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NATURALLY UNDERSTANDING NATURALISM

Stewart Goetz

In his excellent book *World without Design*, Michael Rea argues that naturalism is not a philosophical thesis but a research program. I believe that there is good reason to question Rea's claim about naturalism. In this brief paper, I critique Rea's argument and defend a particular understanding of naturalism as a philosophical thesis.

Barry Stroud writes that "'Naturalism' seems to me . . . rather like 'World Peace.' Almost everyone swears allegiance to it, and is willing to march under its banner."¹ Though naturalism is orthodoxy among the intellectual establishment, some of us are not true believers. One of the most interesting critiques of naturalism in recent years is that of Michael Rea. In his first-rate book *World Without Design*,² Rea argues that naturalism is not a philosophical thesis that is true or false but a research program that is used in trying to revise our beliefs toward truth. After summarizing Rea's description of naturalism in the next section, I will argue in Section II that a good case can be made that naturalism, contrary to what Rea says, is naturally best understood as a philosophical thesis. In Section III, I examine two considerations that might be raised in answer to my position that naturalism is a philosophical thesis. I conclude with one final point in Section IV.

I

According to Rea, a research program is a set of methodological dispositions, where methodological dispositions are "dispositions to trust at least some of our cognitive faculties as sources of evidence and to take certain kinds of experiences and arguments to be evidence."³ Rea says that for most people most of the time methodological dispositions are most likely acquired without any reflection and even unconsciously. For example, "We tend automatically to trust our senses, our reasoning abilities, and our memories. The fact that mathematical and logical propositions seem

¹Barry Stroud, "The Charm of Naturalism," in *Naturalism in Question*, ed. Mario de Caro and David Macarthur (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 22.

²Michael C. Rea, *World Without Design: The Ontological Consequences of Naturalism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002).

³*Ibid.*, p. 2.

obviously to be true we readily and unreflectively take as strong and sufficient evidence in their favor."⁴

An important characteristic of research programs is that they "cannot be adopted on the basis of evidence . . . [because] evidence can only be recognized as such from within a research program."⁵ If one rejects one research program in favor of another, the rejection is a choice made on pragmatic grounds. A chosen research program is one whose consequences are most attractive or whose selection most irritates one's enemies.⁶ Because there is no non-pragmatic neutral basis on which to judge the rationality of a choice to reject one research program for another, there is no basis for claiming that naturalism is the research program for which non-naturalists should rationally choose to exchange their non-naturalism. Similarly, opponents of naturalism can provide no non-question-begging grounds to persuade naturalists to choose to reject their naturalism for non-naturalism. At best, the non-naturalist can bring forth pragmatic considerations for such a rejection.

What, then, are the methodological dispositions of the naturalist? According to Rea, they are those that inform the methods of science, and "naturalism is a research program which treats the methods of science and those methods alone as basic sources of evidence."⁷ In support of his claim, Rea presents an informative summary of the pillars of the naturalist tradition that includes the likes of John Dewey and Willard van Orman Quine.⁸ Beyond the support for his understanding of naturalism that is provided by this historical survey, Rea's main reason for maintaining that naturalism is a research program and not a philosophical thesis is that to hold that it is the latter would open it to the objection that it is a self-defeating position. An illustration of what Rea has in mind here is most helpful.

Consider the suggestion that naturalism is the philosophical thesis that there are no supernatural entities.⁹ Rea maintains that the thesis is uninformative because naturalists disagree about what it is for something to be supernatural as opposed to natural. Definition by example is not helpful because if one maintains that God, angels, ghosts, and immaterial souls are supernatural, then it is unclear what these entities have in common that makes them supernatural.

Even if it were the case, however, that a plausible account of what qualifies these entities as supernatural could be provided, Rea believes that no version of naturalism can include such a supplementary account. This is the case because naturalism regards the natural sciences and their

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., p. 6.

⁶Ibid., pp. 6–7.

⁷Ibid., p. 67.

⁸Ibid., pp. 32–48.

