CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Wittgenstein's methodological naturalism and the location problem in the study of religion

Aleksei Rakhmanin (iD)

Faculty of Theology, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland
Email: aleksei.rakhmanin@helsinki.fi

Abstract

In recent years, the question of naturalism in the study of religions has been increasingly debated. Primarily, these discussions converge in the widely held view that naturalism is the only way for religious studies as an academic enterprise to exclude supernaturalist assumptions from its methodology. While I fully agree with this view, I argue that naturalism is usually formulated with the help of metaphysical assumptions, which are problematically embodied in the location problem, that is, the problem of how to locate certain phenomena, such as meanings and values, in the order of nature. By unfolding the dynamic between the elements of the location problem, I show that the kind of naturalism based on Wittgenstein's thought prevents the location problem from arising and can serve as a balanced version of naturalism for use in the study of religion. While metaphysical naturalism often leads to dilemmas, within Wittgenstein's kind of naturalism, it seems possible both to maintain anti-supernaturalism in the study of religion and to resist the metaphysical temptations hidden in our assumptions about language. These two features make Wittgenstein's naturalism truly methodological.

Keywords: location problem; methodological naturalism; Wittgenstein; metaphysics; holism

Introduction

Naturalism is notorious for having a wide range of meanings. It seems that it makes little sense to discuss naturalism in general because the appeals to it tend to depend on what researchers want from them. What remains common to these appeals, though, is that naturalism serves as a background for addressing the tensions between different types of knowledge and their entry into the academy or science. Depending on how naturalism is understood appeals to it may support opposing claims – that, say, creationism both does and does not belong to the academy, or that science both is and is not all there is, both in methods of acquiring knowledge and in saying how the world goes. Appeals to naturalism may be a form of ideological gesturing, as Hilary Putnam famously describes it (2004, 59), or the basis for vindicating (e.g. Quine and Williams) as well as debunking (e.g. McDowell and Macarthur) scientism.

In philosophy of religion, theology, and religious studies, the appeals to naturalism also play different roles. In this article, I focus on a very specific form of naturalism, which is usually known as methodological naturalism and called upon to delineate the academic responsibilities of religious studies and distinguish it from theology (which is still *another*

university discipline). Although the problem of methodological naturalism that I discuss here may have significant analogies in philosophy of religion[1] and theology more broadly, I will address how naturalism is often used to frame religious studies as an academic discipline that aims to study religious traditions and is supposed to pursue cultural and worldview neutrality.[2] The emphasis must be put on traditions in plural here: unlike, say, the Christian thought (in a particular historical form), for which supernatural claims may pose no problem, the study of various traditions – say, Catholics in the Eighteenth century France, Evangelical Christians in modern-day Brazil, and today's Navaho – faces the problem of one set of supernatural claims conflicting with another. In my fieldwork, I dealt with the stories of magical specialists shapeshifting into animals. What would I have done about them? It seems that the requirement for the academic studies of religious traditions as human phenomena is to adopt a minimally naturalistic attitude to prevent the researchers from committing to a specific set of supernatural claims (primarily because it is unclear *how* to assess those claims) while studying them. The most recent proposals of naturalism in religious studies (collected in Blum 2018 together with the substantial criticisms by Michael Cantrell among others) range from rather relaxed and liberal to more restrictive ones, being connected to various disciplines traditionally associated with religious studies, such as anthropology, cognitive science, philosophy, sociology, and others. Needless to say, each discipline has developed its own understanding of an appropriate approach, usually more than one, so that a formulation of the naturalistic premise of research in the above sense made in one discipline is often at odds with a formulation made in another. This rivalry has intensified due to claims made by some researchers who often represent the cognitive study of religion and who insist that the study of religion must share its epistemological core with the hard sciences in order to have a place in an academy that pursues intersubjectively available knowledge (e.g. Slingerland 2008; Wiebe 2021; see Visala 2018 for an important critique from the cognitive science of religion side).

My argument in this article is as follows. The most problematic aspect of naturalism in religious studies is its metaphysical underpinnings, which contradict the universally emphasized *methodological* character of such naturalism.[3] While the conventional contrast in the field is between methodological and ontological naturalism, I aim to show that certain features of the former include ontological presuppositions that make it a metaphysical position. I argue that this metaphysics is due to the fundamental controversy of combining demarcatory and explanatory claims embedded in traditional methodological naturalism, which express different types of commitments. This controversy is epitomized in the so-called 'location problem', namely the problem of placing things like 'meanings' or 'values' in the natural order (in the section titled 'The location problem'). Combining recent developments in Wittgensteinian philosophy with some hermeneutics of Wittgenstein (in the section called 'A naturalist critique of Frazer's naturalism'), I will show how a form of naturalism that can be extracted from Wittgenstein can effectively address the location problem and remain entirely methodological (the section titled 'Wittgenstein's naturalism and practical holism'). To be fair, not all researchers believe that metaphysics is problematic and should be avoided, but those who do may find some new insights in the proposed interpretation of Wittgenstein. My main ambition here is to bring to religious studies the perspective that has not yet been fully explored in this field. I want to show that a Wittgensteinian response to the location problem may pave the way for naturalism without metaphysics (be it metaphysics of a scientist or religious kind).

The location problem: demarcatory and explanatory naturalism

While saying that naturalism in religious studies in the above sense is of a methodological sort became quite common, there is wide variety as to *how* this naturalism is methodological (e.g. Blum 2011, 85; Pals 2018, 21–22; Frankenberry 2018, 123, 126; Schilbrack 2018, 251; see

also McCutcheon 2001, x–xi; Barret 2017, 196). The emphasis on naturalism being methodological may be a legacy of the past when agnosticism and atheism stood in for naturalism,[4] but the idea, as far as I can reconstruct it, has been that for scholars of religion who position their studies within the university the minimally adequate commitment to naturalism implies one of two claims. According to one claim it is irrelevant to the study of religion if the supernatural exists (more or less Smart's methodological agnosticism); according to the other, scholars must exclude any reference to the supernatural by virtue of their belonging to the academy (more or less Berger's methodological atheism). In both cases, naturalism is primarily anti-supernaturalism, and it is methodological because there is no need to provide an ontological or metaphysical argument in its favour. Moreover, both positions explicitly state that they are 'methodological' in the sense that they operate within the confines of research without interfering with a researcher's private beliefs.

