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NATURALISM AND CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY: IDENTIFYING SOME COMMON GROUND

Abstract. The prospects for finding common ground between naturalists and Christian philosophers seems to be bleak. The typical naturalist is an anti-supernaturalist, the Christian philosopher would appear to be a supernaturalist *par excellence*, and we are told that these positions are mutually exclusive. An expansive naturalist framework calls into question this way of dividing up the philosophical territory and my initial task in this paper is to spell out the shape of this expansive naturalism, using Iris Murdoch as a key interlocuter. I examine her relation to the Christian theologian Paul Tillich and consider the implications for an assessment of her commitment to atheism. I argue that there is a knife-edge between their respective positions and that this has important implications for an understanding of the limits of expansive naturalism as well as the prospects for finding common ground between naturalists and Christian philosophers.

Keywords: naturalism; supernaturalism; expansive naturalism; theism; Christian philosophy; transcendence; immanence; Iris Murdoch; Paul Tillich

1. Introduction. 2. Naturalism and expansive naturalism. 3. Rethinking God: Murdoch and Tillich. 4. The transcendent, the immanent, and the natural. 5. Common ground made explicit.

1. INTRODUCTION

The prospects for finding common ground between naturalists and Christian philosophers seems to be bleak. The typical naturalist is an anti-supernaturalist, the Christian philosopher would appear to be a supernaturalist *par excellence*, and we are told that these positions are mutually exclusive. I have argued elsewhere that this way of dividing up the philosophical landscape is deeply misleading, and that there are good reasons for taking seriously the possibility of a naturalism which is expansive enough to accommodate God.¹ My initial task here is

1 See my *God, Value, and Nature* (Ellis, 2014).

to spell out the shape of this expansive naturalism. This will go some way towards addressing the question of whether and how there could be common ground between naturalism and Christian philosophy, and my next task is to spell this out in more detail by introducing Iris Murdoch as a key interlocuter. Murdoch is an interesting figure for my purposes for she defends a form of expansive naturalism and moral realism whilst also engaging seriously and often sympathetically with the academic theologians of her time. I shall examine her relation to the Christian theologian Paul Tillich and consider the implications for an assessment of her commitment to atheism. I shall argue that there is a knife-edge between their respective positions and that this has important implications for an understanding of the limits of expansive naturalism as well as the prospects for finding common ground between naturalists and Christian philosophers.

2. NATURALISM AND EXPANSIVE NATURALISM

The typical naturalist stands opposed to supernaturalism, she denies that there is anything beyond nature, and it is a common enough refrain amongst naturalists that this world is the only world there is. Thus, John Hermann Randall, writing in 1944, claims that “naturalism” can be defined negatively “as the refusal to take ‘nature’ or ‘the natural’ as a term of distinction” (Randall, 1944, 357). “Nature” he continues, has become “the all-inclusive category.” We are to suppose that nature thus conceived has been shorn of any reference to the supernatural, the supernatural including things like immaterial souls, Platonic forms and divine beings, all of which stand outside the natural world, and cannot be understood to be a part of it.² The naturalist protests that there is no way of explaining how these supernatural phenomena relate to the ordinary natural world, that

² See, for example: Dupré, 2010; Stroud, 2004; Krikorian, 1944, and are well summed up in Randall, 1944.

it is unclear how we could gain knowledge of them, and that we can explain what needs to be explained without making this problematic metaphysical detour. So, the naturalist rejects supernaturalism, she insists that the natural world is the only world there is, and this gives expression to her refusal to take ‘nature’ or ‘the natural’ as a term of distinction.

Such a refusal, in Randall’s hands, goes hand in hand with a commitment to an exclusively scientific conception of nature.³ That is to say that his rejection of supernaturalism leads to the endorsement of scientific or scientistic naturalism. This move is taken seriously by many contemporary naturalists,⁴ but it raises familiar difficulties, and it is unclear what the justification is for insisting that nature be measured in these terms alone. As John McDowell puts it, “scientism is a superstition,” and we should “discourag(e) this dazzlement by science” which leads us to suppose that “genuine truth is restricted to what can be validated by their methods” (McDowell, 2002, 295).

