
A MODEST ASSESSMENT OF RITCHIE'S THEOLOGICAL NATURALISM UNLIKELY BEDFELLOWS, NATURALISM AND THEISM

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Abstract

We are seeing new trends in Theology that presume naturalism as a framework for constructive theology called theological naturalism (a part of the new naturalism). Positively, these new trends are opening up, afresh, discussions in Science and religion concerning divine action, consciousness, and Science and Theology (i.e. the theological turn in Science). There are, however, some concerns with theological naturalism. The present article addresses some of these concerns briefly after summarizing the new movement within contemporary Theology through the lens of Sarah Lane Ritchie, one of its recent expositors and most significant defenders. The fundamental concern has to do with the role of intuitions, generally, and the nature of consciousness specifically. While theological naturalism is relatively young as a project, the following is more of a prompt and encouragement to develop the project more deeply and to flesh out some of the proposals in ways that might conduce greater appreciation and grasp of how a theological naturalist might conceive of consciousness, imagination, the mind, and Divine action.

Keywords: creaturely mind, physicalism, dualism, causal-joint, compatibilism

1. Introduction

We are seeing new trends to affirm naturalism as a lens, frame, or starting point for considering religion. And, positively, we are seeing an evolving literature base that has opened fresh new discussions for reflection. On the negative side, these trends appear to have one thing in common: they appear to be bereft of the deeper realities - those things that we as persons hold most dear (e.g. values, morality, first-person consciousness, the afterlife, God, and, ultimately, the nature of what it means to be a person). The fundamental concern

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with this new movement (seen through the lens of Sarah Lane Ritchie's *Divine Mind and Human Agency*) is that theism cannot fit into the naturalist frame. The following will achieve two objectives. First, it will survey theological naturalism (through the lens of its most recent and important expositors) and general or common problems raised to it (in light of naturalism more broadly). Second, on the basis of the more fundamental concern with variant projects in Divine action, theistic dualism, and non-reductive physicalism, it will advance a critique of Ritchie's overarching perspective that all these projects suffer from an ill-conceived, yet common, intuition of dualism, which prompts the need (as she sees it) to re-envision both Theology and naturalism. The critique will focus on one singular concern: the nature of intuitions. My contention is that revising theology accordingly will necessarily exclude central concepts that need defining, yet in the end I modestly push Ritchie (along with her cohorts) to provide a bit more definition to these central concepts (mind, action, God) and how it is that she can avoid the purported dualisms she suspects are the problem in recent theological projects.

Some provisional comments are in order to stave off objections. The present discussion is focused on theological naturalism, albeit through the lens of Sarah Lane Ritchie. It is both, then, a brief conceptual survey of the terms, history, and objections as well as a critical engagement of the salient features of the movement through Ritchie's survey of theological naturalism. At one level, the reader may wish for an engagement with a broader set of literature on theological naturalism. The challenge with this is that theological naturalism is a new movement that, at present, is underdeveloped and some of the most important proponents of the approach are considered in Ritchie's survey. She offers the first survey of the background to theological naturalism as well as a survey of some of the most important representative models. As such, her work deserves the attention that at once is admittedly a survey yet also a representation of theological naturalism generally. Assuming her presentation accurately reflects the landscape at present, then theological naturalism suffers from the problem of dismissing the intuitive dualism present in other Divine action theological projects. The approach here by focusing on Ritchie's work is both justified and needed to prompt further discussion.

Before laying out a singular critique of Ritchie's rejection of intuitive dualism, it is important to lay out Ritchie's objectives and a basic description of her approach before considering some background considerations to theological naturalism as it relates to naturalism more broadly: particularly a survey of the conceptual history of naturalism in addition to religious naturalism. This will aid in situating the project as a distinct project for further investigation. Ritchie is a part of a growing set of literature that prizes both theology and naturalism comprising a new project, which she lays out as an interesting and possibility to alternative theological projects. Theological naturalists are concerned with a new way of conceiving of naturalism that is at once theistic in nature, thus she (along with her colleagues) must expand the boundaries of naturalism beyond its

normal boundaries, but the problem is that she (and they) may not have expanded the project enough.

2. Theological naturalism - a survey

A recent movement springs from the wells of naturalism broadly construed. You could call it the 'theological turn' in Science and religion, theistic naturalism, or theological naturalism. Theistic naturalism is the view broadly described as a commitment to natural generation (with its lawful nature) as a true depiction of reality and, at a minimum, a commitment to the 'scientific method' otherwise often termed methodological naturalism along with a privileging of the objects of Physics. In other words, this definition excludes a commitment to the belief in idealism or immaterial substances as the central fixtures and the explanatory orbit for which the nature of the world oscillates. Interestingly, however, these theistic naturalists are committed to the following notions that are often perceived as outside the pale of naturalism: 1) A commitment to Divine action as compatible with and permeating the natural order (i.e. an explicit rejection of global dualism, or dualistic action, gap theories, and causal-joint theories). 2) A commitment to the mind as a real entity, but what it is unclear (more on this below). 3) Even an openness to spirits and ghosts with a corresponding diversity of opinion on strict physicalism, reductionism, and even non-reductive physicalism (this latter one is harder to discern whether a local naturalistic dualism might find a place in theistic naturalism). It is at these points that I fear theistic/theological naturalism falls into the same trappings as good ole naturalism and should be rejected. My suspicion is that theological naturalism, while departing in important ways from more 'restrictive' naturalisms, parallels metaphysical naturalism leading to its being either so unhelpful as to render the term useless or sufficiently ambiguous as to disguise its explanatory weaknesses and this is primarily due to the underlying problem of intuitions concerning consciousness as basic to the nature of mind and action.