⁹Ibid., p. 54.

methods alone as the basic sources of evidence. Naturalism, therefore, demands that we follow science wherever it leads and this implies that “naturalism, whatever it is, must be compatible with *anything* science might tell us about nature or supernatural. Thus, no version of naturalism can include any substantive thesis about the nature of nature or supernatural,”¹⁰ because were it to do so it would run the risk of imploding. After all, reasons Rea, if naturalism must be compatible with anything science might tell us about nature or supernatural, then the methods of science might one day lead us to the conclusion that the best explanation of a phenomenon is the existence and activity of a supernatural entity. But if naturalism is the philosophical thesis that there are no supernatural entities, then naturalism will have defeated itself.

After examining other proposals for taking naturalism as a philosophical thesis and explaining how each faces the problem of being self-defeating, Rea concludes that naturalism must be understood not as a philosophical thesis but as a research program. Any attempt “to convert naturalism into a substantive philosophical thesis arises out of nonnaturalistic ways of thinking.”¹¹

II

Rea’s argument is both engaging and important. Is it, however, correct? I have my doubts, and they include but go beyond the fact, which Rea recognizes, that so many naturalists themselves regard naturalism as a philosophical thesis. Of such naturalists Rea says that they “have unwittingly mischaracterized it.”¹² But have they? To see if they have, it is helpful to ask the following question: What are the methods of science that Rea claims are the basic sources of evidence in the naturalist research program? Quite interestingly, Rea answers that,

Notoriously, it is hard to say exactly what methods are supposed to count as *the* methods of science. But I think we will do well enough . . . if we say that the methods of science are, at the present time anyway, those methods (including canons of good argument, criteria for theory choice, and so on) regularly employed *and respected* in contemporary biology, chemistry, and physics departments. Reliance on memory and testimony is included in the methods of science, as well as reliance on judgments about apparent mathematical, logical, and conceptual truths. . . . Presumably there are constraints: not just any method could count as scientific. But I see no reason to take a position on what those constraints are.¹³

In short, when we ask what are the methods of science that are the heart and soul of the naturalist research program, Rea directs us to the disciplines of contemporary biology, chemistry, and physics, and adds that

¹⁰Ibid., p. 55. The emphasis is Rea’s.

¹¹Ibid., p. 73.

¹²Ibid., p. 54.

¹³Ibid., p. 67. The emphases are Rea’s.

there presumably are some constraints on the methods employed therein. "Not just any method could count as scientific."¹⁴

Can an example of the constraints that Rea has in mind be provided? I believe that one can and will turn to some of Rea's own comments for guidance. In his overview of the pillars of naturalism, Rea states that "there are reasons for seeing Aristotle as an opponent of naturalism. After all, the modern scientific method was developed partly in *contrast* with Aristotelian science; and his essentialism and teleology have been favorite targets of criticism among the scientifically minded ever since the seventeenth century."¹⁵ Later, Rea adds that the naturalist Auguste Comte, who had a methodological vision of a unified empirical method for every area of human inquiry, "reject[ed] the quest for . . . teleology in nature."¹⁶ In light of these comments by Rea, I believe we can come up with a condition that ensures that a method of inquiry is not scientific. To explain the content of this condition, it is important to note the fact that explanations of some of our own physical bodily movements (e.g., my typing this paper) typically make reference to mental causes such as intentions and choices whose explanations are teleological in nature and grounded in mental events/states such as our beliefs and desires. In light of this fact, let us say that a sufficient condition of a method being non-scientific in nature is that it countenance explanations of physical events that make reference to what is mental in nature, whether purposes or causes. If a method that does this is non-scientific in nature, then a necessary condition of a method being scientific is that it not countenance explanations of physical events that make reference to either mental purposes or causes. This conception of a scientific method is hardly robust in any positive sense. Indeed, it is essentially a *via negativa*. Because it is a negative way, however, it provides a constraint that in Rea's words ensures that "not just any method could count as scientific."¹⁷ Moreover, this negative way is embraced by biology, chemistry, and physics, which are Rea's examples of disciplines whose methods are paradigmatically scientific. For present purposes, then, inclusion of this *via negativa* condition helps constitute an adequate conception of methods that count as scientific in nature.