The claim that naturalism is essentially anti-supernaturalism is not extraordinary. It is a well-founded generalization in the broader philosophy of science that naturalism serves primarily as a form of anti-supernaturalist commitment (Dupre 2004, 36; Stroud 2004, 23; Forrest 2000, 7–8; in general, see De de Caro & Macarthur 2004, 2; see also Visala 2018, 53). However, the discussions of methodological naturalism in religious studies usually bring two considerations to the fore.

First, naturalistic claims are taken to be entirely methodological: their status and content are justified by the ideal of the most effective way to conduct research within the academy. As Tiddy Smith argues in a broader context, tracking the history of methodological naturalism as a principle that has dominated the modern university, 'methodological naturalism is largely, though I am timid to say "entirely", an epistemological thesis' (T Smith 2017, 330). In other words, it excludes non-natural methods of justification that are not open to public scrutiny from the scope of research, rather than certain types of entities (322, 332). As such methodological naturalism is an attitude rather than a position.[5] This attitude overtly shows the affinity with the academic environment and demarcates an academic study of religion from the enterprises that take supernatural claims for granted (pursued, say, in religious establishments); so, for short, I will call this form of naturalism demarcatory (*cf.* Pals 2018, 21–22; Frankenberry 2018, 123–124; Barret 2017, 195–196; Visala 2018, 53). In this context, supernaturalism, on the other hand, is a commitment to an ontology in which guardian spirits, for example, *must* be considered as existing in order to properly study the Navajo religion. Conversely, if one studies academically, say, the Catholic mass, it is generally assumed that the focus of the study is not on the (allegedly non-natural) process of turning wine into blood, but on the practices and beliefs (again, Smart's position). Thus, one may say that supernaturalist claims are excluded from the second order, not the first: anthropologists study traditions and deal with supernaturalist claims on a daily basis but generally they do not accept the ontological commitments of a tradition as a part of their methodology (although anthropologists inspired by the ontological turn may have substantial to say about it). It is held that *methodological* naturalism warrants that references to non-natural phenomena are excluded from the methods of studying religion by relying on the idea of method established in generalized science (*cf.* Visala 2018, 53–54; Barret 2017, 195).

Second, however, it is said that supernaturalist claims must be excluded from the methodology of the research not as unnecessary, but as plainly false when looked from within the scientific framework (again, Berger's position which is also accepted as normative by some cognitive scientists of religion). As Craig Martin argues, 'if we cannot evaluate first order claims without distortion, then any and all argumentation is futile' (2018, 60) stressing that it is the obligation of academic researchers to promote the expertise that the supernatural claims are not only truth-apt but also *qualified* as false in the light of the overall scientific – that is available for public scrutiny – knowledge. According to this line

of thought, an ontological verdict is thus necessary for the study of religion to be consistent (Slingerland 2008, 377–379, 384, 390–391). While the second position is still called *methodological* naturalism, it departs from being just demarcatory and turns into explanatory framework. Indeed, unlike demarcatory anti-supernaturalism, explanatory naturalism is a position that *must* result in a set of clear-cut formulations of *how* exactly one proceeds in the anti-supernaturalistic attitude: it requires a story about what there is and what is natural to make sure that the non-natural is effectively excluded. And thus, naturalism which is declared methodological, turns out to be a full-blood metaphysical position,[6] more or less akin to scientism, which, moreover, may be characterized as impoverishing the study of religion (see Cantrell's and Tucket's entries in Blum 2018). In other words, demarcatory naturalism turns out to be stable if it is only justified by explanatory naturalism.

It is indeed hard to find a way of appealing to scientific methodology without committing – probably implicitly – to naturalism as an ontological principle that would allow for, say, the existence of physical particles but not of spirits and gods. This ontology need not be physicalist, though it seems that physicalism is the most consistent form of explanatory naturalism[7]; yet, if one says that biological entities – that is, entities studied by academic biologists – need not be reduced to physical particles in order for biology to be naturalist, then this requires further clarification of how the natural order established by biology is consistent with a physicalist one within the unity of science. To clarify this one has to leave the ground of a particular discipline in order to speak on behalf of such a unity. While this kind of talk is essentially metaphysical, its results are often presented as results of scientific theorizing, so that metaphysical claims function as theoretical statements, as if naturalism were not a premise for the scientific endeavour but as a theory proved right (McMullin 2009 is very illuminating on this issue). In the case of naturalism, this theorizing, which by introducing the natural order, articulates how the supernatural is excluded, is self-referential: the theoretical means are used to justify the position from which the theorizing becomes possible (*cf.* B Smith 2017, 20).

It seems inevitable that a position that combines the metaphysical thrust and the supposed theoretical quality of consistency will be construed as all-encompassing and exclusivist. Indeed, the natural order introduced by means of one theory will cancel out the order set by another theory, and if one aims to build a system to reconcile them, that system must itself be theoretical.[8] Epistemological consequences aside, this feature of exclusivism – which I argue is inherent in explanatory naturalism if it is to be consistent – makes interdisciplinarity impossible. Indeed, if one is *consistent* in one's naturalist claims, the kinds of naturalism that, say, an expert on medieval chronicles implicitly proceeds from and a cognitive scientist declares look incompatible. The latter may always conclude that if the former cannot trace the phenomena they study to, say, neurological activity (and usually they cannot), then these phenomena do not belong in the realm of scientific facts.[9]

These three features of explanatory naturalism – its being (1) the exclusivist (2) metaphysical programme (3) justified by theoretical means – do not exhaust its pattern, but they are sufficient for my point here. They converge in the problem that is the cornerstone of the debates on naturalism, namely the location, or the placement problem.[10] In Huw Price's formulation, 'if all reality is ultimately natural reality, how are we to "place" moral facts, mathematical facts, meaning facts, and so on? How are we to locate topics of these kinds within a naturalistic framework, thus conceived?' (Price 2004, 74). If one wants to be consistent with naturalistic claims, then one must agree with Frank Jackson, who in a similar context suggests that any entity included in the scope of serious metaphysics (and naturalism as it is usually formulated must be a *serious* metaphysical position), must either be eliminated or located (Jackson 2000, 5).

