

The Universe Next Door

Chapter Four

The Silence of Finite Space: Naturalism

Without warning, David was visited by an exact vision of death: a long hole in the ground, no wider than your body, down which you were drawn while the white faces recede. You try to reach them but your arms are pinned. Shovels pour dirt in your face. There you will be forever, in an upright position, blind and silent, and in time no one will remember you, and you will never be called. As strata of rock shift, your fingers elongate, and your teeth are distended sideways in a great underground grimace indistinguishable from a strip of chalk. And the earth tumbles on, and the sun expires, an unaltering darkness reigns where once there were stars.

John Updike
"Pigeon Feathers"

Deism is the isthmus between two great continents --theism and naturalism. To get from the first to the second, deism is the natural route. Though perhaps without deism, naturalism would not come about so readily, deism is only a passing phase, almost an intellectual curiosity. Naturalism, on the other hand, is serious business.

In intellectual terms the route is this: In theism God is the infinite personal Creator and Sustainer of the cosmos. In deism God is "reduced"; he begins to lose his personality, though he remains Creator and (by implication) sustainer of the cosmos. In naturalism God is further "reduced"; he loses his very existence.

Swing figures in this shift from theism to naturalism are legion, especially between 1600 and 1750. Rene Descartes (1596-1650), a theist by conscious confession, set the stage by conceiving of the universe as a giant mechanism of "matter" which people comprehended by "mind." He thus split reality into two kinds of being in such a way that ever since then the Western world has found it hard to see itself as an integrated whole. The naturalists, taking one route to unification, made mind a subcategory of mechanistic matter.

John Locke (1632-1714), a theist for the most part, believed in a personal God who revealed himself to us but thought that our God-given reason was the judge of what was to be taken as true from the "revelation" in the Bible. The naturalists removed the "God-given" from this conception and made "reason" the sole criterion for truth.

One of the most interesting figures in this shift, however, was Julien Offray de La Mettrie (1709-51). In his own day La Mettrie was generally considered an atheist, but he himself says, "Not that I call in question the existence of a supreme being; on the contrary it seems to me that the greatest degree of probability is in favor of this belief." Nonetheless, he continues, "It is a theoretic truth with little practical value."[\(1\)](#) The reason he can conclude that God's existence is of so little practical value is that the God who exists is *only* the maker of the universe. He is not personally interested in it nor in being worshiped by anyone in it. So God's

existence can be effectively discounted as being of any importance.[\(2\)](#)

It is precisely this feeling, this conclusion, which marks the transition to naturalism. La Mettrie is a theoretical deist but a practical naturalist. It was easy for subsequent generations to make their theory consistent with La Mettrie's practice so that naturalism was both believed and acted on.[\(3\)](#)

Basic Naturalism

This brings us, then, to the first proposition defining naturalism.

1. Matter exists eternally and is all there is. God does not exist.

As in theism and deism, the prime proposition concerns the nature of basic existence. In the former two the nature of God is the key factor. In naturalism it is the nature of the cosmos which is primary, for now, with an eternal creator-God out of the picture, the cosmos itself becomes eternal--always there though not necessarily in its present form, in fact, *certainly* not in its present form.[\(4\)](#) Carl Sagan, astrophysicist and popularizer of science, has said it as clearly as possible: "The Cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be."[\(5\)](#) Nothing comes from nothing. Something is. Therefore something always was. But that something, say the naturalists, is not a transcendent creator but the matter of the cosmos itself. In some form all the matter of the universe has always been.

The word *matter* is to be understood in a rather general way, for since the eighteenth century, science has refined its understanding. In the eighteenth century, scientists had yet to discover either the complexity of matter or its close relationship with energy. They conceived of reality as made up of irreducible "units" existing in mechanical, spatial relationship with each other, a relationship being investigated and unveiled by chemistry and physics and expressible in inexorable "laws." Later scientists were to discover that nature is not so neat or, at least, so simple. There seem to be no irreducible "units" as such, and physical laws have only mathematical expression. Certainty about what nature is, or is likely to be discovered to be, has vanished.

Still, the proposition expressed above unites naturalists. The cosmos is not composed of two things --matter and mind, or matter and spirit. As La Mettrie says, "In the whole universe there is but a single substance with various modifications."[\(6\)](#) The cosmos is ultimately one thing, without any relation to a Being beyond; there is no "god," no "creator."

