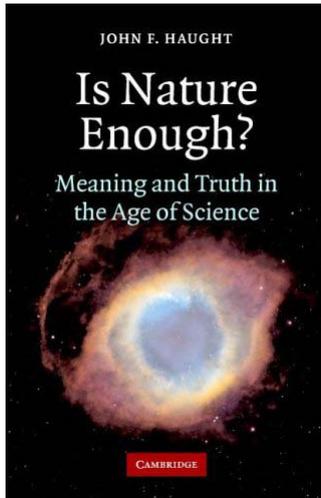


BOOK REVIEW



John F. Haught

Is Nature Enough?
Meaning and Truth in the Age of Science ↗

Cambridge University Press (2006)
Paperback
232 pages
ISBN-10: 0521609933
ISBN-13: 978-0521609937

Review by Ulrich Mohrhoff

In *Is Nature Enough?* John Haught first demonstrates that “the belief that nature is all there is cannot be justified experientially, logically or scientifically” (p. 2) and then lays out what he considers to be “a reasonable, scientifically informed alternative to naturalism” (p. 3). Haught, a Distinguished Research Professor and a Senior Fellow at the Science and Religion Woodstock Theological Center of Georgetown University, is perhaps best known for his testimony as an expert witness for the plaintiffs in the case of *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District* ↗. His opinion was that the effect of the intelligent design policy adopted by the Dover School board would “be to compel public school science teachers to present their students in biology class information that is inherently religious, not scientific in nature.” ↗ At the same time he testified that materialism is “a belief system, no less a belief system than is intelligent design. And as such, it has absolutely no place in the classroom, and teachers of evolution should not lead their students craftily or explicitly to ... feel that they have to embrace a materialistic world-view in order to make sense of evolution.” ↗

Naturalism comes in different flavors. Prominent among them is a variety that its proponents like to be known as *scientific naturalism*. This

assumes not only that nature is all there is but also that science is the only reliable way to understand it. This latter belief is commonly called “scientism.” Scientism, the epistemic soul of scientific naturalism, claims that the experimental method that came to prominence in the modern period is sufficient to tell us everything factual about the universe. (pp. 4–5)

Evolutionary naturalism, next, is the doctrine that all the various features of living beings, including humans, can be explained ultimately in evolutionary — make this: neo-Darwinian — terms.

Hard naturalism is roughly equivalent to the doctrine that is known by the oxymoron “scientific materialism.”

Soft naturalism allows that there may be aspects of the real world that hard naturalism leaves out. A few soft naturalists even like to be called *religious* naturalists. Not that they believe that anything exists beyond the world of nature; they merely use religious terminology (like “mystery” or “sacred”) to express their sense that nature by itself is deserving of a reverential surrender of the mind. These

[s]unny naturalists hold that nature’s overwhelming beauty, the excitement of human creativity, the struggle to achieve ethical goodness, the prospect of loving and being loved, the exhilaration of scientific discovery — these are enough to fill a person’s life. There is simply no good reason to look beyond nature for spiritual contentment. (p. 10)

The sunny naturalists are playing ostrich, for naturalism, as philosopher John Hick has pointed out, “is very bad news for humanity as a whole” (*The Fifth Dimension: an Exploration of the Spiritual Realm*, Oneworld Press, Oxford, 1999, p. 22 ♣). Naturalists are hiding from the truth unless “they acknowledge the fact that naturalism is not good news for much of humanity” (*ibid.*, p. 24). If it were true that “the universe is all that is, all there ever was and all there ever will be,” as Carl Sagan declared at the beginning of his *Cosmos* television series, then Albert Camus would be much closer to the truth.