The items which meet the location controversy are of different kinds. For example, Price listed 'meaning, value, mathematical truth, causation and physical modality, and various aspects of mentality' (Price 2004, 73). I want to emphasize that the entity called 'God' is not the problem here – it is immediately (fairly, I believe) excluded from the natural order.[11] However, if one allows, say, values and meanings among the entities to be studied naturalistically – that is, without introducing non-natural phenomena into the scope – the defender of strict naturalism might argue that unless these entities are not reduced to, say, the inventory with which neuroscience operates and are not thus located as parts of the natural order, such a study would not be naturalistic enough, and would thereby open the door to theoretical naïveté. This alleged naïveté is often seen in the adoption of, say, folk categorizations or in a descriptivist stance that, by not critically explaining religious phenomena, is accused of smuggling supernaturalist underpinnings into the academic study of religion.[12] From a perspective of strict naturalism, the distance between allowing 'meanings' or 'values' in the scope of research and allowing the supernatural entities to be part of it may be rather short (e.g. Slingerland and Bulbulia 2011, 311–312), probably out of the fear that the former will open the door for the 'occult' or the 'supernatural' (Putnam 2004, 66). From this perspective, if beliefs, meanings, and values are not placed in the natural order, as generalized science takes it, one cannot be sure that supernatural commitments are properly excluded from the methodology of studying religion. In this line of reasoning, to study first-order claims one must attest them in the second order.

The challenge, then, is to find a form of naturalism that does not force one to commit to metaphysics, whether explicit or implicit, and that remains what it is declared to be – *methodological*, that is, *non-metaphysical* and thus non-scientistic naturalism. In what follows I aim to show that a type of naturalism that can be elicited from Wittgenstein's work is a reasonable alternative to consider in the context of the study of religion. Furthermore, I will argue that this kind of naturalism belongs to the rare kinds of naturalisms that are methodological precisely in the sense that they are not explanatory. To do that, I will have to show that the proposed naturalism does not have the characteristics listed above, namely that it is not (1) all-encompassing, (2) metaphysical, (3) a product of theorizing.

Although this article does not aim to compare Wittgenstein's and Price's positions, one crucial remark is necessary. They both share, as Price acknowledges, a critique of representationalist assumptions, which give life to placement problems that 'originate as problems about human linguistic usage' (2004, 75). Location problems are significant because they reveal important presuppositions that researchers usually take for granted in their use of language: these problems emerge not at the level of the first order language, but in researcher's applying certain conceptual schemes to it (thus, importantly, the placement problems *are not* problems for the practitioners of the Navaho or Catholic rituals, but may be such for those who study them). Despite this common ground, however, Price responds to the placement problem in a way radically different from what Wittgenstein would do. Price's 'subject naturalism' preserves the common understanding of naturalism as a stance that requires philosophy to defer to science. Consequently, it can be viewed as a type of scientism (B Smith 2017, 217–218, 221). Of course, one might argue that, since Price claims the core of science is anthropology and linguistics because it is there that 'science tells us about ourselves', his scientism differs greatly from the scientism typically associated with physicalism. Nevertheless, Wittgenstein's position is firmly rooted in the idea of the radical autonomy of philosophy and its conceptual independence from science; in fact, divorcing scientism and naturalism is precisely what is important in current interpretations of Wittgensteinian philosophy as a kind of naturalism, and what I find important in the context of the present article (see the next section). I will explore the Wittgensteinian path independently of Price's subject naturalism. However, I proceed from the assumption that

Wittgenstein's naturalism may provide an alternative to Price's subject naturalism when addressing the placement problem, as Wittgenstein's conception was purely philosophical and did not require support from scientism, whether orthodox or Price's. Finally, one might argue, based on their general philosophical assumptions, that location problems are actually pseudo-problems. I admit that this may be a consistent position within a certain ideal of philosophy. Nevertheless, if location problems *are* considered real problems, Wittgensteinian insights may be useful for addressing them.

A naturalist critique of Frazer's naturalism

To begin with, the notion 'Wittgenstein's naturalism' can be considered misleading, given Wittgenstein's own opposition to the tendency to make natural *science* the template for all meaningful enterprises (as the relevant passages, say, in *Culture and Value* suggest). I think the hostility of some Wittgenstein scholars and philosophers to the idea of Wittgenstein as a naturalist philosopher is related to the fact that they construe natural science naturalism, or scientistic/strict naturalism, as the only possible naturalistic position. In recent decades, however, various interpretations have been proposed that present Wittgenstein's views as naturalistic precisely in opposition to strict or reductionist naturalism. The question is then what kind of naturalism one wants to find in Wittgenstein. Now, in the vast majority of cases Wittgenstein's alleged naturalism is found in his later philosophy. Although Wittgenstein's opposition to scientific naturalism can be traced back to Tractarian times (the opposition to making philosophy dependent on or somehow determined by science), the way he articulated his views in the *Tractatus* does not allow one to speak of a definite naturalistic position, however unorthodox that position might be. It is in his reconsideration of the ways of doing philosophy that Wittgenstein made the points that are of an allegedly naturalistic character.[13]

