

DOI: 10.14394/eidos.jpc.2023.0009

Robin Friedman
Independent Scholar
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6841-3774>
Rbnfriedman@yahoo.com

Responses to Naturalism¹

Review: Paul Giladi, ed.,
Responses to Naturalism: Critical Perspectives from Idealism and Pragmatism
(New York, NY, Routledge, 2020), 330 pages.²

During the pandemic, I have participated in an online reading group on Henri Bergson. Our group has studied Bergson's *Time and Free Will* and *Matter and Memory* and is about to continue with *Creative Evolution*. Bergson had a large following early in his career with his flair for writing and with his development of an exciting philosophy that offered an alternative to the prevailing scientific naturalism of his time. The scientific naturalism of Bergson's day has continued to dominate philosophical thinking even as the criticisms of the position have grown. Exploring Bergson and the way in which he tried to raise and address what he perceived as difficulties with naturalism helped me appreciate the importance and continued persistence of questions about this position and its alternatives and encouraged me to pursue these questions in further study.

Although Bergson does not have a prominent place in this outstanding new volume of essays edited by Paul Giladi, *Responses to Naturalism: Critical Perspectives from Idealism and Pragmatism*, the book helped me follow through from my ongoing study of Bergson's work. The book shows the development and continued dominance of the naturalistic position in philosophy. The book also shows the increasing efforts by contemporary philosophers to make a creative use of the history of philosophy in order to engage with contemporary

1) I thank Brandon Beasley for his earlier review which lead me to read and review the book for myself. I also thank my friend, the chemist and philosopher of science Eric Scerri whose thought reminded me of the themes of this book.

2) Hereafter RN.

naturalism and to appropriate what is of value in it and in other philosophical traditions in moving forward. The book suggests how various strands of idealism and pragmatism may have much to contribute in formulating alternatives to or enriching philosophical naturalism.

The twelve essays in the collection are arranged in two parts of six, covering idealist and pragmatist responses to naturalism. Recent philosophers receiving substantial attention in the volume include Putnam, Price, McDowell, Quine, and Sellars. Idealistically inclined thinkers discussed include Kant, Hegel, and Collingwood. Among the classical pragmatists, only Peirce receives sustained attention. Most of the essays adopt a historically-informed approach. They develop an understanding of the nature of naturalism, in either epistemological or metaphysical terms and attempt to buttress what they see as naturalism's deficiencies through analysis of predecessor philosophers.

Introduction

Paul Giladi's stage-setting Introduction to the volume admirably frames the issues involved in thinking about the various forms of naturalism.³ Giladi argues that Anglo-American philosophy has become increasingly committed to construing "the image of the world provided by the natural sciences as all there is to the world" (RN, 1). This claim has, for Giladi ontological and methodological components. Under the former, reality is what the natural sciences say it is. Under the latter, our ways of understanding reality are ultimately only justifiable by the methods of the natural sciences. The conjunction of these two claims is scientific naturalism.

Giladi finds difficulties with the scientific naturalist position. He approvingly quotes Hilary Putnam's claim that scientific naturalism "leaves no room for an independent philosophical enterprise" (RN, 4). The broader problem is that scientific naturalism seems to have little or no place for critical aspects of everyday human experience, including the reality of medium-sized physical objects, the ability of agents to act from intention and reason rather than merely from causation, the possibility of ethical and artistic responses to reality, and modalities – possibilities and necessities – that pervade life and that are accounted for with difficulty by the eliminative, reductionist approaches of scientific naturalism. These factors are referred to in this volume as the "manifest image" (RN, 3). The term "placement problem" has been coined to refer to the difficulty of placing the world of the manifest image within the framework of scientific naturalism. As Giladi writes:

One must either adopt the scientific image of humanity-in-the-world, i.e. adopt the results of the empirical and natural sciences and conform to their standards; or adopt the manifest image of humanity-in-the-world, i.e. conform to the standards of how we understand ourselves and our world that is not justified by appeal to the scientific method and the results of the empirical and natural sciences. (RN, 4)