The basic problem in what follows against theological naturalism can be summarized here. 1) Any metaphysical system that lacks explanatory power or disguises the richness of nature is inadequate to capture reality. 2) Theological naturalism lacks explanatory power and disguises the richness of nature. 3) Thus, theological naturalism is less likely to capture reality. In other words, turning our imaginative powers to the image of naturalism is a step too far [1]. Consider the following a brief assessment of theistic/theological naturalism through the lens of its most recent proponent, Sarah Lane Ritchie.

2.1. What is theistic/theological naturalism?

Theological naturalism is a response to and a development away from both Divine Action project and causal-joint theories. First, the Divine Action project grew out of the perceived tensions between two distinct domains of

knowledge: scientific accounts of Nature and God's action in Nature [2]. This perceived tension motivates the ongoing challenge to find God as acting in the natural world, which, purportedly, is and has been explained, more and more, through Science and the objects of scientific study - i.e. natural causes and effects. Second, and as a result of this tension, several causal-joint models of Divine action have been proposed. As the name suggests, these proponents of divine action seek to find Divine action in what some perceive to be underdetermined places in nature that permit Divine action without the Divine intervening in the regular process of natural events that are, it is supposed, explained by natural causes. Such proposals seek to find special divine action in indeterministic processes such as quantum theory, chaos theory, and emergence theory. If these theories work, then we have proposals that permit Divine action that are non interventionist in Nature. Theological naturalists, like Ritchie, propose an alternative way of conceiving of Divine action that they see as compatible with naturalism and avoids the binary created by the proposals that have been given following the Divine Action project.

Theological naturalism is a revisionist project that attempts to reorient the notions of God and Nature in a way that avoids the supposed dualisms on other accounts present in the Divine Action Project. By avoiding the need to understand God as somehow present in Nature in some unique way, theological naturalists take a theological turn in Science, thereby revisioning the natural world as properly Divine. And, this is precisely what we find present in Sarah Lane Ritchie's fascinating entry to the discussion in *Divine Action and Human Mind*. She represents this general turn toward Theology in Science reflected in other theological naturalists.

Specifically, there are three salient points that summarize her project (representing standard objectives amongst other theological naturalists). Ritchie describes the project of theological naturalism in contrast to the Divine Action project. As a project that conceives of God's acts as consonant with natural events in the world that are discoverable by empirical science in contrast to those projects (oft conceived in the Divine Action Project, hereafter DAP) as God intervening in an otherwise closed system of the natural world (e.g. causal joint theories of Divine action). According to DAP, God's actions can be described according to general and special action alongside "a [complete] natural, physical explanation" [3]. Problematically, this yields a causal joint account of Divine action where Divine action and natural events determine outcomes. This opens the door to discussions about physical indeterminacy and quantum mechanics of mental action [3, p. 68-77]. Most notably, she gives extensive treatment to Philip Clayton's emergentist theory [3, p. 81-133]. Clayton's theory proposes that God can be found in the causal-joints of Nature where consciousness emerges from a suitably complex neural structure, hence remaining physicalist in his approach to the continuity of nature as physical and biologically uniform [3, p. 84-97]. Unfortunately, these models are implausible and end up yielding a search for gaps in natural events because of the implicit binary between nature and mind [3, p. 33-38, 66-67]. Ultimately, this will turn on the problematic employment of

differing 'intuitions' that Ritchie believes is prompting problematic pictures of mental nature and mental agency that are unnecessary (specifically, the underlying issue concerns the nature of consciousness and the hard problem of consciousness more on that below). This is the first part of Ritchie's *Divine Action and Human Mind*.

The second part of the book summarizes theological naturalist approaches on offer that, apparently, attempt to avoid these unnecessary binaries, dualisms, and intuitions which give rise to problems in conceiving of Divine action in the natural world [3, p. 47-54, 78]. Positively, these give us a picture of Divine action that maintain three key ideas motivating theological naturalists: (1) non interventionism, (2) compatibilism (rather than the purported incompatibilism in these causal-joint theories) between divine and natural events and (3) to avoid the split between general and special Divine acts (also common to those theories following the DAP). By bringing God's transcendence and immanence together with nature, one can develop a scientific picture of the world that is deeply dependent on God and participates in him through the natural world as an empirical domain. This is what it means to be fully 'natural' [3, p. 189-193].

The common objection to theological naturalism (as with those often termed 'expansive' or 'liberal' naturalisms) is that it expands the boundaries of what we find in naturalism, generally, too far. It expands the bounds to such an extent that it not only avoids common and historical usage of the term, but the term becomes excessively malleable in the hands of theologians. This charge, I believe, has some merit. But, upon closer examination, the expansion of such boundaries while retaining certain aspects of naturalism actually leads to an obscuring of naturalism and ends up either insufficiently designating naturalism or obfuscating to such an extent as to render central theological terms like God, mind, and action undefinable and unusable because of confusion pertaining to consciousness. This will become clearer below when challenging the underlying motivation to do away with the supposed dualistic intuitions in which Ritchie aims her sights.

In what follows, I will assess the project through the lens of Ritchie's *Divine Action and Human Mind*. In so doing, it becomes clear that her project employs specific assumptions that require further specification, but likely presumes terms inconsistent with her naturalistic assumptions about agents. Before moving on to a brief assessment of Ritchie's models, it is helpful to look at both naturalism and religious naturalism, generally, to show both parallels and similarities in theological naturalism for the purposes of situating the project for theological use. In other words, the problem Ritchie (commonly representing theological naturalists) is to offer a view that avoids the binaries common to Divine Action projects and is not beholden to dualistic intuitions of mind (i.e. as an immaterial substance or immaterial principle) and body (as a material substance or principle).