The opposition to scientistic naturalism does not constitute a unified programme, and not surprisingly Wittgenstein's anti-scientistic naturalism does not appear to have received a unified interpretation either. His position has been characterized as 'human/second nature' naturalism (Kenny 2011; Medina 2004), subject naturalism (as opposed to object naturalism),[14] minimal (Plant 2011), grammatical (Beale 2019), imaginative (Macarthur 2018; Dromm 2003), liberal (Macarthur 2018), liberating (Hutto and Satne 2018), just to mention a few. The common denominators of these interpretations seem to be the following. First, the emphasis in Wittgenstein's belief that sense-making as a human activity cannot be external to human beings: philosophy must start from the fact that human beings eat, walk, and talk, and not from the point of 'nowhere', be it a metaphysically invented epistemic position or a scientifically theorized human nature. In other words, both metaphysics and science grow from human nature – they are not premises for considering human nature. Second, then, an understanding of Wittgenstein's philosophy as a naturalist relies on his unambiguous conception of philosophy's autonomy: philosophy simply does not do things science does. Third, this autonomy of philosophy excludes theorizing as a part of philosophy's activity. Finally, the attempts to interpret Wittgenstein as a naturalist philosopher are primarily made to oppose scientism and support various forms of liberal naturalism. In other words, the interpretations of Wittgenstein's naturalism ubiquitously depict it as a form of non-supernaturalism without scientism (for the excellent exposition of Wittgenstein's naturalism as anti-scientism see B Smith 2017, 210–213, 221). What is even more important, these developments do not so much extend the meaning of naturalism as they propose new ways of looking at it. In what follows, I will take these main tenets as the cornerstones of Wittgenstein's naturalism.

The main areas where the fundamentals of Wittgenstein's alleged naturalism are usually found are the following. First, one has a wide range of ideas concerning language

acquisition, meaning as use, the conceptions of language games and the origin of language, scattered throughout *Philosophical Investigations, Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology I-II, Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*. In an important sense these ideas are probably the most often mentioned in relation to naturalism because they are – ironically – reminiscent of something close to theory (and, after all, the expression 'Wittgenstein's theory of meaning' is not uncommon). This is not the place to get embroiled in exegesis of Wittgenstein, but suffice to say that what seems a piece of theory, in, say, the *Philosophical Investigations* serves as a metaphilosophical reminder: it tells us how to do a proper philosophy, not how the world goes. Second, one has to consider remarks that are explicitly characterized as 'reminders': the notions of 'very general facts of nature', 'invented/fictitious natural history', again, are found in *Philosophical Investigations*. Third, the 'Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*' is the text in which one will find the most valuable ideas on naturalism relevant to religious studies. Finally, much less attention is paid to *On Certainty* which, I argue, may shed a completely new light on the question of naturalism. Moreover, despite the years between the first remarks on Frazer and those in *On Certainty*, they show an important continuity. I will concentrate on the last two texts to show how Wittgenstein's naturalism responds to the location problem. My general assessment is that we find there a kind of naturalism which, by being philosophical non-supernaturalism, is not accompanied by a quasi-theoretical, that is a metaphysical, framework.

In many ways, 'Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*' may give the impression that, contrary to my assertions above, Wittgenstein was working out some sort of theory. The thrust of his critique of Frazer's assumptions indeed makes it almost inevitable to conclude that Wittgenstein was searching for an alternative conception of magic and rituals,[15] and the number of observations he made about the nature of them would seem to support such a conclusion. However, the first remarks – even if the 'Remarks' in general do not form a narrative whole – set the tone for the rest: Wittgenstein immediately points out that what he finds 'unsatisfying' about Frazer's '*representation* of human magical and religious notions' (GB 1, my emphasis) is his application of theorizing to a material where no theorizing is necessary. Frazer attempts to explain the *existence* of rituals by advancing a theoretical scheme of humankind's development (GB 2). Now, the only way to explain why rituals exist, if one follows Wittgenstein's critique of Frazer, is to locate them in the cognitive history of humanity, where they will inevitably appear as intellectual errors and mistakes. However, if they are a part of human history – as both Frazer and Wittgenstein thought – rituals and magic cannot be represented as mistakes and errors, in the same way as walking and talking, as parts of human history, cannot be meaningfully represented as mistakes. It seems that Frazer was trying to follow two proposals simultaneously.

In this light, I find three aspects of the 'Remarks' particularly compelling with respect to naturalism.

The first of these is the idea of the naturalness of rituals. Trivial as it may sound, this naturalness plays a crucial role in Wittgenstein's critique of Frazer's *representation* of magic and rituals. In other words, Wittgenstein does not develop a theory of ritual for its own sake; what he finds perplexing is Frazer's *urge to explain* rituals while at the same time saying that they are part of human history. Wittgenstein stresses that the source of such an urge is the fact that rituals and magic leave us unsettled because they reveal or seem to reveal something deeply disturbing about human beings. Frazer, on the other hand, tried to come up with a theoretical scheme to hide the unsettling character of magic, rather than accepting it as a part of human nature, as he would have accepted eating, walking, and talking. For Wittgenstein, the naturalness of rituals is self-evident in our ability to recognize them as such: one does not need to have a theory of ritual to recognize a behaviour as ritual. As Wittgenstein famously observes:

> One could begin a book on anthropology in this way: when one observes the life and behavior of humans all over the earth, one sees that apart from the kinds of behavior one could call animal, the intake of food, etcetera, etcetera, humans also carry out actions that bear a peculiar character, and might be called ritual actions (GB 15).

The second aspect of the 'Remarks' is the shift from truth-talk in discussing magic to a focus on how rituals make sense. Wittgenstein discusses the sense-making naturalness of rituals at length by juxtaposing the examples from Frazer with more 'modern' behaviour, such as kissing the portrait or name of a loved one (GB 9), Schubert's brother's distribution of Schubert's scores (13), and more complicated matters in the case of Beltane throughout the 'Remarks'. The reason for this ability to recognize a ritual behaviour is that it is not based on or preceded by an opinion or belief (15), which can be right or wrong and dependent on the historical obstacles and conceptual environment. What is particularly fascinating is the way Wittgenstein shows that one does not need any conceptual tools to recognize a ritual and, moreover, 'one could very well invent primitive practices oneself, and it would only be by chance if they were not actually to be found elsewhere' (13), while 'the spirit in which one would invent them is their common one' (46).

