

Is Naturalism Self-Defeating?

Alvin Plantinga argues that, if we think that Naturalism is true—i.e., if we think that the universe is merely a godless place of matter in motion, and that human beings are merely the product of random chance and random genetic mutations—then we have no reason to think that we form beliefs in any reliable way. As such, we have no good reason to think that Naturalism itself is true.

In short, he argues that the belief in Naturalism is “self-defeating.”

1. Defining Some Terms: Before discussing the actual argument, it will be helpful to discuss a few terms:

Naturalism: Naturalism is, roughly, the view that there is nothing supernatural in the universe. We might think of it as the view that everything that exists, and every event that occurs, can be explained (in principle) by science. If something is in principle unobservable, then the Naturalist probably does not believe that it exists. For instance, the Naturalist rejects the existence of God, and immaterial human souls. The Naturalist believes that humans are merely material objects—just a collection of particles—and that our planet, as well as the first living organisms, were the product of random chance. The human species itself is the product of a long, unguided process of evolution (i.e., random genetic mutation plus survival of the fittest).

Defeater: A defeater is a belief that undermines the sureness or justification of another belief. For instance, consider:

- Broken clock: You look at a clock and the hands read 3:30, and it is daylight outside. You form the belief, “It is 3:30 in the afternoon.” But, just then, someone informs you that the batteries in the clock died yesterday at 3:30, and that the hands have been in that position ever since.

In this scenario, the belief that the clock has stopped is a “defeater” for your initial belief. That is, in light of the new information about the clock, you have NO IDEA if it is really 3:30 or not. It might be. After all, even a broken clock is correct twice a day. But, the probability that the clock presently reads the correct time is very low.

Reliable Cognitive Faculties: Most (all?) of us assume that our senses are reliable. If we see a table, and form the belief, “there is a table,” we generally assume that THE BELIEF IS TRUE. Moreover, we assume that the mechanism that led to this belief (i.e., our eyesight, in conjunction with our brains, etc.) is RELIABLE.

But, do we have any good reason for thinking that this mechanism of belief-formation is actually reliable?

Certainly, it is intuitive to assume so. It sure SEEMS that most of my beliefs are true, and that I formed them in a reliable way. But, Plantinga asks, is there any REASON to believe this? What is the probability that the following claim is true?

(R) Our cognitive faculties are reliable.

2. The Argument: Plantinga argues that Naturalism entails a further truth, and this further truth undermines the original belief in Naturalism itself; i.e., he argues that if one is a Naturalist, then one has a “defeater” for their original belief in Naturalism. When a belief ultimately defeats ITSELF, we call that view “self-defeating.” In short, Plantinga argues that Naturalism is self-defeating:

There are two hypotheses under scrutiny here: Theism (T) and Naturalism (N). Here is a question: What is the likelihood that our cognitive faculties—i.e., the mechanism responsible for our formation of beliefs—are reliable, given each hypothesis?

- (1) Theism: Well, if theism is true, then it seems VERY LIKELY that our belief-forming faculties would be reliable. If God is good, then God would almost certainly want us to have true beliefs. So:

$P(R/T) = \text{high}$

- (2) Naturalism: But, if Naturalism is true, what is the likelihood that most of our beliefs are true? Plantinga states that the probability is “inscrutable.” In other words, we have NO IDEA what the likelihood is that our cognitive faculties would be reliable, given Naturalism. This is because, on Naturalism, the universe (including human beings) is just a collection of particles moving in chance fashion. Such a universe does not “desire” or “select for” beings that have true beliefs. Even the evolutionary process does not select for this. Evolution selects for *survival*, not true beliefs. So:

$P(R/N) = \text{low or inscrutable}$

The Naturalist has no good reason to think that their cognitive faculties are reliable; i.e., they have no idea if mechanism responsible for the formation of beliefs is conducive to producing TRUE beliefs. But, Naturalism is ONE OF those beliefs! Therefore, the Naturalist has no good reason to think that their belief in Naturalism is true (because they have no idea if the mechanism that gave rise to that belief is reliable or not). In short, Naturalism undermines itself.

