



## Research Paper

# The Philosophical Implications of Neo-Darwinian Naturalism in Explaining the Meaning of Life: An Assessment of John Cottingham's Critiques

Amirabbas Alizamani\*<sup>1</sup> , Abdolalrasol Kashfi<sup>2</sup> , Mohammad Hossein Shahbazy<sup>3</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor of Philosophy of religion, Faculty of theology, University of tehran, Tehran, Iran. [amir\\_alizamani@ut.ac.ir](mailto:amir_alizamani@ut.ac.ir)

<sup>2</sup> Assistant professor, Department of philosophy of religion, Faculty of theology, University of tehran, Tehran, Iran. [akashfi@ut.ac.ir](mailto:akashfi@ut.ac.ir)

<sup>3</sup> Doctoral student, Philosophy of religion, Faculty of theology, University of tehran, Qom, Iran. [mhshahbazy@iran.ir](mailto:mhshahbazy@iran.ir)



[10.22080/jep.2026.31535.1329](https://doi.org/10.22080/jep.2026.31535.1329)

## Received:

April 13, 2026

## Accepted:

May 12, 2026

## Available online:

May 29, 2026

## Keywords:

Naturalism, Meaning, Meaning of Life, John Cottingham, Neo-Darwinism

## Abstract

In the contemporary era, the paradigm of ontological naturalism has achieved such dominance that it has permeated various domains of knowledge, notably the realm of the meaning of life. In response to the problem of meaning, naturalists have adopted diverse approaches: one group, embracing scientific nihilism, posits that science has demonstrated the universe to be devoid of any objective meaning or purpose; others, adopting a subjectivist approach, deny meaning any external reality, regarding it as a subjective phenomenon contingent upon personal satisfaction; another faction employs evolutionary genealogy (biological reductionism) to interpret human meaning and values purely in terms of survival mechanisms and evolutionary processes; while yet another cohort utilizes objectivist approaches in an attempt to discover objective foundations for meaning within the material world itself, without resorting to the supernatural. Many of these approaches have been subjected to rigorous critique by thinkers such as John Cottingham, He levels fundamental criticisms against naturalistic frameworks, contending that none provide an adequate response to the problem of meaning. The present study employs an analytical-critical approach to examine these critiques in order to evaluate their validity. An analysis of Cottingham's perspective and the foundations of naturalism reveals that his primary criticisms are entirely sound; for these approaches not only conflict with our deepest moral intuitions, but they also fail to provide a proper interpretation of meaningfulness within the realm of lived experience, ultimately leading to an existential vacuum. Consequently, to attain authentic meaning, there is no alternative but to return to a metaphysical framework.

\*Corresponding Author: Amirabbas Alizamani

Address: University of tehran, Tehran, Iran.

Email: [amir\\_alizamani@ut.ac.ir](mailto:amir_alizamani@ut.ac.ir)

Tel: 09123530078



## Extended Abstract

### 1. Introduction

In the contemporary era, naturalism is no longer merely one epistemological approach among many; it has acquired a dominant position within Western intellectual systems. Specifically, ontological naturalism, heavily bolstered by Neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory, claims comprehensive explanatory power over all human phenomena. It asserts that biological mechanisms can account for everything from physical traits to moral and spiritual inclinations, operating on the premise that physical facts determine all other realities. This paradigm shift has transformed Neo-Darwinism from a strict biological framework into a metaphysical worldview, acting as a universal "acid" that dissolves and fundamentally alters traditional concepts.

Consequently, ontological naturalism has deeply infiltrated the philosophical discourse surrounding the "meaning of life". Naturalists have adopted various stances regarding human purpose. Some endorse scientific nihilism, arguing that science has definitively proven the universe lacks objective meaning or teleological goals. Others lean toward evolutionary subjectivism and biological reductionism, interpreting human values and the quest for meaning merely as internal constructs driven by survival mechanisms and genetic history. The pervasive denial of any external, cosmic, or divine meaning has prompted severe criticism from theistic rationalists. John Cottingham, a prominent philosopher of religion, argues that naturalism fails to provide an adequate answer to the question of meaning and actively destroys the foundational pillars required for life to remain genuinely meaningful. This study

aims to systematically evaluate Cottingham's critiques against naturalistic approaches to determine their epistemological validity.

### 2. Methods

This research employs an analytical-critical methodology to assess the philosophical confrontation between Neo-Darwinian naturalism and theistic rationalism concerning the meaning of life. The study first systematically analyzes the core components and philosophical appendages of Neo-Darwinism that elevate it from a methodological framework to an ontological "mega-paradigm". Subsequently, it categorizes the primary naturalistic responses to the meaning of life into pessimistic (nihilism) and optimistic (subjectivism and evolutionary objectivism) frameworks. Finally, the research critically evaluates John Cottingham's counter-arguments by dissecting his four-step critique, measuring his philosophical assertions against both the foundational claims of naturalism and the concrete realities of human existential experience.

### 3. Results

The investigation reveals that ontological naturalism inherently leads to four destructive metaphysical consequences regarding the meaning of life: the denial of the sacred realm, the rejection of cosmic teleology, the negation of objective moral values, and the existential demotion of humanity's status in the universe. Within this purposeless framework, naturalistic attempts to construct meaning—whether through Rosenberg's "benign nihilism" or Metz's objective naturalism—lack a robust ontological foundation.

Cottingham confronts these naturalistic dead-ends through a structured, four-step philosophical



critique: First, he establishes the legitimacy of the question of meaning against positivist attempts to dismiss it as a pseudo-problem, arguing that the human thirst for meaning is an intrinsic, objective reality of our existence. Second, Cottingham exposes the inherent methodological limitations of scientific language. Relying on Aristotelian causal distinctions, he demonstrates that while science efficiently answers questions of material and efficient causation, it is fundamentally incapable of addressing "teleological" or final causes, which are essential for defining a comprehensive purpose. Third, he elucidates the devastating ontological consequences of Darwinian naturalism. Cottingham argues that a universe governed by blind chance dismantles the objectivity, universality, and normativity of ethics. This metaphysical vacuum inevitably subjects modern humanity to profound alienation, despair, continuous susceptibility to failure, and existential fragility. Fourth, Cottingham demonstrates the inadequacy of secular subjectivism. He argues that "meaningfulness" is a robust, objective concept that cannot be reduced to mere personal satisfaction; authentic meaning requires human actions to be directed toward independent, objectively valuable ends.

#### 4. Conclusion

The critical assessment concludes that Cottingham's critiques successfully expose the structural insufficiencies of naturalistic approaches. Ontological naturalism reaches a philosophical dead-

end across three main axes. First, it stands in direct opposition to fundamental moral intuitions, which naturally attest to the objectivity of values, cosmic teleology, and human dignity—concepts that biological reductionism inherently dismantles. Second, the psychological and existential consequences of a purely materialistic worldview inevitably generate profound alienation, despair, and fragility. Third, within the realm of lived experience and concrete human existence, naturalism fails to provide adequate solace or authentic direction during profound crises, often resulting in existential collapse. Ultimately, achieving genuine meaning requires returning to a metaphysical framework where moral values and teleology are authentic truths rooted in the structure of reality, preserving the transcendent status of humanity.

#### Funding

There is no funding support.

#### Authors' contribution

All authors contributed to the evaluation and review of the manuscript, and the corresponding author holds overall responsibility for the study.

#### Conflict of interest

Authors declared no conflict of interest.

#### Acknowledgments

This article is extracted from a doctoral dissertation. The authors would like to express their gratitude to the University of Tehran for providing the academic environment to conduct this research.



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