

Burning Bridges: Why Naturalism Does Not Inevitably Lead to Nihilism

The Closet Atheist
Worldviews 101
9 May 2016

Thesis statement:

I will challenge the inconsistencies that James Sire, author of *The Universe Next Door*, has in his rationale that causes him to believe that naturalism inevitably leads to nihilism.

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In John 14:6 (NIV), Jesus tells His disciples, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." This is one of the countless Bible verses by which I am surrounded daily as a student of ---- College. I know, however, that I am an anomaly at this private Christian school. As a quasi-agnostic optimistic naturalist, it can be hard at times not to feel lonely in a sea of thousands of students whose values and beliefs differ from mine. However, something that my Christian classmates may find it hard to believe is that naturalism itself is not by nature devastating, depressing, or isolating. Without Jesus Christ to guide us as our way, truth, and life, naturalists are capable of living lives full of happiness, love, and meaning without a greater deity.

Before I go any further, I must make a few disclaimers. I am not about to get into why naturalism is true or why theism is false. I am not here to persuade you that God isn't real or good. I'm not trying to convince anyone that the argument that we evolved from monkeys is any better than the argument that we were spoken into existence by a Creator. Theists and atheists have been debating each other around in circles since time began: a time upon which we still have not been able to agree. Rather than belittle anyone's religious beliefs, I am seeking to address some misconceptions about the naturalist worldview. Specifically, I will challenge the inconsistencies that James Sire, author of *The Universe Next Door*, has in his rationale that causes him to believe naturalism inevitably leads to nihilism. He makes his case in three "bridges" between the two worldviews, one of which being the idea that naturalism provides the world with no morals or purpose.¹ I will address and critique his definition of naturalism and his third bridge in order to show why naturalism does not axiomatically lead to nihilism.

¹ Sire, James W. *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog*. (5th ed. Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 2009), 97-110. Print.

Sire defines naturalism as the worldview that believes that (1) God does not exist, matter is all that exists, (2) the world is a closed system held together from within (as opposed to with a God who transcends time and space), (3) humans are akin to complex machines, and personality is an "interrelation of chemical and physical properties we do not yet fully understand," (4) there is no afterlife, (5) we can know the universe through innate human reason, (6) ethics is related only to humans, and (7) history does not have an overarching purpose.² Furthermore, nihilism is the result of the assumption that naturalism makes for a world devoid of free will, accurate knowledge, or meaning. He defines nihilism as such:

Nihilism is a denial of any philosophy or worldview--a denial of anything that is valuable. If it proceeds to the absolute denial of everything, it even denies the existence of reality itself. In other words, nihilism is the negation of everything--knowledge, ethics, beauty, reality. In nihilism no statement has validity; nothing has meaning. Everything is gratuitous, *de trop*, that is, just there.³

Unfortunately, Sire moves too quickly from naturalism to nihilism, and that is because his definition of naturalism is incredibly lacking of two core aspects of what naturalism entails. He has neglected to make the distinction between naturalism's two variations: pessimistic and optimistic.⁴

Sire's definition pertains only to pessimistic naturalism: the belief that without God, there is no objective basis for morality, no purpose, and so on and so forth. While there is no denying that pessimistic naturalism is very closely related to, if not synonymous with, nihilism,⁵ pessimistic naturalism makes up only half of the picture. Sire fails to acknowledge the majority of naturalists, who are indeed optimistic naturalists: those who believe that naturalism can be

² Ibid., 68-85.

³ Ibid., 94.

⁴ "Nihilism and Existentialism", "Naturalism." 1-8 Mar. 2016. Lecture.

⁵ Seachris, Joshua. "Meaning of Life: Contemporary Analytic Perspectives." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Ed. James Fieser and Bradley Dowden. Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy and its Authors, n.d. Web. 7 May 2016.

true without leading its believers to a nihilistic wasteland. It is a fallacy to overgeneralize naturalists by deeming them all pessimistic, when in reality, most are not.⁶ In fact, there are many degrees of pessimistic and optimistic naturalism. Some border on nihilism and some are nowhere near it. Rarely do naturalists identify as one-hundred percent optimistic or one-hundred percent pessimistic. Most naturalists are optimistic about some issues, pessimistic about others, and even agnostic (claiming no belief either way) in regards to others. For example, one could be optimistic that naturalism allows for a moral plumb line, pessimistic that naturalism is incompatible with free will, and agnostic as to whether or not there is an afterlife. If a naturalist is optimistic on at least one topic, then she is not completely pessimistic, and therefore her naturalist beliefs are not equal to nihilism.⁷