What, now, about naturalism as a philosophical thesis? Do we have an adequate understanding of it? According to Rea, if naturalism is a philosophical thesis, then

[t]here must be some reason why the relevant [different versions of naturalism] are rightly identified as versions of *naturalism* rather than as disparate [philosophical] theses that bear no substantive relation to one another. . . . [I]t seems that naturalism ought to be characterized as whatever it is that

¹⁴Ibid., p. 67.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 26. The emphasis is Rea's.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 30.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 67.

the different ‘versions’ have in common. As it is, however, we are often left largely in the dark as to what the connection between the various putative versions of naturalism is supposed to be.¹⁸

Contrary to what Rea claims, I believe that we are not left largely in the dark about the essence of naturalism, when naturalism is understood as a philosophical thesis. The light that we have about this issue is provided by three naturalists who regard naturalism as a philosophical thesis. First, consider the following thoughts that David Papineau provides about this issue. According to Papineau, naturalism is a commitment to the completeness of physics, where physics is complete in the sense that a purely physical specification of the world, plus physical laws, will always suffice to explain what happens. Papineau is aware that the concepts of physics change over time. What categories, therefore, will qualify as “physical” in the final or ultimate physics? Papineau claims that we cannot answer this question with any certitude. At best, we can pursue a *via negativa* and specify one category that will not qualify for inclusion, namely, the category of the psychological attitudes such as beliefs, desires, and choices that represent things being a certain way:

When I say that a complete physics excludes psychology, and that psychological antecedents are therefore never needed to explain physical effects, the emphasis is on ‘needed.’ I am quite happy to allow that psychological categories *can* be used to explain physical effects, as when I tell you that my arm rose because I wanted to lift it. My claim is only that in all such cases an alternative specification of a sufficient antecedent, which does not mention psychological categories, will also be available.¹⁹

And again,

If you want to use the [argument that all physical effects are fully caused by purely physical prior histories], it isn’t crucial that you know exactly what a complete physics would include. Much more important is to know what it won’t.

Suppose, to illustrate the point, that we have a well-defined notion of the *mental* realm, identified via some distinctive way of picking out properties as mental. (Thus we might identify this realm as involving intentionality, say, or intelligence, or indeed as involving consciousness—the precise characterization won’t matter for the point I am about to make.) Then one way of understanding ‘physical’ would simply be as ‘non-mentally identifiable’—that is, as standing for properties which can be identified independently of this specifically mental conceptual apparatus. And then, provided we can be confident that the ‘physical’ in this sense is complete—that is, that every non-mentally identifiable effect is fully determined by *non-mentally identifiable* antecedents—then we can conclude that that all mental states must be

¹⁸Ibid., p. 53.

¹⁹David Papineau, *Philosophical Naturalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 31, n26. The emphasis is Papineau’s.

identical with (or realized by) something non-mentally identifiable (otherwise mental states couldn't have non-mentally identifiable effects).²⁰

Second, David Armstrong advocates naturalism as a philosophical thesis by proposing that ideal physics has an ultimately privileged explanatory role. According to Armstrong, naturalism is "the doctrine that reality consists of nothing but a single all-embracing spatio-temporal system."²¹ Armstrong points out that contemporary materialism is a form of naturalism and maintains that the single, all-embracing temporal system contains nothing but the entities recognized by the most mature physics. Irreducible mental explanation (explanation that involves ineliminable reference to mental causes or purposes) has no place in this (or any other) spatiotemporal system as an ultimate or basic explanatory principle. Thus, Armstrong says that "if the principles involved [in analyzing the single, all-embracing spatiotemporal system that is reality] were completely different from the current principles of physics, in particular if they involved appeal to mental entities, such as purposes, we might then count the analysis as a falsification of naturalism."²²