McDowell defends a form of naturalism which rejects the offending scientistic strictures, and it promises to accommodate the idea that there are values in the world which make normative demands upon us. It can be described as an *expansive* or *liberal* naturalism in this respect, and it bears comparison with the ‘true’ naturalism defended by Iris Murdoch back in 1956, for Murdoch tells us that “the true naturalist ... is one who believes that as moral beings we are immersed in a reality which transcends us and that moral progress consists in awareness of this reality and submission to its purposes” (Murdoch, 1956, 32-58). Murdoch describes her true naturalist position as a form

3 As he puts it: “[T]here is no ‘realm’ to which the methods for dealing with nature cannot be extended. This insistence on the universal and unrestricted application of ‘scientific method’ is a theme pervading every one of these essays [in the volume for which his essay was the epilogue – F.E.]” (Randall, 1944, 358).

4 See my *God, Value, and Nature* (Ellis, 2014, chapters 1 and 2) for the relevant details and difficulties.

of Platonism, and contemporary expansive naturalists – McDowell and myself included – are indebted to her vision.

Naturalism thus understood involves a form of moral realism, and the moral judgements we make in this context are assessable as true or false. This is not to deny that there will be genuine dilemmas and conflicts, and Murdoch talks of the slowness of moral change and achievement, and of the “infinite difficulty of the task of apprehending a magnetic but inexhaustible reality” (Murdoch, 1970, 42). She refers in this context to the clear vision which comes from imagination, effort, and attention – a vision in which the will becomes a matter of “obedience” as reality is revealed “to the patient eye of love” (Murdoch, 1970, 37-40). Her aim is to articulate a moral philosophy in which “the concept of love ... can once again be made central,” and she talks in this context of an “ideal limit of love or knowledge which always recedes” (Murdoch, 1970, 28).

Some of this Platonist imagery sets Murdoch apart from McDowell, and the naturalist might worry that she is moving in the direction of a suspect supernaturalism. But what does it mean to be appropriately suspect in this context? It’s no good complaining that the offending position involves reference to a spooky realm of being that takes us beyond the limits of the natural, for the expansive naturalist commits this error from the viewpoint of the scientific naturalist given this latter figure’s commitment to a scientific conception of the natural, yet scientific naturalism is itself suspect. So, there need be nothing inherently problematic to the idea that there are dimensions of nature which elude science, and we might even describe such dimensions as non-natural or supernatural in this innocuous, anti-scientific sense. Contemporary expansive naturalists are adamant, however, that the natural world thus conceived is the only world there is. Witness James Griffin: “[v]alues do not need any world except the ordinary world around us An other-worldly realm of values just produces unnecessary problems about what it could possibly be and how we could learn about it. All that seems right to me right. But to defend

it, one does not have to adopt a reductive form of naturalism” (Griffin, 1996, 44).

Where does this leave Murdoch’s claim that moral reality has an infinite elusive and inexhaustible character? Such talk leaves open the question of how it is to be interpreted, and it raises the question of how the limits of such naturalism are to be understood, especially in the light of the idea – so important to Murdoch (and Plato too) – that the truths at issue here lie at the blurry limits of our capacity to comprehend. McDowell uses the imagery of darkness to refer to that which exceeds the limits of his own expansive conception of nature, he makes clear that “natural” as he understands it is “not supernatural (not occult, not magical),” and adds: “There is no need for me to take a stand on whether *everything* is natural in that sense (thereby, among other things, giving needless offence to people who think respect for modern science is compatible with a kind of religious belief that preserves room for the supernatural” (McDowell, 2008, 218).

McDowell seems to be suggesting that the relevant mysterious dimension, such as it is, can have no bearing upon an understanding of the natural world and our natural human being. It is, after all, “occult” and “magical,” and seemingly sealed off from anything to which we could be receptive by virtue of our natural human being, including, of course, the moral reality with which we engage at this level. This suggests that there is nothing intrinsically mysterious about moral reality, and that any darkness is to be relegated to that which is supernatural in a more suspect and dualistic sense. We are to suppose that it is at this point that we ascend to the level of religious reality.

The idea that moral reality is unmysterious takes us some distance from Murdoch’s true naturalism, and Murdoch takes herself to be defending an authentic form of religion in this context – religion without God as she sees it (Murdoch, 1992, 419–425). So both McDowell and Murdoch endorse an atheistic expansive naturalism, but Murdoch takes the moral reality at issue to be infinite in its mystery,

depth, and religious significance, whereas McDowell seems to want to relegate any mystery to the realm of the supernatural, the supernatural in this context standing apart from the natural and bringing a religious significance which has no bearing upon morality.

