, found that there were four “great patterns of human culture”. They were: zoistic (focused on day-to-day life with no desire to understand reality, described by Unwin as inert or a dead culture), monistic (bearing superstitious beliefs and/or giving special treatment to the dead), deistic (attributing powers of nature to a god or gods), and rationalistic (use rational thinking to understand nature and make day-to-day decisions).

“U.S. church membership was 70% or higher from 1937 through 1976, falling modestly to an average of 68% in the 1970s through the 1990s. The past 20 years have seen an acceleration in the drop-off, with a 20-percentage-point decline since 1999 and more than half of that change occurring since the start of the current decade… Although the United States is one of the more religious countries, particularly among Western nations, it is far less religious than it used to be. Barely three-quarters of Americans now identify with a religion and only about half claim membership in a church, synagogue or mosque.”

Gallup, U.S. Church Membership Down Sharply in Past Two Decades

“Whatever the deeper causes, religious disaffiliation in the U.S. is being fueled by switching patterns that started “snowballing” from generation to generation in the 1990s. The core population of “nones” has an increasingly “sticky” identity as it rolls forward, and it is gaining a lot more people than it is shedding, in a dynamic that has a kind of demographic momentum. Christians have experienced the opposite pattern. With each generation, progressively fewer adults retain the Christian identity they were raised with, which in turn means fewer parents are raising their children in Christian households.”

Pew Research Center, How U.S. Religious Composition has Changed in Recent Decades

While it may be tempting to say that the United States has a rationalistic culture, I would beg to differ. The majority of people in my experience, have no real desire to explore nature of their own volition. They instead opt to appeal to authority and accept whatever conforms to the preconceived beliefs and prejudices they have been indoctrinated with through the K-12 curriculum. We are closer to the state of a zoistic culture: “Some societies neither erected temples nor paid any kind of post-funeral attention to their dead.” Those who do not actively partake in this portion of American culture may consider it a generalization, however with some research one can easily find that the *rate* at which churches are being built in the United States has been on the decline. With the growth of irreligiosity in this country, there is no doubt that we are going to be an inert society.

The research of J. D. Unwin also found that with this dead culture, there would be a few individuals who have “high energy” and they would transform society into a monistic or deistic one. He says, “the history of these societies consists of a series of monotonous repetitions,” and so it is clear that the state of our society falling to atheism isn’t new. The loss of religious belief has happened before, but religiousness will always experience resurgence. Just as what happened with the USSR, the USA may see itself reverting to a state of religiosity in the future.

Perhaps there is a reason that such beliefs never die out. Millennia of traditions of worship and intellectual discussion pertaining to the topic of God and His creation is not something that can simply be stamped out of humanity over the course of a few generations. There is so much we do not know about the world, and so much still that we are simply incapable of knowing. Why is it difficult for me to find someone to have a fulfilling conversation about this topic with?

Trauma

I am a child of two Bangladeshi immigrants to the United States. My father was a devout practicing Muslim, and he often encouraged me to pray in my youth. So much so that it acted as a deterrent. Father wasn’t home very often, and when he did come home I was always so excited and happy but that was always met with “Fahim, go make sure you do your salah,” which felt like a hassle and chore. At some point, he decided I was old enough to where he decided it was time to inform me of the punishments pertaining to what would happen if I did not complete my prayers.

I was terrified. The promise of everlasting fire was so worrisome to me that I couldn’t make sense of it all. How could this almighty God who created us desire to torture us so? The same God that my father said loved all of us would threaten those who did not submit completely with punishments so severe I could not even bear to write them? This was one of the biggest push factors that steered me away from the topic of religion.

Thus began the phase in my life where I maintained agnosticism toward the topic of religion. Perhaps God does exist, but I wasn’t sure who or which one was the right one. It could also very well have been the case that God didn’t exist, as in school I was taught that all things that are known have tangible evidence that we can work with. So long as we are without any hinting evidence of something, we can be assured that it likely does not exist. Even though I held this position, I couldn’t help but be drawn to the topic of religion itself.

The experience that I just described might be relatable for some, though others might have had significantly worse experiences that have resulted in them completely losing interest in anything pertaining to that “R” word. I can somewhat sympathize with those suffering from some kind of religious trauma, as I also experienced something like it at that time in my life.

Motivation

The trauma resulting from awful experiences in the past is something that I try not to take lightly. If I know someone’s perception of spirituality or religion is framed by something that happened to them, of course I try to tread the topic carefully. Knowing that at some point in my life, I certainly would not have enjoyed a conversation about God or anything related, I would not want to cause any undue distress to any of my peers.

