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Evaluation of Naturalism With Reference To Freedom, Morality, and Inquiry

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After a careful study of the definitions of naturalism by Butler, Vergilius Ferm, William K. Frankena, Ralph Winn and others, some definite conclusions may be drawn as to the real meaning of naturalism: (1), "Nature is all in all of reality"; "It is the sum and substance of all that is." Beyond the World of Nature there is no supernatural being or beings, or kind of entity (such as Plato's Ideas). (2), "To know nature is to come to terms with it . . . by social and tested experience, by scientific method, by reflections based on such experiences and methods." In other words, "every state of the world or event in it can be explained causally or mechanically by reference to previous states or events, or else is the result of chance." The method of exploration is more inductive than deductive. Consequently, it rejects faith, revelation, authority, tradition, a priori reasoning, and intuition as source of truth or guidance. For it all meaning originates in experience, and all beliefs must be tested by experience in accordance with general canons of scientific method and all speculations and reflections must be based on such spirit. (3), Since the pattern of the world is to be found within the World, man is wholly a part of It as to origin and destiny. "No element of his being is immortal, and he is only an incidental product of the world process, whether considered as an individual or as a species." (4), Since the world is not static, everything is changing, relative and nothing is absolute. In summary, it is evident that naturalism implies two important elements: one relates to method; another to conclusions. The naturalist therefore adopts and generalizes the scientific approach and following this scientific method he feels forced to accept the conclusions indicated.

I. Freedom Under Naturalism

A study of the Western history in Middle Ages will suffice to indict the Christian belief as one of the formidable forces in restricting the development of political and ideological freedom. All the academic effort was utilized to justify or rationalize that particular faith in this period. The political theories of Cicero and Roman lawyers, Seneca and the fathers of the Church, St. Thomas, Marsilio of Padua and William of Occam, along with others, will testify to the authoritative monopoly on the part of Church at this time. Even after the Protestant attack upon absolutism, people might have had a little bit more political freedom ideologically. However, they were indoctrinated to the dogmatic teachings of the church. On the other hand, the idealism of Plato has hindered the thinking of the West for centuries; the dialectic idealism of Hegel has developed into the absolute rule of the statism or Nazism; the so-called scientific materialism of Marx patterned after Hegelism

has created in this world one of the most totalitarian political systems. Historically, at least, both supernaturalism and idealism which the naturalists are opposed to present much limitation rather than cultivation upon freedom of man everywhere. Since naturalism is opposed in general to the characteristic doctrines of supernaturalism and idealism, the theory of the naturalists would set the man free—free to work out his own political system, free to think his own problems out. Through social and tested experience man can and should decide for himself a certain form of government without any reference to any supernatural or absolute imposition. He is also free to change the form of government through whatever means, evolutionary or if necessary, revolutionary. A few citations from the writings of such famous naturalists as Rousseau, Locke (also a realist), Hume, and Spencer will support this point.

Although Rousseau concedes in the *Social Contract* that the sovereign power as “absolute, sacred, and inviolable,” he nevertheless asserts that it “does not and cannot exceed the limits of general conventions, and that every man may dispose at will of such goods and liberty as these conventions leave him.”¹ According to him, “the problem is to find a form of association which will defend and protect with the whole common force the person and good of each associate, and which each, while uniting himself with all, may still obey himself alone, and remain as free as before.”² The rights of individuals, such as liberty, equality, and property, which natural law attributed to men as such, to him, are really the rights of citizens. Historians do agree that it was the political theory of Rousseau and Locke which contributed to the cause of American and French Revolution and laid down the cornerstone of modern political democracy.

Hume’s contribution to freedom lies in his criticism and gradual elimination of the system of natural law. According to G. H. Sabine, Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature* “occupies a crucial position in modern philosophy and its importance is not even mainly in the field of political philosophy. . . . The general philosophical position that Hume developed had a profound bearing upon all branches of social theory. What Hume supplied was a penetrating logical analysis which, if accepted, destroyed all the pretensions of natural law to scientific validity.”³ Although Carlyle sneered at Hume’s philosophy as “a flat continuous thrashing-floor for logic, whereon all questions, from the doctrine of rent to the natural history of religion, are thrashed and sifted with the same mechanical impartiality,” yet it was this very “same mechanical impartiality” which destroyed the eternal verities of reason and natural law and, consequently, enhanced the freedom of man to investigate, to think, to speculate and to reason. In justifying the duty of civic obedience, Hume typically used the empirical approach, it is because a stable society in which order is preserved, property protected, and goods exchanged is not possible without them.

