Michael S. Hogue: The promise of religious naturalism
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Philosophical naturalists, much like philosophical pragmatists (and many of the former tend also to be included among the latter), typically eschew any rigid forms of dualism. Natural/supernatural is the primary target of their disdain, with nature/culture following closely in second place. The first dualism is dissolved by straightforwardly rejecting the existence of any sort of supernatural being or reality. The second is undermined by some kind of philosophical account that explains culture in terms of nature, by understanding humans as being naturally inclined to create a culture, or as naturally flourishing within a cultural milieu (so that, for example, it is as natural for humans to develop and use language and symbols as it is for birds to build nests or for bees to make honey). This resistance to dualisms is primarily motivated by philosophical considerations. Indeed, on purely logical criteria (such as the one supplied by Ockham’s razor), it is probably easier to defend a naturalistic perspective than its more complex alternatives.

When philosophical naturalists decide also to argue for a religious world view, however, the challenge that they confront is more formidable. Why banish the supernatural and yet cling to a religious symbolism and sensibilities? Why should one regard a purely naturalistic point of view as being in any sense “religious”? Moreover, if one begins with strictly naturalistic premises how is it possible to generate a morality of the detailed and robust variety that we usually associate with religion and religious communities? When George Santayana tersely reviewed John Dewey’s Terry Lectures as articulating “a very common faith indeed,” it is easy to assume that his comment was motivated by considerations linked to questions very much like these. Yet Santayana himself was also a religious naturalist of sorts, certainly not a defender of

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supernaturalism or traditional theological perspectives, which suggests that there are multiple ways of answering such questions, and more or less successful ways of responding to the challenge that they represent.

Michael Hogue’s assessment of *The Promise of Religious Naturalism* is especially valuable because it embodies a “critical appreciation” of various responses to such a challenge. One of its remarkable features is the success with which Hogue executes the task that he frames at the outset. This is no mere survey. Borrowing from Foucault’s methodology, Hogue proposes to engage in “appreciative criticism,” that is, “not only to analyze and to deconstruct but constructively and creatively to challenge, to bring to life, and to increase the ‘signs of existence’ of religious naturalism” (p. xxiv). Toward that end, he engages in an extended, detailed, and extraordinarily thoughtful consideration of the work of four thinkers: Loyal Rue, Jerome Stone, Donald Crosby, and Ursula Goodenough. Hogue admits to applying the Goldilocks principle of selection here; the writings of these thinkers are more accessible than certain “highly technical explanations” of religious naturalism on the one hand, yet also more “rigorous” and “systematic” than certain “popular expressions” of it on the other (p. 22).

Early on, Hogue casts suspicion on the validity of any traditionally western philosophical perspective “organized around sets of dualisms and binaries such as the mind and body, culture and nature, human and nonhuman, God and world, religion and science, faith and reason, and self and other” (p. xi). Religious naturalism, emerging historically on the “late side of modernity,” represents a “form of integral monism” that appears to be “taking its revenge on dualism” (p. xii). Hogue observes that western modernity resulted not in religion’s demise (as some had predicted) but in its significant transformation. Moreover, the attempt to develop science and technology as a safeguard to protect us from nature’s harsher aspects has “led to the increasing vulnerability of nature” itself (p. 2). On Hogue’s account, religious naturalism emerges through the “strained seams” of this paradoxical modern situation. Its purpose is to provide “a religiously meaningful and morally significant response to the perils of ecological crisis and the possibilities of religious pluralism” (p. 4; italics here and elsewhere are Hogue’s).

Any religious naturalism worth its salt, Hogue contends, will accommodate rather than resist the fact of religious pluralism. It will also be open to, not in competition with, the claims and methods of the natural sciences. But the greatest “promise” of religious naturalism for Hogue is its ethical upshot, the quality and clarity of moral vision that it embodies, most especially, its overall utility as that “response to the perils of ecological crisis.” Furthering the attempt to make good on that promise is this book’s *raison d’etre*. That is to say, what Hogue appreciates most of all about religious naturalism is its “potential to become a significant contributor to living through the vulnerability of the present” (p. 225).

On my reading, “promise” is a stronger word than “potential” and Hogue uses both words somewhat interchangeably to describe the multifarious intellectual resources that religious naturalism can provide. Of course, in a literal sense only persons can make promises, so that the word as it appears in Hogue’s title is surely being used metaphorically. I pause over what may seem like an excessively subtle linguistic distinction, because it helps to frame Hogue’s claims appropriately, to underscore their tentative and modest character. Ecological survival is not the automatic result of affirming the