How did I find motivation to move on from that idea of what religion is and yearn to learn more about it? Well, I suppose it had quite a bit to do with my concern that people don’t really know anything. Not many people talk about it, but I would like to have a somewhat consistent worldview. David Diaz quotes James Sire in his blog post “What is a Worldview and Who Cares?” with the following:

“A worldview is a commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be expressed in a story or in a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) that we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic constitution of reality, and that provides the foundation on which we live and move and have our being.”

You can read more about it if you look up the post title, but by saying I want a consistent worldview, it means that I would like to have a perspective on life that provides me with a rational explanation for literally everything. When I was younger, I had no idea what this was, but I did have a feeling that I needed a consistent worldview to feel grounded in reality. In my mind, knowing that we as humans don’t ‘know’ anything at all is quite scary. I could have gone the very troubling route of external world skepticism and established a nihilistic perspective on life. Instead, I decided that I would fill the gaps of reality with God.

Inspiration

“Every field of science has unanswered questions and gaps in our understanding. Scientists typically view these as open research questions. Others sometimes argue that if science can’t explain how something happened, then God must be the explanation. Such arguments are called “god-of-the-gaps” arguments. The risk in these arguments is that science is always developing. If gaps in scientific knowledge are the basis for belief in God, then as scientists fill in the gaps, the evidence for God disappears.”

Biologos, Are gaps in scientific knowledge evidence for God?

I realized that science and math (surprisingly; Read about Gödel's incompleteness theorems) would never actually be able to provide people with a ‘true’ understanding of reality (we would only understand what we are capable of understanding, or what we are “allowed” to understand as Hoffman would say). Thus, in order to have a complete worldview I would need something to explain what cannot be explained. The only other thing I could think of was religion.

Through a convoluted process of elimination that would require its own essay, I came to religion after many years of avoiding it. A bittersweet reunion but God provided me with sufficient explanation for all that which occurs. However, at this point I no longer believe in the God of the gaps. Rather, I believe that God has an active role in all that which occurs, and I believe that we have a compatibilist form of free will. That means that creatures have the ability to choose an action as they please, however it is God who allows the action to occur in the first place.

This can lead to some issues that people may have with religion, for example the Problem of Evil. Issues such as this, and other paradoxes pertaining to God are not new. It would be quite arrogant to think that after thousands of years of organized religion, not a single person was smart enough to come up with some kind of response or explanation to whatever issues are posed or have been posed by those who seek to disprove the claims of religions.

In any case, now that I have found my consistent worldview, I seek to have conversations with people in order to challenge theirs. Are people having a consistent set of truths in their belief system? Or is it a puzzle of various facts that don’t fit together and they don’t realize it? Either way, it would be interesting to have a long talk with a person about their ideas and how they find (or choose not to find) explanations for things in reality.

Conversation

The ideal conversation for me would be one where I could ask someone their thoughts on an idea, and they are informed enough about their own beliefs and other beliefs that they can justify their position. The “I don’t know enough about this,” comments are honestly quite a turn off and just make the effort seem like a waste. Doesn’t it seem reasonable that if someone has an opinion on a topic, they should know why they hold that opinion? Well, I can’t really force anyone to talk to me about anything. It’s very easy to have an opinion and then just refuse to talk about it, but that doesn’t really make for a productive space, does it? Talking about cosmology, theories of time, the various historic cases made for God’s existence by famous religious scholars, the limitations of science and history, and whatever else would be quite interesting, no?

Of course, there are plenty of people on campus who do know about all of that stuff, but many of those who are in my sphere are already religious and at that point, we wouldn’t really be challenging each other since we would agree on the majority of things. The best conversations in my experience, have been with agnostic people who have dedicated some time to learning more about metaphysics. I once had a discussion with a naturalist for seven hours about the reliability of historical testimony with regard to miracles and the ability of science to verify miracles. I would love to have another discussion like that again, but those kinds of people are not easy to come by.

Perhaps that person can challenge me in my beliefs as well, as I was not always religious but only came to it through learning about epistemology and the philosophy of science. These types of conversations come very close to my heart simply because the topic of religion is multifaceted, and I came to it after doing my own soul searching. Considering how so many people on college campuses do not affiliate with any form of organized religion, I thought it would be easy to find people to talk to. Unfortunately, the opposite was true as many people are irreligious due to religious trauma or other reasons and aren’t able to defend their positions in drawn out conversations. I am open to friendly discussion with anyone, and I pray for the day that more of my peers will take the time to learn what they believe and why they believe it.

For now, I sit alone in my classroom, as an antique of the past. Apathy is bliss.