Within the naturalistic tradition, scientific naturalism has been challenged by the position of liberal naturalism. Liberal naturalists have a broader understanding of nature than do scientific naturalists. While continuing to reject supernaturalist explanations, liberal naturalists, in the words of Mario De Caro and David Macarthur, want:

To do justice to the range and diversity of the sciences, including the social and human sciences (freed of positivist misconceptions), and to the plurality of forms of understanding, including the

3) Giladi has also co-edited a recent online journal symposium on pragmatism and idealism: Paul Giladi and Aaron B. Wilson, "Introduction to Pragmatism and Idealism," *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* 10, no. 2 (2018): 1–3.

possibility of nonscientific, nonsupernatural forms of understanding (whether or not these also count as forms of knowledge). (RN, 5)

Liberal naturalists argue that norms and other elements of the manifest image are not reducible to analysis in terms of cause and description while arguing as well that the natural sciences are authoritative “in terms of making sense of things” (RN, 6). Liberal naturalism has its strong adherents while it also has been strongly criticized by those thinkers committed to scientific naturalism. For example, Ram Neta has argued that liberal naturalism is incoherent and falls into either scientific naturalism or into supernaturalism depending upon whether the manifest image is deemed reducible or irreducible to the ontology of the natural sciences (RN, 7).

Importantly, none of the essays in the volume argue that it is the role of philosophy to challenge or to provide alternatives to the findings of the natural sciences. Instead, the essays argue that considerations such as the placement problem show the insufficiency of scientific naturalism; and they try to use the insights of idealism, pragmatism, and liberal naturalism to broaden its scope. Thus, the volume aims to establish commonalities among naturalism, idealism, and pragmatism and to suggest ways in which these three great philosophical traditions might be combined.⁴ Giladi writes that there is a complexity in the relationship between various idealisms, pragmatisms, and naturalisms that works to illuminate what is valuable in each tradition. He argues that idealism and pragmatism have “sophisticated and enduringly relevant views about modernity, rationality, human mindedness, and the nature and function of philosophic inquiry” and thus “offer some of the most interesting and philosophically sensitive responses to naturalism” (RN, 11). The points of convergence and disagreement among idealism, pragmatism, and naturalism developed in the essays aim to offer fresh insights into nature and normativity.

With this overview of the issues the volume addresses, we turn to the essays themselves.

Idealist Responses to Naturalism

Some philosophers have been returning to the idealist tradition in philosophy after a century of neglect. The six essays in Part I offer ways of combining the insights of naturalism with various forms of idealism in order to give due weight in philosophical thinking to both science and to the manifest image. Towards this end, the two opening essays offer differing considerations of Kant. Of the many philosophers discussed in this volume, Kant remains the most difficult, and the two essays devoted to him are the most challenging.

Katerina Deligiorgi’s essay, “Moral Natural Norms” uses Kant to examine and critique contemporary neo-Aristotelian developments in ethical theory. Her chapter draws heavily upon contemporary Kantian and neo-Aristotelian scholarship. She finds that Kantianism and neo-Aristotelianism share in common a valuable commitment to the objective character of ethics. Neo-Aristotelianism offers a naturalistic defense of moral value that fits within a broader philosophy of liberal naturalism. Deligiorgi brings Kant to bear on two questions raised by neo-Aristotelianism: “the nature of the good and the authority of norms” (RN, 23). As to the first, Deligiorgi finds neo-Aristotelianism deficient because while it offers guidance in attaining one’s choice of ends, it offers no guidance in choosing the ends themselves. She argues that a non-naturalistic concept of the good is required to account for the nature of normativity, separate from the interests of particular individuals; and she finds such an understanding of the good developed in Kant with his concept of the good will. As to

4) An early scholarly study arguing that the philosophies of pragmatism and idealism should be combined is William Caldwell, *Pragmatism and Idealism* (London: A. and C. Black, 1913). Caldwell finds the closest combination of pragmatism and idealism in the thought of Bergson.

the second question, Deligiorgi tries to show that human autonomy and reason are the best sources for the authority of moral demands and do not require appeals to God, divine command, or to “queer” or “spooky” supernatural things (RN, 35). I found her arguments on this point obscure.