Third, Andrew Melnyk makes it clear that naturalists in general (and he in particular) deny the reality of both irreducible mental events and fundamental (irreducible) teleological explanations.²³ As a participant in an online debate with Charles Taliaferro and me in which we claim that libertarian free choices are irreducible mental events that have fundamental teleological explanations, Melnyk denies that conscious occurrences are irreducible mental events and states that "[n]aturalism claims that nothing has a fundamental purposeful explanation. . . . Naturalism says that whenever an occurrence has a purposeful explanation, it has that explanation in virtue of certain nonpurposeful (e.g., merely causal) facts."²⁴

If we follow the lead of Papineau, Armstrong, and Melnyk, we arrive at the following position: naturalism is the philosophical thesis that the fundamental, ultimate, or final explanatory story about the nature and course of events in the physical world will exclude any mention of what is mental in nature. This understanding of naturalism does two things. First, it implies that the ultimate explanatory story about the physical world and all events in it will exclude both any causal chain of events whose first member is irreducibly mental in nature and any teleological explanations of physical events.²⁵ Second, it comports well with the understanding of

²⁰David Papineau, *Thinking about Consciousness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 41. The emphasis is Papineau's.

²¹David Armstrong, "Naturalism, Materialism, and First Philosophy," *Philosophia* 8 (1978), p. 261.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 262.

²³Andrew Melnyk, "Naturalism, Free Choices, and Conscious Experiences," 2007, http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/andrew_melnik/against-dualism.html.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 1.

²⁵Paul Draper has suggested that I weaken my definition of 'naturalism' a bit so that it allows for irreducible mental causation of some events, as long as any chain of mental cau-

the scientific method that was set forth earlier in this section, which is that a necessary condition of a method being scientific is that it not countenance explanations of physical events that make reference to mental purposes and causes. This second point is important in light of Rea's assertion (which I have already quoted) that "it is hard to say what methods are supposed to count as *the* methods of science. . . . Presumably there are constraints: not just any method could count as scientific. But I see no reason to take a position on what those constraints are."²⁶ My claim is that there is a known constraint: the explanatory space of the methods of science excludes mental explanations.

If we assume that naturalism is the philosophical thesis that the ultimate or final explanatory story about the nature and course of events in the physical world will exclude any mention of what is mental in nature, then how will this bear upon the claim mentioned in Section I that naturalism implies that there are no supernatural entities? Rea claims that taking naturalism to imply this is uninformative because, for example, it is not clear what entities like God, angels, ghosts, and immaterial souls have in common that would warrant their classification and exclusion as supernatural entities. But surely one thing that God, angels, and immaterial souls have in common (I'm not sure about ghosts) is that they are subjects of mental attitudes (e.g., beliefs, desires, choices, intentions) that are causally and teleologically involved in explaining the occurrences of at least some events in the physical world. Thus, naturalism entails at least that there are no explanatorily relevant supernatural entities because in

sation does not begin with irreducible mental causation. In other words, any first mental event that is an irreducible cause must itself have a physical cause. According to Draper, this understanding of naturalism is compatible with two essential naturalist claims. First, the mental (if it exists) emerged from the physical rather than vice versa. Second, all teleological explanations can be reduced to scientific explanations.

In my estimation, this is not a substantive, but a cosmetic, weakening of my definition of 'naturalism.' Consider mental causation. While Draper's proposal allows for irreducible mental causes, it will not allow those causes to occupy an *ultimate* status as heads of explanatory chains in the final explanatory story. Then, there is teleological explanation. Draper claims that it is essential to naturalism that all teleological explanations be reducible to scientific explanations. This comports perfectly with my proposed understanding of naturalism, which holds that the ultimate explanatory story will not include teleological explanations of physical events.

Thomas Flint has pointed out to me that strictly speaking naturalism, understood as the philosophical thesis that the final explanatory story about the nature and course of events in the physical world will exclude any mention of what is mental in nature, does not imply that ultimately there will be no teleological explanations of physical events. After all, says Flint, one might be a weird Aristotelian naturalist who denies that we need to appeal to the mental to explain anything but thinks that lots of explanations are teleological in nature (e.g., acorns act as they do because their telos/end is to become oaks).