Here is the argument:

1. Starting assumption: I believe that Naturalism is true.
2. If Naturalism is true, then unguided evolution is also true.
3. If unguided evolution is true, then the likelihood that my belief-forming cognitive faculties are reliable is either low or inscrutable; $P(R/N)$ = low or inscrutable.
4. If $P(R/N)$ is low or inscrutable, then I have defeaters for all of my beliefs (since all of my beliefs are the result of those belief-forming cognitive faculties, and it is irrational to believe something if the chance that the belief was reliably formed is either low or inscrutable).
5. Therefore, I have a defeater for my belief in Naturalism (since I have defeaters for ALL of my beliefs, and my belief in Naturalism is one of them).

Imagine that someone you do not know is accused of being a liar. It would make no sense to consult the accused person and ask, "Are you a liar?" We cannot use anything the accused person says as evidence one way or the other. This is because the accusation serves as a defeater for anything the accused person says. But, the Naturalist is in a similar situation: Their cognitive faculties are called into question because those faculties are merely the product of a universe of unguided, random chance. But, then, it would make no sense to consult those very faculties in order to answer any question, including the very question, "Is Naturalism true?" For, even that question was formed by those very faculties that are being accused of being possibly unreliable. The Naturalist, then, is left in a paralyzed state of complete skepticism, unable to believe anything at all with confidence (including Naturalism itself).

3. Objections: Premise 1 is a starting assumption that any Naturalist, by definition, accepts. Premise 2 is incredibly plausible. We'll look at objections to premises 3 and 4.

(1) Objection to Premise 3: Plantinga responds to a critique raised by Paul Draper. The objection goes, if Naturalism were true, it WOULD be quite probable that our belief-forming cognitive faculties were reliable. Evolution selects for adaptiveness to one's environment. Creatures that have evolved and survived for millions of years must be VERY well-adapted. But, if we had mostly false beliefs, we would not be very well-suited to survival. Surely, *having true beliefs is conducive to survival*. If we all had false beliefs all the time (e.g., "there is not a bus coming down the street") we would die quickly (e.g., by stepping in front of a moving bus). So, premise 3 is false; i.e., $P(R/N)$ is actually very high.

Reply: First, note that even if the Naturalist is correct, at best, what they have proven is that the sorts of beliefs that are relevant to SURVIVAL would have a high probability of being true, given evolution (e.g., beliefs about what berries to eat, what animals to run away from, how to procreate, and so on). What it does NOT demonstrate is that our

belief-forming mechanism would be very likely to be conducive to true beliefs about facts that are IRRELEVANT to survival—and Naturalism is among this set of beliefs. In fact, if the Naturalist believes her observations about the world around them, then surely they have good evidence that our belief-forming mechanism is NOT very conducive to forming true beliefs about abstract ideas such as Naturalism—for, the majority of human beings alive, and throughout history, have rejected Naturalism.

More importantly, Plantinga argues that survival is NOT necessarily correlated with true belief. One does not need to have true beliefs in order to avoid being eaten and successfully reproduce. All that one needs is ADAPTIVE BEHAVIOR. For instance, imagine a tribe that thinks that everything is alive, and made of witches and demons. As long as they think that demon-apples are good for eating, witch-water is good for drinking, and demon-fires are not good for jumping in, etc., that tribe will survive.

Plantinga mentions someone in a bathtub with an alligator. What evolution selects for is whether or not one will REACT to this situation in the right way (i.e., in a way where they escape successfully, and live on to procreate and pass on their genes). But, then, what beliefs one has are COMPLETELY IRRELEVANT. For instance, you might believe that the alligator is a mermaid, or that you are sitting under an apple tree in the shade—it doesn't matter. What matters is that your muscles contract in such a way that you get out of the tub.

Even if our desires and beliefs were wildly out of sync, false beliefs could still result in adaptive behavior. For instance, imagine that I really WANT to die. But, I have the mistaken belief that the best way to do this is to eat lots of fruits and vegetables and exercise regularly. My false beliefs will in that case lead to adaptive behavior conducive to my survival.