Johannes Haag’s chapter, “Naturalism and the Primacy of the Practical” focuses, in contrast to Deligiorgi, almost exclusively on an exposition of Kant’s own difficult texts, with an emphasis on the *Critique of Judgment*. Haag undertakes the daunting task of harmonizing Kant’s three *Critiques* with the goal of showing that Kant remains committed throughout to the specific form of liberal naturalism that Haag finds developed in the *First Critique*. In the *First Critique*, for Haag, Kant developed a concept of nature in which everything that counts as a fact can at least in principle be described mechanistically by the natural sciences. Kant’s naturalism relies on a transcendental idealism because it depends upon synthetic a priori judgments that are not themselves the result of scientific investigation. In the *Second Critique*, Kant developed the primacy of the practical as opposed to the theoretical use of reason with the development of the moral law and the postulates of God and immortality. The conclusions of practical reason were regulative rather than constitutive and thus, for Kant, did not contradict the principles of theoretical reason developed in the *First Critique*. In the *Third Critique*, Kant argued for a synthetic a priori concept of purposiveness in nature. Haag argues that this concept of objective purposiveness was also regulative and reflective in character and did not change the naturalistic limits of theoretical knowledge developed in the *First Critique*. The result was that with the *Third Critique*, “Kant can be seen as walking a tightrope between the interest of practical reason and the safeguarding of his own transcendental idealist version of philosophical naturalism” (RN, 47). Haag’s essay suggests how Kant developed a philosophy of liberal naturalism for the purposes of science. It suggests as well the ways in which liberal naturalism might be deemed insufficient and how Kant tried, however precariously, to combine it with an underlying philosophy of transcendental idealism.

Paul Giladi’s essay, “The Placement Problem and the Threat of Voyeurism” begins with an epigraph from Bergson: “We see that the intellect, so skilful in dealing with the inert, is awkward the moment it touches the living. [The intellect] proceeds with the rigour, the stiffness and the brutality of an instrument not designed for such use” (RN, 71). The aim of Giladi’s historically-rich essay is to dissolve rather than to solve the placement problem by developing, as Bergson suggests, the nature of the intellect and its use and limitations. Giladi does so by using Hegel’s thought to support a position of liberal naturalism broad enough to include the manifest image from the outset as basic to experience as opposed to “placing” it almost as an afterthought in a container, as scientific naturalism, metaphorically, tries to do. Giladi concludes:

From the Hegelian perspective I have aimed to articulate and defend, the world to which we direct our sense-making practices is “capacious ... more English garden than desert landscape.” For Hegel, then, one must go beyond a narrow naturalism that views nature as “self-alienated spirit” and that alienates us from ourselves. (RN 86, footnotes omitted).

From his study of Hegel, Giladi argues that science and the manifest image are not rival ways of understanding the world but are instead complementary and are jointly indispensable for understanding ourselves and our environment.

In his essay, “The Idealistic Challenge to Naturalism,” Alexis Papazoglou critiques both scientific and liberal forms of naturalism. He argues that the human sphere cannot be accounted for by either type of naturalism and that German transcendental idealism as developed by Kant, Hegel, and Husserl offers insights to cure naturalism’s deficiencies. The essay begins with a discussion of contemporary scientific naturalism, as represented by Quine, and its inability to address the placement problem. Papazoglou next considers and rejects

the attempts of two proponents of liberal naturalism, Huw Price and John McDowell, to resolve the placement problem. Papazoglou then turns to the three idealist thinkers and argues that each presents a different transcendental argument of the general form “there is experience; it is a condition for the possibility of experience that P; therefore P” (RN, 105). Although the three idealists offer widely differing transcendental arguments, they each attempt “to situate science within a wider context of human activity, a framework of meaning and normativity, one that eludes the explanations of which science is capable” (RN, 105). Kant’s transcendental argument is based on reason and on a distinction between noumenon and phenomenon. Hegel’s argument is based on a more immanent and historical spirit, while the transcendental idealism of Husserl is based on the lifeworld that is prior to scientific experience. Papazoglou offers a passionate and sweeping argument for a contemporary idealism to overcome the perceived deficiencies of naturalism. He argues that an idealistic theory of the nature of the human mind takes priority over other explanatory frameworks and that science is incapable of providing such a framework. He concludes that “instead of science and philosophy being continuous with one other, as naturalism would have it, philosophy is given its rightful first place in the order of human enquiry.” (116)