2. The cosmos exists as a uniformity of cause and effect in a closed system.

This proposition is similar to proposition 2 in deism. The difference is that the universe may or may not be conceived of as a machine or clockwork. Modern scientists have found the relations between the "various elements of reality to be far more complex, if not more mysterious, than the clockwork image can account for.

Nonetheless, the universe is a *closed* system. It is not open to reordering from the outside --either by a transcendent Being (for there is none) or, as we shall discuss later at length, by self-transcendent or autonomous human beings (for they are a part of the uniformity). Émile Bréhier, describing this view, says, "Order in nature

is but one rigorously necessary arrangement of its parts, founded on the essence of things; for example, the beautiful regularity of the seasons is not the effect of a divine plan but the result of gravitation." [\(7\)](#)

The Humanist Manifesto II (1973), which expresses the views of those who call themselves "secular humanists," puts it this way: "We find insufficient evidence for belief in the existence of a supernatural." [\(8\)](#) Without God or the supernatural, of course, nothing can happen except within the realm of things themselves. Writing in *The Columbia History of the World* (1972), Rhodes W. Fairbridge says flatly, "We reject the miraculous." [\(9\)](#) Such a statement, coming as it does from a professor of geology at Columbia University, is to be expected.

What is surprising is to find a seminary professor, David Jobling, saying much the same thing: "We [that is, modern people] see the universe as a continuity of space, time, and matter, held together, as it were, from within.... God is not 'outside' time and space, nor does he stand apart from matter, communicating with the 'spiritual' part of man. We must find some way of facing the fact that Jesus Christ is the product of the same evolutionary process as the rest of us." [\(10\)](#)

Jobling is attempting to understand Christianity within the naturalistic world view. Certainly, after God is put strictly inside the system --the uniform, closed system of cause and effect-- he has been denied sovereignty and much else which Christians have traditionally believed to be true about him. The point here, however, is that naturalism is a pervasive world view and is to be found in the most unlikely places. What are the central features of this *closed* system? It might first appear that naturalists, affirming the "continuity of space, time, and matter, held together... from within," would be determinists, asserting that the closed system holds together by an inexorable, unbreakable linkage of cause and effect. Most naturalists are indeed determinists, though many would argue that this does not remove our sense of free will or our responsibility for our actions. Is such a freedom really consistent with the conception of a closed system? To answer we must first look more closely at the naturalist's conception of human beings.

3. *Human beings are complex "machines"; personality is an interrelation of chemical and physical properties we do not yet fully understand.*

While Descartes recognized that human beings were part machine, he also thought they were part mind; and mind was a different substance. A great majority of naturalists, however, see mind as a function of machine. La Mettrie was one of the first to put it bluntly: "Let us conclude boldly then that man is a machine, and that in the whole universe there is but a single substance with various modifications." [\(11\)](#) Putting it even more crudely, Pierre Jean Georges Cabanis (1757-1808) wrote that "the brain secretes thought as the liver secretes bile." [\(12\)](#)

William Barrett, in a fascinating intellectual history of the gradual loss of the notion of the soul or the self in Western thought from Descartes to the present, writes:

Thus we get in La Mettrie - - - those quaint illustrations of the human body as a system of imaginary gears, cogs, and ratchets. Man, the microcosm, is just another machine within the universal machine that is the cosmos. We smile at these illustrations as quaint and crude, but secretly we may still nourish the notion that they are after all in the right

direction, though a little premature. With the advent of the computer, however, this temptation toward mechanism becomes more irresistible, for here we no longer have an obsolete machine of wheels and pulleys but one that seems able to reproduce the processes of the human mind. Can machines think? now becomes a leading question for our time.(13) In any case, the point is that as human beings we are simply a part of the cosmos. In the cosmos there is one substance --matter. We are that and only that. The laws applying to matter apply to us. We do not transcend the universe in any way.

Of course, we are very complex machines, and our mechanism is not yet fully understood. Thus people continue to amaze us and upset our expectations. Still, any mystery that surrounds our understanding is a result, not of genuine mystery, but of mechanical complexity.(14)

It might be concluded that humanity is not distinct from other objects in the universe, that it is merely one kind of object among many. But naturalists insist this is not so. Julian Huxley, for example, says we are unique among animals because we alone are capable of conceptual thought, employ speech, possess a cumulative tradition (culture) and have had a unique method of evolution.(15) To this most naturalists would add our moral capacity, a topic we will take up separately. All of these characteristics are open and generally obvious. None of them imply any transcendent power or demand any extra-material basis, say the naturalists.