2.2. A brief history of terminology

The first difficulty has to do with definition. Defining naturalism simpliciter is a challenge because there is no agreed upon definition in the literature. Instead, naturalism often characterizes a set of epistemic or metaphysical dispositions and attitudes without rigid designation across literature by ‘capable’ users. Naturalism has been defined, standardly, along metaphysical lines and epistemological lines. Unfortunately, there is no agreed upon definition of the term despite the willingness to identify with it. Metaphysical naturalism has been defined by early 20th century American analytic philosophers as a thesis committed to the natural world of biological organisms, particularly Darwinian evolution, often with a commitment to and excluding any ‘spooky’ entities like God, spirits, angels, and the like. This definition, or better description, is readily present today in many of the naturalist commitments held by philosophers. The alternative definition along epistemological, or methodological, lines is distinct (albeit, arguably, not wholly unrelated to its metaphysical brother) as a way that privileges the scientific method as the means or the best means for arriving at knowledge claims about the world [4].

There are two broad categorizations of naturalism: 1) metaphysical naturalism and 2) epistemological/methodological naturalism.

You could call these overlapping moods, epistemic attitudes, or commonly shared philosophical principles. But, as many are probably aware, there has been a reaction to naturalism (both of a metaphysical and methodological sort) from the perspective that we have no reason for adopting methodological naturalism unless we have prior metaphysical commitments to the natural world that would exclude such knowledge as we find in supernaturalisms and theism.

If there is a way to synthesize the respective naturalisms, then it may be provisional to advance them as having a shared commitment to the privileging of natural laws, events, and the empirical method. However, the challenges for these respective approaches is their common exclusion of other sources of knowledge derived from consciousness such as principles of logic that make consciousness and conceivability possible, the *a-priori* method guided by rational principles - i.e. they, arguably, become stubborn commitments to that which excludes, unnecessarily hides, and blinds us from reality. Theological naturalism affirms aspects of both these categories in that it privileges the ‘scientific method’, a narrow version of biological evolutionary origins, and Physics by elevating a non-interventionist, compatibilist vision of Nature [3, p. 221-228].

2.3. What theistic naturalists are not doing

In what follows, I summarize two naturalistic attitudes or moods that serve as a backdrop for developing expansions in naturalism. One offers the

reader a version of what is oft called religious naturalism naturalistic religion (i.e. a system of religious thought derived from metaphysical naturalism) and while it would not be accurate to call it theological naturalism, it does expand the designated term, naturalism, to include some religious ideas, which reflects some of the motivations found in theological naturalism. The second offers the reader a version of pure naturalism, what is insufficient with it, and an attempt to expand the designated term, naturalism, in ways that might capture more fully that stubborn and persistent reality of consciousness as a real feature of the world.

Following the famous philosopher's work defending a kind of religious naturalism or naturalistic religion, Mark Johnston in *Surviving Death* develops a view of personal identity and survival that is consistent with his underlying commitments not only to methodological naturalism but to a version of metaphysical naturalism. With that said, he explicitly rejects creedal religion with its commitment to souls, survival of persons, and a determinate personal afterlife. Upon trotting through the various options on how to make sense of the afterlife (e.g. body reassembly, corpse-snatching, Lockean memory-continuity, Divine election views, and several others) he concludes that one really does need a soul to uphold creedal commitments of persons and the afterlife because there is no way that a body in this place is identical to *this* other body in a distinct time and place. They are two bodies! But he is not convinced that souls exist given his underlying naturalistic commitments, so he opts for a different understanding of the afterlife that fails to resonate with anything resembling traditional or creedal theistic religion which obviously enough depends on Plato, the reality of souls, and immaterial substance (which he himself readily admits!) [5].

While this might be construed as a version of theistic naturalism, it is not clear that Johnston has any commitments to theism. However, he has obvious commitments to naturalism, which overlap with theistic naturalism. Yet, other theological naturalists depart in their non-commitment to a version of physicalism (which many see as the logical entailment of naturalism) as well as a commitment to God and robust Divine action in the world.

Let's consider another description of naturalism. Thomas Nagel helpfully describes naturalism as follows: "The profoundly nonteleological character of this modern form of naturalism is concealed by the functional explanations that fill evolutionary accounts of the characteristics of living organisms. But any reference to the function or survival value of an organ or other feature is shorthand for a long story of purposeless mutations followed, because of environmental contingencies, by differential reproductive fitness - survival of offspring or other relatives with the same genetic material. It is in the most straightforward sense false that we have eyes in order to see and a heart to pump the blood. Darwinian natural selection could be compatible with Teleology if the existence of DNA had the purpose of permitting successive generations of organisms to adapt through natural selection to changes in the environment - but that, of course, is not the naturalistic conception. That conception, far from offering us a sense of who we are, dissolves any sense of purpose or true nature

that we may have begun with. The meaning of organic life vanishes in the meaninglessness of Physics, of which it is one peculiar consequence. It is widely thought that, without knowing the details, we now have every reason to believe that life arose from a lifeless universe, in virtue of the basic laws of Particle physics or String theory or something of the kind, which did not have life or us ‘in mind’”. [6]

Nagel rightly understands naturalism, as it is normally understood along with physicalism as its entailment, to yield a non-teleological view of the world. It is noteworthy and rather ad-hoc to point out that Nagel is committed to an atheistic brand of naturalism that he later incorporates mental properties at the fundamental physical level (i.e. neutral monism) to explain the teleological nature of the world in relation to minds. But it is equally interesting that Nagel recognizes the strong entailments from naturalism that eliminate God, Divine action, and mind as somehow a product of mere evolutionary development, granted to us through empirical observation.

Despite Nagel’s rather realistic and dire picture of naturalism, in his work *Mind and Cosmos*, he later pumps a bit of optimism in it with his turn toward panpsychism [7]. Rather than giving up naturalism, he relinquishes physicalism by re-envisioning natural events as somehow already imbued with mental properties or proto-mental properties at the base level. It is at this point those theistic naturalists appear to make a similar move by pumping intuitions drawn from religion. With that said, there are apparent differences between theological naturalism and the naturalistic perspectives of both Johnston and Nagel. Nagel originally approaches the natural world from the vantage point of secularism, yet later approaches the natural world as exhibiting signs of Teleology. Johnston advances a revisionist project that takes the natural world in an Eastern and Buddhist direction quite to the contrary of what we find in theological naturalism with its emphasis on God with mental agency.