The assumption here is that religious reality involves reference to a second, supernatural, realm. The charge is familiar, and we can ask whether there isn't a less pejorative and arguably more faithful way of interpreting the notion of religious reality, and what the argument is for insisting that such reality is to be dualistically opposed to the moral. Murdoch herself insists that moral philosophy should attempt to retain a central concept which has all of the characteristics traditionally associated with God, where God "was (or is) a single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessarily real object of attention" (Murdoch, 1970, 55). This concession is significant and the ambivalence palpable, but she takes theism to be implicated in the offending supernaturalism. As she puts it, its defining beliefs involve reference to supernatural phenomena (God is a supernatural person, heaven is a supernatural place) (Murdoch, 1992, 419-425), and she takes such supernaturalism to be problematic not only because it detracts attention from what really matters (moral reality as it plays out in the here and now), but because it points in the opposite direction. It does so not simply by virtue of taking us beyond *this* world to some further (irrelevant) supernatural realm, but because it panders to our egoistic desires, when, for example, we are motivated to be moral for the sake of heavenly rewards (Murdoch, 1992, 426). The implication here is that theism is irrelevant to the moral and even opposed to it.

3. RETHINKING GOD: MURDOCH AND TILlich

Murdoch's opposition to theism is open to challenge, there is a knife-edge between her own position and a theism which can sidestep the relevant difficulties, and I want now to bring this knife-edge

to the fore, initially by examining her commitment to the seemingly atheistic claim that human life has no external point or τέλος.⁵ This is what she says in full: “That human life has no external point or τέλος is a view as difficult to argue as its opposite, and I shall simply assert it. I can see no evidence to suggest that human life is not something self-contained. There are properly many patterns and purposes within life, but there is no general and as it were externally guaranteed pattern or purpose of the kind for which philosophers and theologians used to search. We are what we seem to be, transient mortal creatures subject to necessity and chance. This is to say that there is no God in the traditional sense of that term; and the traditional sense is perhaps the only sense. When Bonhoeffer says that God wants us to live as if there were no God I suspect he is misusing words” (Murdoch, 1970, 79).

Such remarks must be taken in the context of Murdoch’s claims about the reality and the transcendence of the Good, her description of the Good as “the magnetic centre towards which love naturally moves,” and her description of love as “the tension between the imperfect soul and the magnetic perfection which is conceived of as lying beyond it” (Murdoch, 1970, 102-103). Love’s existence, she goes on to say, “is the unmistakable sign that we are spiritual creatures, attracted by excellence and made for the Good” (Murdoch, 1970, 102-103). Such claims are nothing if not teleological, and we could, of course, accuse her of inconsistency. However, a closer look at the above passage and its surrounding context suggests a more nuanced and interesting picture.⁶ First, there is a clear commitment to patterns and purposes within human life, as exemplified in her description of love’s movement towards goodness. What she rejects is

5 Much of the discussion in this present section is taken from my forthcoming book *The End of Desire: Meaning, Nihilism, and God*.

6 For some insightful thoughts concerning the shape of this more nuanced picture see Burns, 2013, 459-480.

the idea of a “general and as it were externally guaranteed pattern or purpose,” as would be the case, for example, if we were mere cyphers in God’s pre-conceived plan.

Having rightly dismissed such a picture, Murdoch tells us that “if there is any kind of sense or unity in human life, and the dream of this does not cease to haunt us, it is of some other kind and must be sought within a human experience which has nothing outside it” (Murdoch, 1970, 79). I take this to be a rejection of the idea that experience stands dualistically opposed to some further realm (the offending supernaturalism), so as to allow instead that it involves being open to a reality whose depths are inexhaustible and, as such, never wholly accessible or comprehensible. Viewed from this perspective, the Good is the ungraspable horizon of moral and metaphysical thought, never to be possessed and comprehended once and for all, but immanent in the world in the sense that it is encountered and enacted, however imperfectly and provisionally, in our worldly interactions.

We have a sense of what it could be to relate to a Good which is never wholly accessible or comprehensible, but what, if anything, does this have to do with God? Some of Murdoch’s objections to theism are objections to the idea of God as a person, and we can get a clearer sense of the relevant issues by considering her relation to the “demythologising” approach of theologians like Paul Tillich (Murdoch, 1994, 452-460; 510-512).⁷ Murdoch takes this approach very seriously and she talks in this context of our needing “a theology which can continue without God.” She prefers to talk of the Good rather than God, even whilst granting that this “transcendent reality” shares many of the attributes traditionally ascribed to God. She adds that we can call such reflection a kind of moral philosophy provided that “it treats of those matters of ‘ultimate concern,’ our experience of the unconditioned and our continued sense of what is holy” (Murdoch, 1994,

7 For a wonderful and insightful account of Murdoch’s dialogue with the academic theologians of her time see Fiddes, 2002.

