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WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A NATURALIST IN THE HUMAN AND SOCIAL SCIENCES?
A COMMENT ON DANIEL ANDLER’S “IS NATURALISM THE UNSURPASSABLE PHILOSOPHY FOR THE SCIENCES OF MAN IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY?”

In the version of the paper “Is Naturalism the Unsurpassable Philosophy for the Sciences of Man in the Twenty-first Century?” Daniel Andler sent me a few days ago, he puts forth a position in the sciences of Man he starts calling liberalized naturalism. In the course of the paper’s development, however, Andler’s own brand of liberalized naturalism is further clarified as minimal naturalism. Further on, he characterizes minimal naturalism as methodological naturalism with philosophically wide open eyes. This is the complex term he ends up selecting as the designator of the position he wants to mark out. What is then methodological naturalism with philosophically wide open eyes?

Andler presents us his position in terms of a contrast with three other positions, namely, the positions he calls ‘anti-naturalistic’, ‘partly naturalistic’, and ‘fully naturalistic’. He tells us then that what distinguishes these positions in the sciences of Man is the kind of approach they favour to the object these sciences study: the anti-naturalistic position ascribes a privileged status to a formal approach, the partly naturalistic position ascribes a privileged status to a causal approach, and the fully naturalistic position wants to reconcile the formal with the causal approaches. Methodological naturalism with philosophically wide open eyes is then characterized by Andler as a position that deems the unilateral success of any of these three positions to be highly unlikely and that therefore calls for a combination of all of them in order to obtain results that might contribute to strengthen the research program of ontological naturalism. The term ontological naturalism is, in turn, defined as expressing a form of commitment towards the naturalist stance, namely, full acceptance. Finally, the naturalist stance is defined both in terms of the injunction Take natural science with the utmost seriousness and in terms of the commitment to some form of reduction of the realm of the non-natural into the realm of the natural.

Now, I suppose that, in the context of this colloquium, the question I am required to answer is the following: do I agree with Andler’s brand of ‘liberalized naturalism’? Well, it is difficult to give a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer right away. I feel that some ground needs to be clarified first. Thus, I will postpone my answer to the closing part of my comment.
Let me begin by identifying two aspects in Andler’s paper with which I experience major difficulties.

In the first place, it is difficult for me to see how blending naturalistic with anti-naturalistic views on the sciences of Man, as Andler encourages us to do, might contribute to define a philosophically coherent or stable position. This might not be a problem if Andler were just putting forth a pragmatic approach to the field of research and, consequently, refusing to take sides in the dispute between different philosophical ways of making sense of the first order knowledge actually produced by the sciences of Man; but his version of ‘liberalized naturalism’, no matter how liberal, is supposed to be a form of philosophical naturalism, namely, a form which implies full acceptance of the naturalist stance, and not a form of suspension of philosophical belief. I find this perplexing. However, I will not pursue this issue here, since I find the use of the labels ‘fully naturalistic’, ‘partly naturalistic’ and ‘anti-naturalistic’ in this context highly confusing.

Secondly, it is not at all clear to me that the strengthening of the research program of ontological naturalism in the sciences of Man, as defined by Andler, might possibly be achieved; thus, it is difficult for me to see how could one possibly contribute to such a strengthening. Let me belabour this point a little bit, as I think it is the most relevant.

As I mentioned above, liberalized naturalists of the form Andler specifies, are required to strengthen the research program of ontological naturalism. This research program is, in turn, characterized by a full acceptance of the naturalist stance. The acceptance of this stance is, in turn, characterized by the fulfilment of the two above mentioned requirements. I have troubles with the fulfilment of any of these requirements.

Here is what I find troubling with the fulfilment of the first requirement. The formulation of the injunction *Take natural science with the utmost seriousness* seems to me to imply that there is or that there should be a single field of research called ‘natural science’, the method of which is or should be unified and transparent. But I am not sure that there is or that there should be a method of natural science over and above the methods of the different natural sciences.

There are, of course, some general standards concerning, for instance, severity of testing, ways of making sure that the evidence is dealt with impartially, or definition of constraints on what may count as good evidence, which are common to all natural sciences. But these seem to me to be fairly general standards. In particular, I do not find it at all self-evident that many anthropologists, historians or linguists that consider themselves to be siding with interpretivism rather than with scientific explanation might not accept these general methodological standards as their own. As a matter of fact, lots of them do. However, if, in order to exclude them from the set we want to define, we try to make the methodological characterization of general natural science more specific, we will be bound to realize that natural sciences are less unified than we tended to think. We will be bound to realize, for instance, that some perfectly acceptable natural sciences do not live