What the Naturalist is assuming is that there is some sort of law which guarantees that our adaptive behavior evolved in such a way that our actions were caused by TRUE beliefs about what was happening around us. But, Naturalism has access to no such law. There is nothing that guarantees this. On the other hand, Theism DOES have an available explanation; namely, if God exists, He would obviously have a reason to ensure that our belief-forming mechanisms WERE conducive to truth.

(2) Objection to Premise 4: Michael Bergmann attacks premise 4 instead. He actually AGREES with Plantinga that $P(R/N)$ is low or inscrutable. However, he denies that this fact constitutes a defeater for beliefs. There are two ways that a belief might escape being defeated, even if some particular body of evidence counts against it:

- (a) Some further evidence might come along.

For instance, imagine that someone presented you with some evidence that you committed a crime: You had a motive, you have no alibi, and a witness claims to have seen someone about your height, your build, and your gender at the scene of the crime. These facts ALONE might defeat a jury's belief that you are innocent. But, what if there are some OTHER facts as well? For instance, what if someone ELSE'S fingerprints are found at the scene of the crime, and video footage from a security camera places you far away from the scene at the time of the crime. Surely, now, the COMPLETE body of evidence does not defeat the jury's belief that you are innocent.

- (b) You might have compelling PERSONAL, or "first-hand" evidence.

For instance, imagine that in fact all of the evidence presented to the jury counts against you. Nevertheless, you do not REMEMBER committing the crime. In fact, you remember being somewhere else at the time. Surely, even though the complete body of evidence that the jury has counts AGAINST the belief that you are innocent, you would be justified in believing that you are innocent anyway.

These are, in fact, two methods that Plantinga himself uses when it suits his purposes; namely, to explain why the fact that horrible evil exists in the world does not count as a defeater for the belief in an all-loving God:

- (a) Plantinga admits that, while evil ALONE (E) would constitute a defeater for belief in God—i.e., $P(G/E)$ is very low—there are some facts in addition to E that make it very LIKELY that God would allow evil; for instance, some facts about free will (F). So, $P(G/E+F)$ is actually very high. We'll discuss this more in unit 2.
- (b) Plantinga points out that we DO have first-hand experience of God's existence. We even have a cognitive faculty devoted to ascertaining God's presence. He calls this faculty the "sensus divinitatus". With this "6th sense", for instance, we feel God's presence when we look at the magnificent starry sky, or when we feel compelled by the moral good, or just (or guilty when we do the opposite). This feeling is so strong sometimes, that, because of it, our belief in God cannot be defeated by the fact of evil (just as your memory of your innocence cannot be defeated by the incriminating facts available to the jury).

The first kind of evidence (a) provides what is called INFERENTIAL justification. This is justification based on beliefs that are themselves formed on the basis of other beliefs.

The second kind of evidence (b) provides what is called NON-INFERENTIAL justification. This is justification based on experience, and NOT on other beliefs. Take perception, for instance. When you see a bird flying, you might immediately think, "There is a bird flying above me." This belief is not something you INFERRED from other beliefs. Rather, it is immediate, and stems only from your visual perception. (an inferential example of believing that "there is a bird flying above me" might be if someone said, "Close your eyes. There is something above you. It is red. It is alive. And it is flying", you might infer this belief from these facts.)

Bergmann's suggestion is that the Naturalist has this second sort of non-inferential justification (b) available to her. He suggests, following Thomas Reid (circa 1700), that common sense tells us that we CAN trust our senses. Our personal experience tells us that we DO have hands, there ARE trees, and tables, and birds, and so on.

Phenomenal Conservatism: Bergmann does not suggest a method of figuring out HOW we have non-inferential justification that our belief-forming mechanism is reliable. But, Michael Huemer (also a follower in the tradition of Thomas Reid) suggests a principle that may be of some help. He proposes a view called Phenomenal Conservatism:

(PC) If it seems to me that P, then I am *prima facie* justified in believing that P.