This famous novelist and philosopher freely acknowledges that humans have an insatiable appetite for ultimate meaning and eternal happiness. It would be dishonest, he says, to deny it. The hard fact, however, is that the universe can never satisfy such a craving. Eventually the world and each of us will end up in complete annihilation. If death is the final destination of all life, and if God and immortality do not exist — as for Camus they do not — then reality is absurd. Absurdity here means the incongruous union of a death-dealing universe on the one hand and the human passion for life on the other. Since these two sectors of reality will never mesh, their fatal conjunction is the very definition of irrationality. Moreover, no hope can ever surmount this situation. Hence the hero of the human condition is Sisyphus, the exemplar of all striving in the face of futility. (pp. 10–11)

Naturalists, therefore, need to be rigorously honest. Hick again:

[Naturalists] ought frankly to acknowledge that if they are right the human situation is irredeemably bleak and painful for vast numbers of people. For — if they are right — in the case of that innumerable multitude whose quality of life has been rendered predominantly negative by pain, anxiety, extreme deprivation, oppression, or whose lives have been cut off in childhood or youth, there is no chance of ever participating in an eventual fulfillment of the human potential. (*ibid.*, pp. 24–25)

Philosopher Owen Flanagan, who asserts — naturally without telling us how he knows this — that there is nothing beyond what scientific naturalism is able to discern, should therefore be seen for what he is: a *cheat*. For “[t]rust me,” he says, “you can’t get more. But what you can get, if you live well, is enough. Don’t be greedy. Enough is enough” (*The Problem of the Soul: Two Visions of Mind and How to Reconcile Them*, Basic Books, New York: 2002, p. 319).

Scientific naturalists are still a small minority in the world’s overall population, but their influence is out of all proportion to their numbers.

Generally speaking, their beliefs quietly determine what is intellectually acceptable in many of our universities. Naturalism has now spread from science and philosophy departments into social studies and the humanities. Even departments of religion are no longer immune.... Naturalism is now so entrenched in science and philosophical faculties around the globe that it constitutes one of the most influential “creeds” operative in the world today. (p. 25)

Haught believes that in addition to an “*ultimate* explanation” there can be many intermediate or secondary explanations. He accepts Darwinian explanations, but as intermediate, not as ultimate. What he proposes, as a way of giving a place to both science and religion, is *layered explanation*: “everything in the universe is open to a plurality of levels of explanation” (p. 16). The fact that a fire is burning can be explained by chemical combustion as well as by my wanting to roast marshmallows. Not only do these explanations not compete: my wanting to roast marshmallows “cannot be squeezed into the explanatory slot that focuses on the chemistry of combustion” (*ibid.*).

Analogously, let us suppose that there is an ultimate reality which for some mysterious reason wants to create a life-bearing universe. We should not expect this divine intentionality to show up within a physical analysis of nature — including scientific speculations on the Big Bang and the origin of life — any more than we should expect to find “I want marshmallows” inscribed on the burning wood or molecules of carbon dioxide. (p. 17)

Here Haught comes surprisingly close to the Vedantic view (elaborated and updated by Sri Aurobindo, primarily in his magnum opus *The Life Divine* ♠) of an ultimate conscious reality that by a process of involution sets the stage for an adventure of evolution. Ultimate reality, having enchained itself as much as divinely possible, challenges itself to escape, to re-discover its consciousness and to re-affirm its powers under conditions that seem to be the very opposite of what is the case, but which may well be the very conditions that lend the greatest possible stability and concreteness to a progressive self-realization that may go on forever. If ultimate reality is indeed playing hide and seek with itself, we certainly “should not expect this divine intentionality to show up within a physical analysis of nature.”

My wager in this book, then, is that adequate explanation runs endlessly deep and involves many levels. No one science, or even the whole set of sciences, can ever comprehend the rich totality of causal ingredients that underlie each cosmic event ... the human mind must look beyond nature, as understood by science, in order to make *ultimate* sense of the world and ourselves. It is not the business of science, but of theology (or religious thought in a broader sense) to look for ultimate explanations. (pp. 18–20)

To my mind, the possibility of making “*ultimate* sense of the world and ourselves” is at odds with Haught’s wager that “adequate explanation runs endlessly deep.” More sense — yes. Ever more sense — yes. But *ultimate* sense? Not if “there is more, indeed infinitely more” than nature, and not if the “infinitely ‘more’ cannot be known in the same way that ordinary objects are known” (p. 21).

Haught makes it seem as if the knowledge at which religious thought arrives is merely something added to our knowledge of “ordinary objects.” It would be closer to the

truth to say that the more of this “more” we come to know, the more we realize how deceptive our previous knowledge of “ordinary objects” has been.

