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Divergent and Convergent Perspectives on Anthropological Naturalism in Christian and Non-religious Philosophies

ABSTRACT

While current Christian philosophy and various non-religious philosophies of today are most often seen as being at odds with each other, arguing over both theoretical matters and practical solutions, my aim is to demonstrate how a point of convergence between Christian and non-religious philosophies arises from the rejection of anthropological naturalism.

Christian doctrine by necessity involves certain forms of transcendence that cannot be reconciled with a fully naturalistic position and the rejection of naturalism remains one of the main claims of the current Christian philosophy, as described by Piotr Mazur, Vittorio Possenti, Chantal Delsol, and other Christian scholars who deal both with philosophical anthropology and matters of modern culture. Somewhat similarly, naturalism is also at least partially rejected by non-religious philosophies concerned with anthropology, including queer philosophy (Sarah Ahmed), postcolonial thought (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak), and ecophilosophy (Joanna Hańderek). While reasons for opposing naturalism vary greatly between those two groups and so do methods of critiquing it, they seem to share discontent with naturalism, especially with regard to anthropology. This paper examines how expressions of anti-naturalistic thought both diverge and converge between Christian and non-religious thinkers.

KEY WORDS: Christian philosophy, naturalism, postcolonialism, queer philosophy, vegan philosophy

STRESZCZENIE

Rozbieżne i zbieżne perspektywy dotyczące antropologicznego naturalizmu w filozofii chrześcijańskiej i filozofiach niereligijnych

Choć bieżącą filozofię chrześcijańską i różne dzisiejsze filozofie niereligijne najczęściej postrzega się jako wzajemnie skonfliktowane, skłonne zarówno co do kwestii teoretycznych, jak i do praktycznych rozwiązań, moim celem

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jest zademonstrować miejsce, w którym zbiegają się one ze sobą we wspólnym odrzuceniu antropologicznego naturalizmu.

Doktryna chrześcijańska z koniecznością związana jest z pewnymi formami transcendencji, które nie dają się pogodzić ze stanowiskiem całkowicie naturalistycznym, a odrzucenie naturalizmu pozostaje jedną z głównych tez bieżącej filozofii chrześcijańskiej, jak opisują ją Piotr Mazur, Vittorio Possenti, Chantal Delsol i inni chrześcijańscy autorzy zajmujący się zarówno antropologią filozoficzną, jak współczesną kulturą. Podobnie naturalizm jest przynajmniej częściowo odrzucany przez niereligijne filozofie, które również związane są z kwestią antropologii, w tym filozofię queer (Sarah Ahmed), myślą postkolonialną (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak) czy ekofilozofię (Joanna Hańderek). Choć motywy oporu wobec naturalizmu w przypadku tych dwóch grup bardzo się różnią, tak jak różnią się metody jego krytyki, to jednak obie te grupy zdają się łączyć niechęcią wobec naturalizmu, zwłaszcza w kwestii antropologii. Niniejszy artykuł dotyczy tego, jak różne formy wyrazu myśli anty-naturalistycznej zarówno rozbiegają się, jak i zbiegają się ze sobą w myślach chrześcijańskich i niereligijnych badaczy.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: filozofia chrześcijańska, filozofia queer, filozofia wegańska, naturalizm, postkolonializm

Opposition between Christian and Modern Non-religious Philosophies

Current Christian thought oftentimes finds itself at odds with various non-religious philosophies, such as transhumanism, postmodernism, modern approaches to humanism, feminism, postcolonialism, or queer thought – this is not a difficult observation to make. In fact, a popular motif in many current Christian philosophical writings and in public political discourse alike – from the conservative side of the political spectrum – is the motif of a culture in crisis and, consequently, of siege mentality, where the crisis and the siege in question are both currently diagnosed as resulting from modern, liberal, left-leaning non-religious philosophies and from their apparent popularity. Chantal Delsol (2023, p. 67) claims that for more than half a century now we have been witnessing what she calls “l'inversion normative” – the normative inversion – that manifests itself in all things that were once considered evil are now being appreciated and praised. Among such things she (Delsol, 2023) names homosexuality, abortion, divorce, and suicide (in some cases), all of which are phenomena whose modern reevaluation arose from what generally can be called progressivism, liberalism, and left-wing politics. Vittorio Possenti (2022) writes, in turn, about the current pedagogical crisis as a result of the postmodern vision of education, where education is oriented towards instrumental goals rather than

universal truth that can be found in God. Similarly, according to Sławomir Chrost (2020), transhumanism and posthumanism as well as multiculturalism bring about the risk of a post-metaphysical world that depreciates the innate value of the human person. In the United States, commentators of nominally Christian provenance, such as Matthew Walsh (Jessie Gender, 2024a) or Dennis Prager (Shaun, 2018), frequently highlight what they describe as the decline of the Western world, its culture and its traditions, employing strong rhetoric that attributes this development to various progressive groups and ideas, collectively referred to as “wokeness” or even the “woke mind-virus,” as Elon Musk (Leparmetier, 2024) calls it.

