

WHY SHOULD ANYBODY BE A NATURALIST?

Austin Dacey

Abstract: Michael Rea has argued that philosophical naturalists cannot coherently regard the adoption of naturalism as a “research program” as more epistemically rational than the adoption of the alternatives, like intuitionism or supernatural theism. I show that Rea’s argument fails by overlooking several species of epistemic reasons for adopting research programs.

Among the bold theses defended by Michael Rea in his important book, *World Without Design*, there is the claim that “[I]t can be no part of naturalism to say that anyone *ought* to be a naturalist, or that accepting naturalism is more rational from an epistemic point of view than adopting any other research program . . .” (173).¹ I will call this the Quietist Thesis, for it means that, remarkably, naturalists cannot coherently say anything to recommend their own views as more epistemically rational than the alternatives. For the most part, Rea’s book is structured around a quite different bold thesis; namely that unless naturalists can solve the Discovery Problem concerning modal properties (a dim prospect, he thinks), they are committed to rejecting a number of beliefs that most of them would much rather retain, like belief in material objects, materialism, and other minds. Although it receives far less development, the Quietist Thesis is mentioned in several places, and apparently bears a good deal of the weight of the book’s overall message that naturalism’s status as orthodoxy in academic philosophy is in an important sense without rational foundation. For that reason alone it is worth examining the Quietist Thesis more closely. Doing so may also contribute to Rea’s very stimulating exploration of the relationship between naturalism and science.

Rea makes clear that he is using “research program” in a special sense that is related to, but not identical to, the Lakatosian sense. For Rea, a research program is a set of methodological dispositions, or dispositions to

accept certain sources of evidence as basic in the process of inquiry. An *individual* research program is a maximal set of methodological dispositions, where a set of methodological dispositions is maximal just in case “it is possible to have all of the dispositions in the set but it is not possible to have all of them *and* to have other methodological dispositions as well” (3). *Shared* research programs are subsets of individual research programs.

THE EPISTEMIC NON-RATIONALITY OF ADOPTING A RESEARCH PROGRAM

An argument for the Quietist Thesis appears in the following passage in the opening of the book:

In general, the reason why research programs cannot be adopted on the basis of evidence is that evidence can only be recognized as such from within a research program . . . a research program might . . . generate evidence that some other research program is to be accepted. Still, it cannot be on the basis of this evidence that one accept the favored program. For once the old program is rejected, the evidence arising out of the old program in favor of the new cannot be recognized as evidence. Or, at any rate, it cannot be recognized as evidence until a new program is in place which sanctions the sources that generated it. But even if this new program happens to be the program favored by the old, still it will not have been on the basis of the evidence generated by the old program that the new one was accepted. For the new program had to be accepted before that evidence could again be recognized as such. Thus, from an evidential point of view, the best we can say on behalf of a research program is that it is self-supporting (where a research program is self-supporting if and only if it does not prove self-defeating). We cannot say that it is supported by evidence that is somehow generated and recognizable as such independently of the program. (6)

The conclusion is that the adoption of naturalism is an (epistemically) non-rational choice, and so naturalists cannot rationally recommend their research program to others. Let’s look at this argument more carefully. Here’s one way to spell out the premises:

1. For any research program P_1 and any agent A , A is (epistemically) justified in adopting P_1 only insofar as she does so on the basis of evidence she recognizes as adequate.
2. Either A adopts P_1 on the basis of evidence P_1 takes as basic, or A adopts on the basis of evidence that her prior research program, P_0 , takes as basic.
3. If A adopts P_1 on the basis of evidence P_1 takes as basic, then she does so without adequate evidence, since prior to adopting P_1 she does not recognize such evidence as adequate.
4. If A adopts P_1 on the basis of evidence P_0 takes as basic, then she does so without adequate evidence, since in adopting P_1 she no longer recognizes such evidence as adequate.
5. So, A is never (epistemically) justified in adopting P_1 .

First, it is worth pointing out what the argument would *not* establish, even if it were sound. Rea himself acknowledges that the argument is supposed to have force over *any* research program and not just naturalism. No research program is adopted on the basis of evidence. He writes, “[r]esearch programs can be discarded on the basis of evidence, but they cannot be adopted on that basis” (5). Once this is understood, Rea’s remarkable thesis that naturalism is rationally unjustified appears somewhat less bold. There is nothing unique to naturalism that is rationally lacking.