One belief that can be easily confused with optimistic naturalism is existentialism. To be an optimistic naturalist in regards to morality means to believe that naturalism provides us with an objective basis for morality which we ought to follow. Existentialism is an augmentation of nihilism, which denies any basis for morality or meaning. Existentialists do not believe in objective morality, but rather in creating all subjective meaning individually: no morals are given, but everyone has to power to create subjectivity for herself.⁸ Optimistic naturalists, on the other hand, believe that we create meaning for ourselves only given this objective morality and the universal goal of self-preservation that we cannot change.⁹

Sire argues that naturalism leads to nihilism because it does not attribute the world with having any inherent value or meaning: it has no sense of “oughtness.” Sire's third bridge

⁶ “Naturalism,” Slide 2.

⁷ See more on optimistic naturalism in Dan Weijer’s essay “Optimistic Naturalism: Scientific Advancement and the Meaning of Life.”

⁸ “Nihilism and Existentialism,” Slide 6.

⁹ See pages 8-9 about purpose and the Ultimate Goal.

between naturalism and nihilism claims that cultural morals rely on what ought to be and not on what is, and naturalism does not give us any reason to follow what ought to be.¹⁰ He is convinced that naturalism lacks a moral standard by which to measure all morals, which indeed describes existentialism, thus nihilism.¹¹ He is unimpressed by the seemingly indecisive nature of naturalism to allow its believers to pick and choose which values ought to be respected. How far can we go with keeping one value (such as peace) without disrupting another quintessential value (such as equality)? Sire quickly takes this criticism of naturalist ethics to conclude that without a moral plumb line, we can't measure any moral values by a universal standard, an idea which lands him directly at ethical nihilism.¹² Sire goes on to say that without the feeling of guilt of sinning against a watching God, we have no reason not to do whatever we please.¹³ I find that this conclusion falls short of considering what is: what can be observed in the real world, rather than what one could assume to be true about a lack of a set of written moral rules.

We feel guilt when we do something that would normally give us negative consequences because we are taught that it is wrong, and guilt is the brain's way of punishing itself for a wrongdoing when there is no other external consequence available. This is one way that we govern ourselves and act with integrity without needing to act under the command of a divine entity. Let us use an example of a woman in a clothing store. She walks into the store and is surprised to see that there is not a sales associate in sight. She knows with certainty that she will not get caught if she decides to abscond with any merchandise she pleases. If she acts the way that the majority of men and women do, she abides by an upright moral code and acts with

¹⁰ Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 108-109.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 109.

¹³ Ibid., 110. I am referring to Sire's reference to Kafka's parable "The Watchman." My made-up situation about the woman in the clothing store is also reminiscent of this parable. Sire and Kafka seem to assume that a naturalist would run past the watchman, but he has no basis for jumping to such a conclusion about naturalist morals.

integrity, stealing nothing in order to avoid the personal punishment of her own guilt. Guilt keeps us in check when there is no other punishment to keep us from doing wrong. Sire says that without a moral plumb line, guilt has no value, the woman in the scenario has no reason not to steal anything she pleases, and we again shift into the aimlessly wandering territory of nihilism.¹⁴ However, Sire himself admits that the naturalists he knows are very moral people.¹⁵ His claim about naturalism's moral basis disregards the natural weight of guilt, the concept of integrity, and the unwritten Law of Right and Wrong which is so clearly articulated by C.S. Lewis in his famous Christian doctrine, *Mere Christianity*.

I understand how out of place it may initially seem to include one of the most famous Christian apologists to defend the righteousness of an atheistic worldview. However, I find Lewis' meticulous explanation of morals to be of unparalleled value to the theist and atheist alike. Far before he makes any mention of God, he lays out in clear layman's terms what he calls the Law of Right and Wrong. Lewis remarks that while it seems as though no two cultures follow the exact same moral rules, there are standards that almost all cultures have in common: no civilization has praised anyone for being selfish, cowardly, rude, or ruthlessly promiscuous.¹⁶ It is universally understood that if a woman steals from a clothing store, she has done the clothing company wrong, and, in Christian terms, she has "sinned" against it by taking what was not rightfully hers. Indeed, in the very beginning of *Mere Christianity*, Lewis says, "This law was called the 'Law of Nature' because people thought that everyone knew it by nature and did not need to be taught it."¹⁷ A Lewis scholar named Erik J. Wielenberg refers to the Law of Right

¹⁴ Ibid., 110-111.