All this would seem to suggest that there is very little possibility of a meeting place between Christian thought and the “woke” non-religious philosophies of today; this paper, however, explores the idea that, in the context of their critique of anthropological naturalism, these two ways of thinking actually do converge on at least some points. Coming from a Christian perspective, but also drawing on the ideas of such non-religious thinkers as Sara Ahmed, Judith Butler, Joanna Hańderek, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the aim here is to discuss how Christian and non-religious anthropological perspectives on the issue of naturalism diverge but also converge, creating a possibility for dialogue between otherwise embattled worldviews. This is achieved by examining both differences and similarities between ideas expressed by notable scholars from Poland and abroad who, in their work, deal with both philosophical anthropology and modern culture.

The issue at hand is, therefore, one of anthropological naturalism – the claim that full understanding of the human being, their personhood, subjectivity, nature, and the like can be derived solely from our biological, materialistic substructures. Such a version of naturalism, represented by, for example, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Jacques Lacan (Mazur, 2016), is related to various other aspects and versions of naturalism, mainly as a specific case of the more general naturalistic claim that all reality can be explained through its materialistic substructures. Nevertheless, it is distinctive, as it deals with a plethora of human creations, of which culture itself is perhaps the most noteworthy. Therefore, the following parts of this paper are concerned with how the idea that all human creations and their very nature can be reduced to the level of biology and neurochemistry is treated by various Christian and non-religious thinkers. This is because, interestingly, both Christian and non-religious philosophers do agree that such reductive thinking is erroneous, although they tend to disagree as to why this is so.

1. Divergent Perspectives on Anthropological Naturalism

Historically, there is a large difference between the sources of opposition to materialism on the side of Christian thought and from the side of modern non-religious philosophies, a difference that seems immediately obvious. While Christianity is a religion with core doctrinal beliefs about the godhood of Jesus Christ and other supernatural phenomena that remain central to it and are shared by almost all denominations, alternative ways of thinking about transcendence (very loosely understood) are much less homogeneous. In fact, the very idea of decentralization of thought plays a crucial role in at least some of them, meaning that their heterogeneity is not a coincidence here, but emerges “by design,” so to speak.

As explained by Ahmed (2004), queer theory, for example, is anti-normative at its core, which means strong opposition to the very idea of homogeneous social norms and unified frameworks of knowledge. This is also at least sometimes true of postcolonialism, from which arises the concept of the decolonization of knowledge, where alternative forms of comprehending the world and our place in it are given their own voice on par with Christianity or atheistic naturalism, which Budd L. Hall and Rajesh Tandon (2017, p. 13) call “knowledge democracy.” Such knowledge democracy, in turn, takes a more radical shape in vegan philosophy, where not only humans but also animals are granted knowledge and importance, and even voice – “between me and Mr Mole there is no wall that divides, no qualities, skills or other magical rules divide us from each other,” as Hańderek (2021, p. 14) puts it.

This basic concept of decentralization, of cultural and ideological pluralism, common in many non-religious philosophies that in some form oppose naturalism, is clearly at odds with the unifying ambitions of Christianity, demonstrated, for example, by the quest for universal truth in education proposed by Possenti (2022), according to whom all true education starts with the differentiation between what is true and what is false, what is good and what is evil, and what is just and what is unjust. For those non-religious philosophies such differentiation, if at all possible, cannot be achieved universally, through the perspective of one religion, but must be negotiated between different groups, different cultures or even different species.

This is why Christianity and philosophies such as queer theory (as expressed by Ahmed), postcolonialism (as expressed by Hall and Tandon), and vegan philosophy (as expressed by Hańderek), remain at odds with each other regarding naturalism, even though both sides agree that its attempt to explain human beings solely through biology and neurochemistry is not satisfying. This also means that there are many examples of opposition to anthropological naturalism from the side of non-religious philosophies that diverge from the Christian perspective.