Ernest Nagel points out the necessity of not stressing the human "continuity" with the nonhuman elements of our make-up: "Without denying that even the most distinctive human traits are dependent on things which are nonhuman, a mature naturalism attempts to assess man's nature in the light of *his* actions and achievements, *his* aspirations and capacities, *his* limitations and tragic failures, and *his* splendid works of ingenuity and imagination."(16) By stressing our *humanness* (our distinctness from the rest of the cosmos), a naturalist finds a basis for value, for, it is held, intelligence, cultural sophistication, a sense of right and wrong are not only human distinctives but are what make us valuable. This we will see developed further under proposition 6 below.

Finally, while some naturalists are strict determinists with regard to all events in the universe, including human action, thus denying any sense of free will, many naturalists hold that we are free to fashion our own destiny, at least in part. Some, for example, hold that while a closed universe implies determinism, determinism is still compatible with human freedom, or at least a sense of freedom. We can do many things which we want to do; we are not always constrained to act against our wants. I could, for example, stop writing this book if I wanted to. I don't want to.

This, so many naturalists hold, leaves open the possibility for significant human action, and it provides a basis for morality. For unless we are free to do other than we do, we cannot be held responsible for what we do. The coherence of this view has been challenged, however, and is one of the soft spots in the naturalist's system of thought, as we will see in the following chapter.

4. Death is extinction of personality and individuality.

This is, perhaps, the "hardest" proposition of naturalism for people to accept, yet it is absolutely demanded by the naturalists' conception of the universe. Men and

women are made up of matter and nothing else. When that matter which goes to make up an individual is disorganized at death, then that person disappears.

The Humanist Manifesto II states, "As far as we know, the total personality is a function of the biological organism transacting in a social and cultural context. There is no credible evidence that life survives the death of the body."[\(17\)](#) Bertrand Russell writes, "No fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave."[\(18\)](#) And A. J. Ayer says, "I take it....to be fact that one's existence ends at death."[\(19\)](#) In a more general sense mankind is likewise seen to be transitory. "Human destiny," Ernest Nagel confesses, "[is] an episode between two oblivions."[\(20\)](#)

Such statements are clear and unambiguous. The concept may trigger immense psychological problems, but there is no disputing its precision. The only "immortality," as The Humanist Manifesto II puts it is to "continue to exist in our progeny and in the way that our lives have influenced others in our culture."[\(21\)](#) In his short story "Pigeon Feathers" John Updike gives this notion a beautifully human dimension as he portrays the young boy David reflecting on his minister's description of heaven as being "like Abraham Lincoln's goodness living after him."[\(22\)](#) Like the seminary professor quoted above, David's pastor is no longer a theist but is simply trying to provide "spiritual" counsel within the framework of naturalism.

5. History is a linear stream of events linked by cause and effect but without an overarching purpose.

First, the word *history*, as used in this proposition, includes both natural history and human history, for naturalists see them as a continuity. The origin of the human family is in nature. We arose out of it and, most likely, will return to it (not just individually but as a species).

Natural history begins with the origin of the universe which, despite the variations among naturalists, is said to be eternal. Most scientists will only say that some incredibly long time ago a process took place among the stuff of the cosmos which ultimately resulted in the formation of the universe we now inhabit and are conscious of. But exactly how this came to be, few are willing to say. Professor Lodewijk Woltjer, astronomer at Columbia University, speaks for many: "The origin of what is --man, the earth, the universe-- is shrouded in a mystery we are no closer to solving than was the chronicler of Genesis."[\(23\)](#) A number of theories to explain the process have been advanced, but none have really won the day. Still, among naturalists, the premise always is that the process was self-activating. It was not set in motion by a Prime Mover --God or otherwise.