¹⁵ Ibid., 107-108.

¹⁶ Lewis, C.S. "Book 1: Right and Wrong as a Clue to the Meaning of the Universe." *Mere Christianity*. (New York: HarperCollins, 1952), 5-6. Print. Sire's statement on page 79 of *Universe Next Door*, "Of course values differ from culture to culture, and none seems absolutely universal" directly contrasts with Lewis' claims here.

¹⁷ Ibid., 5. Note that Lewis used the terms "Law of Nature" and "Law of Right and Wrong" interchangeably.

and Wrong as "universal, objective moral truths." He considers them universal because they "apply to all normal human beings whether they know it or not" and objective because it is just as much a fact that, say, killing children is wrong, as it is a fact that the moon is 2,160 miles in diameter.¹⁸ Lewis even goes so far as to say that we use our intrinsic human reason to determine what is good from what is bad.¹⁹ He says that "if we cannot prove [moral principles], that is not because they are irrational but because they are self-evident and all proofs depend on them."²⁰ This is the opposite of what an existentialist or nihilist would say in regards to objective morality.

Contrasting Lewis' and Wielenberg's claims, Sire voices his troubles with cultural relativism, which is the idea that cultures rely on values that they believe everyone ought to have rather than values that everyone has.²¹ If it is indeed true that killing children is wrong, then why do some people do it? To put it simply, the killer felt that the joy of killing was of greater value than the child's freedom to live.²² Of course, this is an extreme example, and almost everyone knows that it is unethical to choose the joy of killing over a child's freedom to live. In many cases, however, without a set of concrete moral rules, Sire says we have no way of proving to one another which values are true values.²³ Even if naturalists do abide by a Universal Law of Right and Wrong, how do we know exactly how to apply this Law in every situation?

Without the Bible's written set of moral rules, we are constantly pitting values against each other in order to allow for the most good, most fair, and most right rule.²⁴ The abortion debate is really a contest between the right to life versus the right of control over one's own body.

¹⁸ Wielenberg, Erik J. *God and the Reach of Reason*. (New York: Cambridge University, 2008), 60. Print.

¹⁹ See Book One Chapter Two of *Mere Christianity* to see Lewis' notes on the herd instinct.

²⁰ Lewis, C.S. *Miracles*. (New York: HarperCollins, 1947), 54. Print.

²¹ Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 108-109.

²² See *Mere Christianity*, pages 40-52.

²³ Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 109.

²⁴ See *Mere Christianity*, page 13. See J.S. Mill's idea of consequentialism.

The gun control debate is a contest between the freedom to bear arms versus the freedom to feel safe. There is no way that everyone will agree that freedom trumps safety or vice versa. It is worthwhile to note that I did not say that only *naturalists* disagree on which values win out against each other, but *everyone* does. There are some Christians that are pro-abortion and some that are in favor of same-sex marriage. In fact, many atheistic scholars, including Sam Harris, one of the “Four Horsemen of New Atheism,” say that there is no evidence that atheists as a whole are less morally obligated than religious people.

Harris' short essay entitled "The Myth of Secular Moral Chaos" demonstrates the widely known truth that the morals practiced in the Bible are "simply odious and incompatible with a civil society".²⁵ He points out that the Bible declares that children deserve to be beaten or killed for getting out of line or talking back (Prov. 13:24, 20:30, and 23:13-14, Ex. 21:15, Lev. 20:9, Deut. 21:18-21, Mark 7:9-13, and Matt. 15:4-7), and people should also be stoned for anything from adultery (Lev. 20:10) or homosexuality (Lev. 20:13) to working on the Sabbath (Ex. 31:14) or premarital sex (Deut. 22:20-21). Harris concludes his essay with the powerful statement, "While we do not have anything like a final, scientific approach to maximizing human happiness, it seems safe to say that . . . killing children will not be one of its primary constituents."²⁶

What do the moral horrors in the Bible have to do with rejecting James Sire's claims that naturalism leads to nihilism? Sire may have the impression that there is nothing to stop naturalists from doing whatever "sin" they please, but Harris' article shows that Christianity is not much better at guiding us in the right direction. It would be deeply unsettling to discover that the only reason that Christians do not always commit adultery and murder is because the Ten

²⁵ Harris, Sam. "The Myth of Secular Moral Chaos." (2006.)