One version of anthropological naturalism is what Judith Butler (2024), among many others, calls “biological determinism,” which is the belief that biological substructures determine all forms of human existence and, in the context of Butler’s (2024) own field of study, that they define our sex, making the very topic of gender obsolete. In turn, Butler (2024, p. 161) describes a narrative common among certain anti-LGBTQ+ movements that uphold biological determinism, where gender theory is presented as purely constructionist in nature: “still others claim that gender denies the materiality of the body or that it elevates language and culture over the biological science,” they write. This account is consistent with Jessie Earl’s (Jessie Gender, 2024a) analysis of anti-trans sentiment among American commentators, who appeal to simplistic notions of biology and highly simplified versions of anthropological naturalism in order to defend the binary division of gender.

Butler (2024, p. 163) rejects this narrative, claiming that:

what we call our biology is always interacting with social and environmental forces, and ... we cannot really think about biological facts outside of this interaction. ... Biological and social forces are together interacting in embodied life.

This idea of an “embodied life,” itself present in phenomenological considerations of such Christian scholars as Michel Henry (2015), long before Butler’s own use of the term here, can be considered a form of transcendence, though not a metaphysical one. Rather, according to Butler (2024), it is a cultural and social transcendence that is irreconcilable with biological determinism. Still, some Christian scholars today give at least some credence to the idea of biological determinism regarding the matter of sex and gender (Butler, 2024), meaning that, in this case, gender theory diverges quite drastically from the common Christian perspective.

Another example: in her draft on vegan philosophy, Hańderek (2021, p. 18) criticizes our separation from the world of animals and our environment, saying that

severance of the bond [between humans and animals] is a huge problem. Man surrounded himself with a wall of concepts, convictions, beliefs, superstitions, he separated himself from the world and built a pedestal for himself, onto which he gladly ascended.

She (Hańderek, 2021, p. 15) calls for the rejection of such a separation that should grow from the ecological concern, from, as she calls it, “understanding that we have no more time left for any further egoistic games,” where “egoistic” clearly means anthropocentric. One particular point of disagreement for her (Hańderek, 2021) is philosophy of the Enlightenment, especially of Descartes,

who considered all animals to be mindless machines, which also means, of course, rejection of the historical foundations of modern naturalism, although those play very limited role in the modern versions of this way of thinking. Additionally, one cannot help but notice that the very form of Hańderek's book is directly opposed to the model of academic knowledge fostered within science in general, and research based on naturalistic assumptions in particular. Characterized by the use of colloquialisms, diminutives, and personal anecdotes, her reflective approach brings to mind the matter of knowledge democracy, as described by Hall and Tandon (2017).

What Hańderek (2021, p. 15) proposes instead of anthropocentrism is a kind of ecological pantheism focused around an obviously symbolic figure called "Mother Gaia," itself derived both from neopaganism and earlier examples of ecophilosophy, such as that of James Lovelock (Hańderek, 2021). This is also a form of transcendence that defies anthropological naturalism. Human beings are here seen as part of something much larger than themselves, meaning that subjectivity is here seen as a derivative of over-structures (as Mazur, 2026, would call them), though the over-structures in question are somewhat atypical for that class of ideas, as they are neither language nor society, but the environment. Such a pantheistic rejection of anthropocentrism is clearly at odds with the Christian belief in the special place of human beings in nature as *imago Dei*, and with Christian anthropology in general, represented by such thinkers as St Augustine, St Bonaventura, George Berkeley, or even, in some version, Kierkegaard, as explained by Chrost (2020).

Examples such as these, where modern, progressive, left-leaning non-religious philosophies oppose anthropological naturalism, but also against Christian thought, are quite common. What seems more interesting, then, are the rare cases where their critique of naturalism and the Christian critique of it are not divergent, but convergent.

2. Convergent Perspectives on Anthropological Naturalism

There are at least two issues in the discussion on which some versions of Christian thought and some versions of non-religious thought seem to agree in their critiques of anthropological naturalism: the issue of the decolonization of knowledge and the narrative of culture in crisis, which are strongly interconnected in at least some contexts.

Regarding the decolonization of knowledge and knowledge democracy, it is important to note that, according to Hall and Tandon (2017, 7–8, 11), Christianity in the past was a major factor in why knowledge today supposedly needs decolonization. More specifically, they (Hall & Tandon, 2017) write about medieval times and the origins of modern university as an ecclesiastical

institution of knowledge dispossession. However, „it seems that the story of dispossessing the people from ownership of their ideas in the new medieval universities, which brought ecclesiastical power to those institutions, was just the start of our knowledge story,” they (Hall & Tandon, 2017, p. 11) say. What followed was what Ramón Grosfoguel (Hall & Tandon, 2017, p. 11) called “four epistemicides of the long 16th century” – a process through which, among other things, the hegemony of power over knowledge was transferred from the Church to science and to the Enlightenment-era idea of reason.