Again, according to Haught “[s]cience deals with what can be sensed, or at least what can be inferred from sensation. Religion is based in experience too, but of a different kind from science” (*ibid.*). Here, too, the distinction between science and religion appears rather too clear-cut. Nothing can be inferred from sensation alone, in the absence of a framework that formulates questions and interprets answers. For those of a materialistic bent, this interpretative framework will be embedded in a materialistic metaphysics. For those of a religious bent, it will be part of a religious system of beliefs.

A deeper psychological exploration reveals an even closer dependence. About the instrumentality of the senses and the nerves in the formation of knowledge, Sri Aurobindo observed:

These means are so ineffective, so exiguous in their poverty that, if that were the whole machinery, we could know little or nothing or only achieve a great blur of confusion. But there intervenes a sense-mind intuition which seizes the suggestion of the image or vibration and equates it with the object, a vital intuition which seizes the energy or figure of power of the object through another kind of vibration created by the sense contact, and an intuition of the perceptive mind which at once forms a right idea of the object from all this evidence. Whatever is deficient in the interpretation of the image thus constructed is filled up by the intervention of the reason or the total understanding intelligence.

If the first composite intuition were the result of a direct contact [with the object known] or if it summarised the action of a total intuitive mentality master of its perceptions, there would be no need for the intervention of the reason except as a discoverer or organiser of knowledge not conveyed by the sense and its suggestions: it is, on the contrary, an intuition working on an image, a sense document, an indirect evidence, not working upon a direct contact of consciousness with the object. But since the image or vibration is a defective and summary documentation and the intuition itself limited and communicated through an obscure medium, acting in a blind light, the accuracy of our intuitional interpretative construction of the object is open to question or at least likely to be incomplete. (*The Life Divine*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 2005, pp. 547–548 ♣)

A common thread thus runs through all our cognitive modalities, from the merest sensation to the highest religious intuition or revelation: the thread of *intuition* — see “Intuition and Human Knowledge” in *AntiMatters* 2 (4) 2008 ♣. And the evolution of our intuitive faculties brings with it a continual “revaluation of all values,” to borrow Nietzsche’s phrase. Not only do such revaluations occur within the confines of science (Kuhn’s “paradigm shifts”) but science itself is liable to be superseded by the evolution of a more direct, suprarational way of knowing — see “Evolution of Consciousness according to Jean Gebser” in *AntiMatters* 2 (3) 2008 ♣.

Throughout the book’s twelve chapters, Haught develops and applies a powerful argument against the sufficiency of naturalistic accounts of our *critical intelligence*:

the actual performance of human intellection (and later I shall include moral aspiration) is such that it will forever overflow the limits of naturalistic understanding, no matter how detailed scientific understanding becomes in the future. I shall propose that the

concrete functioning of intelligence cannot in principle, let alone in fact, be fully captured by the objectifying categories of any science. In other words, the natural sciences cannot account completely for what I shall be calling *critical intelligence*. (p. 28)

His advice “that you should never deny in your philosophical claims what you implicitly affirm in your every act of knowing” (p. 36) makes perfect sense.

There must be a coherence between your worldview and the critical intelligence by which you experience, understand and know the world.... If you embrace the belief system known as scientific naturalism, therefore, have you ever asked whether it coheres logically with the invariant structure of human cognition? Let me put my question another way: is the essentially mindless, purposeless, self-originating, self-enclosed universe of scientific naturalism large enough to house your own critical intelligence? If not, truthfulness compels you to conclude that nature is not enough, and that naturalism is an unreasonable creed.... [T]he pure desire to know, the craving that issues the precepts to be attentive, intelligent and critical, is never satisfied with illusions. It seeks the truth, no matter what the cost. My question, then, is whether naturalism is supportive of or contrary to this pure desire to know that we can identify at the foundation of our own critical intelligence. (pp. 36–37)

Haught suggests that

there are at least five fields of meaning through which the desire to know must travel if it is to encounter the rich texture of the world’s being. These avenues are: affectivity, intersubjectivity, narrativity, beauty and theory. Science falls predominantly in the last, the realm of theory, but it is not through science alone that the mind comes into contact with reality. (p. 42)

Revealingly,

the scientific naturalist’s own elevation of the theoretic ... field of meaning to the status of supreme arbiter of all correct knowing is itself sodden with passion. There is a high degree of emotional investment in the naturalist’s own personal commitment to scientific knowing as normative. In order to confirm this point all you need to do is have a serious conversation with an entrenched scientific naturalist. Naturalism is no more separable from feeling than are any other kinds of belief. This is because the desire to know can never be severed from the affectivity that carries along any passionate longing. (p. 44)