How human beings came to be is generally held to be more certain than how the universe came to be. The theory of evolution, long toyed with by naturalists, was given a "mechanism" by Darwin and has won the day. There is hardly a public school text that does not proclaim the theory as fact. We should be careful, however, not to assume that evolution is strictly a naturalist theory. Many theists are also evolutionists.[\(24\)](#)

For a theist, the infinite-personal God is seen to be in charge of all natural processes. If the biological order has evolved it has done so by conforming to God's design; it is teleological, directed toward an end personally willed by God. For a naturalist, the process is on its own. G. G. Simpson puts this so well he is

worth quoting at some length:

Organic evolution is a process entirely materialistic in its origin and operation. Life is materialistic in nature, but it has properties unique to itself which reside in its organization, not in its materials or mechanics. Man arose as a result of the operation of organic evolution and his being and activities are also materialistic, but the human species has properties unique to itself among all forms of life, superadded to the properties unique to life among all forms of matter and of action. Man's intellectual, social, and spiritual natures are exceptional among animals in degree, but they arose by organic evolution.(25)

This passage is significant for its clear affirmation of both human continuity with the rest of the cosmos and special uniqueness. Yet lest we conclude that our uniqueness, our position as nature's highest creation, was designed by some teleological principle operative in the universe, Simpson adds, "Man was certainly not the goal of evolution, which evidently had no goal."(26)

In some ways the theory of evolution raises as many questions as it solves, for while it offers an explanation for *what* has happened over the eons of time, it does not explain *why*. The notion of a Purposer is not allowed by naturalists. Rather, as Jacques Monod says, man's "number came up in the Monte Carlo game," a game of pure chance.(27) Any intentionality is ruled out as a possibility from the beginning.

In any case, naturalists insist that with the dawn of humanity, evolution suddenly took on a new dimension, for human beings are self-conscious --probably the only self-conscious beings in the universe.(28) Further, as humans we are free consciously to consider, decide and act. Thus, while evolution considered strictly on the biological level continues to be unconscious and accidental, human actions are not. They are not just a part of the "natural" environment. They are human history.

In other words, when human beings appear, meaningful history, human history -- the events of self-conscious, self-determining men and women-- appears. But like evolution which has no inherent goal, history has no inherent goal. History is what we make it to be. Human events have only the meaning people give them when they choose them or when they look back on them.

History proceeds in a straight line, as in theism (not in a cycle as in Eastern pantheism), but history has no predetermined goal. Rather than culminating in a Second Coming of the God-man, it is simply going to "last" as long as conscious human beings last. When we go, human history disappears, and natural history goes on its way alone.

6. Ethics is related only to human beings.

Ethical considerations did not play a central role in the rise of naturalism. Naturalism rather came as a logical extension of certain metaphysical notions -- notions about the nature of the external world. Most early naturalists continued to hold ethical views similar to those in the surrounding culture, views which in general were indistinguishable from popular Christianity. There was a respect for individual dignity, an affirmation of love, a commitment to truth and basic honesty. Jesus was seen as a teacher of high ethical values.

Though it is becoming less and less so, it is still true to some measure today. With a few recent twists --for example, a permissive attitude to premarital and extramarital sex, a positive response to euthanasia, abortion and the individual's right to suicide-- the ethical norms of The Humanist Manifesto II are similar to traditional morality. Theists and naturalists can often live side by side in communal harmony on ethical matters. There have always been disagreements between them. These disagreements will, I believe, increase as humanism shifts further and further from its memory of Christian ethics.[\(29\)](#) But whatever the disagreements (or agreements) on ethical norms, the *basis* for these norms is radically different.

For a theist, God is the foundation of values. For a naturalist, values are manmade. The naturalist's notion follows logically from the previous propositions. If there was no consciousness prior to humans, then there was no prior sense of right and wrong. Furthermore, if there were no ability to do other than what one does, any sense of right and wrong would have no practical value. So for ethics to be possible, there must be both consciousness and self-determination. In short, there must be personality.

Naturalists say both consciousness and self-determination came with the appearance of human beings, and so ethics too came then too. No ethical system can be derived solely from the nature of "things" outside human consciousness. In other words, no Natural law is inscribed in the cosmos. Even La Mettrie, who fudged a bit when he wrote "Nature created us all [man and beast] solely to be happy," betraying his deistic roots, was a confirmed naturalist in ethics: "You see that natural law is *nothing but* an intimate feeling which belongs to the imagination like all other feelings, thought included."[\(30\)](#) La Mettrie, of course, conceived of the imagination in a totally mechanistic fashion so that ethics became for him simply people following out the pattern imbedded in them as creatures. Certainly there is nothing whatever transcendent about morality.