But Christianity has always been a diverse tradition. Certain schools of thought within Christianity, such as Thomism and its modern versions, e.g., within the Lublin Philosophical School, can be seen as direct or indirect continuations of the approaches to knowledge described by Hall and Tandon (2017). Their distinguishing mark is totalizing ambition – claims that they can provide an answer to every possible question, that everything can be explained within them. Other approaches to Christianity can be interpreted as having much more in common with the colonized systems of knowledge than with the universal system that colonized them. That is not to say that they were colonized *per se* (although some of them, in many places of the world, might have been at some point in time); rather, they are equally powerless and removed from the world of science in the sense of naturalism as their colonized counterparts. This is true of personalism and philosophy of dialogue, but also about mysticism and even folk Christianity or non-denominational Christianity. Such ways of thinking about Christ and His message for the world are the first place where Christianity meets non-religious philosophies, specifically – postcolonialism. Both oppose the hegemony of power over knowledge, currently perceived as being held by the naturalistic European sciences since the time of the Enlightenment-era idea of reason, and both could be seen as striving for knowledge democracy (though not in the more radical sense of vegan philosophy).

This leads us directly to the other issue – the narrative of culture in crisis. This narrative is commonplace in Christian thought, among such scholars as Delsol (2018; 2023), Chrost (2020), and Possenti (2022), and earlier on in the thought of Henry (2012). It is interesting to notice that for Henry, sources of this supposed crisis of culture differ wildly from the more modern diagnosis of Delsol. While Delsol (2018) writes about e.g. the idea that within the Western culture there is a form of *oikophobia* – the rejection of itself and its achievements in the form of political correctness and deconstructions of all structures of power – Henry (2012) in his *Barbarism*, published some 30 years before Delsol’s work, focuses his critique on the emptiness of consumer society and especially on modern sciences that arose from the Enlightenment-era idea of reason. According to him (Henry, 2012, p. 2) the crisis in our culture is an anthropological one, it is “the result of the indispensable multiplication of knowledge in obedience to science’s desire for rigor and objectivity” where “these ways

of knowing, as diverse as they may be, constitute the only knowledge possible and the only foundation to rational behavior in all spheres of experience.” This largely echoes the historical idea of colonization of knowledge found in postcolonialism and singles out naturalistic sciences as the main cause of the perceived crisis of culture.

A similar approach to this crisis can more recently be found in the writings of Possenti (2011, p. 185), who states that what brought about this crisis of culture is globalization, including “instrumental rationality,” and who also links this crisis to “the negative weight of anthropological and moral models of behavior,” though by “anthropological” he refers here to the idea of *homo oeconomicus* under late capitalism, not to anthropological naturalism, as Henry (2012) does.

Interestingly enough, while Delsol (2018) claims that there is a strong continuity between the Enlightenment-era idea of reason criticized by Henry (2012) and some modern non-religious philosophies, such as ecophilosophy, in fact many such philosophies are equally critical of this version of anthropological naturalism as Henry or Possenti. Especially postcolonialism, with its idea of decolonization of knowledge is as strong in its rejection of the hegemony of naturalistic sciences as Henry is, but queer thought with its anti-normativity (Ahmed, 2004) also contributes to that rejection. When Possenti (2011, p. 184) writes about “a crisis of capitalism, which became manifest in the vehement and dangerous transition from an industrial capitalism to a purely financial one, based on greed and blind to systemic risks,” his sentiments are almost identical to those of many queer theorists, such as Ahmed or Earl. This, however goes beyond the discussion of the rejection of anthropological naturalism; what is important instead is to note that certain Christian philosophers and certain followers of modern non-religious philosophies expressed at a similar time and for similar reasons, their discontent with naturalism and its consequences in the world of science, with totalizing ambitions of such a proposition. This is a kind of similarity that goes beyond simply sharing a common enemy and could potentially have important consequences for the remote possibility of dialogue between these two usually entrenched camps.