Both, however, do not encounter the original problem motivating the ‘theological turn’ in Science and that is the incompatibility of Divine action in the natural world (see the Divine Action Project) because there is no mental or personal agent behind, undergirding, above, or outside the natural world. In fact for Nagel and Johnston, there is no Divine agent, so there is no concern arising from the incompatibility of Divine agency and natural events. Theological naturalists are not approaching the natural world as secularists, but as theists.

They too, attempt, to avoid the problem of what some might call the ‘interaction problem’ so prevalent and latent in dualisms (e.g. locally construed to the mind and body, yet serving as an analogy for global interaction between God and Creation) of Divine agency and natural events not by eliminating the Divine (along with creaturely minds and agent powers), but by reconceiving it. For a brief exposition of the interaction problem as a local problem of this broader, global problem between theism and the natural world, the following is helpful by Howard Robinson. “The simplest objection to interaction is that, in so far as mental properties, states or substances are of radically different kinds from each other, they lack that communality necessary for interaction. It is generally

agreed that, in its most naive form, this objection to interactionism rests on a 'billiard ball' picture of causation: if all causation is by impact, how can the material and the immaterial impact upon each other? But if causation is either by a more ethereal force or energy or only a matter of constant conjunction, there would appear to be no problem in principle with the idea of interaction of mind and body." [8]

While the 'interaction problem' is often posed as an objection, there is not always a clear objection to mind-body dualism or to global dualism. Rather, there is a shared or common agreement amongst scholars that there is a problem of conceiving how it is that one could or why one should try to conceive of these two incompatible entities interacting and causally influencing the other. Rather than an objection, it is more of a worry. Of course there have been and are sophisticated responses to this charge from those who begin with theism (as theism provides a natural and intuitive ground for conceiving of the possibility of mind-body or brain interaction as simply an instance of a larger paradigmatic reality coming from theism) [9]. Without delving into this problem or worry in too much detail, it is worth signalling as one of the motivators behind a theological naturalist (often correlating with naturalism generally) stance against theism (as dualism, or theistic-dualism) as it is normally construed as problematizing natural events. Theological naturalists, too, are motivated by this picture that conceives God along the lines of non-interventionism and compatibilism. It is perceived by theological naturalists as an underlying problem with a dualistic picture of God and the world, which proponents of theological naturalism see as unnecessary.

This growing trend to avoid the dualist implications of mind, agency, and God so common to Science-engaged theological projects does raise important concerns with theological naturalism. If it cannot avoid the dualist categories, then it is unlikely to have the resources to motivate a different theological project. It will obfuscate terms that render its success as a new project null, and it will fail to provide a picture of the world that captures its richness and depth.

3. Theological naturalism: a modest critique

Having offered a survey of theological naturalism according to Ritchie, I have situated her project in naturalism generally and noted some of the common challenges to it as well as the conjoining of naturalism with theism. The fundamental issue motivating Ritchie (and theological naturalists generally) is a concern over intuitions that present God and nature through the lens of dualism (not substance dualism mind you, but dualism of mental agency and natural agency). By so doing this, I will focus on this more specific issue of intuitions regarding the mind and agency, which accordingly is ascribed the problem motivating the various causal-joint theories following from DAP. This narrow focus, then, seems both fitting and justified as a way of moving the discussion forward.

3.1. Theological naturalism concerns

Possibly the most prominent and engaging articulations of theological naturalism are found in Fiona Ellis [3, p. 221-225], Sarah Lane Ritchie and Christopher Knight [3, p. 261-297], but we could include in this the theologian Amos Young [3, p. 316-338] and variations of Thomist double-agency. Once again, I will focus on Ritchie's work as she offers the most recent survey of theological naturalism.

There are two parts, once again, structuring Sarah Lane Ritchie's *Divine Action and Human Mind*. In the first part, she develops a sustained critique against causal joint theories of Divine action, as situated in the Divine Action Project so popularly called in the Science and religion literature [3, p. 1-183]. Causal joint theories attempt to find God, divine action, as it were, in consciousness because that is the most natural place to find it in a causally closed system of physical causes and effects. However, Ritchie is clear that the central problem these projects are beholden to the unnecessary intuition about mind and body prevalent among advocates of dualism (i.e. where mind and body are, at a minimum, conceptually distinct). The second part of the book is a brief look at three models of theological naturalism that avoid the physicalist naturalisms and the dualisms of these causal-joint theories (e.g. Thomist divine action, Christopher Knight's eternalist model, and pneumatological naturalism) [3, p. 187-341].

In short, theological naturalism is a deflationary ontological project that avoids the problems ensuing from what we will look at later called, the hard problem of consciousness. If the hard problem of consciousness is a problem, then it leads to dualistic conclusions - a conclusion theological naturalists wish to avoid. As Ritchie sees things, there have been masterful advances in overcoming this hard problem in the physicalist literature already, but her version of theological naturalism is not beholden to physicalist ontology, although at times she appears sympathetic to it. All of the physicalist naturalisms, as she sees it, unnecessarily assume the hard problem of consciousness and exhibit those dualist implications in divine action and causal joint theories (i.e. where God is somehow present in the mind as an emergent phenomena of the natural world). Theological naturalism is also an expansionist project as seen above when we considered both Nagel and Johnson. Ritchie defines the project as a theological turn in science that fully conceives of the natural world as, in some way, Divine. She states: "To be fully natural", accordingly, "is to be inherently involved in active participation and interaction with God" [3, p. 215].