This is where it must become clear that Wittgenstein does not do ethnography and the 'Remarks' are not a treatise on cultural anthropology, contrary to what it might seem. In fact, they deal with matters of logic pretty much in the same way as the fictional facts of nature that he introduces later in the *Investigations* and elsewhere, reveal the logic of basic assumptions. The fact that these are 'possibilities' (GB 13) and that 'the correct and interesting thing is not to say, "this has come from that," but "it could have come from that"' (47) suggests that, according to Wittgenstein, if one wants to develop a theory of ritual and magic in their historical variability one has to start somewhere in non-theoretical reality. One must begin with basic assumptions, and not with opinions. By Wittgenstein's lights, Frazer's mistake was to try to explain the fundamental, which does not need explaining, and to take theoretical assumptions as fundamental. For theoretical assumptions to make sense they must be 'agreement[s] not in opinions but in form of life' (PI §241): this agreement is seen in the recognizability of even invented rituals and 'it is prior to questions of truth or falsity' (McGinn 2010, 339). In a sense, Frazer himself invents rituals, but he does so on the basis of theorizing, and, if one follows Wittgenstein, one cannot surrender to external theorizing as the source of meaning (GB 47). In this respect, it is important to note that Wittgenstein's references to Schubert's brother's manipulations and kissing a portrait are not pieces of evidence that support a theory (there is no theory); they are observations that make theorizing possible. Yet these observations make theorizing something that is grounded in human nature; they are not made from nowhere.

These two features together – our natural ability to recognize rituals as rituals and to invent them without any theorizing – come together in the third remarkable point in Wittgenstein's treatise on Frazer, which might be called a peculiar anti-scientism (Beale 2019; Plant 2011). This peculiarity is threefold. First, I do not think that Wittgenstein wanted to present a 'correct' interpretation of, say, Beltane. What interested him, however, was the *possibility* of an interpretation. This is also evident in the fact that, contrary to what it might seem, Wittgenstein does not argue that the natives are right in their views (business such as that would be misleading by Wittgenstein's lights) but is interested in comprehending these views from a broader perspective of human nature. Wittgenstein gives no hint of a way to decide which views are right or wrong; what he does do is to show that ritual makes sense precisely as human behaviour. This does not mean that a philosopher should try to adopt a native perspective – this would be impossible if by perspective one means a set of

beliefs: 'One can only resort to description here, and say: such is human life' (GB 3). The description to which Wittgenstein appeals here is thus not a naïve adaptation of a foreign view in order to find truth: it is a premise for seeing conceptual activities in their independence of any particular standpoint.[16] This reminder is crucial if one does not want to make a move that Wittgenstein takes to be the source of Frazer's mistaken representation of data, namely, to use a conceptual framework as if it were a measuring rod to explain the reality that makes conceptual activity, including theorizing, possible.

Second, Wittgenstein's anti-scientism is rooted in the descriptivist attitude (see also B Smith 2017). Descriptivism is quite often opposed to explanatory attitude, and it may look like Wittgenstein's desire to reject explanations of rituals promotes their description. But it should be remembered that Wittgenstein was only interested in dealing with philosophical problems, and so his descriptivism is not of the kind found in sciences or the humanities, where making a consistent description is possible only within a certain theoretical framework. Wittgenstein introduces *philosophical* descriptivism. While this is in itself a topic for a long discussion, I shall briefly characterize philosophical descriptivism as a practice of grounding conceptual activities within the bounds of sense to make possible the ability to look at phenomena from different points of view. This description is thus determined by the need to put various conceptual activities in plain view. Ritual behaviour is recognizable precisely because it is independent of any conceptual activity, and it is at this point that one 'has to pass from explanation to mere description' (OC §189).

Third, Wittgenstein's anti-scientism does not aim to formulate an alternative to science but to deal independently of science with the issues that are important for philosophy. One of these issues is how science itself makes sense. What Wittgenstein's anti-scientism brings forward is the critique of science's tendency to claim overarching authority in all issues and primarily in understanding human nature. Following Wittgenstein, one might say that science, when it is turned into metaphysics, itself becomes a form of supernaturalism. In this case it proclaims one kind of conceptual activity[17] as the template for assessing the other kinds, as is evident in Frazer's evolutionism, forgetting that science is one of the activities each of which has meaning only within the set of various activities that stem from human nature. Human beings eat, walk, talk, perform rituals, and make normative claims. There is nothing supernatural in accepting this, and no mystery to be uncovered. In other words, one does not have to find a place for rituals and magic in the natural order to study them – one just has to accept that they are part of the natural order without having to articulate that order in theoretical terms.

In summary, one may present Frazer's conception of rituals (and his conception of magic) as an attempt to locate them in the natural order (*cf.* Franek 2020, 56–57). Given Frazer's assumptions about the intellectual history of humanity, such a presentation would not be unreasonable. Conversely, Wittgenstein's critique may be read as a counterargument to these locating attempts, as it tackles the three tenets of explanatory naturalism.

The metaphysical character of Frazer's attempts, if one follows Wittgenstein, is evident in his use of a general scheme that pretends to be theoretical – a framework to organize empirical data – while being a frame that makes theorizing possible.[18] In other words, to show how he is in a position to explain rituals, Frazer must present them as something that cannot be explained other than as (rooted in) mistaken explanations. However, Frazer expresses assumptions here – they are not theoretical claims. The location of rituals implies that the only meaningful way to look at them is through a theoretical framework. Wittgenstein argues that in order to do this, one has to recognize ritual as ritual, that is, as something that is a part of human nature. One may create as many theories of ritual as one likes, but for those theories to *make sense*, they cannot be grounded in a theoretical claim (that claim would just be another frame alongside of the others); or, to put it differently,

the category of sense must lie somewhere outside theory. Frazer, on the other hand, made theory the ground of his theoretical enterprise. This makes such a position exclusive. This is not a defect; on the contrary, it is common sense that a theory must be exclusive and reductive to be consistent. But it is debatable whether a set of assumptions on which theorizing *is based* must be reductive, because in this case one can legitimately ask – reductive in relation to what and on what grounds? In the case of Frazer, they are reduced to assumptions that leave no room for human beings to be human. Moreover, our ability to invent rituals, to which Wittgenstein refers, serves as a counterargument to Frazer's location efforts, since, according to Wittgenstein, one does not need a theory to recognize rituals as rituals. It would seem that Wittgenstein's naturalism remains an attitude and does not collapse into a set of quasi-theoretical theses, as philosophy, according to Wittgenstein, must not formulate theories, or else it turns into metaphysics.