The Humanist Manifesto II states the locus of naturalistic ethics in no uncertain terms: "We affirm that moral values derive their source from human experience. Ethics is *autonomous* and *situational*, needing no theological or ideological sanction. Ethics stems from human need and interest. To deny this distorts the whole basis of life. Human life has meaning because we create and develop our futures."[\(31\)](#) Most conscious naturalists would probably agree with this statement. But exactly how value is created out of the human situation is just as much up for grabs as is the way we ought to understand the origin of the universe.

The major question is this: How does *ought* derive from *is*? Traditional ethics, that is, the ethics of Christian theism, affirms the transcendent origin of ethics and locates in the infinite-personal God the measure of the good. Good is what God is, and this has been revealed in many and diverse ways, most fully in the life, teachings and death of Jesus Christ.

Naturalists, however, have no such appeal, nor do they wish to make one. Ethics is solely a human domain. So the question: How does one get from the fact of self-consciousness and self-determination, the realm of *is* and *can*, to the realm of what *ought* to be or be done?

One observation naturalists make is that all people have a sense of moral values. These derive, G. G. Simpson says, from intuition ("the feeling of rightness, without objective inquiry into the reasons for this feeling and without possible test as to the

truth or falseness of the premises involved"), from authority and from convention. No one grows up without picking up values from the environment, and, while a person may reject these and pay the consequences of ostracism or martyrdom, seldom does anyone succeed in inventing values totally divorced from culture.

Of course, values differ from culture to culture, and none seems absolutely universal. So Simpson argues for an ethic based on objective inquiry and finds it in a harmonious adjustment of people to each other and their environment. [\(32\)](#) Whatever promotes such harmony is good; what does not is bad.

John Platt, in an article which attempts to construct an ethic for B. F. Skinner's behaviorism, writes,

Happiness is having short-run reinforcers congruent with medium-run and long-run ones, and wisdom is knowing how to achieve this. And ethical behavior results when short-run personal reinforcers are congruent with long-run group reinforcers. This makes it easy to "be good," or more exactly to "behave well." [\(33\)](#)

The upshot of this is a definition of good action as group-approved, survival-promoting action. Both Simpson and Platt opt for the continuance of human life as the value above all values. Survival is thus basic, but it is human survival which is affirmed as primary.

Both Simpson and Platt are scientists with a consciousness of their responsibility to be fully human and thus to integrate their scientific knowledge and their moral values. From the side of the humanities comes Walter Lippmann. In *A Preface to Morals* (1929) Lippmann assumes the naturalists' stance with regard to the origin and purposelessness of the universe. His tack is to construct an ethic on the basis of what he takes to be the central agreement of the "great religious teachers." For Lippmann, the good turns out to be something which has been recognized so far only by the elite, a "voluntary aristocracy of the spirit" [\(34\)](#) His argument is that this elitist ethic is now becoming mandatory for all people if they are to survive the twentieth-century crisis of values.

The good itself consists of disinterestedness --a way of alleviating the "disorders and frustrations" of the modern world, now that the "acids of modernity" have eaten away the traditional basis for ethical behavior. It is difficult to summarize the content Lippmann pours into the word *disinterested*. The final third of his book is addressed to doing that. But it helps to notice that his ethic turns out to be based on a personal commitment of each individual who would be moral, and that it is totally divorced from the world of facts --the nature of things in general:

A religion which rests upon particular conclusions in astronomy, biology and history may be fatally injured by the discovery of new truths. But the religion of the spirit does not depend upon creeds and cosmologies; it has no vested interest in any particular truth. It is concerned not with the organization of matter, but with the quality of human desire. [\(35\)](#) Lippmann's language must be carefully understood. By *religion* he means morality or moral impulse. By *spirit* he means the moral faculty in human beings, that which exalts people above animals and above others whose "religion" is merely "popular." The language of theism is being employed, but its content is purely naturalistic.

In any case, what remains of ethics is an affirmation of a high vision of right in the

face of a universe which is merely there and has no value in itself. Ethics thus are personal and chosen. Lippmann is not, to my knowledge, generally associated with the existentialists, but, as we shall see in chapter six, his version of naturalistic ethics is ultimately theirs.

Naturalists have tried to construct ethical systems in a wide variety of ways. Even Christian theists must admit that many of the naturalists' ethical insights are valid. Indeed theists should not be surprised by the fact that we can learn moral truths by observing human nature and behavior, for if women and men are made in the image of God and if that image is not totally destroyed by the Fall, then they should yet reflect --even if dimly-- something of the goodness of God.