511-512). Murdoch is referring here to Tillich's conception of God as the object of our ultimate concern. She notes his reference to Psalm 139 ("Whither shall I go from thy spirit, whither shall I flee from thy presence?"), and her use of these words to bring her book to a close suggests that the Good, as she conceives it, is similarly inescapable (Murdoch, 1994, 512).⁸

Murdoch wants a picture which can do justice to the reality of the Good and our relation to it but without the unnecessary complication of a supernatural agent or person, and our question is whether this is sufficient to rule out theism. An obvious way of approaching this issue is to ask whether we should be thinking of God as a person, and where the theist stands – and ought to stand – on this score. Neither the Bible nor the classical Christian tradition state that God is a person,⁹ and although God is described as knowing, willing, and loving in these contexts, this leaves open the question of which notion of personhood is appropriate, and we should hesitate before concluding that the only available options are those supplied by Descartes' conception of the self as an immaterial substance or the Lockean idea of a person as a conscious and reflective individual.¹⁰ It is in the light of such a point that we can appreciate Brian Davies's insistence that "when it is the *divine nature* at stake, talk about God being another person (in addition to us) seems to be drawing upon an idolatrous notion of God" (Davies, 2022, 435).¹¹

8 Tillich's reference to the Psalm is to be found in his *Systematic Theology* (1973, 12).

9 For an important discussion of this issue see Clement C.J. Webb's Gifford Lectures as published in his *God and Personality* (2002). See also Tillich, 1973, 241-252.

10 Brian Davies makes these points in his excellent *Comment: Is God a Person?* (2022, 434).

11 Davies is happy to grant the inference "Jesus was a person; Jesus was God; so God is a Person." This follows from the orthodox doctrine of the Incarnation according to which "some person is God since Jesus is God and since anything correctly said of Jesus can be affirmed of God." It follows that if Jesus is a human person, then we can say that God is a human person. However, there is an important distinction to be made between the human *nature* of Jesus and his *divine nature*, and what does not follow is that it

If God is not a person in a dualistic or individual sense, then where does this leave the question of whether it is appropriate to describe God as personal? This is Tillich: “[t]he solution of the difficulties in the phrase ‘Personal God’ does not mean that God is *a* person. It means that God is the ground of everything personal and that he carries within himself the ontological power of personality. He is not a person, but he is not less than personal. It should not be forgotten that classical theology employed the term *persona* for the trinitarian hypostases but not for God himself. God became ‘a person’ only in the nineteenth century, in connection with the Kantian separation of nature ruled by physical law from personality ruled by moral law. Ordinary theism has made God a heavenly, completely perfect person who resides above the world and mankind. The protest of atheism against such a highest person is correct. There is no evidence for his existence, nor is he a matter of ultimate concern” (Tillich, 1973, 245).

Tillich grants with Murdoch the importance of accommodating matters of ultimate concern. He claims also, however, that one cannot be ultimately concerned for anything that is less than personal (Tillich, 1973, 244). Murdoch, by contrast, seems to be suggesting that the proper object of ultimate concern is the (impersonal) Good. But how is the notion of the personal to be understood in this context? We can agree that the Good is impersonal in the sense that it is not an individual person, but Tillich would say that God counts as impersonal in *this* sense. Tillich’s more positive conception of the personal involves lending emphasis to the relationality or communion it involves – a communion he takes to be mediated by the power of love,¹² and we know from the above quotation that he takes this

belongs to the divine nature to be a human person. Hence his closing claim that when it is the divine nature at stake, it is idolatrous to talk of God being just one more person.

12 Hence: “When individualization reaches the perfect form which we call a ‘person,’ participation reaches the perfect form which we call ‘communion.’ Man participates in all levels of life, but he participates fully only in the level of life which he is himself – he has communion only with persons. Communion is participation in another completely

power to be rooted in the “ontological power of personality” which constitutes the (theistic) ground of being.

