

Talk for conference:

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POETIC NATURALISM

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I don't know how many of you have heard about poetic naturalism before or to what extent you are already acquainted with this concept. To be on safe side, I will assume that you know practically nothing about it so far. By the way, if it really was the case that you have never heard about poetic naturalism, I wouldn't be that surprised because this term appeared only about a year ago (in 2016) – at least in its philosophical meaning. Incidentally, the same term is also used in other non-philosophical areas, I found a few occurrences in literary science and in the history of art.

So let me begin my talk by giving you some brief and preliminary answers to two very obvious questions. What exactly is poetic naturalism, and – second – why do I care to talk about it, or perhaps: Why do I want you to be interested in poetic naturalism.

As for the first question, the short answer would be that the term **poetic naturalism** comes from a certain contemporary scientist whose name is **Sean Carroll** who, in addition to being a scientist, more precisely, a theoretical physicist, is developing his own philosophical position, namely, poetic naturalism. In a minute I will show you the definition of poetic naturalism in his own words. Now let me tell you something regarding the second question – why should we care. As for me, what I like about Carroll's poetic naturalism is the fact that he

is trying very hard to come to terms with two questions that I consider to be of critical importance for any naturalistic position.

The first question concerns a contrast or even a clash between the so called fundamental ontology and our folk ontology. The second question is related to some negative ethical and existential consequences of the naturalistic way of thinking (or at least allegedly negative).

By the way, I wouldn't say that Carroll's philosophical perspective is somehow extraordinarily original – even if he has given it a new name. In the end you will be the judge to decide whether his philosophy deserves its name (and particularly whether it deserves the qualifying adjective).

Now let me tell you a few words about Sean Carroll. I think he is an interesting person even apart from his philosophical project. I must confess that the first time I got to know Carroll's work it wasn't along the philosophical line, but it was rather through his scientific work, or more precisely it was due to his pedagogical work, namely, his textbook on general relativity. I found out from many different sources that this textbook is one of the best recent textbooks written on this topic. What I also found out very quickly at that time – and this wasn't the happiest discovery of mine – that reading this book presupposes that your knowledge of math and physics is – roughly speaking – on the level of a graduate physics student, so I wasn't quite able to appreciate Carroll's didactic skills, to put it mildly.

Anyway, Sean Carroll certainly is a first-rate physicist and well respected expert especially in the field of cosmology. By the way, If you are wondering about the paper I highlighted on my slide, I just want to say that it deals with one of the most famous and toughest problems in contemporary cosmology, the problem of so-called „dark energy“ (which has something to do with the observable fact of accelerating expansion of the universe). In this work, Carroll and his three colleagues proposed a certain modification of Einstein's equations of general

relativity in order to get rid of the necessity to postulate dark energy as some sort of mysterious cosmic fluid with high negative pressure.

There are many other things about Sean Carroll that would be worth mentioning, but I have to get to my main topic.

So, let's take a look at Carroll's own definition of poetic naturalism. First comes the naturalistic part of poetic naturalism. This part can be – according to Carroll – summarized by the following three claims:

1. There is only one world, the natural world.
2. The world evolves according to unbroken patterns, the laws of nature.
3. The only reliable way of learning about the world is by observing it.

I don't have time enough for a closer analysis and detailed explanation, so I will only make two or three comments and leave it at that. The third claim could also be dubbed as the principle of empiricism. Of course, Carroll is aware of other cognitive activities besides observation, such as math, logic and conceptual analysis. His point is that neither of these reveals us new knowledge of the world. As for the mathematics, it was Albert Einstein who hit the nail exactly on its head with his statement: „As far as the laws of mathematics refer to reality, they are not certain; and as far as they are certain, they do not refer to reality.“ My second remark goes to claim number 2. I would like to emphasize that this is not meant as a dogmatic statement. Though Carroll's naturalist sees the regularities in nature, he does not assert the necessary existence of cosmic order. As far as we know, the universe could just go crazy tomorrow, regardless of all our expectations and experience accumulated thus far.

Now, let me show you what is supposed to play the part of „poetry“ in Carroll's poetic naturalism. Again, we have a triad of claims:

1. There are many ways of talking about the world.
2. All good ways of talking must be consistent with one another and with the world.
3. Our purposes in the moment determine the best way of talking.

This time I'm not going to comment since I will come back to this poetic part in connection with talking about the two problems with naturalism that I alluded to at the beginning of my talk.

