**Title**

**Abstract**

In recent years there has been much debate and controversy over the content and meaning of the metaphilosophical position of naturalism in analytic philosophy. Naturalism is a metaphilosophy that means many different things in analytic philosophy, but its content can be broadly and generally summarised as the assertion that all that exists in the universe is natural. Nothing exists which is not natural, supernatural. A corollary of this is usually the assertion that only what is explained and described by the natural sciences is natural. The biggest (and some might contend perhaps the only) issue of current debate about naturalism is how naturalism has accounted for human value. Naturalism was previously committed to the position that discourse about human normativity was their reducible to, or “non-factual” in comparison to natural scientific discourse. There has since developed a movement in analytic philosophy that it is possible to be a naturalist without regarding human value as ontologically inferior to natural scientific discourse.

This thesis looks at the work of John McDowell. The thesis is divided into three parts. The first part discusses and assesses McDowell's “liberal naturalist” account of human value—his attempt at accommodating human normativity within a non-reductive and non-non-factualist naturalistic framework. It is argued that John McDowell comes close to succeeding at his aim. However his philosophy leads to an unacceptable dualistic account of nature.

The second part of the thesis looks at the very recent work of Joseph Rouse at attempting to overcome this dualism within John McDowell's left-Sellarsian research program. It is argued that Rouse's philosophy doesn't succeed in its aim at being non-reductive. As Rouse observes, his cutting-edge reformulation of the biological origins of normativity falls on the “objective side of the Kantian antinomy”.

The last part of the thesis discusses and assesses the work of Alison Stone. Stone gives an interpretation of Hegel's naturalistic account of the universe. It is argued that this orthodox Hegelian naturalism completes McDowell's liberal naturalism. Instead of leaving the space of nature divided between the realm of law and the space of reasons, as McDowell does, Hegel fully inflates the space of reasons to encompass the space of nature, without leading to the pitfall of coherentism that McDowell criticises early on in *Mind and World*.

**Introduction**

*Overview*

John McDowell in *Mind and World* adopts the position that human value can be a part of nature. McDowell has a specific position on *how* human value is natural, however. McDowell does not regard human value as derivative of or inferior to natural scientific facts. This is normally how naturalists account for human value. The aim of my thesis is therefore to defend McDowell's conception of human value: that it is *sui generis*. Despite this, I will not be defending all of McDowell's “system”. McDowell's system depends on two key arguments, one epistemological and one metaphysical. I find McDowell's epistemological argument persuasive but agree with several commentators that McDowell's metaphysical argument is deeply flawed. The rest of my thesis is devoted to exploring the consequences of accepting the first part of McDowell's system while substituting different metaphysical pictures of how the first part of McDowell's system can play out.

As I explain several times below, I have a broader, more political aim with this thesis. I am aiming to combat a particular conception of science that sees it as a practice that reveals a value-free universe through value-free methods. I argue that this picture of science and the universe is deeply flawed for both methodological and ethical reasons.

*Topic and purpose*

Topic

The topic of my thesis concerns the philosophical position called “naturalism”. Naturalism is a position that is familiar across both the analytic and continental philosophical divide, but it is particularly important in the analytic sphere because it is a position for which there is a very wide and broad degree of subscription.

Speaking very generally, a naturalist holds to the following meta-positions. The first is the rejection of the “supernatural”. Naturalists strive towards what Joseph Rouse terms a “naturalistic self-understanding”.[[1]](#footnote-2) That is, naturalists hold that nothing exists or happens in the universe outside of nature. The idea here is that we must understand ourselves *as* natural through *natural means*, and in no other way. The second meta-position to which naturalists hold concerns the status of the natural sciences. Rouse writes:

At a minimum, naturalists regard scientific understanding as relevant to all significant aspects of human life and only countenance ways of thinking and forms of life that are *consistent* with that understanding. More stringent versions of naturalism take scientific understanding to be *sufficient* for our intellectual and theoretical projects and perhaps even for practical guidance in other aspects of life.[[2]](#footnote-3)

The third meta-position is a rejection of a “first philosophy”. Naturalists hold that there is no understanding of the world that is “prior to or authoritative over scientific understanding”.[[3]](#footnote-4)

Purpose

In recent decades, this very popular philosophical position has come under devastating criticism. Much of this criticism concerns the description and explanation naturalists often give of normative dimensions to human experience. Given the very important place naturalists give to the natural sciences in their account of the universe, naturalists give very poor accounts of human value.