Paul Redding’s intriguing chapter, “An Hegelian *Actualist* Alternative to Naturalism,” rejects a commonly held view of idealism as other-worldly and as committed to the existence of a transcendent God. Redding contends that Hegel developed a this-worldly version of idealism which Redding calls “actualism.” For Redding, actualism is committed to minds and subjectivity from the outset, and thus sidesteps the placement problem without committing to necessitarianism or to a transcendent, creating mind. Redding offers a fascinating historical development of his position ranging from Russell’s and Moore’s rejection of idealism through Huw Price’s efforts to circumvent the placement problem with liberal naturalism, to contemporary possible worlds theories in metaphysics and modal logics. His essay shows a strong interest in rehabilitating Hegel’s logic in the face of Russell’s and Moore’s early critiques. Redding concludes that “Idealism as actualism redetermines the object of metaphysics as the actual world, and the actual world, rather than the natural world, already has minds within it, thus circumventing worries about the placement problem” (RN, 139). Redding urges the reconsideration of actualistic idealism as an alternative to the naturalism developed by analytic philosophy.

Giuseppina D’Oro’s “How to (and how Not to) Defend the Manifest Image,” also seeks to avoid rather than resolve the placement problem. D’Oro argues that the manifest image needs to be understood *sui generis* rather than through the perspectives and methods of the natural sciences. Instead of understanding the role of philosophy as locating the manifest image within the scientific image, D’Oro argues that the scope of science is limited to its own *explanandum*. D’Oro develops what she calls the Reciprocity Thesis based on idealism under which there is a relationship between knowledge and what is known. Philosophy has a robust role in uncovering “the forms of inference or judgment which are implicit in the categorical descriptions of reality” (RN, 147). The body of D’Oro’s essay consists of expositions of the British idealist, R.G. Collingwood and of Heidegger with a view to showing how portions of their thought use the Reciprocity Thesis to respect the teachings of science without falling into scientism. Collingwood, for example, distinguished between actions and events. The former requires explanations in intentional, teleological terms, while the latter calls for explanation in terms of an efficient cause. Collingwood uses this distinction to deny that there is a privileged form of being or description, that of the natural sciences. Instead, there are different kinds of explanations with different senses of causation and different explanatory needs.

As do several other essays, D’Oro concludes by rejecting the claimed either-or character of the relationship between naturalism and supernaturalism. She argues that “supernaturalism is the shadow cast by naturalism” in that the naturalist assumes that a commitment to supernatural entities and explanations is naturalism’s only alternative. D’Oro maintains, to the contrary that “no such conclusion ... needs to be drawn if one does not assume that physics has displaced metaphysics as the science of pure being and that nature has taken the place

of the traditional object of metaphysical reflection: the thing-in-itself.” Philosophers need to understand that there are different and irreducible ways of understanding reality.

Pragmatist Responses to Naturalism

The six essays in the second part of the book explore the relationship between naturalism and pragmatism. In these essays, pragmatism tends to be equated to liberal naturalism as an alternative to scientific naturalism.

The essay by Shannon Dea and Nathan Haydon, “From the Experimentalist Disposition to the Absolute” and the essay by Gabriele Gava, “Common-sense and Naturalism,” both explore the highly idiosyncratic thought of Charles Peirce and benefit from being discussed together. Both essays recognize the difficult, highly individual thought of Peirce and its resistance to easy categorization. The two essays also recognize the slippery, ambiguous character of broad philosophical terms, such as “naturalism,” “pragmatism,” and “idealism,” particularly for a thinker such as Peirce. Each essay includes a discussion of positions often identified with a naturalism in philosophy (tellingly, different factors are mentioned in each essay) and show that many thinkers, including Peirce, will be committed to some of these positions and not to others. Both essays emphasize the role of methodological naturalism and come to differing conclusions.