In light of what we have already stated about theological naturalism concerning the history of terminology, similar yet distinct projects, and its reaction to the underlying dualist ontology present in most accounts of theistic action, I want to look further at its plausibility as a version of naturalism. Here's the question: is it truly a form of naturalism and can it plausibly sustain the commitments theists have to God, God acting in the world, and minds? We will

look at each of these in turn to imaginatively conceive its plausibility by considering the core concept that captures both mind and agency - namely, that of consciousness, conscious experience, or even intentional consciousness [B. Gordon, *On the Very Idea of Theological Naturalism*, Sapientia, July 8, 2020, <https://henrycenter.tiu.edu/2020/07/on-the-very-idea-of-theological-naturalism/>, accessed on August 10, 2022].

Let us consider one of the original options within theistic/theological naturalism - namely, Thomist Classical Theism. But, let me be clear. This is not a defense of Classical theism or any other theisms (e.g. neo-classical theism, theistic personalism, panentheism). Instead, I am taking Thomism as an obvious instance of Classical Theism. If one can show that Thomism is not an instance of theological naturalism because of the terms and concepts employed, then it raises doubts about theological naturalism as a project itself but more on that in a moment. Let's consider Classical Theism as paradigmatic Thomism, then attempt to conceive theological naturalism as fitting within Thomism.

I take it as obvious that Classical Theism is not Theological Naturalism [3]. Classical theism is the view that God is absolute in his bearing the properties of aseity (in a strong sense), immutability (both with respect to his intrinsic and extrinsic properties), impassibility, and an immaterial being unlike much of his creation. In other words, there is a radical difference between God as the Creator and his creation such that the creation would always and only be analogously related to God on a hierarchy of participation. Theological naturalism, however, takes God to be not only known through the 'scientific method' (as a level within the natural world), but also somehow a deeper expression of natural laws. Let's take Thomas Aquinas as an instance of Classical Theism [10].

Aquinas says that the soul (i.e. mental reality in common contemporary language, although mind is described more as a power that is predicable of souls) is fundamental to reality [11]. Aquinas also says that this mind intentionally selected to create the universe for a particular reason. Aquinas believes in Aristotle's four causes, which entails a telos for the whole universe and all that is within it. Aquinas affirms the great chain of being with God at the top. Finally, Aquinas affirms universal divine causality with respect to all things that exist simultaneously with human freedom (i.e. a form of compatibilism and concurrence concerning the God-world relation). My intention here is not to suggest that Aquinas is right, but to show that this is not a version of theological naturalism, given their agreement with Aquinas in compatibilism, Divine concursus, and a rejection of Divine interventionism. If it is a version of theological naturalism, then I would like to know what not theological naturalism is. If Thomas's version is a version of theistic naturalism, then it would seem to follow that all versions of classical theism are naturalistic. That seems patently absurd on the surface but let's attempt to be a bit more charitable by considering Ritchie's proposal for Thomist Divine Agency because there are some relevant characteristics that each share, e.g. particularly the non-interventionist and compatibilist theses (with its implied rejection of Divine

interventionism), but, once again, it is not clear that these characteristics are aptly situated in theological naturalism given other Thomist commitments [12].

Attempts at a fuller description of the term than what I have already given, above, can be found in Ritchie's writings in *Divine Action and the Human Mind*. As with most treatments with Divine action, the link or bridge often concerns the human mind as a way of framing the discussions. However, Ritchie (along with her theological naturalist cohorts) is not so sanguine about this approach as it has often led quite naturally to immaterialism, dualisms, and non-reductive physicalism.

In fact, at points Ritchie appears sympathetic to the non-reductive physicalism of the likes of Nancey Murphy [3, p. 178-181], but she rejects it when she opts for an expansionist naturalism with a deflationary conception of mind. She makes this clear, in the following: "In any case, non physicalist naturalisms relying on an immaterial mind are not entirely relevant for the argument at hand. I have argued against non physicalist approaches to the mind; such approaches often privilege consciousness as being uniquely non-physical, in a way that is perhaps unwarranted and unnecessary." [3, p. 217]

On page 181, she is convinced with Kim's criticisms that with non-reductive physicalism (with its implicit rejection of the causal-closure principle) we end up with a form of dualism precisely because non-reductivists like Murphy reject causal reductionisms and end up employing dualist metaphors (i.e. linguistic or conceptual dualism, if there such properties without substances) [13]. Jaegwon Kim is a famous philosopher who advances a series of arguments against non-reductive physicalism as a viable project without adopting some form of immaterial or dualist substance ontology. Instead, he has forcefully argued for some brand of reductivist physicalism without qualitative experience (because as he understands it, we cannot have real instances of qualitative experience on physicalism - i.e. they are non-identical and non-reducible so this one set of properties). For these reasons, as Ritchie surveys the physicalist material she has greater sympathy with some form of reductivist physicalism (as a natural naturalism) that exists within a hierarchy of explanations all the while giving credence to physics as the basis for empirical study. To this point, I wholeheartedly agree with her assessment of non-reductivism as non-natural naturalism! But, she supposes, that we ought to revisit both naturalism and these stronger physicalisms by situating the natural order in a more robust Divine-world relationship. In other words, the hard problem of consciousness needs to be reinvisioned, but not as a version of physicalist naturalism. In this way, she is not convinced that the hard problem of consciousness is a hard problem [3, p. 183-185, 216-225]. Yet, by adopting what one author termed theistic non-physicalist naturalism, one is hard pressed to not think in terms of immaterialism, souls, minds as separate entities etc. because this appears to be a foundational, fundamental structuring item of our epistemic wherewithal (i.e. a categorical item of the mind that structures the world and is unavoidable) [P. Gould, *Divine Action and Human Mind: Introducing the Symposium*, Sapientia, June 29, 2020, <https://henrycenter.tiu>].

edu/2020/06/divine-action-and-the-human-mind-introducing-the-symposium/, accessed on November 2, 2022].