Wittgenstein's naturalism and practical holism

From the above interpretation one can safely conclude that Wittgenstein's anti-scientistic position is what makes it naturalistic (B Smith 2017, 209). Wittgenstein's philosophy is anti-scientistic not in the sense that it treats science as fundamentally misleading in itself, but in the sense that it opposes the tendency to take scientific concept formation as the yardstick for all conceptual activities, in which case this concept formation is exclusivist in matters where plurality is a basic fact. The naturalistic position, on the other hand, would be to accept all these conceptual activities in their own right. According to Wittgenstein's interpretation of Frazer, theory is not a prerequisite for recognizing rituals; on the contrary, the ability to recognize rituals (or other behaviours, for that matter) is a prerequisite for forming theories. Besides, theory is not a prerequisite for treating something as natural, otherwise one commits oneself to metaphysics and uses a theoretical scheme as a decider of what is natural in order to apply it to all other instances that might – and usually do – give life to other theoretical schemes. In fact, treating some behaviour as natural is not an interpretation (by which an entity takes its place in the overall scheme of things) but an acceptance: 'our mistake is to look for an explanation where we ought to regard the facts as "proto-phenomena"' (PI p. 654). In this broader view, naturalism is not a position to which one is committed on the basis of a theory; it is not a set of assumptions that must be consistent in the way that is usually prescribed for a scientific theory. Rather, it is the assumptions themselves that make theorizing possible.

Wittgenstein's naturalism would thus presuppose that religious practices make sense as they are and not only when they are reduced to evolutionary processes, or – in more modern terms with which Frazer would have agreed – neurological activity. One may ask how this position differs from the notorious essentialist and *sui generis* discourse that dominated the study of religion in the past. What Wittgensteinian naturalism may bring to religious studies is philosophically nuanced idea that religious phenomena are irreducible not due to 'experience' lying at their core (as more phenomenologically minded classics like Smart were inclined to think) but because the very idea of reduction is fundamentally essentialist. Withing Wittgensteinian naturalism, meaningfulness of human activities is not the outcome of theorizing and so cannot be assessed through the analysis of the truth-aptness of those activities: the issues of meaning and truth are simply different. Non-essentialism of Wittgenstein among other things confronts the idea – more often implicit than not – that meanings are somehow unavailable to observation, being mysterious entities to which one gets through dealing with their manifestations (Cahill 2021, 41–43). Within Wittgenstein's way of thinking, accepting that religious phenomena are natural as they are does not require attributing a specific nature (let alone a supernatural kind of nature) to them in order for them to be meaningful. Rather, the naturalistic stance is to accept their

meaningfulness as they are without reducing it to artificially theorized frame of truth-aptness. In other words, religious phenomena – language, beliefs, practices – make sense not when they are explained: they can be explained because they make sense. What stands in a way for such an acceptance is a set of presuppositions, at the core of which is a particularly dominant one that makes reduction look as if it does not have anything to do with language (Price 2004). Indeed, location problems stem from the assumption that a connection can be made between a thing and a word, ignoring the environment in which words exist. This assumption has two aspects: first, language is considered an inert mass that has no meaning unless it is interpreted; second, the scientific use of language is seen as the epitome of clarity, despite being artificial. This is the issue I am now moving to.

Not surprisingly, all of the issues discussed can be linked to the problem of language, since much if not all of Wittgenstein's critique of metaphysical reasoning is concerned with the perplexities one inevitably ends up in if one commits oneself to the assumption that all language serves a function of representation (of something beyond language). This picture of language, which, because of its depth and influence on every aspect of thought, might be called a representationalist ideology – or, to use Wittgenstein's own vocabulary, a mythology – of language is, according to Wittgenstein, what bewitches us. There are good reasons for concluding that this mythology is an ultimate tacit justification for the view of the supremacy of scientific knowledge. In short, if all language serves the function of representation, then all knowledge is theoretical knowledge of the kind obtained by natural science. But if the former is misleading, the latter is empty (*cf*. Price 2004, 72).

To make this case clearer I shall use Kevin Cahill's reintroduction of two types of holism that he links to a discussion of the alleged continuity between the social and natural sciences. First introduced by Hubert Dreyfus, the distinction is between theoretical and practical holisms. The former 'involves the idea that meaning is something we *arrive at* by translating or interpreting otherwise preliminarily meaningless linguistic items, so as to fit them into a semantic theory' (Cahill 2021, 23). In turn, 'a central feature of practical holism is the way in which both practical and theoretical activities rest for their intelligibility on a mostly unarticulated, pre-theoretical, substantially (though perhaps not exclusively) acquired background understanding of how the world hangs together' (24).

An exhaustive account of this distinction would require much more space than I have here, so I will limit myself to the claim that I think is at the heart of the argument. The theoretical holism regards all knowledge as a 'homogeneous mass' (*cf*. OC §213) and is *structurally* dependent on language in its representational function: in this picture, every piece of knowledge is language-independent and confirms the model of hypothesis confirmation. Just as an utterance corresponds to a state of affairs and thus can be true or false, so too does a piece of knowledge that is the result of testing a hypothesis. However, since 'language did not emerge from some kind of ratiocination' (OC §475), one cannot, following Wittgenstein, without committing oneself to metaphysics, isolate a segment of language and ascribe to it some primary functions.

The source of such metaphysics is the declaration of a science-like kind of knowledge as the template for all other kinds of knowledge. This position, however, is in striking contrast to the 'knowledge' of language we naturally have. Knowledge of language is certainly not the kind we arrive at by confirming hypotheses (Cahill 2021, 21–22, 34). Wittgenstein's efforts to show how such a picture of language misleads us into metaphysical puzzles are instructive in this respect: one cannot apply to the language we live with the limitations of the language used in scientific theories. These limitations are based on 'a largely unquestioned dogma in philosophy, namely that language consists primarily of, indeed could only be, a set of normatively inert signs that require interpretation to *give* them meaning' (Cahill 2021, 28). It is a powerful mythology that leads to the idea that language is meaningless

unless it is interpreted, so that one arrives at meanings through interpretation. However, the results of such interpretation are undoubtedly taken as the *only* meaningful ones, and this gives them the impression of being natural.