Dea and Haydon’s essay places Peirce’s thought in the historical context of the scientific revolutions of the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. The chapter then develops Peirce’s commitment, through his pragmatic maxim, to an “experimentalist disposition” under which “the same methods apply to all modes of inquiry” (RN, 167). Peirce combined this experimentalist disposition with strongly idealistic components in his ontology, including a commitment to minds and possibly to a Roycean-influenced Absolute. Peirce saw no discontinuity between minds and bodies and argued that methodological naturalism might ultimately lead to a connection of the material and spiritual components of reality.

Gava’s essay, in contrast, rejects an idealistic, non-naturalist reading of Peirce. She distinguishes between an “extreme” and a “moderate” form of methodological naturalism, with the former committed to the methodology of the natural sciences while the latter allows the use of defeasible, non-scientific methodology under some circumstances. Gava identifies different strands in Peirce’s thought at different times, while concluding that Peirce’s mature view supported an extreme version of methodological naturalism in both the natural and the human sciences and a moderate version of methodological naturalism in philosophy. In general, Dea and Haydon’s essay emphasizes Peirce as a metaphysician who combined pragmatism with idealism while Gava views Peirce as more of a liberal naturalist and a scientist. An earlier review of this volume aptly commented that it would be a “fertile ground for further work to figure out how to fit together Dea and Haydon’s and Gava’s equally compelling exegeses and analyses of Peirce’s complicated but richly detailed views of these matters.”⁵

The volume’s two chapters on the naturalism of Wilfrid Sellars also benefit from being considered together. William A. de Vries’ essay, “Picturing: Naturalism and the Design of a more Ideal Truth,” argues that Sellars attempted to integrate what he saw as the valuable features of idealism into a naturalistic philosophy.⁶ The essay sets out Sellars’ central argument that normative claims are causally but not logically reducible to the descriptive language of physical claims. This argument is intended to make room for a normative space of reasons in a world

5) Brandon Beasley, “Responses to Naturalism: Critical Perspectives from Idealism and Pragmatism,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 28, no. 4 (2020): 563–68. DOI: 10.1080/09672559.2020.1812967

6) Another recent book chapter offering a sympathetic view of Sellars’ project is Preston Stovall, “The Lamp of Reason and the Mirror of Nature,” in Randall Auxier, Eli Kramer, and Krzysztof Piotr Skowroński, eds, *Rorty and Beyond* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019)

of physical causality. de Vries then discusses the insights that Sellars found valuable in idealism and how he attempted to restate them naturalistically. This effort culminated in Sellars' obscure concept of "picturing" which de Vries tries to explain and defend. He praises Sellars' efforts to articulate a synoptic naturalistic philosophy which ties an "otherwise seemingly independent intentional realm" to the actual world, while also allowing for the "possibility of progress in our comprehension of the world" (RN, 246).

Steven Levine's essay, "Rethinking Sellars' Naturalism" offers a less sanguine view of Sellars' accomplishment. Levine, as does de Vries, praises Sellars' effort to develop a "synoptic vision" of philosophy that attempts to show how normativity fits into a scientific, naturalistic picture of the world. His essay carefully unpacks the two seemingly disparate aspects of Sellars' position: a). normativity is conceptually (logically) irreducible to the descriptive world of scientific naturalism; and b). normativity is causally reducible to the world of scientific naturalism. He subjects Sellars' position to an incisive analysis and concludes that Sellars' thought when pushed, leads to various unsatisfactory options under which the reducible or the irreducible aspects of his position must give way. As did a previous reviewer of this volume,⁷ I find Levine's critique convincing. Levine briefly sketches an alternative position which he terms pragmatic naturalism under which normative behavior, including linguistic behavior, is also causally irreducible to scientific description. In a recent book, Levine has elaborated upon his understanding of pragmatic naturalism.⁸

