Naturalizing Naturalism: Modernity, Science, and Tradition in Ursula Goodenough's *The Sacred Depths of Nature*

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Abstract: That shift in the way the naturalism of scientists like Ursula Goodenough tends to replicate the epistemological assumptions commonly attributed to religion—assumptions, that is, that Enlightenment, in its pursuit of knowledge won by reason alone, is assumed to have extirpated. To this end, my argument is that the naturalism found in Goodenough's *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, recently updated and reissued, isn't all that natural after all. But it could be; if only it would treat knowledge as emerging not from an awareness of "how things are," as Goodenough says (3), but as entangled in traditions whose paradigmatic expression is, paradoxically, religion. Naturalism need not be a repository for the metaphysical ambitions Enlightenment frustrated by supplanting religion. Embracing the very naturalistic means whereby, in collaboration with those traditions we've inherited and those interlocutors who comprise our present social situation, might allow us to lay claim to what we know by our words.

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Religion is a problem for modernity; so much so, in fact, that religion is thought to have compelled modernity's very emergence. To *overcome* religion, to stand unburdened by myth, superstition, and other forms of illusion, so thus to stand in the light pure reason shines—this is the Enlightenment project writ large. Once that project took root across western European civilization, to hear conventional history tell it, so too did the modern era.

Religion's character as a problem to modernity has shifted over time, however. Here, I wish to explore that shift in the way the naturalism of scientists like Ursula Goodenough tends to replicate the epistemological assumptions commonly attributed to religion—assumptions, that is, that Enlightenment, in its pursuit of knowledge won by reason alone, is assumed to have extirpated. To this end, my argument is that the naturalism found in Goodenough's *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, recently updated and reissued, isn't all that *natural* after all.[1] But it *could* be; if only it would treat knowledge as emerging not from an awareness of "how things are," as Goodenough says (3), but as entangled in traditions whose paradigmatic expression is, paradoxically, religion.

All naturalists' religious sensibilities emerge directly from encounters with nature, according to Goodenough. "A religious naturalist," she writes, "is anchored in and dwells within her understandings of the natural world" (224). That our distinctly *scientific* understandings of nature fail to exhaust its mystery is precisely what makes Goodenough's naturalism *religious*, she says. Nature's beauty "readily elicits religious responses" (4). Hence the normative agenda of Goodenough's book: to outline the foundation of a planetary ethos. Goodenough is convinced that a science-based understanding of nature, paired with religious responses to nature's mystery, necessarily will generate planetary ethical commitments. Because science is a "culture-independent, globally accepted consensus as to how things are" (3), it offers a shared worldview in which to ground our knowledge of nature, and thus our efforts to revere, preserve, and protect it.

Whose nature are we talking about here, though? To the postmodern critic concerned about the danger of a single story, Goodenough might respond: Our position of planetary peril *demands* that we set our differences aside to unite behind the common worldview science provides—we've got no time to lose.[2] Fair enough. But don't such claims as these reproduce the epistemological problems Enlightenment originally sought to eradicate in its criticisms of religion? More precisely, if the primary lesson of

Enlightenment is that nothing external to humans' own reason-giving practice endows our thinking with normative significance, is not the move to construe "nature" as a nonhuman, objective standard exercising authority over the correctness of knowledge *also* a move to reinstitute arrangements of subordination that Enlightenment sought to dissolve?

Immanuel Kant is representative of Enlightenment's rejection of nonhuman authority. To be free, on Kant's account, is not merely to be free from *constraint*, but to be free to constrain *oneself*, that is, to bind oneself to norms to which one might reasonably take oneself to be responsible. Yet Kant's efforts, in the end, were hamstrung by his enduring interest in whether we ever gain access to things-in-themselves (the so-called "noumenal" realm), which, in turn, hindered his realizing Enlightenment's fullest epistemological aspirations.[3] Kant's distinctive failure was his inability to extend the rejection of any nonhuman authority in matters concerning ethics (what it's right *to do*) to a correlative rejection of any nonhuman authority in matters concerning epistemology (what it's right *to think*).

A duality Goodenough situates at the heart of *Sacred Depths*' argument leads her to make a similar mistake. For as long as religions have been around, they've given answer to two fundamental human concerns, Goodenough says: "How Things Are and Which Things Matter" (1). This side of Enlightenment, religion is no longer invited to address the first score, for "[t]he workings of life are not mysterious," writes Goodenough (60)—science plainly explains *how things are*. While the province of morality, the question of *which things matter*, is the more suitable sphere for religion, on Goodenough's view, religion's primary role today, she says, is to integrate the two sides, "to render the cosmological narrative so rich and compelling that it elicits our allegiance and our commitment to its attendant moral understandings" (5).