For example, two popular naturalist accounts of human normativity are reductionism and non-factualism. Reductionism asserts that discourse about human value is reducible to natural scientific discourse. It asserts that human value does not have any independent reality outside of the natural sciences. Non-factualism, on the other hand, does not claim that human normativity can be reduced to natural scientific explanations, but instead holds that discourse about human value is a benign falsehood. In other words while non-factualism holds that there are no such things as moral facts or evaluations about states of affairs, such discourse is harmless.

Such widely popular accounts of human experience are clearly unacceptable for explaining the universe and humanity's place in it. The ethical implications of such a metaphysics are worrying. These accounts obviously lead to a nihilistic or relativistic approach to human normativity, or at best make it seem mystical as to why humans have value-laden experience in the first place.

The purpose of my thesis is to investigate whether it is possible to formulate a naturalistic understanding of the universe without the devastating drawbacks of the “bald” naturalism described above. I want to investigate some attempts at building a “liberal” or “broad” naturalism, and take their conceptual toolkits and improve upon the solutions they have offered up.

*Potential significance*

My thesis targets the key issues that are currently being discussed and debated by the analytic philosophical movement called “Liberal Naturalism”. By producing my thesis, I hope to contribute to this emerging research program, and help drive it forward. Liberal naturalism aims to give a naturalist account of the universe that includes the independent reality of human normativity. This is a very new and exciting research program, and is attracting a lot of interest from philosophers all over the world.

The debate throws G. W. F. Hegel into the spotlight as a key figure in providing fecund resources for grappling with the core issues of liberal naturalism. Hegel has historically been a slighted and misunderstood philosopher in analytic philosophy, but thanks to the work of John McDowell, Robert Brandom, Terry Pinkard, Robert Pippin, Stephen Houlgate, Paul Redding, Willem deVries, Richard Dien Winfield, Kenneth Westphal and Alison Stone, Hegelian-inspired philosophy is now seen as a powerful and insightful tool for dealing with important philosophical issues. My thesis is squarely situated within this research context.

*Framework and research questions*

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework that I will be using to answer my main research questions is borrowed from the philosophical tradition of Wilfrid Sellars. The interpretation of Sellars I will be following will be that of what Joseph Rouse describes as the Pittsburgh left-Sellarsians, chiefly John McDowell, Robert Brandom, and Willem deVries. These philosophers are distinguished from their right-Sellarsian colleagues by the way they place key pride of place in the role that normative social institutions play in constituting human experience. Right-Sellarsians are to be identified with their emphasis on foundationalism and representationalism in explaining the content of human experience.

The key concepts I will be using to guide my argument and assess its success are (a) the “space of reasons”; (b) the “space of concepts”; (c) the “realm of law”; and the “space of nature”. These concepts form the backbone of my investigation. Everything I argue will be related to these key concepts. For an explanation of what these concepts mean, and how they impact the answer of my research question, see my literature review.

Research Question(s)

The overall research question that I will answer in my thesis is:

*What is the status of the space of reasons within the space of nature?*

As I will explain in my literature review, the Sellarsian tradition of analytic philosophy conceives the space of reasons as a logical space that humans inhabit that permits them to evaluate each others' social commitments. The space of nature is simply the logical space in which anything inhabits if it is real. So in plain English my research question can be formulated as:

*To what extent, if at all, is human value a component of nature?*

The obvious corollary to this question will also be answered:

***How*** *is human value natural?*

In addition to these overarching general research questions, there are a whole suit of meta-questions I must answer. These feature prominently in my literature review. The following are a small sample:

*What is the status of the space of concepts in the space of reasons?*

*Must the space of reasons and the space of concepts be identified?*

*Is it possible to give a description of human biology that doesn't reduce the normativity of human experience to a mere description?*

This last meta-question is actually a variation on the main research question, as a lot of them are.