I agree that there is logical space for such a weird Aristotelian position but believe that the position is completely unmotivated. Our best, if not only, route into understanding the concept of teleological explanation is one that passes through our own minds and, therefore, any position (e.g., naturalism) that denies the irreducible reality of what is mental will have no reason to introduce the reality of non-mental teleological explanations. Moreover, if naturalism is anything, it is a position that seeks to rid the world of teleology.

²⁶Rea, *World Without Design*, p. 67. The emphasis is Rea's.

principle it will not allow what is mental in nature to enter into the ultimate explanatory story of the physical world. And because science (at least in the forms of biology, chemistry, and physics) is methodologically committed to accepting only non-mental explanations of physical events, it will never arrive at a position where it must postulate the existence of a supernatural entity to account adequately for some physical feature of or event in the physical world. Should science come across some physical feature or event for which it cannot presently provide an adequate physical/non-mental explanation, it will simply insist that it has failed to find a plausible physical explanation for that physical feature or event and will go on trying to find this kind of explanation.

What, now, about Rea's main concern with understanding naturalism as a philosophical thesis? Does understanding naturalism in the way I have suggested leave open the possibility that naturalism might self-destruct? It is possible to envision a defense put forth by a naturalist in order to avoid an implosion of his view. Consider the issue of teleological explanation. A naturalist might worry that naturalism would self-destruct because the methods of science are themselves employed for the fundamental *purpose* of revising our beliefs by discarding old ones and acquiring new ones. Given what Papineau, Armstrong, and Melnyk have told us, however, naturalism cannot implode in this way. Recall what Papineau tells us: while he is quite happy to grant that psychological categories can be used to explain physical effects in a case where he tells us that his arm rose because he wanted to lift it, he insists in this case (and all others like it) that an alternative description will be available in the complete scientific story that does not make use of psychological (teleological) categories.²⁷ If this is true for the rising of his arm, then it is surely true for the pursuit of science. While it is true that we now employ mental (teleological) categories to explain what science is about, the naturalist will insist that an alternative description will be available in the complete scientific explanation of the practice of science, where that scientific explanation will not make mention of any fundamental teleological explanation. The correct story will be thoroughly non-teleological in nature and, therefore, naturalism will not defeat itself.

Is there any other way in which naturalism might self-destruct, when understood as the philosophical thesis that the ultimate explanatory story about the physical world will exclude any mention of what is mental in nature? I can think of two other possibilities.

First, one might wonder about how the belief in naturalism, which seems to be an irreducibly mental event in virtue of its contents, fits into the overall naturalist story. Presumably the naturalist will insist that the belief in naturalism is or is realized in a physical event or state, and like any other physical event or state will ultimately be explicable in thoroughly non-mental terms.

²⁷Papineau, *Philosophical Naturalism*, p. 31, n26.

The matter of the explicability of the belief in naturalism raises the possibility of a second way in which one might argue that naturalism self-destructs. C. S. Lewis is well known for, among other things, having argued that naturalism is self-defeating.²⁸ He believed that it is self-defeating because the belief that naturalism is true, if justified, must ultimately be caused by other beliefs in virtue of their contents. If Lewis was right about this, then naturalism must recognize the reality of irreducible mental causation and, therefore, the claim that the ultimate explanatory story about the physical world can be told in exclusively non-mental terms is false.

This is not the place to set forth Lewis' argument,²⁹ but it seems to me that the naturalist could respond to it by claiming that the belief in naturalism is *basic* or *foundational* in nature, and contrary to what Lewis assumed, not in need of justification in terms of other beliefs. If this response seems implausible, a naturalist might claim that it is surely no more implausible than claiming that naturalism is a research program and not a philosophical thesis. After all, Rea tells us that the methodological dispositions of research programs are held or acquired *without any reflection* and even unconsciously.³⁰ If this is the case and the naturalist is fundamentally disposed to trust the empirical methods of science, then it is not much of a stretch to think that naturalism as a philosophical thesis occupies a basic position in the naturalist's noetic structure. If it does, then this guarantees that naturalism is not and will not be self-defeating in the way that Lewis argued.

