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The Encounter Between Naturalistic Atheism and Christian Theism



Michael Peterson (b. 1950) sets the debate between atheism and theism in the larger context of a worldview conflict between naturalism, which entails atheism, and Christian belief, which entails theism. He tries to show that Christian theism has intellectual resources that can handle both arguments against theism and arguments for atheism. Then he compares the capacity of atheistic naturalism and Christian theism to generate credible explanations of many important features of reality, such as consciousness, mind, morality, and personhood. He concludes that such impressive phenomena are not likely to occur in a naturalistic universe and that naturalists provide explanations of them that are reductionistic and strained. However, in a universe described by Trinitarian Christian theism, which was created by a supremely intelligent, moral, personal, and relational being, it is much more likely that finite consciousness, mind, morality, and personhood would arise.

In academia and broader society, the intellectual conflict between theism and atheism continues. Theism is the belief that an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good personal spiritual being exists who is creator and sustainer of the universe; this being is designated God. Positive atheism is the belief that God does not exist, i.e., the denial of theism. Negative atheism withholds belief in God and is equivalent to agnosticism. This essay analyzes the debate between theism and positive atheism.

The dispute between theism and atheism is fundamentally a clash between two opposing explanations

of reality. An explanation of everything is a worldview—a comprehensive conceptual framework that makes sense of important features of life and the world. Both theists and atheists advance key arguments and cite significant evidence for their positions. Thorough worldview assessment must evaluate all of the arguments, pro and con, and look for the best interpretation of all of the evidence. This essay outlines why theism is much more plausible than atheism as an explanation of reality as we know it.

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NATURALISM AS THE WORLDVIEW HOME OF CONTEMPORARY ATHEISM

Frankly, neither theism nor atheism per se is a comprehensive worldview. Theism is an essential belief component of the three great theistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The unique doctrines and teachings of each of these religions then give nuance and texture to the definitions of the theistic attributes (e.g., defining the kind of power God possess, the kind of goodness, etc.). As each religion projects its worldview, it gives philosophical expression to its distinctive concepts of the divine purposes, the nature and status of humanity, and many other phenomena. Although basic theism makes some important claims, it does not contain enough information to form a complete worldview. Theism needs a larger, more complete explanatory framework—i.e., some established religious tradition that entails it. In attempting to rationally defend and recommend specifically Christian belief, many thinkers simply settle for defending theism. (Or, in discussing basic theism, they sometimes include elements of the Christian story, if only implicitly.) One reason for the focus on theism is the minimalist presumption that there is less to defend and less for the critic to attack. Anchoring both defense of and argument for Christian belief in basic theism is sometimes appropriate to make a certain point or answer a certain criticism, but this approach often lacks sufficient information to handle adequately some extremely difficult and complex issues. That is why I recommend utilizing the fuller intellectual resources of Christian theological understanding in order to effectively engage the issues.

Atheism, too, is a minimalist commitment. The simple denial that God exists does not provide any other information about the nature of ultimate reality that illuminates and makes understandable key facts about our existence. In secularized Western culture, the default worldview for atheism is philosophical naturalism. Philosophical naturalism is constituted by the following claims: that physical nature alone is real; that there are no supernatural beings such as God or gods; that genuine knowledge

is obtained through empirical procedures as exemplified by science; that all phenomena in the universe are in principle explicable by reference to the ultimate reality of nature which is the totality of physical things and their operations; that the whole physical system is causally closed to supernatural or nonnatural influence. Naturalism entails atheism and provides general explanations for important phenomena that constitute the structural features of the world. These explanations play out in the typical cluster of naturalist views: a materialist view of the nature of mind and self, a deterministic view of the human will, and relativism regarding morality. Any meaning in life is what we make of it, and any human excellence we achieve must be accomplished in this life or not at all. There is no overarching meaning of life or purpose for existence. Epistemologically, naturalists tend to hold strong empiricist commitments, which strongly incline them to look to science as the definitive mode of human knowledge and as a ready support for their metaphysics. In contemporary analytic philosophy, which is the predominant mode of philosophy in Anglo-American universities, atheistic naturalism, according to Jaegwon Kim, is the prevailing ideology.¹

So, the irreconcilable worldview conflict in our focus is between atheistic naturalism and Christian theism as intellectual competitors. How does each worldview employ its fundamental metaphysical and epistemological commitments to answer a broad range of deep human questions about the nature of rationality, morality, human personhood, and the ultimate meaning and purpose of existence? The exploration of this question requires articulating as we go the fuller philosophical dimension of specifically Christian religion. It is worth observing that the philosophy of naturalism—which argues against the truth of religion—actually performs religious functions in focusing its adherents on some ultimate reality and providing a framework for creating a vision for living. Richard Carrier says that naturalism is a philosophy in which “worship is replaced with curiosity, devotion with diligence, holiness with sincerity, ritual with study, and scripture with the whole world and the whole of human learning.”²