Naturalism in Practice: Secular Humanism

Two forms of naturalism deserve special mention. The first is *secular humanism*, a term that has come to be both used and abused by adherents and critics alike. Some clarification of terms is in order here.

First, secular humanism is one form of humanism in general, but not the only form. Humanism itself is the overall attitude that human beings are of special value; their aspirations, their thoughts, their yearnings are significant. There is as well an emphasis on the value of the individual person.

Ever since the Renaissance thoughtful people of various convictions have called themselves and been called *humanists*, among them many Christians. John Calvin (1509-64), Desiderius Erasmus (1456?-1536), Edmund Spenser (1552?-99), William Shakespeare (1564-1616), John Milton (1608-74), all of whom wrote from a Christian theistic world view, were humanists, what are sometimes today called *Christian humanists*. The reason for this designation is that they emphasized human dignity, not as over against God but as deriving from the image of God in each person. Today there are many thoughtful Christians who so want to preserve the word humanism from being associated with purely secular forms that they signed a Christian Humanist Manifesto (1982) declaring that Christians have always affirmed the value of human beings.[\(36\)](#)

Secular humanism is another specific form of humanism. Its tenets are best expressed in Humanist Manifesto II, drafted by Paul Kurt, professor of philosophy at the State University of New York at Buffalo.[\(37\)](#) Secular humanism is a form of humanism, one completely framed within a naturalistic world view. It is fair to say, I believe, that most who would feel comfortable with the label of secular humanist would find their views reflected in Propositions 1-6 above. Secular humanists, in other words, are simply naturalists, though not all naturalists are secular humanists.

[A section of this chapter entitled "Naturalism in Practice: Marxism", written by C. Stephen Evans, has been omitted here due to excerpting agreements.]

The Persistence of Naturalism

Unlike deism, naturalism has had great staying power. Born in the eighteenth century, it came of age in the nineteenth and grew to maturity in the twentieth. While signs of age are now appearing, naturalism is still very much alive. It dominates the universities, colleges and high schools. It provides the framework for most scientific study. It poses the backdrop against which the humanities continue to struggle for human value, as writers, poets, painters and artists in

general shudder under its implications. No rival world view has yet been able to topple it, though it is fair to say that the twentieth century has provided some powerful options and theism is experiencing somewhat of a rebirth at all levels of society.

What makes naturalism so persistent? There are two basic answers. First, it gives the impression of being honest and objective. One is asked to accept only what appears to be based on facts and on the assured results of scientific investigation or scholarship. Second, to a vast number of people it appears to be coherent. To them the implications of its premises are largely worked out and found acceptable. Naturalism assumes no god, no spirit, no life beyond the grave. It sees human beings as the makers of value. While it disallows that we are the center of the universe by virtue of design, it allows us to place ourselves there and to make of ourselves and for ourselves something of value. As Simpson says, "Man *is* the highest animal. The fact that he alone is capable of making such a judgment is in itself part of the evidence that this decision is correct."[\(42\)](#) It is up to us then to work out the implications of our special place in nature, controlling and altering, as we find it possible, our own evolution.[\(43\)](#)

All of this is attractive. If naturalism were really as described, it should, perhaps, be called not only attractive or persistent but true. We could then proceed to tout its virtues and turn the argument of this book into a tract for our times.

But long before the twentieth century got under way, cracks began appearing in the edifice. Theistic critics always found fault with it. They could never abandon their conviction that an infinite-personal God is behind the universe. Their criticism might be discounted as unenlightened or merely conservative, as if they were afraid to launch out into the uncharted waters of new truth. But more was afoot than this. As we shall see in more detail in the [following chapter](#), within the camp of the naturalists themselves came rumblings of discontent. The facts on which naturalism was based --the nature of the external universe, its closed continuity of cause and effect-- were not at issue. The problem was in the area of coherence. Did naturalism give inadequate reason for us to consider ourselves valuable? Unique, maybe. But gorillas are unique. So is every category of nature. Value was the first troublesome issue. Could a being thrown up by chance be worthy?

