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FAITH AND REASON

Sublime Naturalism

LAWRENCE RIFKIN

While strolling on the boardwalk during a vacation in Wildwood, New Jersey, my family was approached by a well-dressed man with a charming smile who was carrying a Bible. When he tried sharing his beliefs about the glory of God, I just shook my head and walked on. But my friendly wife, with our young children at her side, struck up a conversation with him. Eventually, he realized that she was as rational and tough as she is personable and delightful and that he was not going to win her over. It was then he reached deep and came up with what he obviously thought was his knockdown argument: “Look out there at the ocean. It’s magnificent! And the sky—so glorious! If you believe in this, then you believe in God.”

This wasn’t the “argument from design,” it was the “argument from profound beauty.” And it is equally fallacious.

A short time later, I found myself deeply moved when I read the following quotation by Charles Lyell from 1830: “Although we are mere sojourners on the surface of the planet, chained to a mere point in space, enduring but for a moment in time, the human mind is not only enabled to number worlds beyond the unassisted ken of mortal eye, but to trace the events of indefinite ages ... and is not even withheld from penetrating into the dark secrets of the ocean, or the interior of the solid globe; free, like the spirit which the poet described as animating the universe.”

The proselytizer on the boardwalk and the Lyell quotation lead to the question: why do people so often follow emotional expressions of awe at our naturalistic world with conclusions about, or connotations to, the supernatural? There is no evidence, logic, or reason for any such connection.

This perceived link between awe and religious sentiment can be broken. Naturalistic encounters of profound beauty and awe can stand on their own, both as a clear conceptual category and as experiences with deep

emotional resonance. This essay focuses on the *emotional* response to naturalism, its value, its expression, and its relationship to the secular humanist worldview.

EMOTIONAL RESPONSE TO NATURALISM

A deep response to our naturalistic world can be conveyed with powerful, emotive language. Awe at the wonder of life. The sheer beauty and mystery of existence. Being totally overwhelmed, for a brief moment, by the unfathomable vastness of the universe.

For me, the insights usually come most forcefully when I learn about nature on the grandest scale. But there are countless sources from which an emotional response to naturalism can emerge. Quiet, small moments gazing at your child. The shudder as you respond to magnificent music. Shock when we watch a seal abruptly snapped away from life by a great white shark on *Planet Earth*. The magnificence of ocean and sky as seen from a boardwalk.

There is no need to assume a conscious puppeteer or to imagine some otherworldly realm in order to understand and convey such emotions in evocative, alluring, and clearly naturalistic terms. The resplendent does not entail the transcendent. Awe does not entail Yahweh.

Nature is and always will be the backdrop to all life. To paraphrase Joseph Wood Krutch, our physical as well as our emotional dependence on nature can be obscured but not abolished, and to be unaware of this fact is to be as naively obtuse as the child who supposes that cows are no longer necessary because we now get milk from supermarkets.

As humanists, we try not to let our emotions dominate our cognitions. But emotions bounded by naturalistic cognitions are no less powerful and meaningful than the emotions of any worldview. Our naturalistic understandings form the song, but we can crank up the volume as loud as anybody. Though skeptical blood may course through our veins, we can live our days with wonder and joy.

SUBLIME NATURALISM DEFINED

To capture this emotional understanding and response to naturalism, I propose the term *sublime naturalism*.

Sublime naturalism is the experience or expression of a profound emotional response toward naturalism or its manifestations. Naturalistic manifestations consist of both nonhuman and human phenomena, including the human realm of ideas, creativity, love, and beauty.

The dictionary meaning of *sublime* includes the following: “of such excellence, grandeur, or beauty as to inspire great admiration or awe,” “majestic, supreme,” “to convert (something inferior) into something of higher worth.” Unlike the words *religious* (as in religious humanism) or *spiritual* (as in spiritual naturalism), *sublime* does not carry strong connotations to the supernatural or transcendent and therefore is a more clear and accurate reflection of the naturalist position. In this way, sublime naturalism captures the distinctively naturalistic, human emphasis of secular humanism while adding depth and significance to our experiences.

As discussed so far, *sublime* refers to positive emotions, but in certain branches of philosophy and art criticism, *sublime* also reflects profound expressions of fear, terror, or the tragic. The sublime need not be positive, particularly when one confronts a universe that as a whole is impersonal and indifferent to our desires. As Bertrand Russell wrote, “We see, surrounding the narrow raft illumined by the flickering light of human comradeship, the dark ocean on whose rolling waves we toss for a brief hour.”