Accordingly, she is not convinced by David Chalmers's hard problem because she understands it to be primarily a problem of intuitions. David Chalmers's famously named this problem the hard problem of consciousness and sees it as a problem of reconciling the objects of the study of Physics with consciousness-properties. This is not really a new problem so much as a problem that was recognized by Chalmers and others who have developed it substantially in light of physicalism (or physicalist naturalism). David Chalmers helpfully states the problem in what follows: "What makes the hard problem hard and almost unique is that it goes beyond problems about the performance of functions. To see this, note that even when we have explained the performance of all the cognitive and behavioural functions in the vicinity of experience - perceptual discrimination, categorization, internal access, verbal report - there may still remain a further unanswered question: Why is the performance of these functions accompanied by experience?" [14]

This same problem has been developed in varying ways. Famously, Thomas Nagel, as cited earlier, perceives it as a problem of subjectivity or "subjective appearances" as irreducible to the objects of Physics [15]. Joseph Levine famously described a similar problem as an explanatory gap between consciousness and the physical [16]. All three have in various and important ways show that there is a strong distinction between consciousness properties and the properties of the physical and biological makeup of natural entities. And, while there might be a variety of responses to it by way of solutions, there is a growing consensus that it is, in fact, a not insignificant problem [J. Weisberg, *Hard Problem of Consciousness*, Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <https://iep.utm.edu/hard-problem-of-consciousness/#SH1a>, accessed on 1 November 2022].

Theological naturalists like Ritchie are not convinced, however, that the hard problem is really a problem. Their desire is to reconceive the issue in a way that would not eliminate, reduce or eschew theistic action as well as the epistemic legitimacy of the natural sciences. The question is: can they do this? This requires giving up some deep-seated intuitions. Intuitions are not so easily dismissible, and some may not be ignored or denied a place at the table of ontological reality. Intuitions are not the sorts of things that are readily changeable like that of different types of beliefs that have a different history of development. Beliefs can change, especially beliefs that are based on unsteady testimony, bias, etc., but intuitions as the sort presented here are deeply ingrained and readily present themselves in all of our experiences. There is a growing recognition that this is the case and the developed thought by Chalmers, Nagel, and Levine show how intractable much of the world would be without them. The same seems to be the case for theological naturalists, ironically. Arguably, the intuitive dualism (i.e. a common term representing a position of dualist's that take souls or minds and bodies as distinct according to common-sense) present in much of the theological and scientific discourse yields the

conclusion that these ideas are what philosophers would call properly basic (i.e. they are foundational or fundamental to our epistemic, perspectival wherewithal).

The intuitiveness of the mind as distinct from the body is taken as a duelling intuition that needs to be meted out of our system and language (e.g. the subject-object distinction is readily apparent when we reflect on our bodies and the parts of our bodies), yet this is not so readily excised from our language or how we think about the world. In this way, Rene Descartes' cogito principle seems to reassert itself as the epistemic deliverances intimately overlap with metaphysical conclusions regarding what we perceive to be the case with what actually is the case (i.e. these perceptual items are *de re* beliefs, which means they are metaphysically real and not merely epistemic ideas with no referent). Yet, theological naturalists try to resist this. Instead of privilege the mind as intuitive, theological naturalists as with Ritchie attempt to supplant it in favour of a world that is already profuse with all that is needed regarding the mind, but it is not clear that this can avoid the dualism they wish to avoid. According to them, all these physicalist naturalisms reassert the same old binary that creates a potentially irresolvable gap between the mind and physics (as expressed so clearly in causal-joint theories of Divine action). Yet, that binary seems to be precisely what is needed if, in fact, we are to begin to describe theistic action in the world. It is unavoidable, but to re-envision it is merely to stubbornly disregard what is directly perceived.

Georg Bealer has carefully described the difficulty in changing these intuitions in contrast to beliefs, "Belief is highly plastic; not so for intuition. For nearly any proposition about which you have beliefs, authority, cajoling, intimidation, etc. fairly readily insinuate at least some doubt and thereby diminish to some extent, perhaps only briefly, the strength of your belief. But seldom, if ever, do these things so readily diminish the strength of your intuitions. Just try to diminish readily your intuition of the naive comprehension axiom or your intuition that your favourite Gettier example could occur. Although there is disagreement about the degree of plasticity of intuitions (some people believe they are rather plastic; I do not), it is clear that, as a family, they are inherently more resistant to such influences than are the associated beliefs." [17]

In other words, intuition of this sort is properly basic, which in technical philosophy means that it operates at the most foundational level of our epistemic wherewithal. Properly basic items resist change. If that were not enough, then one can say more about why these items are properly basic.

One could opt for a descriptivist account of these 'seemings' or 'intuitions' as directed toward linguistic items rather than contentful items of the mind (as real items of a real object). By doing this, one avoids the conclusion of *De Re* reference that actually refer to ontologically real properties distinguishing those properties of say the body. However, the intuitions being described are, once again, foundational or 'categorical' in our epistemic structure and function to frame the world around us. Following Edmund Husserl, in his very Cartesian

manner, these items (i.e. seemings and intuitions of the mind as distinguished from the body) refer in a specific intentional structure without which would render our basic knowledge of the world intractable. The relation between the intention and the intended is one of determinate to determinable. The quality, way (or manner) the object is presented reveals the nature or essence of the object being intended. Again, these intuitions are categorical and yield the fact of *de re* reference. A similar approach has been taken by Roderick Chisholm insofar as he takes the intentionality structure of intuitions to be properly basic and reveal the categorical nature of them. He takes up the notion of self-presenting properties, which are those properties of the external world that presume the fact of their presentation as transparent to the subject of the object [R. Legum, *Roderick M. Chisholm: Epistemology*, Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <https://iep.utm.edu/roderick-chisholm-epistemology/>, accessed on November 2, 2022]. The subject's being presented to in a certain way is a categorical item of the intentional subject's power that reveals a basic structure. The property of self-presentation to the subject attends any and all conscious intentional acts of objects, thereby pointing to a *de re* reference implicit in the intentional act. If this is the case, then it raises a significant challenge to the theological naturalist move to unsettle these intuitions, as defended by Ritchie.