¹*Social Contract*, II. iv.

²*Ibid.*, I. vi.

³G. H. Sabine, *A History of Political Theory*, Holt, 1947, p. 598.

"The members of a society do feel a sense of common interest," he says, "and they admit the obligations that this is seen to impose. . . . This common interest is more like language than it is like a promise or a rational truth. It is a body of conventions or rough general rules that have been shown by experience to serve human needs in a general way. . . . For the sake of stability men have to know what they can rely on, and hence rules of some sort are necessary. If they become too inconvenient, men will change them, even by violence if there is no other way."⁴ Obviously these rules, in Hume's opinion, are not eternal verities rooted in nature, but merely standard ways of behaving justified by experience of their consequences and fixed by habit. After all, according to Hume, the hypothetical liberty "is universally allowed to belong to every one who is not a prisoner and in chains."⁵

Among the naturalists, Herbert Spencer probably would be one of the most outstanding.⁶ The universal process of evolution, according to him, is a movement from uniformity and incoordination to diversity and coordination; in all phenomena, inanimate and animate, there is a development from "an infinite, incoherent homogeneity to definite, coherent heterogeneity."⁷ It is so too in social evolution. Consequently, political policy must be accommodated to this universal progress from the like to the different.⁸ In civilized society, government must accept the inevitable individuation and automatic equilibration of parts; any extension of state activity beyond what is necessary to protect individual freedom of action tends to impede the increasing specialization and the spontaneous interaction of interdependent individuals that are essential factors of social evolution. According to Francis W. Coker's analysis, Spencer is of the opinion that "the state has two, and only two, sorts of duties. Its primary function—the function which formed the original motive of political organization—is defense against external attack; its secondary function is to prevent encroachments reciprocally among the individuals within the political community. . . . The state's sole domestic duty, in other words, is to preserve justice." And Spencer's formula for justice is this: "every man is free to do that which he wills, provided he infringes not upon the equal freedom of any other man."⁹ In his first book, *Social Statics*, published in 1884, he advocated the so-called doctrine of "equal freedom" in asserting that every human has "equal rights to the use of this world."¹⁰ Spencer's strong opposition to the governmental operation or regulation of industry, all state aid to education or industry led Sabine to conclude that "he went even beyond the early liberals," meaning John Stuart Mill, Bentham, Adam Smith, David Ricardo, etc.¹¹

⁴Sabine, *Ibid.*, p. 603.

⁵Charles W. Hendel, Jr., *Hume Selections*, Scribner's Sons, 1927, p. 174.

⁶Ferm, *Ibid.*, p. 438.

⁷Herbert Spencer, *First Principles*, Pt. II.

⁸Herbert Spencer, *Principles of Sociology*, Chap. 18-19.

⁹Francis W. Coker, *Recent Political Thought*, Appleton-Century, 1934, p. 394.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 89.

¹¹Sabine, cited, p. 672.

So far as ideological freedom is concerned, Ralph Winn is of the opinion that the naturalists might agree to a sort of social selection which is different from the biologists' natural selection in this respect: that whereas in natural selection the struggle is mainly of brawn against brawn, with individuals and whole species perishing or surviving in the end; in social selection, the struggle is among competing concepts.¹² Since naturalism would recognize that supernaturalism, idealism, mythology and absolutism are also a part of human experience, a true naturalist would accept and tolerate them as a part of nature and hence they are also in the struggle for social selection, although they would not agree to their particular points of view. In this sense, as far as naturalism goes, no other school of ideology would indeed be more liberal.