SCIENCE, EVOLUTION, AND ATHEISTIC NATURALISM

Naturalists claim that science assists them in their refutation of religion in general and theistic belief in particular. This is generally a two-fold claim: first, that the *method of science* adequately explains phenomena by reference to purely physical causes; second, that the *content of science*, its accumulated knowledge, indicates that nature encompasses the whole of reality such that God is either not necessary or nonexistent. It is common to call the rational procedure of science *methodological naturalism* and to argue that this method, which has produced so many successes in the investigation of the physical world, should be emulated in all disciplines seeking bona fide knowledge. Randall Dipert's essay in *The Future of Naturalism* surveys the ongoing effort to make philosophy more scientific—e.g., by generating knowledge about the natural world, comparing theories with evidence, etc.³

According to naturalists, the actual findings of science reveal a world with its own regular laws and processes, not a world acted upon by deity. For instance, it is argued from cosmic evolution that the Big Bang, not God, brought everything else into existence, and that astronomy and cosmology since Galileo have shown that the earth and our solar system are minor structures in the vast context of the cosmos. To the naturalist, our smallness and our remoteness suggest that an atheistic interpretation of reality makes more sense. Perhaps more prominent in recent years is the claim that biological evolution supports the worldview of atheistic naturalism. Richard Dawkins makes the point this way:

An atheist before Darwin could have said, following Hume: "I have no explanation for complex biological design. All I know is that God isn't a good explanation, so we must wait and hope that somebody comes up with a better one." I can't help feeling that such a position, though logically sound, would have left one feeling pretty unsatisfied, and that although atheism might have been *logically* tenable before Darwin, Darwin made it possible to be an *intellectually fulfilled atheist* [emphasis added].⁴

An atheistic outlook can now combine the details of evolutionary science with philosophical naturalism to form a comprehensive explanation of how the living world came to be—an approach that makes no appeal to divine creative activity.

Naturalism's Grand Narrative, then, prominently includes its interpretation of evolutionary cosmology, evolutionary biology, and other facts of science. The story goes roughly as follows: The universe originates by chance from the Big Bang, undergoes violent and cataclysmic development to reach its present shape, gives rise on a small planet to life, which emerges and evolves by chance. Human beings are late arrivals, more sophisticated in degree than our primate ancestors, but not different in kind. All things operate within a vast network of both universal laws (e.g., gravitation) and probabilistic laws (e.g., quantum mechanics). The universe will eventually end—either in something like the Big Freeze as galaxies fly farther apart and become so cool that they cannot sustain life or the Big Crunch as gravity overcomes the expansive effects of the Big Bang to make all of the matter in the universe collapse upon itself in a violent heat death. What we know is that there is an ending out there—and that all the matter and energy in the universe will transmute into some other scenario that we cannot imagine. In this vision of reality, there is no God, nothing is intrinsically valuable, and the universe has no inherent purpose. "Human destiny," as Ernest Nagel observes, is "an episode between two oblivions."⁵

The modern atheistic story of the universe obviously clashes with the traditional theistic story of God as creator, the world as his creation, and humanity as the focus of his loving purposes. From the atheist side, it is not difficult to envision how this clash must unfold intellectually: theistic arguments for God's existence must be shown ineffective and convincing arguments for atheism must be advanced. In *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification*, Michael Martin presents his version of this project, which follows two general strategies.⁶ First, he seeks to rebut theistic arguments, the ontological, cosmological, and teleological arguments as well as arguments from miracles, consciousness, and morality. Second, he offers atheistic

arguments that concept of God (as omnipotence, omniscience, etc.) is logically incoherent, that the problem of evil (coupled with the failure of theistic defenses and theodicies) makes God's existence unlikely, and that the universe is not created by a single intelligent being. Of course, there are many other atheistic arguments that deserve careful scrutiny as well.

Since I cannot in this essay treat all of the arguments that atheistic thinkers have made against theism or proposed for atheism, I select two important arguments for attention. The first atheistic argument performs the negative function of critiquing the cosmological argument. The second is a positive argument for the nonexistence of God based on the evidence of evil. My responses are designed to show how the resources of distinctively Christian theism—not just of theism *per se*—can be utilized to meet the challenge of atheistic naturalism.

DOES THE COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT REST ON A FALSE PRINCIPLE?