It raises the question as to whether Ritchie can readily dismiss the dualist intuitions that she is so ready to avoid and take up a revisionist project that is not a version of non-reductive physicalist naturalism or dualism generally. It raises a series of other related concerns as well. This assessment of naturalism, then, raises two immediate questions. Is Ritchie's brand of non-physicalist naturalism truly naturalistic (i.e. methodological naturalism, and the privileging of physics and the empirical sciences)? And is she able to conceivably avoid the dualist implications of her physicalist cousins when describing the mind and the Divine? First, I am less than optimistic that naturalism is consistent with non-physicalism, given its basis in physics and I am also less than optimistic, if it can, that it is a useful term. But I will focus on the second question by considering the positive proposals in the second half of *Divine Agency and the Human Mind*.

3.1.1. Mind

Ritchie begins with an analysis of Thomistic Divine action as a model of theological naturalism. She states: "The Thomistic conception of divine action has much to commend it, and it is perhaps *the* paradigmatic example of theistic naturalism: God is inherently involved in each and every natural event, albeit at a separate ontological level from the realm of secondary causes" [3, p. 246]. (emphasis mine) For this reason, it is appropriate to begin with Thomism despite the shortcomings Ritchie advances later in her exposition. This is so because Thomas affirms primary causality (God) and secondary causality (humans) as both acting in a non-competitive way (using the language of Kathryn Tanner). In this way, Thomism affirms a compatibilist non-

interventionism, and, presumably could be worked out in a way that it affirms the causal closure principle (the metaphysical thesis) plus the ‘scientific method’ (the epistemic thesis) as the primary means for gaining knowledge of reality. But it is not clear why naturalism would be the *natural* bedfellow. To do this, Ritchie must employ terms that appear bereft of meaningful content regarding souls and their mental properties. For as she states (reiterating what appears to be a causal joint problem), “There must be a point when spiritual realities meet material processes and somehow effect physical events” [3, p. 246]. This due to the transcendence and immanence distinction in the God-world relation, which could be collapsed when considering God’s “general, universal” action, or presumably Ritchie argues [3, p. 246-247]. On Thomism, God’s being is higher than the natural organisms in a hierarchy. The binary reappears as a reality that privileges something distinct from the material principle of hylomorphic entities (drawing from Aquinas’s philosophy of mind). All this can be explained by a higher-order principle descriptive of rational or spiritual substances - of which God is analogously understood. To fit Thomism with naturalism, one must obscure the terms Mind, God, and action in the world in such a way as to eliminate distinction, but to reaffirm distinction (as Thomas so readily is inclined) re-introduces a form of dualism that privileges the mind as epistemically explanatory (not explicable in third-person terms) and both metaphysically foundational as well as hierarchically top-shelf of which lower level physical organisms are actualized and epistemically accessible. Apart from the linguistic dualism, without which the terms are necessarily obscure, it is difficult to see how one might say anything about what it is at the top of the ontological mountain. Intrinsic to Thomism’s natural order is an ontological priority given to mind at every level. But this lends itself less to naturalism and more to idealism (but surely idealism is not compatible with naturalism).

3.1.2. *God*

Thomistic naturalism raises the related issue of defining God in any meaningful way. Granted, this is not an uncommon charge to Thomist variants of classical theism, but the difference is that most readily concede that something about it is understood analogously to the mind of humans. Unique to naturalism, it seems hopelessly lost to understand God through natural laws epistemically funnelled by physical causal closure. Can Physics really bear the weight of a robust conception of theism? I don’t think so, and I believe most naturalists would readily agree. There are two intuitive arguments that readily present themselves when talking about God. Given what was argued earlier about the nature of intuitions as ontologically revealing structures present to the first-person perspective, I think these present significant instability to theological naturalism projects like Ritchie’s.

The first argument is that using language about God employs precisely the linguistic structure present when we use language about minds. When Ritchie and other theological naturalists talk about God, they necessarily employ the

language of subject-object distinction. And, as we saw already there is a good reason to take this as more than linguistic, but rather it is, arguably (more on this in a moment) rooted in an intentional structure that is categorical regarding the mind. If we are to speak of God's actions in the world, then we presume some structure of intentionality as predicated of God's actions. Without this intuitive structure, we are unable to talk about God in a meaningful way. It becomes part of the intuitive structure, already implicit, in talk of minds generally - of which God is a paradigm example. But, when one makes this move, they are employing the same dualistic metaphors theological naturalists wish to reject.

The second argument is related to the first, and follows from it. If we are to give up the intuitions regarding the mind and its relation to the body or God in relation to the natural world, then we must replace it with some other way of speaking about God. Unfortunately, there are no apparent examples in view that could replace this intuitive understanding. And, if theological naturalists take this route then they end up in one of two conclusions. The first is that they end up speaking out of two sides of their mouth by rejecting the intuitive framework while also using it. The second is that they fail to capture meaningful God-talk. These concerns apply to Divine action generally.

3.1.3. Divine action in the world

But then what are we to make of Divine action, or action generally? Without imbuing the mind at every level of the natural order (or at the level of emergent-minds as with causal-joint theories of Divine action, e.g. Philip Clayton) we lack the epistemic wherewithal to explain the teleology intrinsic to physical beings or the intentional nature of mental actions. Further, we lack the explanatory resources to give not only a coherent account of action let alone a robust account that has any traction at all. The mysterianism, then, appears to be devastating in a way that fails to map on to anything meaningful no matter how much we bracket ontological levels of explanation. Is this an intuitive problem? Maybe, but it appears that without an intuitive appeal to intentions (univocally or analogically construed) we have nothing to say about mind or action in any meaningful sense. In these ways, causal-joint theorists (like Philip Clayton) and non-reductive physicalists (like Nancey Murphy) have a more promising place in the discussions on Divine action.