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

Commandments tell them not to. On the other hand, if they do in fact refrain from committing these sins simply because they are told to, what keeps them from owning slaves or living a polygamous lifestyle, both of which the Bible permit? Does the innate Law of Right and Wrong not play a role in Christians' consciences? How does the Bible provide Christians with any better of a moral plumb line than their natural moral standards do? I personally find it a much greater wrongdoing for one to stone a homosexual to death than for one to be a homosexual. The idea that the Bible has many illogical as well as logical teachings gives me reason to believe that Christians, as well as naturalists, must pick and choose which values they find to be true values. In this respect, naturalists are no further from a nihilistic lack of a moral plumb line than Christians are.

Without a higher being, we are fully capable of acknowledging and following the objective moral basis to be found in the natural universe. Sire also claims that without a greater deity, the world has no overarching purpose: no drive to push us forward; hence, nihilism.²⁷ Especially in this regard, the impending nihilism teeters precariously on the edge of existentialism, which is the haphazard assembly of values, a concept which is indeed absurd. In his description of this bridge between naturalism and nihilism, Sire acknowledges an idea reminiscent of Lewis' universal Law of Right and Wrong: the primary value, an Ultimate Goal, if I may, of the universe. This Ultimate Goal is one that even cultural relativists (those who believe that morals are relative to one's culture) agree to be true: we ought to survive and keep the universe "going."²⁸ It is the reason we desire to tend to our most basic needs for hunger, safety, and sexual desire, as well as more complex goals of studying medicine and caring for the

²⁷ Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 107-111.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 108-109. See *Deepest Differences: A Christian-Atheist Dialogue*. In this dialogue between Sire and his naturalist friend Carl Peraino, Peraino mentions on page 34 the Darwinian standard that the moral plumb line of naturalism is that which promotes the survival of humanity.

environment. The fact that naturalists believe that the Ultimate Goal is survival is clear, although a greater and ever more puzzling question is: why? If there is no God to have assigned our universe with an ultimate reason for existence, then why bother surviving?

As previously stated, the optimistic and pessimistic naturalists view this question in two ways: those who are pessimistic naturalists in regard to meaning would see its lack as devastating. Their answer to the question "why bother surviving in a meaningless universe?" is "There is no reason," which leads them to nihilism. For the optimistic naturalist, however, this is great news: we get to create meaning for ourselves.²⁹ Regarding the privilege of assigning meaning to our own lives, optimistic naturalists and existentialists have very similar beliefs; the existentialist merely believes this to a greater degree, saying that all meaning and purpose vary between individuals, while optimistic naturalists would say that it is an unchangeable and objective fact that the universe has an Ultimate Goal to survive.

In the famous existential parable "The Myth of Sisyphus," we are asked to consider a man who has been assigned a task for all eternity: to push a boulder up a mountain, only for it to fall to the bottom each and every time he pushes it up, and each and every time it falls, he pushes it back up once more; hence, an endless cycle.³⁰ To the theist, this scenario may seem to describe not only existentialism, but nihilism and naturalism as well. It is considered a parallel for the universe: always going and never quite getting anywhere, much like a man chasing an infinite horizon but never reaching it.³¹ Naturalism differs from nihilism and existentialism in this respect because we can assign a meaning to what we specifically do during our time staying alive and perpetuating the universe. We can give ourselves a motive: whether it be to graduate,

²⁹ "Naturalism." Slide 5. 1-8 Mar. 2016. Lecture.

³⁰ Camus, Albert. "The Myth of Sisyphus." 1942.

³¹ See the Stephen Crane poem on page 106 of *Sire*.

to have children, to write a novel, or any infinite number of goals. Sire says that for a naturalist, the examined life (as opposed to the unexamined life of which Socrates speaks in his famous quote) is not worth living,³² but he is absolutely mistaken. Since Sisyphus knows that his ultimate goal is to continue pushing the boulder up the mountain, he assigns his task with meaning.³³ In the words of John Steinbeck, the nonreligious author of some of America's greatest fiction, "For man, unlike any other thing organic or inorganic in the universe, grows beyond his work, walks up the stairs of his concepts, emerges ahead of his accomplishments."³⁴ Camus says that Sisyphus must take joy in his task, his rock, his thing. "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy."³⁵

³² Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 113.

³³ Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus."

³⁴ Steinbeck, John. *The Grapes of Wrath*. (New York: Viking, 1939), 157. Print.

³⁵ Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus."

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