Recall that "prima facie" means something like "initial", such that the justification can be overridden. For instance, it might seem to me that a stick submerged in water is bent. So I DO have some INITIAL justification that the stick is bent. However, this justification can be overridden if I know about the illusion that occurs when you put a stick in water, or if I pull the stick out of the water and examine it.

So, if it seems to me that I am forming mostly correct beliefs about the world around me, then this does give me SOME initial justification for believing (R).

Huemer gives this principle as a response to the possibility of complete skepticism. For instance, for all you know, you might be dreaming right now, or you might be just a brain in a vat of chemicals, being stimulated to think it is walking around in a real world. But, on Huemer's view, if it seems to me that I am not dreaming, or that I am not just a brain, then this provides some justification for believing that I am not. Thus, the mere POSSIBILITY that I am dreaming does not defeat my evidence that I am not dreaming.

Huemer states that our goal is primarily to believe truths, and only SECONDARILY to avoid falsehoods. If we abstain from trusting our senses just because we MIGHT be dreaming, or a brain in a vat, we are placing too much emphasis on the secondary goal. If we refrained from believing anything that MIGHT be false, we would have to refrain

from believing just about everything. We would be complete skeptics. But, if we want to try to acquire some true beliefs, the best we can do is endorse the common sense view that we should trust our initial seemings (e.g., perception, memory, moral, and intellectual seemings, or intuitions). And these should be sort of "innocent" until proven (or at least be shown to be PROBABLY) false.

Basically, the only time we should NOT trust our seemings is when we have evidence that they are in fact probably FALSE, or at least unreliable. For instance, if I had some evidence that I actually WAS a brain in a vat (of the sort that Morpheus gave Neo), then this would be a defeater for my seemings. But, otherwise, I should believe what seems most likely to be true.

In short, Bergmann could use (PC) in order to ground the non-inferential justification for the belief that our cognitive faculties are reliable. For, it certainly SEEMS like they are! Therefore, even if all of the inferential evidence is to the contrary, it doesn't matter, because our first-hand experience (i.e., our "seemings") says otherwise.

One Worry: On Huemer's view, note that even someone who WAS a brain in a vat would be justified in believing that they were not. For, having no evidence to the contrary, it would "seem" to that brain that it was walking around in a real world with reliable senses.

[Objection: Bergmann/Huemer's strategy might work if Plantinga's claim were only that P(R/N) were INSCRUTABLE. But, Plantinga in fact thinks that it is probably LOW. Why does Bergmann think that it does not matter if P(R/N) is low? He likens it to the court case where all of the evidence points against you, but your memories contradict that evidence. But, that is not how it is with Plantinga's accusation. Evidence is the sort of thing that can be faulty, and doesn't make it unlikely that you can trust your own perceptions. So, if you have a memory which contradicts the evidence, you can TRUST that memory.

On Plantinga's objection, however, he's saying that it would be very UNLIKELY that you could trust your senses (or, at least, the beliefs formed from them). That is, the Naturalist has a very strong reason to DOUBT the "seemings" or intuitions that come to them. But, then, they cannot just go ahead and trust those seemings and say that they defeat Plantinga's evidence!

To fix Bergmann's case, we would need to change it so that part of the evidence was this: It was discovered that, after the crime, you were captured and brainwashed into thinking that you were somewhere other than the scene of the crime. This fact makes the probability that you have a reliable memory of those events very LOW. But, then,

you cannot turn around and say, "But, I have a strong seeming contrary to the jury's evidence. For, I REMEMBER being somewhere other than the scene of the crime." This will not do. For, this seeming is the product of the very cognitive faculty which has been called into question!]

4. Conclusion: Plantinga concludes that, since Naturalism entails that it is improbable that the majority of our beliefs are true, the Naturalist has no good reason to believe that Naturalism is true. In short, Naturalism undermines itself; it is self-defeating. In that case, it is irrational to be a Naturalist. One should, instead, adopt some other view that is not self-defeating; for instance, **theism**.