It is important to point out that to hold that the belief in naturalism is basic is not to hold that it is uncaused. Presumably it is caused. Its causes, however, will, given the truth of naturalism, ultimately be completely describable in non-mental categories that can be included in a larger explanatory story that is exclusively non-mental in nature.

III

In this section, I set forth and respond to two considerations that might be raised in answer to my argument for the view that naturalism is a philosophical thesis. The first consideration is one that Rea himself has brought up. In correspondence, he states that he does not see any deep justification for my understanding of naturalism as a philosophical thesis. "True, you've found three people who endorse the thesis [as understood by you] and say things that suggest that this is what naturalism is. But why think they're right?"

One of the reasons I believe these people are right has much to do with Rea's point that there is a close relationship between naturalism and science. The question is: What is the nature of that relationship? Rea's perspective

²⁸C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*, Rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1978).

²⁹Charles Taliaferro and I state and give a defense of Lewis's argument (the argument from reason) in *Naturalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008). For another defense of Lewis's argument, see Victor Reppert, *C. S. Lewis' Dangerous Idea: In Defense of the Argument from Reason* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

³⁰Rea, *World Without Design*, p. 2.

is that naturalists are methodologists who regard the natural sciences and their methods alone as basic sources of evidence. As I see things, a fundamental weakness in Rea's argument for understanding naturalism in the way that he does is his failure to clarify adequately what are the methods of science that supposedly inspire and guide naturalists. Once it is made clear that the scientific method as such excludes explanations that make reference to mental causes and purposes, there is a perfectly natural explanation for why naturalists are keenly interested in the natural sciences. This explanation is that naturalists are individuals who espouse a philosophical thesis that takes the natural sciences' methodological commitment to excluding mental explanations of physical events and converts it into a metaphysical axiom. Given that naturalists begin with a commitment to a philosophical thesis that requires ultimately explaining *everything* that occurs in the physical world in terms of physical/non-mental terms, they naturally look favorably upon the natural sciences because those disciplines are methodologically committed to finding non-mental explanations of physical events.

Are there naturalists who characterize naturalism as something other than a philosophical thesis? Most certainly there are. But in the spirit of a good *tu quoque* response to Rea, why think they're right? After all, it is hard not to be skeptical when these naturalists (e.g., Quine) claim that they would acknowledge the reality of souls, God, etc., if science found a place for them.³¹ One cannot help but be skeptical here because these naturalists prefer the methods of science above all others,³² methods that deny any explanatory space to what is mental. One finds it very difficult to avoid concluding that these naturalists, if they were consistent, would refuse to acknowledge a place for souls and God in the explanatory story of events in the physical world. How could they do anything else, given the methodological commitment that denies any explanatory space for what is mental?

The second consideration that might be raised in answer to my argument for the view that naturalism is a philosophical thesis is that the position I have defended is one that Rea has already addressed and refuted.³³ For example, in his survey of versions of metaphysical naturalism Rea characterizes the following "quasi-ontological" formulation of naturalism by Philip Pettit:

Naturalism imposes a constraint on what there can be, stipulating that there are no nonnatural or unnatural, praeternatural or supernatural entities. . . . Nature comprises those entities and constructs made of those entities that the ideal physics, realistically interpreted, posits.³⁴

³¹Ibid., p. 42.

³²Ibid., p. 43.

³³An anonymous referee raised this objection.

³⁴Rea, *World Without Design*, p. 57. Pettit's work is entitled "The Nature of Naturalism," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, suppl. vol. 66 (1992), pp. 245–266.

Rea believes that this characterization of naturalism fails because it

is either an obviously false metaphysical thesis or else a disguised epistemological thesis. As we all know, there is in fact no such thing as the ideal physics or the best physics. The physics we now have is not the best (otherwise there would be no reason to continue trying to improve it) and it is less than ideal. But if there is no ideal physics, then there is no *ontology of the ideal physics*. Thus, taken at face value [this quasi-ontological thesis] implies that *no* ontology is correct. But that is obviously false. Of course, the idea probably is that the correct ontology is whatever ontology *would be* (or, more optimistically, *will be*) implied by an ideal physical theory if (or when) such a one were to exist. But if that is right, then [this quasi-ontological thesis] is not so much a metaphysical thesis as an affirmation of the ability of physics to tell us the whole truth about the world. In other words, it is a disguised epistemological thesis. It does not tell us what, specifically, exists. Rather, it just expresses the conviction that, *whatever* exists, an ideal physics will be able to detect it.³⁵

