



NATURE TAKING ITS COURSE

"The natural course of events" is often referred to as a benign, if not a wonderful thing. At times, to be sure, it can be welcome and even appreciated. Normal human development is an example of this. For who would be pleased even with a newborn if it were to remain, forever, a newborn? At other times "the natural course of events" is unwelcome, but still it is implied that it is to be accepted as a good thing precisely because it is "natural."

In truth, "natural" can be a bad thing, even when it must be accepted when and because there are no other options. Old age, disease, and disasters of all kinds are natural, as are rattlesnakes, Ebola, and cyanide. When people say they prefer that "nature be allowed to take its course" what they really mean is that they don't want to begin or continue interventions that are futile or can be expected to make matters worse. When someone is in pain and suffering from a serious illness, for example, no one in their right mind suggests "allowing nature to take its course" when there is an effective treatment available that would restore them to health.

In reality, nature always "takes its course." How could this not be so when everything that happens is a part of "the natural course of events?" Penicillin, pesticides and plutonium aren't supernatural, after all! They, too, follow the natural regularities that are so much a part of objective reality that we call them "laws of nature." Human interventions that are said not to be "natural" are, in fact, as natural as any other purposive action taken by living things, including such simple behaviors as a mosquito's following the scent of its perspiring warm prey, a plant's roots seeking water or even a virus particle's binding the specific molecule on a cell membrane that gains it entry. Indeed, where in the world of objective reality is there anything which is not natural?

Of course, part of the enterprise of science is, by discovering "laws of nature," to devise technologies that allow the manipulation of objective reality. But such technologies only work to the degree that they make the most of – by depending on! – "the natural course of events." Or, as Francis Bacon (1561-1626) put it:

"Nature, to be commanded, must be obeyed."

Most intelligent people have a deep interest in and respect for humanity's understanding of the natural world and "natural law." Many unbelievers, in particular, prefer to take notice of and celebrate the astronomical events – such as the solstice coming next month – that gave rise to the major holidays now claimed by various systems of supernatural faith that go under the label of "religion." Now, more than ever, the forces of nature, from evolution by natural selection to gravity, quantum mechanics and the newest findings of dark matter and dark energy, offer much food for thought and inspiration. Our 21st-Century civilization depends critically on the technologies of science so that not to have a solid grasp of science is, in a very important sense, not to have an appreciation of our modern way of life.

Some people seem to make a fetish of "nature" and the "natural." But they take this to exclude all human action and, in particular, anything – and often everything – having to do with science and technology. This ideology, carried towards its logical conclusion, sees all but the most primitive means of subsistence as "unnatural," "artificial" and corrupting of a kind of sacred purity of the "nature" they have in mind. Carried a little further, this becomes a belief that humanity itself is fundamentally evil and a danger to the planet. Paradoxically, this anthropomorphizes the planet – minus humans – as a kind of being with its own meaning, purpose and rights. The only thing for people to do, on this view, besides feeling guilty about their mere existence, is to have as little effect on their surroundings and other living things as possible. That is, to make make their existence imperceptible.

Others of this persuasion have had bolder suggestions. In accepting the 2006 Distinguished Texas Scientist Award from the Texas Academy of Science, for example, UT-Austin Professor Eric Pianka suggested that an airborne version of the Ebola virus could reduce the human population to 5% of its current level, saying that "the world, including all [surviving] humanity, would clearly be much better off." He defended his remarks by saying that "this idea has been espoused by ecologists for at least four decades and is nothing new. People just don't want to hear it." Indeed, in 1988 Prince Phillip, Duke of

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Edinburgh, said that, if he were to be reincarnated: "I would like to return as a deadly virus, in order to contribute something to solve overpopulation." (Phillip is the father of four and the grandfather of eight.)

The religion of "natural" is a curious one that is no less irrational and counterfactual – and hypocritical – than the traditional supernatural religions. In some forms it even includes nontraditional supernatural beliefs such as "subtle energies," other-dimensional mysticism and various concepts of the "New Age" movement. As with other religions, its ideas also affect the popular culture and become incorporated into what "everyone knows" to be true. The word "natural," for example, has become a marketing slogan. People take "natural" to mean "risk-free," "healthy" and "good for you" to the point where they never question such "obvious" connections.

But these ideas and the attitudes they create are also more than a little problematic. For they can threaten the ability of democratic societies to make wise decisions. Overpopulation is a real problem, after all, but most women, when allowed to have fewer children and improve their standard of living, generally choose to do so. Likewise, anthropogenic carbon emissions have and are causing climate change and perhaps one of the most promising solutions is nuclear power. Vaccines, meanwhile, though demonized by many adherents of the "natural" religion, have shown their effectiveness and are the only possible way to address new disease threats like Ebola. Drawing irrational distinctions between what is "natural" and what is not, pretending that the one is good and the other evil, and stirring up baseless fears is as dumb as thinking to solve the problem of poverty with the biblical Jesus's admonition to "sell all you have and give to the poor."

Humanity is long past being able to choose between living "naturally" and making the most of the fruits of science. Of course, everything has its good and bad, its benefits, risks and dangers. Even the wheel has doubtless contributed to the modern scourge of obesity. The trick is to have a clear-eyed understanding of our actions and their likely consequences and an ongoing willingness to do better. Everything that happens is an instance of "nature taking its course." But if human ingenuity and effort is a part of the process, we can reasonably expect that things will go better than if they are not.

**PLANNED FOR NEXT MONTH:
"WINTER HOLIDAYS"**

**>>> Sunday, December 7th, 2014 <<<
SHERATON GRAND DFW AIRPORT
CORNER OF 114 AND ESTERS**

All NTCOF events can be found through our website calendar , or our meetup page, from which you can RSVP, at:

**- www.meetup.com/church-of-freethought -
JOIN THE NTCOF MEETUP GROUP !!!**

Social Luncheon: Today, immediately after our Service, join us for lunch and discussion. Today we meet at the Jason's Deli on MacArthur Blvd just south of 635, at 7707 N MacArthur Blvd, phone (972) 432-0555.

Freethought Salon: Get together to discuss today's service topic or other conundrums of interest for Freethinkers. It happens most non-1st Sundays, over breakfast, at the Hilton DFW Lakes Hotel restaurant in Grapevine beginning 10:30 AM; see the meetup site!

Game Night: The regular game night crew meets nearly every Friday night at the IHOP on 2310 Stemmons Trail (I-35), near Northwest Highway (Loop 12). Plan to arrive at about 7:30 PM, and stay late playing Risk, Rummikub, and other fun games!

Have Another Idea? Email or call us about it!

"There is no condition so severe that you cannot reverse it by choosing different thoughts. However, choosing different thoughts requires focus and practise. If you continue to focus as you have been, to think as you have been, and to believe as you have been, then nothing in your experience will change."

- Mary Ann Hickman

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TO THE NTCOF ARE NEEDED,
APPRECIATED,
AND TAX-DEDUCTIBLE!!**



The North Texas Church of Freethought
The Fellowship of Unbelievers

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