So what are these two problems? The first problem I want to mention is expressed in the statements of naturalists themselves. I mean those formulations in which some naturalists claim that everything except elementary particles (or some other fundamental physical stuff) is an illusion, that things we know and experience in our daily life do not actually exist. The list of all things that are supposed to be non-existent is very long. I will only add so much that some naturalists consider themselves to be especially obliged to emphasize the non-existence of such things as free will, consciousness, values, abstract objects. This way of talking is very unfortunate because it is – to put it bluntly – nonsensical. If I wanted to be a little bit more charitable, I would say that it's a very misleading way of talking – regardless of what motivations led the naturalists to use such formulations. In any case, this way of talking often gives the naturalistic approach as a whole a bad reputation.

The second problem, which is often perceived as a disqualification for naturalism, is that the image of the world that it paints does not seem to allow a decent place for meaningful human life. According to naturalists, the universe is an self-contained entity that exhibits some observable patterns, which we call natural laws, and these laws are impersonal in the sense that they are not set up to "serve" such beings as we are. But – so the objection goes – how is

it even possible to understand and profess values and meaning in a universe that lacks any transcendent meaning? If there is not something higher that would lead us in our lives, it seems that everything must fall into the abyss of pure relativism and ultimately nihilism.

How does Sean Carroll respond to these two problems? According to Carroll, it is exactly the poetic part of his naturalistic philosophy that should give us the solution to the first problem. Once we realize that there are many different ways of talking about the world we don't need to deny reality to descriptions that are useful and effective within their limited domains, even though they don't refer to true, real world, and that is – according to Carroll – the world as it is described by science (meaning ideally completed physics).

Let me make one brief critical remark. I suspect that Carroll's position is not entirely plausible. To put it shortly, my sense is that he wants to have it both ways: on the one hand, he wants to be a strong naturalist – not only methodological but also ontological naturalist – but on the other hand he feels there is something wrong with the eliminativist proclamations. So he's willing to assign some reality to our ordinary, everyday descriptions of the world. But what does it mean exactly? It certainly doesn't mean that Carroll admits the existence of something else besides the fundamental stuff of the universe as it is revealed to us by scientific investigation. In the final reckoning, the introduction of the poetic aspect into his naturalism looks more like a rhetorical trick.

Now, what about the second problem? In this case, I think, Sean Carroll gives us the only answer that we can get, if we don't want to fall prey to illusions. Let me quote one passage from his book that nicely summarizes his point of view:

The universe doesn't care about us, but we care about the universe. That's what makes us special, not any immaterial souls or special purpose in the grand cosmic plan. Billions of years of evolution have created creatures capable of thinking about the world, forming

*a picture of it in our minds and holding it up to scrutiny. We are interested in the world, in its physical manifestations and in our fellow humans and other creatures. That caring, contained inside us, is the only source of “mattering” in any cosmic sense. Whenever we ask ourselves whether something matters, the answer has to be found in whether it matters to some person or persons. We take the world and attach value to it, an achievement of which we can be justly proud. (S. Carroll, *The Big Picture*, p. 273)*

I fully agree with Carroll that this is the only correct way of thinking about our ethical values. The greatest advantage that comes from adopting this position lies in its honesty. We don't need to dress up the man-made character of our values with the metaphorical and metaphysical cloak of objectivity or some kind of transcendence. To declare that so and so value is objective is legitimate only in the sense that we view it as an extremely important part of ourselves and of the community to which we feel attached. We shouldn't confuse our being conservative in our ethical life with our having objective – that is non-man-made – values.

Let me conclude this talk with one personal note. I don't count myself as a philosophical naturalist, But if I faced a binary choice between philosophical naturalism and philosophical supernaturalism, I would certainly have to go with the first one. And again, If I had to choose from different available versions of naturalism, I would be most probably inclined to follow a path very similar to Carroll's. I don't think Carroll's poetic naturalism gives me a satisfactory resolution of the tension between what Wilfrid Sellars once characterized as „manifest“ and scientific images of the world, but I guess that the framework of poetic naturalism is at least in its basic intention a good starting point. If the philosophical naturalism is intended to be something more than just another abstract philosophical doctrine living and dying on the pages of academic journals, it should also be a certain way of life with its own recognizable and characteristic ethos. And my personal feeling is that in this particular

respect, Sean Carroll as a freely philosophizing physicist has accomplished much more than many other professional philosophers – naturalists.