Does my position that naturalism is a philosophical thesis escape through the horns of the dilemma presented by Rea? I believe that it does. In explaining how it does, it is relevant to note that my formulation of naturalism makes no mention of any physics, ideal or otherwise. Instead, it is stated in terms of an ultimate explanatory story about the nature and course of events in the physical world. In so far as this explanatory story is ultimate or final in nature, it is the ideal explanatory story. If we adapt Rea's criticism to my conception of naturalism, we end up with something like the following: "My characterization of naturalism fails because there is at present no such thing as the ideal explanatory story. But if there is no ideal explanatory story, then there is no ontology of that ideal explanatory story. This implies that no ontology is correct, which is obviously false. The idea, then, must be that the correct ontology is that which would be implied by the ideal explanatory story, were it to exist. In that case, however, naturalism as I understand it is no more than an affirmation of an ability of that explanatory story to tell us the whole truth about the world. It is a disguised epistemological thesis that does not tell us what, specifically, exists. It just expresses the conviction that, whatever exists, the ideal explanatory story will include it."

What is important to note when considering my formulation of naturalism in light of Rea's dilemma is that the ideal explanatory story does tell us, specifically, what exists. What it tells us is that what exists includes that which is physical in nature and that the ultimate explanation of anything and everything that happens to what is physical in nature *does not include any reference to what is mental in nature*. While the exclusion of ultimate mental explanations is negative in character, it is both extremely deep and broad in scope and, what is particularly relevant to Rea's dilemma, ontological in nature (it tells us, specifically, what does not exist). Because we know what we do about the ontology of the ideal explanatory story, my

³⁵Ibid., pp. 57–58. The emphases are Rea's.

view that naturalism is a philosophical thesis is one that has not already been addressed and refuted by Rea.

IV

There is, then, a plausible understanding of naturalism that renders Rea's claim that it is a research program and not a philosophical thesis implausible. In closing, I raise one final issue. It concerns Rea's main reason for maintaining that naturalism is a research program. He states that if naturalism were a philosophical thesis, then it would be exposed to the critique that it is self-defeating. Perhaps out of the principle of charity, Rea is inclined to assume that no philosopher (at least, no naturalist) would advocate a position that is self-defeating. While it is hard to disagree with being charitable, it is equally hard to deny that philosophers sometimes defend positions that are self-defeating. Here, the logical positivists come to mind. They were ardent proponents of the verification principle, which was roughly the thesis that no statement is meaningful unless it is either a tautology or empirically verifiable. When it finally dawned on someone to ask whether the verification principle itself was either a tautology or empirically verifiable, the fate of logical positivism was pretty much sealed. Given that naturalism can plausibly be viewed as the principal heir of logical positivism, one should not be too quick to dismiss the possibility that it too is self-defeating. I for one do not find it the least implausible to think that a philosophical thesis, and naturalism in particular, might be self-defeating. Thus, while I tried in the previous section to explain how a naturalist might argue that naturalism, when taken as a philosophical thesis, is not self-defeating, I am not convinced that this argument is successful.³⁶ Even if it is not, why should that lead us to conclude that naturalism is only a research program? Perhaps there are some naturalists who regard it as such, but there seem to be just as many, if not more, who take it as a philosophical thesis. Not only should we take them at their word, but also we should take seriously the possibility that they might very well be correct in viewing naturalism as a philosophical thesis. What I have tried to do in this brief paper is explain why I believe they are correct.³⁷

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³⁶See Goetz and Taliaferro, *Naturalism*.

³⁷I want to thank Paul Draper, Thomas Flint, J. P. Moreland, Michael Rea, Charles Taliaferro, students in my seminar on naturalism, and two anonymous referees for *Faith and Philosophy* for reading and making helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.