

Daniel Andler: *La Silhouette de l'humain. Quelle place pour le naturalisme dans le monde d'aujourd'hui?*
Paris: Gallimard, 2016 (available 17 March)
The introduction is available [here](#).
(Approximate Engl. translation) *The Human Contour: The proper place of naturalism in today's world*

Many people hold that naturalism is not an issue: that it's either obviously true, or obviously false, or so vague as to elude any assessment, or again that it's an empirical issue—in the fullness of time, we would reach a point where either acceptance or rejection would be the only option. None of these positions hold water. While there is no answer to the question *Is naturalism true?*, naturalism is a serious issue. This book is an attempt at framing it in a fruitful way and providing an assessment after all.

As a general stance, which can be tracked throughout the history of philosophy and culture, naturalism rests on the combination of two heuristics. The positive heuristic is empiricism: "Look first!". The negative heuristic is monism, or rather, default monism: "Don't take the reigning dualisms for granted!". History and context variously determine what counts as looking and as a reigning dualism: hence the protean form of naturalism across ages and questionings. In most of the ongoing debates, science does the looking, and the reigning dualisms set the human mind and realm apart from the stuff of physics and biology, natural science from the sciences of man, science from philosophy.

Philosophers tend to approach naturalism *in abstracto*. They seek to determine the status of scientific naturalism on the basis of conceptual analysis, or empirical arguments such as induction from the success of science. No clear-cut result is to be expected from these efforts, however enlightening they may be. What needs to be asked is not whether the whole of reality *is* in fact natural, but how it might be naturalized *with the means now available*, whose emergence has caused naturalism to become again a live issue. Naturalism *anchored* in cognitive science, neuroscience, evolutionary psychology and anthropology, that is the proper target. And the proper query does not bear on its truth or falsity, but (i) on whether it is promising and progressive, and (ii) on the kind of naturalization it brings about to the extent that it succeeds. There are no off-the-cuff answers to this query: nothing short of a close examination of the assumptions, methods and results of the ongoing, interlocked naturalization programs can yield a robust assessment of their achievements and potential, and an informative, noncircular characterization of the nature of what has been naturalized.

The answer to the first question is unambiguously positive. The answer to the second provides us with a rich, surprisingly multi-faceted view of the nature of the mind and the human realm, and also makes us realize how clueless we were before the new disciplines filled in our largely vacuous concept. Naturalization and nature are co-evolving concepts, in this area as, in previous eras, in the physical realm and the biological realm and their special provinces.

Yet the ongoing naturalization process runs into significant limits. As a close examination of the research programs shows, the picture that the natural human sciences in their present state deliver is fragmentary, lacunary, tentative, more often than not controversial; more importantly perhaps, the explanations that are offered are generally only partly naturalistic. A different and perhaps more radical limitation is that one central human capacity seems to be out of reach: that of producing an appropriate behavior in most circumstances of real life. The reason, in a nutshell, is that appropriateness in a normative notion in a strong sense, one seemingly resistant to any naturalistic account.

The resulting view is *critical naturalism*, which is both a species of naturalism and critical. It encourages naturalistic inquiry, welcomes its results on both theoretical and practical grounds, and views naturalistic accounts of aspects of our mental and social life as bolstering human flourishing. It espouses Peirce's 'laboratory habit of mind'. It is critical in three senses: (i) It critically examines the assumptions, methods, results and, above all, general programmatic claims of science, especially cognitive science and allied disciplines, because they are a young and fragile province of science and because they have an enormous impact on our self-understanding and our social institutions. (ii) While it grants science an epistemic privilege as long as it's restricted to local investigations on scientifically tractable issues, it denies science the privilege of the last word when it comes to assessing the contributions of science to the overall scheme. (iii) Finally, because it denies science the last word, critical naturalism rejects the anti-humanist streak often found in the radical forms of naturalism: debunking is unwarranted and in fact goes against the basic commitment of naturalism, which is to keep one's eyes wide open and shake off blinkers of any sort, including those offered by science.

In other words, critical naturalism applies the naturalistic heuristic to naturalism itself. In so doing, it rehabilitates a large part of philosophy and of mainstream social science and opens the way for a much wider collaboration with cognitive science and allied disciplines than what is usually assumed, on both sides of the fence. And that collaboration in turn is required to attack some pressing problems faced by humanity today.