3. Conclusions: Possibility of Dialogue between Christian and Non-religious Philosophies

This overview of the current state of discussion is a testimony to at least the theoretical possibility of dialogue between Christianity and non-religious philosophies. While this possibility is slight, it goes beyond the simple dynamic of sharing a common enemy – it can be seen not as a case of shared interests in the marketplace of ideas that coincide for no real reason, but as possible symptoms

of some common, albeit vague and general, values and ideas, such as dignity of the unprivileged members of society, critique of capitalism, belief that humans participate in something larger than themselves or the notion that Enlightenment-era reason cannot explain everything.

It is certainly true, though, that this is not an easy dialogue to have and that, in the eyes of many the various differences between these two groups may simply outweigh what is common to them. After all, Christian thought often seeks to contest anthropological naturalism for reasons that have to do with transcendental metaphysics at the core of Christian beliefs, not because of politically motivated desires for social change. While for Christian thought discussion with naturalism is, then, of primary philosophical importance, as a direct apologetic enterprise, for various non-religious philosophies of today it is of secondary importance, a result of other factors, such as the need for decolonization of knowledge and opposition to social norms or to anthropocentrism. As Earl (Jessie Gender 2024b) describes it:

We need to fight back against the individuals who uphold these institutions [of power – M.J.] but also realize that those individuals are not the actual target and that tons of people enforce these institutions and act them out both directly and passively. And it is our job to try to change their consciousness by presenting a different way of seeing and thinking about the world.

This is also interconnected with how Hańderek (2021, p. 15) sees vegan philosophy as a way of thinking and acting that is “not easy, but full of empathy, respect and love,” which Christian philosophy likewise seeks.

Returning to the idea that non-religious philosophies are more decentralized and less homogeneous than Christian thought – somewhat contrary to that, Spivak (2012, pp. 137–143; in the context of modern education and national identity in the United States) calls for something more than “the promise of liberal multiculturalism”: a way of thinking that goes beyond differences between national and cultural groups, a way to tie them together. Interestingly enough, Christianity itself has such a way of thinking in the form of ecumenism. In ecumenism, various Christian denominations come together despite their differences and work for the greater unity of religion itself – it is one of the mechanisms that guarantees basic Christian unity. Though shared opposition to anthropological naturalism is very different from the meeting places created within ecumenism, the very existence of the latter shows that Christianity is not beyond agreeing even to very difficult conversations. Perhaps one reason why this particular opportunity for dialogue may be difficult to come to fruition is the belief, on both sides of the debate, that sharing a common enemy is not enough for any real cooperation. However, as the cases described above prove, there is much more to this debate than that.

Let us also conclude this paper with the following important observation: while our considerations of philosophical perspectives, disagreements, and shared positions can be rather abstract – arrived at by comparing texts published by authors independently of each other – the very debate between Christian and non-religious philosophies should, on the contrary, be observed in actual academic practice, as a living experience of dialogue. Although such instances of dialogue between Christian and non-religious philosophers on anthropology seem to occur rather rarely, let us consider but two examples in order to demonstrate that such considerations are not purely theoretical in nature.

For example, regarding Christianity and postcolonialism, it is relevant to note that in current Christian missiology there is a discussion on the topic of “postcolonial Theology,” exemplified by, for instance, the postcolonial theology roundtable that took place in October of 2010 at Gordon College in Wenham, Massachusetts, organized by the Lincoln Theological Institute (Lincoln, 2010), or more recently by a conference titled “Missionary Activity and Postcolonial Theology” that took place in June of 2022 at the Tomsk Theological Seminary in Russia (Mission, 2022). This discussion, undertaken, as we see, by different denominations of Christianity (Catholics and Protestants in the US, and the Russian Orthodox Church) demonstrates how insights from postcolonial thought bring new ideas to Christian philosophy and theology, to the point that a suggested topic of discussion can even be the decolonization of the Church (Mission, 2022). This example is related to the first area of convergence that I described above.

And one more example, this time connected to vegan philosophy: in June 2023, there was an online debate on the subject of animals, their relation to human beings, and their rights that took place on the YouTube channel of the University Ignatianum in Cracow (Ignatianum, 2023). Some guests at the debate were members of the Catholic lay organization, Kongres Katolicki i Katolików, but in attendance was also Joanna Hańderek, who gave a short talk on her perspective on the issue, which is closely related to her views on vegan philosophy. Although there were some points of contention in this debate, all attendees seemed to agree on many issues, such as the urgent need for stronger legal protections of animals in the Polish legal system. This example is related to the second area of convergence I described above.

As we see, then, the question whether Christian and non-religious philosophers can agree in their respective critiques of anthropological naturalism can be answered in positive not only regarding abstract, theoretical considerations, but also regarding actual academic practice.

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