Second, could a being whose origins were so "iffy" trust his or her own capacity to know? Put it personally: If my mind is coterminous with my brain, if "I" am only a thinking machine, how can I trust my thought? If consciousness is an epiphenomenon of matter, perhaps the appearance of human freedom which lays the basis for morality is an epiphenomenon of either chance or inexorable law. Perhaps chance or the nature of things only built into me the "feeling" that I am free but actually I am not.

These and similar questions do not arise from outside the naturalist world view. They are inherent in it. The fears that these questions raised in some minds lead directly to [nihilism](#), which I am tempted to call a world view but which is actually a denial of all world views.

NOTES

1 La Mettrie, *Man a Machine* (1747) in *Les Philosophes*, ed. Norman L. Torrey (New York: Capricorn Books, 1960), p. 176.

2 Whitehead, for example, says, "Of course we find in the eighteenth century Paley's famous argument that mechanism presupposes a God who is the author of nature. But even before Paley put the argument into its final form, Hume had written the retort, that the God whom you will find will be the sort of God who makes that mechanism. In other words, that mechanism can, at most, presuppose a mechanic, and not merely a mechanic but *its* mechanic" (Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, p. 77).

3 The brash, anti-Christian, anti-clerical tone of La Mettrie's essay is of a piece with its anti-theistic content, exalting, as it does, human reason at the expense of revelation. A sample of this from the conclusion to *Man a Machine* is instructive: "I recognize only scientists as judges of the conclusions which I draw, and I hereby challenge every prejudiced man who is not an anatomist, or acquainted with the only philosophy which is to the purpose, that of the human body. Against such a strong and solid oak, what could the weak reeds of theology, metaphysics and scholasticism, avail; childish weapons, like our foils, which may well afford the pleasure of fencing, but can never wound an adversary. Need I say that I refer to the hollow and trivial notions, to the trite and pitiable arguments that will be urged, as long as the shadow of prejudice or superstition remains on earth, for the supposed incompatibility of two substances which meet and interact unceasingly [La Mettrie is here alluding to Descartes' division of reality into mind and matter]?" (p. 177).

4 Strictly speaking there are naturalists who are not materialists, that is, who hold that there may be elements of the universe that are not material, but they have had little impact on Western culture. My definition of naturalism will be limited to those who are materialists.

5 Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* (New York: Random House, 1980), p. 4. Sagan goes on to say, "Our feeblest contemplations of the cosmos stir us --there is a tingling in the spine, a catch in the voice, a faint sensation, as if a distant memory, of falling from a height. We know we are approaching the greatest of mysteries." For Sagan, in this book and the television series of the same name, the cosmos assumes the position of God, creating the same kind of awe in Sagan, who tries to trigger in his readers and television audience the same response. So-called science thus becomes religion, some say the religion of scientism. See Jeffrey Marsh, "The Universe and Dr. Sagan," *Commentary* (May 1981), pp. 64-68.

6 La Mettrie, *Man a Machine*, p. 177. On the other hand, to define a human being as "a field of energies moving inside a larger fluctuating system of energies" is equally naturalistic. In neither case is man seen as transcending the cosmos. See Marilyn Ferguson, *The Brain Revolution: The Frontiers of Mind Research* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., 1973), p. 22.

7 Bréhier, *The History of Philosophy*, vol. 5, p. 129.

8 *Humanist Manifestos I and II* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1973), p. 16. These two manifestos, especially the second (which was drafted by Paul Kurtz), are convenient compilations of naturalist assumptions. Paul Kurtz is a professor of philosophy at the State University of New York at Buffalo, editor of *Free Inquiry*

(a quarterly journal devoted to the propagation of "secular humanism") and editor of Prometheus Books.

9 *The Columbia History of the World*, ed. John A. Garraty and Peter Gay (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 14.

10 David Jobling, "How Does Our Twentieth-Century Concept of the Universe Affect Our Understanding of the Bible?" *Enquiry* (September-November 1972), p. 14. Ernest Nagel, in a helpful essay defining naturalism in a midtwentieth-century form, states this position in more rigorously philosophical terms: "The first [proposition central to naturalism] is the existential and causal primacy of organized matter in the executive order of nature. This is the assumption that the occurrence of events, qualities and processes, and the characteristic behaviors of various individuals, are contingent on the organization of spatiotemporally located bodies, whose internal structures and external relations determine and limit the appearance and disappearance of everything that happens" (Ernest Nagel, "Naturalism Reconsidered" [1954] in *Essays in Philosophy*, ed. Houston Peterson [New York: Pocket Library, 1959], p. 486).