A second limitation is that even if the argument shows that there is no epistemic justification for the adoption of a research program, it leaves open the possibility of a *pragmatic* justification. Thus, even if Rea’s argument shows that the most naturalists can hope for is a pragmatic justification of their choice, it does not thereby show that their choice is simply unacceptable to reasonable people. Rea overstates his conclusion when he says “it can be no part of naturalism to say that anyone *ought* to be a naturalist,” for on his own account one might be able to say that we pragmatically ought to be naturalists. Elsewhere Rea argues that pragmatic justification does not in general supply epistemic justification. But he does not establish that there is anything intellectually or morally suspect about choosing a research program for pragmatic reasons. Still, most naturalists would like to think that they can offer epistemic reasons as well.

Third, the argument only addresses the rationality of initially committing oneself to a research program. It does not address the rationality of *maintaining* that commitment. Suppose that at time t_1 , A initially adopts P_1 on the basis of no good evidence that she then accepts, but that when reflecting on P_1 at time t_2 , A maintains her commitment to P_1 on the basis of the sort of evidence provided by her newly-acquired research program; that is, P_1 -evidence. In this case, according to Rea’s account, A ’s adoption of P_1 would have been epistemically unwarranted because it would not have been undertaken in accord with evidence she accepts. However, her subsequent decisions, upon reflection, to persist in her commitment to P_1 might be responsive to evidence she accepts; namely, P_1 -evidence.

More fundamentally, I think the argument is not sound. Premises 3 and 4 are highly problematic, even on Rea’s other assumptions. To see this, consider intuitionism and supernaturalism, which Rea regards as naturalism’s most viable competitors. As he describes them, intuitionism takes rational intuition and the methods of science (and nothing else) as basic sources of evidence, and supernaturalism takes at least religious experience and the methods of science as basic sources of evidence.

It is easy to imagine a naturalist who becomes convinced that some scientific evidence supports the truth of theism, and that the truth of theism supports the adequacy of religious experience as a basic source of evidence. Such an inquirer would have become a supernaturalist. This is a counterexample to Premise 3, which says that one cannot adopt P_1 on the basis of P_1 -evidence since prior to adopting P_1 one does not recognize such evidence as adequate. It also contradicts Premise 4, which says that one cannot

adopt P_1 on the basis of evidence P_0 takes as basic, since in adopting P_1 one no longer recognizes such evidence as adequate. Our supernaturalist convert adopts supernaturalism because of evidence sources that are recognized by supernaturalism and naturalism alike, so it is not true that by moving from the one to the other he must exchange one set of methodological dispositions for an entirely different set. Such will be the case whenever one rationally moves between two research programs that share a common source of basic evidence. (Apparently Rea does not consider this possibility, mentioning only a related situation in which some deliverances of religious experience are found by a naturalist to be justified at the bar of scientific inquiry, and therefore judged acceptable.)

Rea might deny that such a convert would have become a genuine supernaturalist. The convert accepts religious experience only when it passes the bar of science. He does not take it as a basic source of evidence; that is, a source that is trusted even in the absence of evidence for its reliability. However, we can coherently imagine an inquirer, Paul, who comes to recognize reasons to adopt a new method as a basic source of evidence, and having recognized these reasons, adopts that method. Rea would respond that Paul does not in fact adopt the new method as a basic source, since he only adopted it in light of evidence for its reliability. Here Rea's terminology deserves close attention. In virtue of having a research program we have a disposition to treat a certain source of evidence as basic. But that just means that our confidence in the source does not depend on our confidence in any other sources. However, there are at least two ways to understand this requirement for basicity. The first version is that an evidence source is basic for an agent if she would trust it in the absence of evidence for its reliability. A second version is that an evidence source is basic for an agent if she would trust it in the absence of evidence for its reliability, *and there is no such evidence*. The second version can be called the *strong version* because it adds an additional requirement to the first.