The notion of practical holism, which I think aptly characterizes Wittgenstein's point, emphasizes that certainty, like the natural, is not a product of theorizing. If, as Cahill summarizes his discussion of these matters, 'there is no good reason to regard ordinary language as a theory' (Cahill 2021, 31), then one must accept that 'practical holism cum ordinary language can get along much longer and better without any theoretical stance, scientific or otherwise, than theorizing can get along without ordinary language' (26).

The distinction between practical and theoretical holisms helps to articulate the fundamental feature of Wittgenstein's thinking on the matter of naturalism: the natural frames the issues of making sense, not truthfulness. Effectively, the natural is the ground for theorizing, not the outcome of it (*cf.* OC §102, §§60–65). In Wittgenstein, the propositions that appeal to the natural show how making sense happens within a picture of the world that cannot be taken as a theoretical notion: 'I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness: nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false' (OC §94). What is important is that 'the propositions describing this world-picture might be part of a kind of mythology' (OC §95), and it is in dealing with them that 'at some point one has to pass from explanation to mere description' (OC §189). It is the task of philosophy to reveal that these mythologies in our language are just that – mythologies – without turning them into theoretical positions and declaring that these positions have the quality of ultimate certainty.

The implication of this idea for the present topic is that the background knowledge encompassed by the notion of practical holism is not privileged knowledge. It is hardly possible to speak of this knowledge as 'better,' '*more* certain', and thus 'justified' – at least within Wittgensteinianism that would be misleading talk. The upshot is that one cannot develop a theory of the natural and pretend that it has the quality of absolute certainty (this quality most certainly cannot be articulated in terms rigorous enough to be considered theoretical). One cannot replace a 'flawed', say, Frazer's, naturalism with a naturalism based on 'practical holism' – that would be another misleading metaphysics. In sum, one cannot build a theory on practical holism (while being able to propose a theory of holism), but one has to keep it as a background against which to assess theories. This, in fact, is what naturalism in the spirit of Wittgenstein might add to ongoing discussions: such naturalism is not a universal framework but is instead the attitude that proclaims the necessity of keeping assumptions under control.

What Wittgenstein's naturalism – if my interpretation of it is correct – can offer to the study of religion is the position that ensures that if the location problem arises, it doesn't lead to metaphysical clashes but to reflection on how we use language and how we can escape conceptual conundrums. The usual and probably the most established ways of locating religious phenomena are by decomposing them into elementary theoretical entities or by placing them on the scale of an emergent whole. I am not saying that either solution is wrong, but they both imply metaphysical choices which, as I have shown, may seem problematic simply because they are metaphysical.[19] Part of this metaphysics is that the explanatory principle that defines the location of 'entities' results from a tacit acceptance of certain linguistic ideologies that treat language as an inert mass. Certainly, language may be reduced to its bare representational function, if one wishes, but the question of how this is possible is rarely asked. The distinction between practical and theoretical holism highlights the plurality of ways in which language is used to produce theoretical knowledge. If,

in the end, naturalisms appear to be the result of accepting a particular form of language, their underlying metaphysical principles lose, at least in part, their compelling force.

Although Wittgenstein's naturalism may have other implications for the study of religion that I have not discussed in this paper (for instance, the possibility of observing meanings), I want to emphasize its normative character. Part of the problem with naturalism of non-Wittgensteinian varieties, as I have tried to show, is the loose boundary between a normative principle and its operationalizations in the form of a particular theoretical framework. Wittgensteinian naturalism, by being a 'negative discipline,' to use David Macarthur words (Macarthur 2018, 46), keeps the normative *as normative*, without justifying it, since any attempt at justification in this context would be doomed to result in a quasi-theoretical loop of self-reference.

Conclusion

Looking at Wittgenstein's naturalism through the lens of practical holism leads to several consequences. First, his naturalism, following the idea of philosophy's radical autonomy, is philosophical in Wittgenstein's sense of the term: philosophy does not build theories but seeks to reveal the mythologies in our language to free us from conceptual conundrums such as placement problems. Importantly, naturalism is a philosophical principle, and if it is so, it should not seek justification from science in order to be operative; otherwise, philosophy turns into metaphysical conundrums. Second, such a naturalism is thus entirely methodological because it does not imply the need to submit to a set of propositions or doctrines as its justification. In fact, it is hard to think about anything like a justification for Wittgenstein's naturalism apart from a very particular understanding of philosophy. But that understanding, in turn, is entrenched in the notion of human nature. After all, naturalism does not have to be scientific: philosophical and scientific naturalisms belong to different realms of human activity.

These two aspects of naturalism may contribute to religious studies some new ways of articulating the discipline's intellectual autonomy. First, Wittgensteinian naturalism offers a way of excluding non-natural commitments from studying religious phenomena – and I dare say in studying natural creatures like us in general – on non-scientistic grounds. It proclaims that it is in no way necessary to postulate some order of nature to frame phenomena as meaningful; on the contrary, Wittgensteinian naturalism accepts the variety of ways of sense-making as a primary thing from which one may go further on to formulate theories. In this perspective, it is not the case that the theories formulated, say, within the cognitive study of religion are futile – on the contrary, they are effective *as* theories, not as the framework to decide what is natural and what is not. Thus, the proposed version of naturalism depletes the location problem of its allegedly mandatory status (see B Smith 2017, 220): the emergence of the location problem simply signals that one takes for granted things in our language, which require reflection. One of such assumptions is that if an entity is not placed in natural order, then it is mysterious and non-natural. What naturalism in Wittgenstein's spirit offers is the way of looking at the natural order as something created by means of language ideologies rather than theories. Therefore, placement problems are not theoretical, but normative. However, if they are normative, they cannot be solved by theoretical means but rather revealed through reflection, and that is what Wittgensteinian naturalism might contribute to the study of religion.