Murdoch takes seriously the power of love and the communion with others it involves, describing the endless task we face as we learn to love those around us and deepen our understanding of the Good in the process (Murdoch, 1970, 28-29). A seemingly crucial departure from Tillich’s position is that she takes love to be the self’s route to the Good rather than being the Good itself, the implication being that it belongs to the level of the human rather than being a characteristic of fundamental reality. Yet this difference must be taken alongside her insistence – and she is in agreement with Tillich on this score – that we are limited with respect to what we can say about fundamental reality, and her preparedness to allow that we are left appealing to certain areas of experience and “using suitable metaphors and inventing suitable concepts” (Murdoch, 1970, 74). She follows this up with a reminder that human love is “normally too profoundly possessive ... to be a place of vision” whilst conceding that “the highest love is in some sense impersonal” (Murdoch, 1970, 74). The implication here is that there is more to love than deficient human love, and that the highest love is impersonal in the sense that it transcends the deficiencies of human love. Yet there is nothing here to rule out saying – however falteringly and metaphorically – that the highest love converges with a Good which is personal by virtue of sustaining the loving and morally transformative relations which make us properly human, and which is impersonal only in the innocuous and welcome sense that it is not an individual person.¹³

centered and completely individual self... No individual exists without participation, and no personal being exists without communal being... Persons can grow only in the communion of personal encounter” (Tillich, 1973, 177). See Tillich, 1973, 279-282 for Tillich’s conception of divine love.

13 Fiddes offers a variant of this interpretation when he argues that if it is allowed that all language about our ultimate concern is symbolic or metaphorical, “then there is still

4. THE TRANSCENDENT, THE IMMANENT, AND THE NATURAL

Tillich and Murdoch agree that we are limited with respect to what we can say about fundamental reality, but they insist nonetheless that the transcendent and the immanent are mutually implicating dimensions of a single reality rather than being dualistically opposed. What this means is that the transcendent and the immanent are dialectically intertwined in the sense that if you deny one, you distort the other. Thus, denying the transcendent leaves us with an unduly restricted conception of the immanent (reductive naturalism), and denying the immanent leaves us with an unduly restricted conception of the transcendent (suspect supernaturalism). This is a one-world position – the natural world is the only world there is – yet it points beyond itself to an excess we can only falteringly grasp, and Tillich describes it as “self-transcendent” in this respect (Tillich, 1957, 8). As spiritually motivated beings we are similarly self-transcendent, but there are limits to what can be said about the reality to which we transcend in such a context because it is irreducible to any part of the natural world and is not any kind of being. Tillich’s way of expressing this point is to say that it “infinitely transcends everything that is,” (Tillich, 1957, 9) and he concludes on this basis that all talk of God has a symbolic character.¹⁴ Murdoch grants likewise that we are limited with respect to what we can say about the transcendent, and they both agree that what is at issue here is a matter – the only matter – of ultimate concern. I have argued that the differences between their positions become significantly less pronounced once

a place for personal symbols, while not for ‘a person’ in the sense of ‘a being’” (Fiddes, 2002, 74).

¹⁴ Thus: “Every religious symbol negates itself in its literal meaning, but it affirms itself in its self-transcending meaning. It is not a sign pointing to something with which it has no inner relationship. It represents the power and meaning of what is symbolized through participation. The symbol participates in the reality which is symbolized. Therefore, one should never say ‘only a symbol.’ This is to confuse symbol with sign” (Tillich, 1957, 9).

we move beyond the various terminological disputes concerning the limits of the personal and the impersonal.

The theologian John Robinson takes Tillich to be defining a middle path between the problematic extremes of, on the one hand, a suspect dualistic supernaturalism and, on the other hand, reductive naturalism. As he puts it in his famous 1963 book *Honest to God*, the naturalist critique of supernaturalism allows us to tear down an idol – namely, the idea of God as a distant supernatural being – whilst theism allows us to “challenge the naturalist’s assumption that God is merely a redundant name for nature or for humanity” (Robinson, 1963, 32). He describes Tillich’s position as an “ecstatic naturalism” and sums up the approach as follows: “This, I believe, is Tillich’s great contribution to theology – the reinterpretation of transcendence in a way which preserves its reality while detaching it from the projection of supranaturalism [Robinson’s term for suspect supernaturalism – F.E.]. ‘The Divine,’ as he sees it, does not inhabit a transcendent world *above nature*; it is to be found in the ‘ecstatic’ character of *this* world, as its transcendent Depth and Ground. Indeed, as a recent commentator has observed, supranaturalism for Tillich actually represents ‘a loss of transcendence’ ” (Robinson, 1963, 34).