In these postmodern times, it ought to be a truism that “the world is not experienced, at least in a rich or interesting way, apart from stories” (p. 46). Whereas Haught holds that by “situating our lives and all events within the setting of stories, religions bring coherence to the moments that make up our lives” (*ibid.*), the (modern) naturalist’s party line still is that “most of our stories, especially religious ones, as nothing more than human fabrications superimposed on the senseless substratum of physical reality first fully exposed by science” (*ibid.*).

However, close examination will show that the naturalistic dismissal of the cognitive (as distinct from emotive) function of story, a denial that undergirds much contemporary academic life, is itself borne aloft on the wings of a firmly established cultural narrative of its own. It is empowered by the myth that trustworthy consciousness came into the world only with the birth of objectifying scientific method during the sixteenth and seventeenth Centuries. It is a story laced with abundant accounts of heroic explorers and

their own struggles toward the light. All over the world initiates to objectifying consciousness imbibe the myth of science's ascent and its exalted ethic of knowledge. Nothing provides clearer evidence of the inescapability of story than the modern attempts to escape it. (p. 47)

The dismissal of religion as mere illusion usually comes from persons who are fully immersed in the heroic narrative that tells how genuine enlightenment can come about only by way of the asceticism of impersonal knowledge. And this very modern myth tends to mold passions, shape intersubjective involvements and determine aesthetic preferences among naturalists in no less forceful a fashion than religions have always done with their own adherents.... Ironically, ... the exclusivist preference for theory may itself be a consequence not so much of the pure desire to know as of other cravings. (p. 50)

As one can easily observe in their writings, scientific naturalists such as Dennett, Papineau and Atkins are exceptionally confident about their cognitional capacities. However, they almost never turn around and take note of this confidence as a datum itself in need of deep explanation. Even if they did try to explain it, one can only assume that it would be in terms of the earlier-and-simpler, an approach that if taken consistently would subvert rather than justify their cognitional swagger. (pp. 89-90)

Let's have some of that cognitional swagger:

there is only one sort of stuff, namely matter — the physical stuff of physics, chemistry, and physiology — and the mind is somehow nothing but a physical phenomenon. In short, the mind is the brain.... [W]e can (in principle!) account for every mental phenomenon using the same physical principles, laws and raw materials that suffice to explain radioactivity, continental drift, photosynthesis, reproduction, nutrition and growth. (Daniel C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, Little, Brown, New York, 1991, p. 33) (quoted on p. 85)

I take it that physics, unlike the other special sciences, is complete, in the sense that all physical events are determined, or have their chances determined, by prior physical events according to physical laws. In other words, we never need to look beyond the realm of the physical in order to identify a set of antecedents which fixes the chances of subsequent physical occurrence. A purely physical specification, plus physical laws, will always suffice to tell us what is physically going to happen, insofar as that can be foretold at all. (David Papineau, *Philosophical Naturalism*, Blackwell, Cambridge MA, 1993, p. 3) (quoted on p. 83)

According to Atkins, finally, complexity is only a disguise for an underlying physical simplicity; even the most complex of all natural phenomena, the human mind, is simplicity masquerading as complexity (P. W. Atkins, *The 2nd Law: Energy, Chaos, and Form*, Scientific American Books, New York, 1994, p. 200). “[I]f the roots of Atkins’ own mind have such a physically lowly status,” Haught reasonably asks, “where then did he acquire the colossal *trust* in his mental powers that allows him to assume now that we should listen to him?” (p. 212)

Simply denying that there is *really* any more in the outcomes of emergent process than “what goes in” leads logically to the subversion of the most impressive outcome of cosmic emergence, critical intelligence. It is especially with reference to this most wondrous of all emergent phenomena that we need to test the intellectual integrity of naturalism. (p. 82)

Haught's counterproposal, which makes decidedly more sense, is that

Emergence at all levels of being, and not just at those of life and mind, requires that nature possess an anticipatory rather than simply a cumulative character. It must be open to a domain of potentiality that makes a quiet entrance — from the future as it were — and thus opens up the otherwise unbending fabric of things to the later-and-more. (p. 86)