However, the fore-mentioned conclusion would not blind us into believing that all naturalists would naturally or automatically be for the extension of freedom as such. The political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes, whom Butler described as one of the naturalists,¹³ is a case in point. According to Sabine, Hobbes' political writings "were designed to support absolute government and in Hobbes' intention this meant absolute monarchy . . . and he sincerely believed that monarchy was the most stable and orderly kind of government."¹⁴ Probably it was Hobbes' belief that human nature is selfish and the state of nature is "a war all against all," and consequently all social authority must be concentrated in the sovereign for each other's protection and security.¹⁵ Hobbes also stressed the fact "that resistance to authority can never be justified, since justification would require the approval of authority itself. It followed equally that resistance will in fact occur wherever government fails to produce that security which is the only reason for subject's submission."¹⁶ Superficially, Hobbes' theory would be used to support absolutism and therefore suppress freedom, but the last part of the statement cited above would however indicate that Hobbes would also justify the resistance to any authority if it ever occurs. As a matter of fact, Hobbes' only argument for government is that it does in fact govern and consequently, any government is better than anarchy. Monarchical government he thought more likely to be effective than any other kind, but his theory is equally good for any government that can preserve peace and order. Later thinkers had indeed no difficulty in adapting it to a republican or parliamentary form of government. In his analysis of the origin of the sovereign power, Hobbes himself stated "that as if every man should say to every man, 'I authorize and give up my right of governing myself to this man, or this assembly of men, on this condition, that thou give up the right to him, and authorize all his actions in like manner.'" And he further stated that the essence of the commonwealth is "a multitude,

¹²D. D. Runes: *Twentieth Century Philosophy*, Philosophical Library, p. 532.

¹³Butler, *Four Philosophies*, Harper, 1957, pp. 64-72.

¹⁴Sabine, cited, p. 456.

¹⁵See my article, *Dr. Sun Yat-sen's Theory of the State*, China Culture, March, 1960, p. 34.

¹⁶Sabine, cited, p. 470.

by mutual consents one with another, have made themselves every one the author, to the end that he may use the strength and means of them all, as he shall think expedient, for the peace and common defense."¹⁷ In this sense, Hobbes' theory of absolutism in politics is based on an extreme position of individualism and eventually his extreme individualism had been explored by later thinkers for the extension of freedom.

II. Morality Under Naturalism

It is generally assumed that the naturalists are not religious since they do not believe in any supernatural being or beings, or absolute ideals. In the Western world, morality had been made synonymous with religion, consequently whoever does not believe in religion are considered or regarded as of low morality. Nothing however is farther from the truth. The naturalists may be atheistic, yet they may not be anti-religious, nor is it necessary for them to be non-religious, immoral or even non-moral. In fact most of the naturalists are very religious men with high, if not higher, moral standard. In the first place, it is not necessary for a man to believe in any supernatural being in order to be religious. According to Julian Huxley, "belief in supernatural beings is not an essential or integral part of the religious way of life, nor, conversely, are the objects of religious feeling necessarily supernatural beings."¹⁸ Secondly, like other aspects of a culture, religion is only a part of human experience. According to the naturalists, "while religion may be a valuable phase of life and the source of genuine inspiration, it is defined as purely natural, an affair of men adjusting themselves to the forces and process of Nature; thereby achieving a harmonious life."¹⁹ In this sense, it is therefore very clear that religious truth is the product of human mind. It is not necessary to attend church services or believe in supernatural beings to be religious. On the other hand, one's attendance at the services is not necessarily a good indication of his being religious either.

Under the influence of Christianity, Western civilization tried to relate morality with religion, or more specifically with Christian beliefs. It is inconceivable to think otherwise. But this is certainly not true. The teachings of Confucius, for example, are mainly a code of morality or ethics. When he was asked about the worship of ghosts and spirits, Confucius said: "We don't know yet how to serve men, how can we know about serving the spirits?" When he was asked about death, he said: "We don't know yet about life, how can we know about death?"²⁰ In reality, the naturalists in the West, like Confucius in China, advocated a rather high standard of sound conduct without reference to the traditional religious beliefs. Spencer talked about a sort of "perfect type of life" in which "the development of the individual will only be limited by the equal right of other men to develop; but in this state, the individual, moved by his inner impulse, will spontane-

¹⁷Leviathan, Pt. II, chap. xvii.

¹⁸Julian Huxley, *Religion Without Revelation*, p. 21.

¹⁹Butler, cited, p. 116.

²⁰*Sources of Chinese Tradition*, Columbia Uni. Press, p. 31.

ously avoid all encroachments on the normal development of others; indeed, he will exert all his effort to promote this development, until at last the work undertaken for the furtherance of distant ends will in itself no longer be distasteful! . . . The continuation of the conditions of perfect type of life must be based on the principle of benevolence."²¹ According to him, evolution will modify human nature until the individual will find "his highest blessedness in sacrifice . . . for what is possible to the best human nature lies within the reach of the whole of human nature, and development is incomplete as long as there is still a possibility of life being richer and of more value by the unfolding of capacities which bring immediate satisfaction to the individual himself and at the same time are the cause of benefits to other men."²² Julian Huxley's "idea of fulfillment" and "science of human possibilities" as the essence of his "evolutionary humanism" could also be cited as the most desirable standard of human endeavour.²³