While the critical rejection of religion enabled Enlightenment thinkers like Kant to separate concerns about ethics from traditional forms of authority (the will of God, say), Enlightenment failed to achieve a similar secular emancipation in epistemology, a failure I'm arguing is reflected in *Sacred Depths*. Specifically, Enlightenment substituted the medieval pursuit to know the mind of God with the pursuit to know reality *as it is in itself*. A pernicious obsession with correspondence theories of mind (think of Descartes' *cogito*) precluded Enlightenment from fulfilling its emancipatory goals in epistemology in the way it had in ethics.[4] The aim for Enlightenment thinkers became to make what's *inside* our minds to correspond with what's *beyond* them so to set our knowledge of nature on a solid foundation rather than the shifting sand of so much religious tradition.

Goodenough finds such a foundation in the mechanistic principles of the physical sciences. Yet something important is lost, I think, in the assumption that "nature just is" (206), as Goodenough argues, and moreover, that science gives an immediate access to that is-ness. It's that *all* human knowledge is a product of discursive practice, our giving and sharing and taking reasons. What's true about nature is not independent of our beliefs, in other words, but rather is instituted by our *social practices*. This is not to say science is *untrue*, of course, just that it's one among many kinds of human reason-giving practices, none of which can properly lay claim to being a transcultural, transhistorical measure of epistemic accuracy. Science, as one among innumerable forms of discursive practice, is a *tradition* of reasoning.

By "discursive practice," I simply mean ways of communicating that generate various forms of knowledge, power, and social relations that condition the quality of one's being in the world—how one knows, sees, and experiences; how one lives, moves, and has their being with others as part of a community or communities. Religions, as I mentioned earlier, are paradigmatic examples of traditions insofar as they inculcate, in Jeffrey Stout's words, "certain habits of reasoning, certain attitudes toward deference and authority in political discussion, and love for certain goods and virtues, as well as a disposition to respond to certain actions, events, or persons with admiration, pity, and horror."[5] Traditions make possible the social practice of giving and receiving reasons that justify our thinking and acting as rational.

It was Hegel who understood the assumption that moderns must choose between reason and tradition, rationality and mythology, was a fiction. Reason may challenge and potentially transform tradition, yet tradition *grounds* reason; it provides the context within which reason operates. Traditions, in

this sense, are the building blocks for practical inquiry. They dispense the necessary rationale for communicating values and our commitments to uphold them.

The larger point I'm driving at isn't that Goodenough's commitment to science as a distinct tradition of human reasoning is itself problematic. It's that that commitment becomes problematic when it's confused as a nonhuman epistemological authority purporting to secure the quest for knowledge and ground our ethics. If Enlightenment's rejection of *all* forms of nonhuman authority over matters concerning practical conduct (our ethics) should also apply to matters purporting to justify our beliefs about what's true (our knowledge), then appeals to a world beyond the sphere of human affairs as an ontologically prior truth to which our belief and action should correspond should be viewed to be as outmoded as the appeals to divine authority that Goodenough herself avoids ("I find god-belief conversations to be irrelevant to my religious sensibilities," she writes; 223).

Might there be a way for Goodenough to maintain her naturalist commitments without replicating the very metaphysical assumptions in epistemology that Enlightenment eschewed in its critical appraisal of religion? I think so, but it will require not drawing as firm a distinction between fact and value, science and morality, as Goodenough does (which, coincidentally, is the basis of Western philosophy's historical criticism of naturalism, at least going back to Hume's formulation of the "naturalistic fallacy").

Epistemological claims are necessarily ethical claims insofar as both are concerned with *authority*, that is, what counts as good, right, and true forms of belief. If this is the case, as I take it to be, then we must recognize that knowledge emerges from practices to contest and uphold those norms to which we're accountable, not from a given tradition's claim to access how things *really* are. Recall that, for Kant, the freedom endemic to humans' condition is the freedom to bind oneself to rules in the form of norms. Nonhumans, so far as we know, don't do this; they don't take themselves to be responsible by virtue of their commitment to norms through their use of concepts. Such is the basis of Kant's definition of our dignity *as* human.

Another way of putting this is to say: our *attitudes* to commit ourselves freely to the norms instituted by our concepts are essential to the *status* we are accorded—in this case, our status as agents.[6] Prior to Enlightenment, normative statuses of authority were taken to be ontologically predetermined. We were reckoned responsible to the extent that we conformed our attitudes to the world's inherent structure. The contrasting modern idea, however, is that normative statuses are not *found* in the natural (or supernatural) world but instead are *made* through social practices of giving, receiving, and assessing reasons.