We are the source of beauty, awe, and love, not some otherworldly realm. As David Eller writes (“Why Spirituality Is Antihumanistic,” *FREE INQUIRY*, February/March 2004), what some call “spiritual” experiences are *human* experiences: “the best, the strongest, the most profound human experiences, but human nonetheless. They are not nonhuman, but rather ultra-human. We are richer by and for them; we impoverish ourselves when we credit these soaring feelings and capacities not to ourselves but to realms nonhuman, unknown, and almost certainly unreal.” In this way, talk of the spiritual perpetuates, in Eller’s powerful words, “perhaps the most profound betrayal humans have ever committed against themselves.”

Certainly religious words can be evocative (*sacred, holy, spirit, soul, divine, etc.*), but so can the emotive force of secular prose. The grandest of emotions can be communicated in ways full of power and poetry but with clarity that entails no link between naturalistic awe and a supernatural experience, whether expressed directly, by implication, or through metaphor.

The danger in using religious words as metaphors for naturalistic experiences is that these words might be interpreted not as metaphor but by their commonly and traditionally understood literal religious meaning. Joseph Campbell said, “If you think that the metaphor is itself the reference, it would be like going to a restaurant, asking for the menu, seeing beefsteak written there, and starting to eat the menu.” Unfortunately, there are a lot of menu-eaters out there, and, according to some interpretations, rivers of blood have been shed throughout history regarding which menu is “real.” Humanists can continue to promote a worldview that uses language clearly and avoids religious menus altogether. The banquet is no less delicious.

Experiences of sublime naturalism can be triggered by music, sunsets, walks in the woods, gazing at a starry sky, sexual thrill, a birth, or a funeral. Naturalistic experiences of the sublime—the grandeur of the universe, the wonder of being alive, the mysteries of existence—fill us with awe, terror, or profound emotion.

PART OF THE SECULAR HUMANIST FAMILY

Sublime naturalism is offered as a descriptive category for the humanist expression of awe. Secular humanists often bring the naturalistic worldview and scientific methodology to bear on issues that impact personal flourishing and fulfillment. Sublime naturalism suggests one way to reverse the direction and allow one of the *affective* aspects of humanism to focus *back* toward the cognitive understanding of naturalism. The emotional component doesn't *justify* naturalism. But when different aspects of the humanist worldview reflect on one another, it makes the cognitive encounter with naturalism even more emotionally rewarding and helps reinforce the worldview as a coherent whole.

In a useful essay, Frank L. Pasquale (“Religious Humanism and the Dangers of Semantic Distortion,” *FREE INQUIRY*, Fall 2002), suggests the phrase “inspiral humanism” for naturalistic humanists who “yearn for some nontranscendent way of expressing a special sense or feeling they have when inspired by nature or existence.” “Sublime naturalism” is quite similar, only my emphasis is to position it as a *part* of secular humanism as compared to *inspiral*, which Pasquale offers as a descriptive way to subdivide different types of naturalistic humanists. I like the term *inspiral* very much, but thus far the word does not seem to have caught on, at least as Pasquale intended—when I looked up *inspiral* on Google six years after it was coined, all I found was the name of a condom. (Perhaps such was also the case with the ill-fated expressions “Trojan naturalism” and “latex humanism.”)

Humanists may or may not have sublime naturalist experiences. They may or may not desire such experiences. But for those who do value such experiences and expression, sublime naturalists are welcome with warmth and open arms as part of the secular humanist family. Just watch your language.

MULTICOLORED EXTRAVAGANZA

For those who value sublime experiences and expressions, sublime naturalism, as a part of humanism, offers both emotional depth and intellectual authenticity. Secular humanists should not yield passionate expressions of naturalistic experiences—and should not yield the audience to which such emotions speak—to any other worldview.

The vast, immense cosmos, the astonishing interrelated ecological web of life and nonlife, the deeply mysterious realm of the quantum—all emerge from complex interactions of natural, physical phenomena. The mind-boggling world of human thought, love, joy, values, art, and culture—all emerge from staggeringly complex interactions of natural, physical phenomena. Humanists can stand tall for our convictions. Humanists can justify our convictions. And we can convey our profound *emotional* response—our *human* response—to this magnificent, sublime, natural truth with clarity and compelling beauty.

We can open our emotions as well as our intellect to understanding naturalism, with all its implications. Once we comprehend that there is no dualistic supernatural transcendent realm, we are happy to live our lives dazzled by a natural, multicolored extravaganza rather than blinded by an imaginary eternal light.

Lawrence Rifkin, a physician and writer, was the Grand Prize winner of the 2008 Doctors' Writing Contest sponsored by Medical Economics. His articles in FREE INQUIRY have explored the intersection of science, humanism, and meaning.