In his treatise, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, David Hume discussed the general principles of morals, benevolence, and justice in great detail. "The epithets sociable, good-natured, humane, merciful, grateful, friendly, generous, beneficent, or their equivalent," he says, "are known in all languages, and universally express the highest merit, which human nature is capable of attaining. Where these amiable qualities are attended with birth and power and eminent abilities, and display themselves in the good government or useful instruction of mankind, they seem even to raise the possessors of them above the rank of human nature, and make them approach in some measure to the divine."²⁴

Furthermore, a careful review of the "*Axiology of Naturalism*" by Butler in the *Four Philosophies* will convince the readers that the naturalists are very much concerned with life's value and do give much attention to the study of this problem. The naturalist concept of God may be different from that of the conventional, or even it is not God or gods, yet the naturalists are not necessarily "God-less" people. To the ordinary religious people, morality is to obey the dogmatic teachings of their respective denomination or faith, to the naturalists, "the only moral to be drawn is that each generation must do its best, content that its conclusions should be scrapped later, provided only they have helped humanity's advance."²⁵

²¹Harold Hofing: *A History of Modern Philosophy*, Vol. II, p. 484.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 485.

²³Julian Huxley, cited, pp. 194, 201.

²⁴Hendel, Jr., cited, pp. 200-201.

²⁵Julian Huxley, cited, p. 35.

III. Inquiry Under Naturalism

In general, the method of inquiry of the naturalists could be described as "empiricistic." An empiricist believes that our knowledge arises from experience and can be known to be correct only when it can be checked against future experience. According to Hume, pure reason which the rationalists like Spinoza trusted is valid in logic and mathematics, because we are there concerned only with the relations of our ideas to each other. To answer questions about what is really existent in the world, the empiricist teaches that reason must start with the data of the senses, work with them to derive conclusions, and check the conclusions by further observation. Because of the emphasis they put on the human experience, they would not be bound by previous tradition or belief and would be amenable to any conclusion they encountered in their pursuit of knowledge. For instance, if the conclusion of a naturalist philosopher does diverge from the beliefs of religion, he will not say, "Mea culpa! I must have made a mistake." He will say, rather, "So much the worse for those who have not thought this through, and who have accepted on faith something that my philosophical examination shows to be false."²⁶ Of course, the naturalists will rely mainly on science in their pursuance of knowledge. "The contribution which science can make is two-fold," Julian Huxley asserted, "It can contribute an enormous body of hard-won, tested, organized knowledge; and also a spirit of disinterested devotion to truth, and a willingness to apply this spirit to any problem, irrespective of prejudices or possible consequences."²⁷

However, according to Ferm, "experience is not something apart from reason. Reason itself is empirical when it observes and respects experience and weaves it into some coherent meaning. Of course, no empirical method can today ignore the methods of responsible scientific inquiry; but such inquiry does not mean an enslavement to laboratory techniques nor to purely inductive procedures. Scientific methods continually employ hypotheses and critical deductions."²⁸ As Dr. DeChemin has very well pointed out in the class, "the naturalist investigates, reflects, and speculates. To the naturalists, facts and speculations are both important." From this observation, we can very well conclude that the naturalist is willing to accept any change or any new discovery which is based on "social, tested human experience." He doubts the existence of a personalized God, he accepts the agnosticism of T. H. Huxley. He is against supernaturalism, yet he is ready to admit it as a part of nature. He believes that "all dependable knowledge comes through natural channels and the world is amenable to such inquiry."²⁹ Indeed such ideas as democracy, freedom and tolerance "have been shaped, not in accordance with the eternal laws of the universe, but in accordance with the rational will of man aspiring to become master

²⁶Lewis White Beck: *Six Secular Philosophers*, Harper, 1960, p. 15.

²⁷Julian Huxley, cited, p. 190.

²⁸Ferm, p. 439.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 439.

of his earthly home and of his historical destiny. And it is possible, no doubt, increasingly to realize this long-range ambition."³⁰ Ferm in fact has summarized this situation very well by saying that "practically all disciplines of contemporary inquiry—be they educational, programs of social reforms, scientific, technological, ethical, economic—are committed to the empirical method and unity of understanding—and with phenomenal success!"³¹

³⁰Runes, cited, p. 536.

³¹Ferm, cited, p. 440.