

Hudson - Alternatives to Theism

Agnosticism : suspension of judgment or refusal to affirm or deny theism given the available evidence.

Skepticism : doubt concerning the possibility of religious knowledge.

Atheism : the belief that there is no God or the rejection of belief in God

MATERIALISM : The philosophical (metaphysical) position that only material entities are real or that everything that exists is made of matter.

Without resorting to gods, spirits, non-physical forces or anything supernatural, relatively comprehensive descriptions and explanations of reality can be given and are becoming ever more comprehensive and successful as the sciences advance.

Some materialists have been **reductionists**.

Complex forms of matter can only consist of the simplest parts of matter. These are studied by Physics. Sciences that deal with more complex forms of matter, e.g., Chemistry, can be *reduced* to the principles of Physics *with nothing left over*. Biology studies life forms. The simplest of these life forms (e.g., viruses and bacteria) are composed of complex chemical structures: organic molecules.

So Biology is reducible to Chemistry, with nothing left over. Psychology, the science of the behavior of organisms, reduces to Biology, with nothing left over. Higher life forms are nothing but organisms with complex nervous systems.

The Human Sciences: Anthropology, Sociology, Economics and History are reducible to Psychology. They are all about more or less complex patterns of behavior on the part of human organisms. In all these cases, what is “higher” and more complex can be reductively explained by what is lower and simpler.

Criticism of reductionist materialism:

The position fails to *explain* the attributes that distinguish “higher” from “lower” types of entities. It pretends that, by identifying the components of complex entities, these attributes are simply unreal; they are *explained away*. Living substances may consist of complex molecules, but that fact by itself does not constitute an explanation of their *being alive*.

Theists often claim that the error of reductive materialism is that, by being simpler than Theism, it is too simple. It really has no explanation for the characteristics of life, consciousness, mind, purpose, value, etc. Theism is a more complex worldview, but perhaps this added theoretical complexity provides some explanation of these phenomena *without explaining them away*.

Materialist response: these criticisms have some force but they are obsolete. They apply only to early, crude versions of materialism, versions that have been around from ancient times to the early 19th century. Contemporary versions of materialism are far more advanced and sophisticated.

Emergent Naturalism is the name used by many recent materialists to represent their more sophisticated view. These philosophers deny that there are any nonmaterial, supernatural substances or forces but they avoid reductionism and the bleak depressing picture of reality conveyed by older versions of materialism.

. Each science seems to require its own distinctive explanatory principles and, apparently, these cannot be just logically or mathematically derived from the principles of a more basic science.

Nature has many distinct levels. They assert that different sorts of laws operate on each level.

Nature should not be pictured as alien, inert, static, blind or meaningless. It is dynamic, purposeful and full of aesthetic, moral and spiritual qualities. These qualities emerge naturally in specific types of natural objects, situations and events without having to be put there by any supernatural agency.

The workings of evolution show the dynamic creativity of Nature rather than blindness or sheer chance. It is not an alien, meaningless context for us. Rather, it has qualities analogous to those of humanity, a striving or reaching out toward the creation of new things. (Cf. Henri Bergson's **`elan vital** or vital impetus)

Other materialists have expressed dissatisfaction with such forms of emergent naturalism. For example, they express doubts as to whether anything useful or even meaningful is contributed by such terms as “*vital impetus*” or “*creative striving*”. Do these terms serve as anything more than labels for the fact that evolutionary processes do lead to more complex life-forms?

Some recent philosophers (e.g. David Chalmers, have argued that a certain type of reductionism succeeds for many mental qualities such as believing, reasoning, memory and language-processing. However, they argue that reductionism fails when it comes to such things as experiences of flavor, color, sound, emotion and various other “qualia”. These must be acknowledged as non-material phenomena. Even such opponents of general reductionism concede that such experiences as these are closely dependent on the existence and normal functioning of brains and nervous systems.

Humanism

Based on a Naturalistic form of materialism. Denies supernaturalism.

Anti-reductionist. Meaning, values, ideals are genuine aspects of this life and of the natural world. They are not present in the world from some supernatural cause but neither are they illusions or merely subjective feelings. Human beings create values, meaning and purpose, but these are grounded in real needs and passions inherent in human nature. Hence they are as objectively real as any other human creation.

Basic idea of humanism stated by **Protagoras** (490 - 421 B.C.)

“Man is the measure of all things: of all the things that are, that they are and of all the things that are not, that they are not.”

Humanism was first made into an alternative to Theism in the 19th and 20th centuries. This may be called **naturalistic humanism**.

For more on Humanism, see:

<http://www.secularhumanism.org/>

Naturalistic humanists such as John Dewey, Corliss Lamont and Paul Kurtz take a basically materialistic stance and deny the existence of all supernatural entities, but assert the supreme value of human beings and advocate making human beings the central focus of all organized thought and social activity.

This outlook is not necessarily anti-religious. Some humanists refer to themselves as religious humanists, though they, too, are naturalists and reject belief in anything supernatural.

See: <http://www.religioustolerance.org/humanism1.htm>

There are also some churches which embrace a very liberal, inclusive, nontraditional and vague sort of Theism which are committed to principles essentially the same as those of humanism. **Unitarian universalist** organizations are one example.

See: <http://www.religioustolerance.org/statbelief.htm>

Other examples of non-theistic religions:

Buddhism

(see: <http://webpace.ship.edu/cgboer/buddhaintro.html>)

Taoism (see: <http://www.taoism.net/enter.htm>)

Confucianism

(see: <http://www.religioustolerance.org/confuciu.htm>)