Kant erred by arguing that the norms to which agents commit themselves are inherent to the structure of the concept-user's own mind. The work to ground our thinking in a priori reasons, or *pure reason*, became both the focus of Kant's critical project and the basis of what qualifies rationality as being truly human. Yet this also instituted a dualism between facts and norms, causes and reasons, which, like Goodenough's distinction between how things are and which things matter, rendered the relation between the world's reality and humans' encounter with it unintelligible.

 Hegel demonstrated how to avoid that dualism. While norms, for Kant, are accessed by the agent's capacity to pierce the veil of appearances to access transhistorical reality, Hegel argued that norms don't transcend but rather *issue from* the social sphere in which we engage in reason-giving practice. Normative statuses, in other words, are social statuses, according to Hegel. The norms by which we constrain ourselves—norms concerning what we are, say, or what the world is—are norms that aren't tied in any meaningful sense to what the world *actually* is. *They're instead products of our practical activity*, of our engagement in processes to give and take and share reasons for what we understand to constitute our knowledge of things.

It's in the way that Hegel could be said to have *naturalized* normativity that a naturalism such as Goodenough's might stand to succeed. Our normative commitments to *how things are* do not flow from an immediate access to nature's inherent reality. Not even our best science gives a direct insight into nature's inner essence, an idea Goodenough herself acknowledges by the "covenant" she makes with mystery (18), which names her commitment not to seek an exhaustive description of nature's reality through the scientific means at her disposal. Yet to say that nature is *sacred* in a religious vein, much as it

is to say nature is mechanistic and molecular via appeals to science, is to commit ourselves to the best of what we've inherited in our thoroughly *human* procedures to generate what we know of the world. Our norms, tested and contested and perennially revised, emerge not from the quest to know nature as an ahistorical, metaphysical ground of reasons. Rather, they're products of our sharing in the production of knowledge that goes back all the way to when our earliest human ancestors began to use language to name and bind themselves to a shared sense of how the world is *for us*, so thus began the shared enterprise of how we might best be *in* and *with* the world.

The irony, of course, is that, by giving up the idea that there's an essential way things are that can be accessed by us, namely by science, we also make possible a more creative, more flexible, more *human* engagement with nature than we would've had otherwise. Indeed, singular descriptions of the world negate all alternative considerations and redescriptions of the many ways the world has been or might be linguistically construed, which, as I've sought to demonstrate, is the only way the world is present to us; is the only way it has *ever* been present to us. Science doesn't correspond any more of less to the way nature is than any other historically contingent tradition of knowing. The advantage of Pasteur's vocabulary over, say, Paracelsus's, is in its utility for our coping with a world that not only outpaces our ways of knowing but defies our desires at every turn.[7] Naturalism, then, need not be a repository for the metaphysical ambitions Enlightenment frustrated by supplanting religion. If only we might embrace the very *naturalistic means* whereby, in collaboration with those traditions we've inherited and those interlocutors who comprise our present social situation, we might lay claim to what we know by our words.

Notes

1. Ursula Goodenough, *The Sacred Depths of Nature: How Life Has Emerged and Evolved*, second ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023). Hereafter, citations to this volume will be parenthetical.

2. The language that single stories might be "dangerous" is that of the Nigerian writer Chimimanda Adichie's. Goodenough cites Loyal Rue's idea that science is a single story, in fact "everybody's" story, in *Everybody's Story* (New York: SUNY Press, 1999).

3. Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979) is the most famous account of Kant's failure along these lines.

4.See Robert Brandom, *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2019), 35-44, for a helpful account of representationalist (correspondentist) epistemology as it developed in the early modern period, and particularly Descartes' thinking. I borrow from Brandom in the remainder of this paper when I refer the shift from epistemology to semantics in Kant, which gains its most illustrious expression inwhat Brandom takes to be Hegel's inferentialism. The language of the relation between normative statuses and normative attitudes, also Brandom's, figures prominently. For Brandom's synoptic vision of German idealist tradition, see *Tales of the Mighty Dead: Historical Essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 21-32.

5. Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), 3.

6. Robert Brandom formulates the "central problem of modernity" as the need to come to terms with how normative statuses of authority no longer operate independently of human attitudes but rather are *dependent* on our attitudes, are instituted by our attitudes. See *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 32-7.

7. I borrow the example of the utility of Pasteur's scientific vocabulary versus that of Paracelsus's from Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism (Essays: 1972-1980)* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 162-4.