*Limitations*

I will only be discussing the issue of naturalism within the context of three scholar's work. These three scholars are distinguished academics in their field. They are John McDowell, Joseph Rouse, and Alison Stone. For a detail discussion of the content of their work I will be investigating, please see my literature review. These three authors deal exhaustively with the Sellarsian approach to naturalism. I will only be focusing on naturalism within the context of the Sellarsian philosophical tradition. The concept of naturalism means far too many different things across analytic philosophy to give a coherent discussion without limitation, and attempting to be encyclopedic about the position would impair the thesis from having proper critical force. The Sellarsian approach, in any case, is now being seen as a main contender for the preferred framework through which to give content to the position naturalism. While being synoptic would give more context, focusing more on recent developments in the discipline allows me to explain why naturalism espouses so much interest and controversy.

**Design and Methodology**

*Overall approach and rationale*

This thesis aims to provide the outline of an answer to the criticisms that commentators have leveled against John McDowell's formulation of liberal naturalism. There are three parts to the thesis. Within each part features two chapters. The first chapter of each part will give an exposition of each author's framework for dealing with the issue of human value and naturalism. The second chapter of each part will be a criticism and assessment of that author's framework. The sequence of arguments I consider and assess in the thesis aim to put into practice the main leitmotif of my offered solution to the issue of naturalism and human value: dialectical thought. Each proceeding stage of my thesis considers higher and more perfect answers to problem put forth my the thesis's overall conceptual framework. In this way the thesis aims to practice Hegel's dialectical method. For a determinate demonstration of the content of this method, please see the literature review.

The main idea behind dialectical thought is immanent critique. Dialectical thought aims to be suppositionless. That is, it aims never to make any foundational or static assumptions about the topic it deals with. The idea is to start from any particular set of assumptions, and circle outwards and gain an absolute perspective of the complete context in which any given topic is embedded. The contradictions within the content of each argument drive the process forward and outward, allowing an answer to be given at the end. As I say in the introduction to my literature review, my thesis will approach McDowell's “system” at first as if it make sense, and will then push its assumptions to their logical conclusions. The results of this process will yield the answer to the research question.

**Chapter 1** introduces McDowell's epistemological and metaphysical arguments for his specific “system” for solving the problem of human value and naturalism.

**Chapter 2** considers the criticisms that have been made against McDowell's “system”, in particular Christoph Halbig's arguments that McDowell's metaphysical arguments lead to a dualism between nature and reason.

**Chapter 3** is an exploration of Joseph Rouse's very recent work *Articulating the World*. Joseph Rouse attempts to synthesise the dualism in McDowell into a unified account of natural science that allows normativity to exist without reduction or being treated as non-factual.

**Chapter 4**is a critical examination of Rouse's “system”. The negative conclusion that I reach on Rouse is one that Rouse is aware of: the weakness of his approach is that his account of human evolution and the natural sciences risks reducing human normativity to a mere description. It risks, as he says, coming down on the “objective side of the Kantian antinomy”.

**Chapter 5** is an exposition of Alison Stone's interpretation of Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature*. In it, the key ideas attendant in Halbig's response to McDowell are developed fully. The overall concepts of essence, teleology, and intersubjectivity are developed.

**Chapter 6**is a critical evaluation of Stone's offered solution to the problem of reason and nature in McDowell. I argue that Stone's “system” is successful and points the way to a rapproachment between human value and nature. A re-enchantment of nature.

*Ethical considerations*

The thesis is a literature review. It will not be performing any experiments or collecting data from anyone or any thing. As a result I am confident my thesis will only require low risk ethics clearance at my university, Notre Dame.

1. Joseph Rouse, *Articulating the World: Conceptual Understanding and the Scientific Image* (University of Chicago Press, 2015) 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)