Now it seems that a supernaturalist, in Rea's sense at least, should prefer the weaker version. The supernaturalist accepts both empirical methods and religious experience as basic sources of evidence. But suppose, as many theists would like to believe, that some empirical outputs evidentially support the reliability of religious experience (perhaps indirectly, by supporting classical theism). It could still be true that *were there no empirical support for the reliability of religious experience*, he would still trust it. Happily, perhaps it turns out there is empirical support. Presumably this would not prompt him to lose his independent confidence in religious experience and thereby to cease being a supernaturalist. But that is precisely the implication of the alternative, strong version. The weaker version of Rea's basicity requirement is strong enough to capture the thought that a source of evidence is basic in an important way: our confidence in it is sufficient unto itself.

If we ask Paul what validates the outputs of his research program, he can genuinely respond, "Well, nothing. So long as it consistently produces outputs that are not self-defeating, I just trust the program." If we ask him

how he came to trust the program, he can genuinely respond, "I recognized the force of certain independent epistemic reasons in favor of it," or "It made the most sense in light of my total available evidence."

A related counterexample could be constructed out of an intuitionist convert to supernaturalism, who through rational intuition, perhaps, comes to appreciate the force of a modal ontological argument for theism and consequently comes to include religious experience in the basic sources of evidence she accepts.

Such counterexamples are significant because it is not implausible to suppose that many of those who come to accept naturalism do so from within a research program that already recognizes the methods of science as a basic source of evidence. Accordingly, we can imagine various scenarios of "conversion to naturalism" consistent with Rea's taxonomy: (1) a conversion from supernaturalism to naturalism wherein some lines of scientific evidence lead one to abandon religious experience as a basic source of evidence in favor of the methods of science only; (2) a conversion from intuitionism to naturalism wherein some lines of scientific evidence lead one to abandon rational intuition as a basic source of evidence, leaving only the methods of science. In both cases, one would adopt naturalism because of what one regards as adequate basic evidence.

There is another general kind of evidence-guided transition between research programs that Rea apparently overlooks. First, it is necessary to distinguish between the reasons yielded by a source of evidence, and the agent's own understanding of the source and nature of those reasons. It seems possible to believe q without being committed to any particular understanding about the nature and source of beliefs such as q : for instance, that they are truths of reason apprehended a priori, or beliefs instigated by the Holy Spirit, or, in Deweyian fashion, empirical hypotheses in the broad sense that they are evaluated by reference to future experience. If so, then it should be possible to change one's mind about the proper understanding of q while retaining q itself. In this way, an inquirer might come to reject P_0 in favor of P_1 on the basis of beliefs yielded by P_0 without changing her degree of confidence in those beliefs. In the transition from P_0 in favor of P_1 , the inquirer would exchange one way of understanding the beliefs for another, without exchanging one set of beliefs for another. In cases where such beliefs are recognized as adequate grounds for adopting a new research program, that adoption could be epistemically rational, contra Rea.

Suppose you are a non-naturalist who comes to recognize the force of certain arguments for naturalism (for example, difficulties with intuitionism and supernaturalism, the successes of empirical methods in other domains), and so to adopt it as a "research program." Prior to doing so, you would have understood the arguments for naturalism in some non-naturalistic way. Once having done so, however, you would regard them naturalistically. While you once took the case for naturalism to be based in intuition, perhaps, you now see that it is based in hypotheses that over time provided the best explanation of certain experiences, or some such thing. What as a non-

naturalist you saw as part of a distinctive non-empirical method, you now see as a branch of the sciences.

The possibility of this sort of scenario is obscured by the Quietist Thesis because of how it treats the concept of evidence. When Rea denies that a research program can be “supported by evidence that is somehow generated and recognizable as such independently of the program,” he could mean (1) supported by *sources* of basic evidence (intuition, empirical scientific methods, etc), or (2) supported by *reasons* that are yielded by such sources. If adopting naturalism just is committing oneself to empirical methods as the sole basic source of evidence, then it cannot be supported by appeal to such a commitment. However, there might nevertheless be reasons in favor of the commitment that can be endorsed whether or not one already holds naturalism, or any other view about the ultimate source of evidential reasons, for that matter.