Christopher Knight's eternalist proposal that God somehow frontloads the ontological principles at the beginning of biological evolution with a base in physics does nothing to circumvent the concerns raised with Thomistic naturalism. Knight's theistic naturalism shares the same basic commitments to the obscuring of dualistic properties, the jettisoning of the commitment to privileging the mind in ontology, and the elevating of methodological naturalism reflecting similar commitments in Thomist theological naturalism. This is not to deny that Knight's proposal has no advantages, but to say that a naturalistic metaphysic is bereft to explain mind and action in any meaningful way without

importing intentionality (and by extension teleology, value along with a host of other properties that humans cherish).

But there is another problem parasitic on naturalism that fails to capture the concepts above and renders naturalistic explanation untenable. Naturalism's commitment to a bottom-up approach to explanatory mechanisms in the world yields epistemic agnosticism and metaphysical ambiguity. The old dictum: 'you can't get something from nothing' is ever more pressing when we consider the prospects of theological naturalism, specifically, and naturalism, generally as they both struggle to account for mind, agency, and, finally, God.

Similarly, contemporary naturalism, with physics as the basis, is a broken view. We have no working fundamental physical theory [18]. What we have are a patchwork of theories in conflict, and these are often instrumental theories (i.e. anti-realist). Why should we place confidence in contemporary Physics to give us a coherent picture of the world that adequately displays its multifaceted complexity, let alone anything that resembles theological naturalism, as its proponents advance? Theological naturalism is an ill-defined view, albeit a creative and temporarily attractive one, based on a patchwork of conflicting theories of physics for which scientists are constantly trying to replace. It shows little sign of hope and rationality.

4. Future directions

With all that has been said, there are several discussions deserving the attention of philosophers, scientists and theologians. First, the previous discussion merits further attention given to the term naturalism as a sufficient designator for theistic projects. In what sense is this truly a naturalistic project and how does it fit conceptually within historical developments of the term naturalism? As most are familiar with the term naturalism, they will or should readily concede the term is notoriously difficult to define and not simply in the way that all philosophical terms are difficult to define. The term has been appropriated in quite porous ways making it difficult to pin down. This is an ongoing discussion pertinent to philosophers. Second, it would be interesting to see developments of this project from more theologians. Specifically, what would be the fruitful results of adopting theological naturalism and what can it do for those invested in dogmatic, practical, and pastoral theology? Third, what would be the fruitful results for scientists? As is clear from any fruitful program, the prospects of how theological naturalism could influence, shape, or affect the scientist in the lab would be not only interesting but also give credence to its fruitfulness as a program. Fourth, in addition to Science-engaged theology (i.e. where Science becomes a fruitful source of theological knowledge that is deeply inter-laced with theological concepts), one might think that a theologically-engaged science is relevant for showing how it is that Theology could be a source of knowledge for Science. Or, is Theology merely beholden to the scientific results? It is difficult to see how theology could be a source of knowledge itself. If it is not a source of knowledge, then how does it avoid

becoming equivalent to secularist naturalist proposals as with the proposals already espoused earlier under the section Naturalism and Religious Naturalism. In order for the success of theological naturalism to move forward, it is vital that theological naturalists take up and develop thoughtful answers to these questions. But, my suspicion is that they will have difficulty answering these questions because of the assumptions that do away with the supposed dualistic intuitions they wish to avoid. For these reasons, I suggest that philosophers, theologians and scientists committed to a non-interventionist, compatibilist account of Divine action in the natural world take up some version of idealism that takes the mind seriously.

5. Conclusions

The present article laid out a survey of issues pertinent to this developing project called theological naturalism whilst also raising concerns and showing some potential relations it has to other naturalistic projects. More importantly, I honed in on one central concern and implications following from it for theological naturalism: namely, the issue of intuitions on consciousness. While theological naturalism ideally has benefits beyond that of physicalist naturalism, it is obscure or insufficiently developed and it appears that it cannot give us a robust picture of the world in a conceivable sense, given the concerns raised above concerning our intuitions about consciousness and action.

Naturalism is not the turning image needed to account for a deeply involved God in what Ritchie and others hold dear: namely, non-interventionism and compatibilism, but I suggest that idealism, on the other hand, can. I take it as obvious that idealism (whether epistemic or metaphysical) is not theological naturalism. Well, here is what idealism says: idealism is a metaphysical theory that places the mind as central to reality. On a modest idealism, minds take some priority to the physical as necessary to explain all of reality (the epistemic thesis). On stronger versions of idealism, all things (natural events, organisms, etc.) are ontologically dependent on mind(s). There are, at least, three idealist options that exhibit both the non-interventionism and compatibilist theses: theistic intentionalism (oddly enough it renders naturalism superfluous as a descriptor for what one might call holistic interactionism), Augustinian idealism (i.e. the view that at its base Divine ideas exist and humans have latent a-priori ideas that are triggered while interacting with the world), or Berkeleyan idealism (i.e. the view that all are minds or ideas, God is the mind that communicates to creaturely minds as phenomenological experiences) [19]. But, all of these do not privilege natural law, natural events, the scientific method, or Physics. Rather, each privilege what, arguably, most naturally comes from a commitment to theism - namely the mind.

The irony of theological naturalism is that it appears to pump the naturalist frame of the world with important religious ideas only later to obscure what it is that it hopes to embrace. The oddness of theism sleeping with naturalism is expressed in the fact that it obscures the mind, hence the Divine

nature, while attempting to retain the mind - as is commonplace in theism. Adding the mind to an otherwise resistant system, won't help and appears to be in conflict with naturalism, but philosophers and theologians await further developments to assess it as a prospective theological project. Until then, the present article aims to help the philosopher, theologian and scientist gain a grip on theological naturalism and potential problems with it.

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