

I. Naturalism: The World as We See It

Sometimes life seems empty. What is supposed to make us happy just doesn't.

Metallica had a song a few years ago called "Fade to Black". They say, "I cannot stand this hell I feel; emptiness is filling me to the point of agony." Just trying to think of a reason to get up every morning is too much for a lot of people.

All of this is really about worldviews. Everyone has a worldview. It is inescapable. It's part of being human. It is your explanation of the world and your interpretation of what happens around you. It is also your way of living. You live out your worldview all the time. Your worldview is how you answer the ultimate questions of life – Questions of origin, meaning, morality, and destiny. It forms the foundation of your life, and from that you develop values: the preferences and priorities you have in your life are seen in how you spend your time and your money, the kind of music you like, the movies you watch, and the friends you hang out with.

Every movie, every song, every television show has at its foundation a worldview. They are telling us how they believe and what is important in life.

Most worldviews fall into one of three categories: Naturalism (which we will talk about now), Transcendentalism, and Theism. Over the next few sessions we will explore these three categories of worldviews to give you as much information as you need to recognize the worldviews around you and inside you.

Naturalism, as the name implies, believes that everything that exists is natural. There is nothing supernatural. Everything that exists is physical. Nothing is metaphysical. From the smallest subatomic particles to the largest galaxies, everything is simply a matter of ... matter!

A lot of other "isms" fall under the category of Naturalism: atheism, materialism, secularism and modernism. Different words but the same basic ideas. They say there is no God and that humans are merely a collection of physical reactions – biological, chemical, and electrical. Everything we are and everything we become has purely physical causes and explanations. Even religion, which is so prevalent among people all over the world, is said to have a physical source. Sigmund Freud, for example, said that belief in God is a physically derived psychological need for a cosmic father figure.

Here's a simple perspective of Naturalism. Imagine this square represents everything that exists. This square consists of nature: all the matter that exists, all the laws of the universe, and the forces of nature. Outside the square is, of course, nothing.

In a naturalistic worldview, science can give us the answer to just about everything we need to know. Science, after all, studies the physical world, and if that is all that exists, then that is all the knowledge that we need.

That means that everything about you is physically determined. Your genetic makeup and your social environment determine the kind of person you are or at least set the boundaries of the kind of person you can become.

What does all this mean? Well, it means that the universe began as a huge accident and will end as a huge accident. You are an accident, too. You are an episode between two oblivions. There is no ultimate accountability for our actions, so we really don't have to worry about what happens after we die. No life after death, no God to answer to, and no final judgment. What freedom! The reality that there are no ultimate consequences is frequently declared the "good news" of atheism.

II. Naturalism and the Ultimate Questions

How does Naturalism answer the ultimate questions?

First, Naturalism answers the question of origins very simply: however the universe came into existence, it came about by natural means. In other words, there was no God or Supreme Being that created the universe. Of course, this is the most fundamental question of all philosophy. If there was no God to create the universe, then we are on our own. The vast, cold universe gave rise to a freak event – us. There is no reason, no purpose for us to be here. We just are. Even our desire to have a purpose is a freak event. But whatever the reason we are here, it all has a physical cause.

The second ultimate question, that of meaning, therefore, is left wide open. What kind of purpose do we give ourselves if we are derived only of physical causes with no real Creator to give us a reason to live?

How do we determine what is right and wrong? The naturalistic worldview very simply says that we determine it ourselves. You decide or at least we as a group decide what is right and wrong. Use your common sense.

Some will say that whoever is in power determines the rules. You must obey them or suffer the consequences. If you don't like their rules, then overthrow them so that you can be in power and set the rules.

The most common moral code is simply stated: do what you want to do, just don't hurt anybody else. This sounds like it makes a lot of sense and, in fact, is the rule that most people live by.

The final ultimate question, destiny, is also answered very simply by naturalists. If Naturalism is true, then when we die, that's it! We cease to exist because we are only physical beings.

III. Naturalism and the Meaning of Life

One of the nagging problems with Naturalism is finding meaning in life. Most people are not too happy about living an accidental life. It just doesn't fit with what we see around us and feel inside us.

But Naturalism says, "There is no meaning in life. Get over it." So, I must find meaning IN my life because there is no meaning OF life. And I can choose any reason I want. There's not right or wrong. This reminds me of *Dead Poet's Society*, where Robin Williams tells the boys in his class to "seize the day" because one day they are going to be dead. Sounds good ... but still pretty depressing.

Some people who believe a naturalistic worldview aren't as nice as Robin Williams. They are called nihilists. The word means "nothing." They say that life is nothing so don't even try to fool yourself by making up reasons to live. Nihilists usually don't care much for schools, governments, or religions. They see them as imposing on their freedom to live out their own empty lives. You hear this a lot from extreme rock groups who scream about hate, anger, and anarchy.

A lot of people don't have the stomach for nihilism so they take another approach. If there is no God, then I can do what I want. There are no consequences for any of my actions. Eat, drink, and be merry, like Bill Murray in *Groundhog Day*. Once he realized there was no accountability for his life, he went crazy with the food, the girls, and everything. He got pretty tired of it after a while.

In fact, a lot of people get tired of Naturalism. Oh, they like the idea of there being no God to be accountable to, but the emptiness and despair are just too much. Naturalism does provide some limited perspective about the physical world, but we are still left with a reality that is ultimately meaningless. Where do I go for help?

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