

Report from the 3rd International Christian Philosophy Conference, “Christian Philosophy Facing Naturalism”

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The international conference “Christian Philosophy Facing Naturalism” took place at Ignatianum University in Cracow from September 24th to 25th, 2024. This is the third event in the Christian Philosophy conference series organized by the Institute of Philosophy at UIK. Conference participants included philosophers from all over the world, including Poland, the United States of America, India, Great Britain, Hungary, Italy, the Czech Republic, Germany, and France. Among the guests were keynote speakers Robert C. Koons, Charles Taliaferro, Jacek Wojtysiak, Włodzisław Duch and Georg Gasser. Over two days, dozens of scholars discussed Christian philosophy, naturalism, and the complicated relationship between these two perspectives. Appropriately construed, a range of topic areas associated with science, artificial intelligence, logic, history, theology and politics were also discussed.

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The conference featured a debate entitled “The controversy over the naturalistic image of the world and man” between Georg Gasser and Włodzisław Duch. At the outset, Gasser differentiated between reductive and non-reductive, metaphysical and methodological, and “hard” and “soft” naturalisms. In the context of the humanities, hard naturalism, in which we reduce all phenomena to natural phenomena, is most often spoken of. According to Gasser, this type of approach is limiting when we talk about human beings (for example, in a therapeutic context). Duch, meanwhile, described himself as agreeing with Popper about the existence of three

worlds: more precisely, on his view, mental phenomena result from physical phenomena. Referring, for example, to the operation of GPT-4o networks, he held that science can produce systems that exhibit characteristics analogous to the human mind.

In the subsequent discussion, the speakers revealed the more nuanced aspects of their positions. Gasser pointed to the permeating, holistic nature of the mind, which is in constant relation to reality. Duch, on the other hand, agreed that the physical processes corresponding to thinking are subject to interpretation, and even a full understanding of the physical structure of the brain is not enough to fully understand the human being.

In addition to this official debate, we may mention at least one more, which arose between Peter van Inwagen and Charles Taliaferro. In his presentation, Inwagen analyzed, among other things, the problems of dualism, theism and the simulation hypothesis, starting from an ontological definition of naturalism. On this definition, naturalism is a view according to which everything consists only of fundamental entities lacking mental or teleological properties.

Charles Taliaferro, in his lecture, referred to Peter van Inwagen's critique of the argument from reason. Taliaferro placed himself in the tradition of the Cambridge Platonists, and in this spirit reinterpreted the argument from reason by going all the way back to its Platonic roots. He also referred to contemporary critics of the argument, including Inwagen. For Inwagen, as interpreted by Taliaferro, the argument from reason refers to the principle of reason, which is an abstract object, and abstract objects have no effect on things. The author of the paper expressed a different position towards the nature of form and abstract objects by giving a classic example of solving a mathematical problem that requires both abstract and material conditions to be taken account of.

In his lecture, Robert C. Koons presented the Aristotelian-inspired argument from the First Mover of St. Thomas, supplemented with a temporal perspective describing God as an out-of-time, unchanging mover, being outside of the chain of infinite causes and effects. To illustrate this concept and fend off possible objections, he drew an analogy between the author of a book who, in creating a certain narrative, is outside of its time, and God. In his lecture he showed how such a perspective avoids the most popular arguments levelled against Aquinas' First Mover argument. In his view, the approach of St. Thomas serves to prove the existence of an extra-temporal cause, and extra-temporality is a quality possessed only by God.

In his lecture, Jacek Wojtysiak analyzed the concepts of naturalism, religion and explanation with a view to properly elaborating the question

“Does naturalism explain religion?”—which was the title of his talk. In his argument for the existence of God, he proposed two possible alternatives: the N-world, in which God does not exist, and the T-world, in which He does. He then asked the question “In which world is religion more likely to occur?” and argued that this is more likely in the T-World. He referred in his argument to such aspects as motivation (in the T-world, there is a God who wants religion to exist), realization (in the T-world, religion is necessary), and harmony (there is a correspondence between the epistemic and ontological aspects of religion). Toward the end of the presentation, Wojtysiak also presented an additional argument for belief in a deity by showing that, assuming a naturalistic definition of religion, there are rational reasons for religious belief (e.g., utility, coherence, non-contradiction).

Among the presentations by other participants were critical studies and presentations of many other arguments and positions in the debate between naturalism and Christianity. These included the following: A. Plantinga’s argument against naturalism (Christopher Oldfield, Piotr Biłgorajski, Piotr Bylica, Norbert Heger and Andrzej Zabołotny) Wittgenstein’s philosophy (Carl Humphries, Ines Skelac and Christian Kanzian), non-religious anti-naturalism (Maciej Jemioł, Oskar Lange and Bartosz Wesół), cognitive science and psychology (Stanisław Ruczaj, Szilvia Finta and Evelina Deyneka) and many others (Walter Menezes, Adam Świeżynski, Mirosław Rucki, Alexander Barrientos, Miles Kenneth Donahue, Luca Gasparinetti; Margherita Moro, Piotr Mazur, Jiří Baroš, Antonios Kaldas, Krzysztof Pięta, Piotr Duchliński; Jarosław Kucharski, Guido J.M. Verstraeten, Marcin Podbielski, Robert B. Tierney, Tymoteusz Mietelski, Jacek Surzyn, Finley I. Lawson, Andrzej Karpinski, Przemysław A. Lewicki). All of the presentations are available on the YouTube channel of Ignatianum University in Cracow.