I propose that the ultimate basis for our trusting the desire to know and the mind's imperatives can be found only in the mind's native anticipation of a transcending fullness of truth that has already grasped hold of us but which also escapes our grasp. Only if our minds already anticipate, and allow themselves to be carried away by, an infinite horizon of being and truth (later I shall add goodness and beauty), do we have any plausible reason for trusting our critical intelligence to take us deeper and deeper into the real... Anticipation of truth's fullness is possible not because we can ever actually grasp this fullness, but only because we have the capacity to be grasped by it... What I have been calling the "imperatives" of the mind ... are at heart responses to a most compelling invitation that summons from a horizon up ahead. (pp. 91–92)

Since our own critical intelligence is the most luminous instance of emergence to which we humans have access, its characteristically anticipatory orientation may be understood as an intensification of ... nature's more general orientation toward a fullness of being and truth. The fullness of being and truth that arouses my own desire to know is the same horizon — or domain of potentiality — that awakens emergence in nature as such. In some sense the whole of emergent natural history, inseparable from the emergence of mind, has always anticipated the same fullness of being that my critical intelligence now reaches toward more explicitly. (p. 93)

Truth, accordingly, is "the objective or goal of the pure desire to know" (p. 37). As such, it "cannot be bottled and capped" (p. 38).

Truth is the goal of the mind's imperatives, and its complete capture always eludes the desire to know. Truth can never be possessed, only pursued. Consequently, for the human mind to set arbitrary limits on what can be taken as real or true is to repress the desire to know... The horizon of being and truth toward which the desire to know extends itself is unrestricted. And it is only our mind's reaching out toward an endlessly wider plenitude of being that exposes, by way of contrast, the poverty of what we have actually comprehended. (pp. 38–42)

This explains why the naturalists' claim that nature is all there is, smacks of obscurantism. Perhaps they are afraid of having to acknowledge the poverty of what they have actually comprehended. Perhaps they fear the endless wider plenitude of what they have *not* comprehended. In either case, their denial is baseless, for "[t]he limits of cognitional achievement cannot be recognized as such unless the mind has already transcended those limits in some way" (p. 42).

If you are a Darwinian naturalist you will be given to making claims such as this one by biologist David Sloan Wilson:

Rationality is not the gold standard against which all other forms of thought are to be judged. Adaptation is the gold standard against which rationality must be judged, along with all other forms of thought. (*Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion and the Nature of Society*, University of Chicago Press, 2002, p. 228) (quoted on p. 113)

Haught wonders “if Wilson is aware of how thoroughly his subordination of rationality to evolutionary adaptation logically undermines not only his claim but also the confidence with which his own mind makes such a claim” (*ibid.*).

What is it in the naturalist worldview that makes truth-telling an unconditional value, the absolute good that everyone is obliged to revere? If all the ideals that give purpose to one’s life were seriously taken to be contingent concoctions of the human brain or cultural convention, it would seem inconsistent for naturalists to tell me in effect that I must treat the values of truth and truth-telling as though these were *not* also pure inventions. (p. 103)

Thus naturalists are not consistent:

Typically they deny in their philosophy of nature what they implicitly affirm in their actual ethical and intellectual performance. For example, evolutionary naturalists clearly treat truth as a value that judges their own work, and therefore as something they did *not* invent. (*ibid.*)

If you have ever read Richard Dawkins or Owen Flanagan, for example, you cannot miss the moral idealism that pervades their work. They scold their opponents for not adhering to a *responsible* way of looking at the world. . . . The naturalistic ethic is demanding, almost puritanical in its moral rigor: the responsible knower is one who becomes detached from pre-scientific ways of seeing and understanding. Right knowing requires not just cognitive growth but also a painful process of moral development. (p. 151)

Go figure. Haught’s final verdict:

Attempting to explain how intelligence arises out of unintelligence without citing a proportionate cause for such a prodigious feat can only come off as superstition. Simply reciting the usual evolutionary factors is scarcely enough to help us understand how mindless objects can be transformed into sentient, intelligent and critical subjects. A richer explanatory toolbox is needed to avoid the appeal to miraculous leaps. Explanatory adequacy must somehow make the categories of intelligence and subjectivity fundamental to the makeup of true being rather than derivative aspects of an originally senseless reality. (p. 134)

We thus need to consider another possibility. As mentioned already, “truth, in order to function as a value that gives meaning, must have its foundation in a region of being that transcends both nature and culture. Truth is best thought of as neither a natural nor a cultural creation, but as the anticipated goal of the desire to know” (p. 106).