11 "La Mettrie, *Man a Machine*, p. 177.

12 Copleston, *History*, vol. 6, p. 51. Among recent proponents of the notion that human beings are machines is John Brierly, *The Thinking Machine* (London: Heinemann, 1973).

13 William Barrett, *The Death of the Soul: From Descartes to the Computer* (New York: Anchor, 1987), p. 154.

14 *The Humanist Manifesto II* states the situation generally with reference to the whole of nature: "Nature may indeed be broader and deeper than we now know; any new discoveries, however, will but enlarge our knowledge of the natural" (p. 16).

15 Julian Huxley, "The Uniqueness of Man," in *Man in the Modern World* (New York: Mentor Books, 1948), pp. 7-28. George Gaylord Simpson lists man's "interrelated factors of intelligence, flexibility, individualization and socialization" (*The Meaning of Evolution*, revised and abridged [New York: Mentor Books, 1951], p. 138).

16 Nagel, "Naturalism Reconsidered," p. 490.

17 *Humanist Manifestos I and II*, p. 17.

18 Bertrand Russell, "A Free Man's Worship," *Why I Am Not a Christian* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), p. 107.

19 A. J. Ayer, ed., *The Humanist Outlook* (London: Pemberton, 1968), p. 9.

20 Nagel, "Naturalism Reconsidered," p. 496.

21 *Humanist Manifestos I and II*, p. 17.

22 John Updike, "Pigeon Feathers," in *Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories* (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett, 1959), p. 96.

23 *The Columbia History of the World*, p. 3.

24 See, for example, Malcolm Jeeves, *The Scientific Enterprise and Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1969), pp. 80-117; *Evolution and Christian Thought Today*, ed. Russell L. Mixter (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959); Charles Hummel, *The Galileo Connection* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1985); and countless articles in the *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation*.

25 Simpson, *Meaning of Evolution*, p. 143. Why Simpson should assign human beings a spiritual nature is not clear. We must not, however, take him to mean that they have a dimension which takes them out of the closed universe.

26 Ibid.

27 Jacques Monod, *Chance and Necessity*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), p. 146.

28 A few naturalists like Carl Sagan believe that, given the size and age of the universe, other intelligent beings must have evolved elsewhere in the universe. But even Sagan admits that there is no hard evidence for this view. (Sagan, *Cosmos*, pp. 292, 307-15).

29 This shift in the content of ethical norms can be studied by comparing *Humanist Manifesto I* (1933) with *Humanist Manifesto II* (1973).

30 La Mettrie, *Man a Machine*, p. 176; emphasis mine.

31 *Humanist Manifestos I and II*, p. 17.

32 Simpson, *Meaning of Evolution*, p. 149.

33 John Platt, *The Center Magazine* (March-April 1972), p. 48.

34 Walter Lippmann, *A Preface to Morals* (New York: Time Incorporated, 1964), p. 190.

35 Ibid., p. 307. Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* could be described as a sustained cry for the maintenance of some other basis for human values than *commitment* or human *decision*. Without seriously contending with an infinite-personal God who acts as the foundation for these values it is difficult to see just how contemporary values will be able to be grounded in any firm absolute. See Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), esp. pp. 194-216. See also Alasdair McIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1984).

36 A Christian Humanist Manifesto was published in *Eternity* magazine (January 1982), pp. 16-18. The signers were Donald Bloesch, George Brushaber, Richard

Bube, Arthur Holmes, Bruce Lockerbie, J. I. Packer, Bernard Ramm and I.

37 Humanist Manifestos I and II. Another, briefer compilation of secular humanist views, "The Affirmations of Humanism: A Statement of Principles and Values," appears on the back cover of *Free Inquiry* (Summer 1987).

42 Simpson, *Meaning of Evolution*, p. 139.

43 Ibid., pp. 166-81. From the early days of Darwin and T. H. Huxley, naturalists have placed much hope in human evolution. Some modern optimists are Arthur C. Clarke, *Profiles of the Future* (New York: Bantam, 1964), pp. 212-27; Peter Medawar, pp. 437-42; Glenn Seaborg, "The Role of Science and Technology," *Washington University Magazine* (Spring 1972), pp. 31-35; Julian Huxley, "Transhumanism," *Knowledge, Morality and Destiny* (New York: Mentor Books, 1960), pp. 13-17.

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