The themes, claims, and images are familiar from Murdoch’s true naturalism, and Robinson likewise gives centre stage to the concept of love, citing Ludwig Feuerbach’s claim that the true atheist “is not the man who denies God, the subject; it is the man for whom the attributes of divinity, such as love, wisdom, and justice, are nothing” (Robinson, 1963, 30). Robinson grants that this is very near to his own, theistic position in the sense that he is wanting to interpret theological assertions as assertions about human life, but he insists that this is *not* a form of atheism, for love thus understood has its source in God. It is in this sense, he adds, that we can agree with Dietrich Bonhoeffer that “God is the ‘beyond’ in the midst” (Robinson, 1963, 32). As for the worry that this picture involves a *denial*

of God's transcendence, the proper response is to point out – with Tillich – that it is the opposing dualistic picture which carries this implication. It does so by reducing God to this-worldly categories – he becomes “one object among other objects” as Karl Rahner put it – and on a level with any other thing in this respect (Rahner, 1978, 61).

5. COMMON GROUND MADE EXPLICIT

I hinted at the outset that my aim was to find common ground between Christian philosophers and naturalists, and I want now to spell out the implications of my findings. The typical contemporary naturalist is an atheist, and I have argued that the scientific version of such a position can be contested. With respect to this kind of naturalism, it is difficult to discern any common ground with Christian philosophy, although it is not ruled out that such a naturalist could be persuaded to broaden her philosophical vision and to enter into fruitful dialogue with the Christian philosopher. One such broadening move comes with the endorsement of a more expansive naturalism, and I have defended such an approach. I have argued also, however, that there are difficult and unresolved questions concerning its nature and limits, and that matters have been obfuscated by the typical naturalist's commitment to an untenable conception of theism. The offending dualistic picture has encouraged a commitment to atheism, and this, of course, has stood in the way of fruitful dialogue. One of my aims has been to define the shape of a middle ground beyond this dualism, to press the question of its religious significance, and to make clear that there is more at stake than the rejection or acceptance of an irrelevant second world.

What of the Christian philosopher? It would be easy to think that such a figure has been absent from the discussion. After all, my philosophers have been naturalists (expansive or otherwise), and my Christians have been theologians. It should be clear that matters are rather more complex. Take, for example, Murdoch. Murdoch

is a philosopher, but she talks of the need for a theology without God, and she is clearly and often explicitly operating at the interface of philosophy and theology. She also describes herself as a Christian, albeit a Christian Buddhist who cannot escape from Christ but who doesn't believe in "the supernatural aspects of Christianity."¹⁵ I have denied that such a position stands or falls with the acceptance of a dualistic supernaturalism. As for Tillich, he is a theologian, but he is operating at the same metaphysical level as Murdoch and claims that "the boundary line between philosophy and theology is the center of [his] thought and work" (Tillich, 1948, 83-93). We have seen that both of them can be described as naturalists.

So, the prospects for finding common ground between Christian philosophers and naturalists turn out to be rather good. First, there are philosophers like Murdoch who are receptive to elements of Christianity, worry about theism, but might be persuaded that the relevant difficulties can be overcome and that the resultant position shares significant common ground with their own preferred philosophical outlook. Second, there are expansive naturalists who share similar worries about theism and who worry also that Murdoch herself has gone too far. These philosophers might be persuaded likewise that theism is rather less problematic than it might first appear, and that its supposed extravagances – and indeed those of Murdoch – are not different in kind from the kind of expansive move that they themselves are eager to put in motion. After all, it is agreed on all sides that there is more to reality than what is measured by the sciences, the residual dispute concerning how we are to approach the further dimension in question once it is granted – if it is granted – that there are limits to what can be said and known

15 Hence: "It seems to me that some kind of Christian Buddhism would make a satisfactory religion because of course I can't get away from Christ, who travels with me; I was a Christian as a child. But I don't believe in the supernatural aspects of Christianity" (Haffenden, 1983).

in this context.¹⁶ There is no question of proof or refutation in this context. What matters above all is that the philosophers and theologians remain in dialogue, pressing the question of how the relevant positions are to be understood, and being open to the possibility that they contain rather interesting and unpredictable multitudes. I have argued that the question of naturalism offers a significant starting point for discussion, and I hope to have shown that there are good reasons for continuing the dialogue.

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¹⁶ See my *God, Value, and Nature* (Ellis, 2014, chapter 8) for more thoughts along these lines.

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DOI 10.21697/spch.2025.61.A.10

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Received: 13/09/2025. Reviewed: 15/10/2025. Accepted: 18/11/2025.