AGAINST EPISTEMOLOGICAL NATURALISM

Later in the book, in chapter 3, Rea presents some considerations in favor of the Quietist Thesis that appear to be independent of general concerns about the epistemic rationality of adopting a research program. Unlike the argument from non-rationality, the argument I will now examine addresses naturalism *per se* and not research programs more generally. In the chapter’s closing section, Rea says

What unifies naturalists is just a shared set of methodological dispositions . . . these dispositions preclude naturalists from justifiably believing that their research program is one that *ought* to be shared by others, or that it is the only one that issues in justified belief. For to think such things is to suppose in part that the epistemic status of scientific reasoning is open for philosophical debate. But the project of using philosophy to justify science is a project that naturalists reject. Thus given their methodological dispositions, they lack the resources for converting descriptions of their research program into theses about how inquiry ought to be conducted. (72–73)

From the text, it is not entirely clear whether the above remarks alone are meant to constitute an independent argument for the Quietist Thesis. If so, then they stand in need of further development. One problem is that they seem to beg the question against a robust naturalist who believes that philosophy is part of the empirical sciences, or empirical methods more generally. Naturalists may reject the project of using non-empirical methods to vindicate empirical methods. But if philosophy (when done properly) really is just another empirical method, then “using philosophy to justify science” is not an instance of the project they reject. Instead, it is an instance of using one empirical field to pass judgment on others, something which seems entirely in keeping with science and naturalism.

Alternatively, maybe these remarks are meant to be a gloss on the earlier case against construing naturalism as an epistemological thesis. There, Rea considers what he calls epistemological versions of naturalism, such as

Quine's: "It is within science itself, and not some prior philosophy, that reality is to be identified and described." He comments:

Suppose one of [the epistemological formulations] is proposed as a version of naturalism. As such, it would have to be consistent with the methodological dispositions distinctive of naturalism. But then it must not be an empirical thesis. For, as we have already seen, theses refutable by science cannot plausibly count as versions of naturalism because naturalism involves, first and foremost, a commitment to follow science wherever it leads. Thus, [the epistemological formulations] would have to be taken as these justified, if at all, by methods *other* than the methods of science. But now they truly are self-defeating. For, as we have seen, by their own lights they are precisely the sorts of theses that *must* be justified by scientific methods if at all. (63)

Rea is presenting naturalists with a dilemma:

- a. Epistemological naturalism is either empirical or non-empirical.
- b. If epistemological naturalism is empirical, then it is implausible as a version of naturalism (since it is refutable by future science).
- c. If epistemological naturalism is non-empirical, then it is self-defeating (since it asserts that empirical methods are the sole source of basic evidence).

One implication that Rea wants to draw from this dilemma is that naturalism is not charitably construed as an epistemological thesis. However, he also may want to say that naturalists cannot coherently recommend naturalism to others. For if, as he argues previously, naturalism cannot be charitably construed as an ontological or metaphysical thesis, then to recommend naturalism to others is just to defend an epistemological thesis, a claim about how we ought to conduct our inquiry about the world. But if the dilemma above is sound, then such a thesis would either be implausible as a version of naturalism, or self-defeating. So, when Rea says at the close of chapter 3 that naturalists lack the resources for converting descriptions of their research program into theses about how inquiry ought to be conducted, perhaps he rests this claim on something like the above dilemma argument against epistemological naturalism.

I will confine myself to making only a brief critical observation about the argument, and then highlight its relevance to the central concern of my comments, the Quietist Thesis. Let's assume that the naturalist will prefer the first horn of the dilemma, according to which epistemological naturalism is an empirical thesis. Since epistemological naturalism is taken in this context as a methodological injunction and not a descriptive claim, presumably by "empirical" Rea means "justified by empirical methods." Some naturalists will also regard this methodological injunction as empirical in another important way. On a robust naturalism, epistemological norms articulated by philosophers do not represent some extra-empirical source of knowledge that sits in judgment of empirical disciplines; rather, they are part of the empirical disciplines. That is to say, if the naturalist understand-

ing of philosophy is true, it is true *of naturalism*. Would this make naturalism implausible because it is at the mercy of future science? I don't see why. Think of naturalism as a claim about how to do philosophy, which is revisable in accordance with our total evidence, including scientific evidence.

There is much more that could be said about the fate of epistemological versions of naturalism. If, as I have attempted to show, the argument from the non-rationality of adopting a research program fails, then the argument against epistemological naturalism represents Rea's best hope of vindicating the Quietist Thesis.

Center for Inquiry, SUNY at Buffalo

NOTE

1. *World Without Design: The Ontological Consequences of Naturalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). All in-text references in this article will refer to this book.