In the mind’s anticipation of truth, goodness and beauty the entire cosmic process is drawn toward the goal it has silently sought perpetually. To the naturalist, obviously, the appeal to such a theological understanding will seem to be an unwarranted leap. But here the leap, if you want to call it that, consists only of ensuring that all necessary and relevant categories for robust explanation are loaded in at the beginning rather than invented in midstream. . . . Something causally proportionate to this inestimable phenomenon has always been quietly, persuasively and non-coercively proposing new possibilities to the cosmic process. When critical intelligence does eventually arise in cosmic history it is ultimately because the universe has been charged with the ingredients for its arrival from the moment of creation. . . . [T]he advantage of a theological understanding is that it can explain, in a way that naturalism cannot, why the intelligent subject spontaneously puts so much trust in the desire to know. (p. 138)

Haught's reflections on morality are equally commendable:

Moral action that consists solely of emulating what is already perfect can lead only to a sense of failure. In some measure, of course, the moral life entails following exemplars of goodness, but moral aspiration comes to life most enthusiastically when there is a sense that human action can contribute something new and unique to the universe. For this reason it is appropriate to think of the good life as grounded in anticipation more than imitation. (p. 155)

For pre-conventional morality God is the upholder of taboos. For conventional morality God is the sanctifier of the status quo. But for post-conventional morality God is the vaguely anticipated mystery of goodness that calls us to transcend the conventional and pre-conventional levels of morality. It goes without saying that the most innovative figures in the history of ethics and religion have been decidedly post-conventional, their ideals contested especially by the more conventional types. It is also evident that religious and ethical traditions that are originally built on the ideals of a great prophetic figure can often decay into conventional or even pre-conventional spin-offs. (p. 164)

I beg to differ, however, when it comes to the vexed question of theodicy. "Why all this fooling around for fourteen billion years and the trillions that may lie ahead?" Haught asks (p. 189) and supplies the following answer:

the only answer that makes sense to me is that any notion of an originally completed cosmos would be theologically incoherent. As Teilhard and others have already suggested, there is no plausible alternative, theologically speaking, to an unfinished initial creation. An originally perfect creation ... is theologically inconceivable. Why? Because if a creator, in the beginning, made a perfectly finished, fully completed world, such a world would not be distinct from its maker. It would not be *other* than God. If the world were created perfectly in the beginning, then this world would be nothing more than an extension of God's own being, an appendage to a dictatorial deity. It would not be a world at all. (*ibid.*)

Given the acuity Haught brings to bear on the defects of naturalism, I am surprised that he should have missed the defects of his own theistic premise: the duality of creator and creation, and the cognate confusion of moral perfection with divine perfection. Whereas morality arises at a particular stage in evolution and is bound up with our sense of separateness, divine perfection, which has its roots in the identity of creator and creation, transcends all moral judgments.

Haught's theism leads him to the question-begging conclusion that "the world must in some sense be radically other than God" (*ibid.*). In this particular manifestation, ultimate reality is indeed *pretending* to be other than itself, but a cycle of involution and evolution is by no means the only way by which ultimate reality can express and experience itself. It can view the content of its consciousness from a multitude of perspectives — or present itself to itself under a myriad of aspects — without losing sight of its fundamental oneness. As Sri Aurobindo wrote,

There is a possibility of self-expression by an always unveiled luminous development of the being, a possibility also of various expression in perfect types fixed and complete in their own nature: that is the principle of becoming in the higher worlds; they are typical and not evolutionary in their life principle; they exist each in its own perfection, but within the limits of a stationary world-formula. But there is also a possibility of self-

expression by self-finding, a deployment which takes the form and goes through the progression of a self-veiling and an adventure of self-recovery: that is the principle of becoming in this universe of which an involution of consciousness and concealment of the spirit in Matter is the first appearance. (*The Life Divine*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 2005, p. 708 ↗)