Second, by focusing on language ideologies and not introducing the order of the natural, such naturalism keeps open the options of what can be taken as natural. Different forms of language give life to different ways of framing the natural, and the decision as to which is more natural is made within a particular concept formation, but not with the help of a metaphysically constructed order of the natural. Religious language, beliefs, practices may

be natural – that is we don't need to evoke non-natural entities or methods of justification to study them – in many ways, and, according to the Wittgensteinian version of naturalism, this variety is itself a crucial thing for understanding human nature. This position may contribute to religious studies a new version of interpretivism, one that doesn't reduce the source of meaning to one of the facets of human nature as a frame of truth-aptness. In this perspective, questions about the natural are not questions about truth but about making sense: thus, one doesn't have to frame the first-order statements through the second order for them to make sense, which move – from a Wittgensteinian point of view – inevitably leads to metaphysics and leaves no place for natural variety. Moreover, since these things are natural in many ways, the proposed version of naturalism does not endanger interdisciplinarity, which is universally recognized as a core academic value of religious studies, but which is always at risk when it is framed in terms of an all-encompassing and exclusivist programme justified by reference to a metaphysical order.

Notes

1. I proceed from the idea that philosophy of religion includes philosophy of religious studies (see Schilbrack 2014, 30 et passim and the special 2024 issue of *Religion*).
2. As is implicit in the Constitution of the IAHR, the largest association in the discipline (though not the only one of course). Now, 'neutrality' is another notorious category that can be so vague as to become epistemically empty and merely an ideological gesture. In the context of academic studies of religion through its long history starting from the late nineteenth century, neutrality is generally understood as the value of suspending a researcher's own religious and ideological views for the sake of giving intellectual justice to phenomena being studied. Needless to say, the competing paradigms – phenomenological, sociological, and cognitivist, to name the main ones – have very different understandings of what it means to give intellectual justice (and of whether an emphasis on neutrality merely serves as a backdoor for scientist ideologies – in this regard, Porpora 2006 still remains an important paper).
3. To avoid terminological ambiguity, by metaphysics I mean ontology theorized by linguistic means. In this I follow both Wittgenstein (see below) and Price (2009).
4. Exemplified by Ninian Smart's methodological agnosticism (Smart 1973, 67) and Peter Berger's methodological atheism (Berger 2011, 121), the positions that for a long time were *loci classici* in academic religious studies. Notice that the logic behind Smart's and, to a lesser extent, Berger's proposals is different from the logic that animates the notion of methodological naturalism in *philosophy,* where naturalism is considered methodological on the grounds that philosophy is supposed to be 'continuous with science' (in Quine's famous formulation). Throughout this article, I speak about methodological naturalism not in Quine's terms but in the sense the notion is used in religious studies.
5. See Forrest (2000, 8–9); an overview and the critique of the idea that naturalism can be a 'merely' attitude, see Spiegel 2023. I generally agree with his critique of naturalism as it is traditionally construed but argue that the Wittgensteinian type of naturalism (which implies that philosophy is independent from science) can still be presented as an attitude rather than a thesis.
6. See remarkably different explanations of this in Martin (2018) and Tuckett (2018)).
7. See, e.g. Sandy Boucher's arguments against 'a way of defining naturalism that may be independent of the connection with physicalism' (Boucher 2019, 62).
8. One of the frequent twists in the clash of naturalisms is to condemn the competing form as ideological, that is, to characterize it as not epistemic at all. This, however, takes the debate in directions I will not explore in this paper. Another twist is to interpret naturalism as a programme or attitude, as I noted earlier, which I think is more promising.
9. Justin Barrett claims that committing to methodological naturalism makes the cognitive study of religion scientific by providing a common ground for researchers 'from various metaphysical commitments' to study religion 'in entirely naturalistic terms' (Barret 2017, 195–196). This implies that 'nature' is unproblematically understood

in the same way by all scholars and is not a metaphysical notion itself. This assumption seems problematic in many ways.

10. Huw Price famously coined the term 'placement problem' (Price 2004, 73–74), Frank Jackson introduced the term 'location problem' (Jackson 2000, 4 et passim). I see these as synonyms and use Jackson's term for no specific reason.

11. See Donahue (2024), 9 (and the rest of the article) for the pros and cons of this.

12. This line unites very different trends in the study of religion from the critiques of ideology (Fitzgerald 2000; McCutcheon 2001) to the cognitive approaches.

13. I am of course leaving out the question of the continuity/discontinuity of Wittgenstein's thought. Yet it is important that even though – as one may argue – Wittgenstein's position remained more or less the same (see TLP 4.11; 6.53), the styles of his 'early' and 'later' philosophy were drastically different.

14. Even though the connection may be indirect – through Nietzsche and Hume (Price 2004, 73), the crucial claim of the non-representationalist understanding of language binds Prices' and Wittgenstein's positions together (291).

15. Of course, 'magic' and 'ritual' are not the same-order categories (as they are not in Frazer, who distinguished between magic and religion as evolutionary stages). I will generally use the terms interchangeably as if I were talking of a unified phenomenon just to save time and space, not because I think they are the same.

16. One must also remember that '"Observing" does not produce what is observed' (PI, p. 196).

17. Another question, which unfortunately I cannot discuss at length here, is to what extent Wittgenstein's naturalism is a reaction to a scepticism that is both produced by and resulted from declaring the supremacy of the kind of knowledge that is impossible to achieve. Cavell's idea of Wittgenstein's thrust at naturalizing philosophy is crucial here (Cavell 2004, 275; see also Cahill 2021, 29–30).

18. Another way of putting it, of course, would be Carnapian: making the internal questions a frame for the external ones.

19. The former option is characteristic of the scientific study of religion represented today mainly by the cognitive approaches; the latter option is represented, in particular, by Kevin Schilbrack and is generally characteristic of the liberal forms of naturalism. The particular problem, which I do not have space to discuss here, is that the emergent approaches often rely explicitly on metaphysics, while the scientific ones remain implicitly so, creating a serious tension given science's inherent suspicion of metaphysics.

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