Mario De Caro's essay, as do most others in the book, tries to make philosophical room for both scientific realism and for the realism of the manifest image. With the goal of being "realist in regard to both the common-sense and the scientific views of the world" (RB, 184), De Caro offers a historical overview of the rise of the scientific worldview and of the placement problem it created. He then offers a historical survey of philosophers, ranging from Thomas Reid to Roderick Chisolm, who responded to scientific naturalism through various appeals to common sense. He finds a promising approach in developing a philosophy of realism for both science and common sense in the pragmatic philosophy of liberal naturalism exemplified in the work of Hillary Putnam. De Caro explores Putnam's many changes of philosophical position over his long career while finding that even Putnam's earliest physicalist position suggested his "dedication to the spirit and themes of the pragmatist tradition" (RN, 193). The essay focuses on Putnam's work from about 2000 to his death in 2016 which combined Aristotelian insights with pragmatism and argued for irreducible levels of reality and the multivocality of being. A pluralist in both ontology and epistemology, Putnam accepted both science and the manifest image with the proviso that no ontological or epistemological position worth adopting could contradict the currently accepted scientific worldview. While recognizing that issues remain to be addressed with Putnam's liberal naturalism, De Caro finds the approach promising and concludes that Putnam's "constant insistence on the fundamental inspirational role that common sense and science play in philosophy is one of the most precious intellectual gifts that this eminent philosopher has left us" (RN, 201, footnote omitted).

David Macarthur's essay, "Pragmatic Naturalism," weaves together many of the themes discussed in the volume. Macarthur examines the adequacy of the responses of scientific naturalism, idealism, and pragmatic naturalism to Pyrrhic skepticism. For the Pyrrhonist, any proposed justification of a claim is subject to its own "why" or demand for justification, thus leading to an infinite regress. Macarthur argues that scientific naturalism is unable to give a satisfactory response to this form of skepticism because it is limited to a description of the study of causes and relations studied by science. In other words, scientific naturalism lacks a concept of normativity that is "indispensable to a sense of ourselves as rational agents; and one that is not reducible to the objective causal categories recognized by scientific naturalism" (RN, 271). The essay compares the responses of

7) Beasley, "Responses to Naturalism."

8) Steven Levine, *Pragmatism, Objectivity, and Experience*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

German idealism and liberal naturalism to the Pyrrhonist. The response of the idealist is non-naturalistic and, Macarthur claims, verges on theology. It requires a commitment to monistic and holistic forms of explanation. Macarthur is much more sympathetic to the response of pragmatic naturalism which he finds has its basis in the thought of Kant and Peirce. Broadly, pragmatic naturalism rejects the assumption of Pyrrhic skepticism that “entitlement can only accrue to a belief by its being inferred from an independent belief that provides a good reason for it.” In every system of belief, some claims are entitled to be taken as true, subject to correction based upon further inquiry. The various forms of pragmatic naturalism share in common “commitment to the idea that epistemology is equated with (or replaced by) democratic experimentalism” (RN, 279, footnote omitted). After developing the nature of this commitment, Macarthur concludes that the pragmatic naturalist’s account of inquiry is a “naturalized and democratized form of Kant’s epistemology of critique” (RN, 285) that sidesteps Pyrrhic skepticism. His essay, with its attempt to integrate insights from naturalism, idealism, and pragmatism, brings the volume to a fitting close.

Conclusion

This review began with the efforts of Henri Bergson to develop an alternative to the scientific naturalism of his day. Scientific naturalism and its attendant analytic philosophy became even more dominant in the years after Bergson’s renown. We have explored scientific naturalism in this review and the reasons some philosophers have advanced for its modification or its integration with other philosophical positions. The essays in this volume share a recognition of the undisputed importance of science in understanding the world together with a strong reluctance to engage in supernatural types of explanations. With these important recognitions, the essays find scientific naturalism incomplete and seek to combine its insights with those of pragmatism, idealism, or both. The focus on pragmatism may be unsurprising because it has played a role as an alternative to scientific naturalism for many years. The resurgence of interest in idealism, a philosophy not long ago given up for dead, as shown in this volume and elsewhere is more worth noting. The growth of interest in both pragmatism and idealism is, in my view, to be welcomed and is supported by the many thoughtful, provocative essays in this book. The book suggests, at least in some quarters, a return of philosophy to the broad questions of metaphysics and purpose traditionally associated with the understanding of philosophy as the love of wisdom.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.