Atheist philosopher Adolf Grünbaum correctly states that the cosmological argument rests on the assumption that contingent existence requires necessary existence. For if the cosmos is contingent and not necessary, then we must move toward the theistic conclusion that there is a necessary being upon which the cosmos depends. Grünbaum seeks to undercut the intuition behind this principle, which he identifies as Leibniz's Principle of Sufficient Reason: "nothing takes place without sufficient reason, . . . a reason sufficient to determine why it is thus and not otherwise."⁷ Theistic thinkers to the contrary claim that we should indeed be surprised at the existence of the cosmos and ask, with Leibniz, the profound cosmological question: Why is there something rather than nothing? This creates logical space for cosmological reasoning: since something exists that is not necessary, there must have been an operative cause of its existence. Grünbaum argues that it is a mistake to think that, in the absence of an overriding cause, such as God, the null world would naturally arise or that the null world

is somehow more likely among all other possible contingent worlds. If Grünbaum is right that the nonexistence of the null world should not be surprising or puzzling, then no explanation is required for its nonexistence. If no explanation is needed for why some non-null world exists instead of the null world, the cosmological argument loses traction.

Unfortunately, Grünbaum makes two mistakes, the first a subtle matter of logic. He argues that there is no clear consensual criterion for what, if anything, makes one contingent possible world more likely to exist, such that there is nothing intrinsic to the concept of the null world (e.g., conceptual simplicity) that makes it more likely to exist or more natural to arise than any other worlds. Taking it as axiomatic that some contingent state of affairs will exist, even if it is the null world, Grünbaum insists that there should be no puzzlement at the existence of some non-null world. However, his reasoning conflates sets of modals to equate logical possibility and ontological contingency. It is one thing to engage in abstract reasoning about the possibility of different contingent worlds, and even about the unsurprising nature of a non-null world. However, in regard to the present question of why something exists at all, such arguments completely underestimate how the situation changes dramatically when contingent *being* enters the picture. Once real finite beings—ontologically contingent entities that need not exist—populate the possible world that happens to be actual, we are no longer strictly talking the logic of possibility. The metaphysics of *being* comes into play. The deep metaphysical intuition of the cosmological argument is that only an actual being can bestow being. Given that there is contingent being, there must be a necessary being that has the power to confer being upon it. The cosmological argument is more difficult to dismiss than imagined.

Grünbaum's second mistake is to extend his critique to the Judeo-Christian doctrine of creation out of nothing (*ex nihilo*), which is importantly linked to cosmological reasoning. The theological doctrine reflects the logic of pure monotheism: that only God is self-existent, with no co-existing factors, and that he created and sustains everything else. Grünbaum

reminds us approvingly that Aristotle held that the universe is eternal and uncreated—that it did not need an external cause. Then Grünbaum predictably invokes modern science as supplying evidence regarding whether it is natural or not for something to come from nothing in the absence of God as ex nihilo. He references both Big Bang and Steady State models in cosmology to show that each model, in its own way, allows that something can come from nothing without divine creative action. The Friedmann Big Bang model posits a three-dimensional universe that expands from a punctual big bang to a maximum finite size and then contracts into a punctual crunch, with no need for a supernatural agency to generate or sustain its total mass out of nothing. The universe simply comes into being. On the Bondi and Gold Steady State model, now defunct, Hubble's discovery of the mutual recession of galaxies requires that new matter (as hydrogen atoms) must literally pop into existence in order to keep the total mass of the universe constant. Again, matter can come from nothing, according to Grünbaum. Stephen Hawking proposes a related strategy in *The Grand Design* when he argues that "the universe can create itself out of nothing," given quantum gravity.⁸

Grünbaum's error here is complex. For one thing, he assumes that there is only one type of explanation, physical and scientific as opposed to metaphysical and theological. It is not unexpected, then, that he erroneously deploys some proposed scientific explanations as though they are metaphysical explanations. Yet the scientific models that he (or Hawking or anyone else) invokes apply only when *some* physical system is already present in *some* form (including its governing laws) such that it can undergo change and bring about new events. So, one scientific theory may describe how the universe comes into existence "out of nothing" (so to speak) only to develop and collapse. Another theory may assume the eternal steady state existence of the universe but posit new matter being created "out of nothing" (so to speak). And so it goes. All of this is perfectly legitimate for science to explore within the domain of physics and physical cosmology. Within the discipline of science, the language of "something coming into being out of nothing" may even be used—that is, "nothing" as far

as science can determine within its own framework. But "nothing" in scientific theories is hardly the radical and fundamental use of the term which means "absolutely nothing" in metaphysical considerations. As the medievals taught us: out of nothing, nothing comes (*ex nihil, nihil fit*). Out of genuine, absolute nothingness, you get nothing.

Science simply cannot explain why the physical system—with its components and lawful processes—exists and is there for science itself to investigate empirically. Why the universe is there for science is a matter for metaphysics to address. Grünbaum implicitly acknowledges this: in trying to prove that there need not be a transcendent cause distinct from the universe as a whole, that a metaphysical stopping point is not required, he simply opts for a different metaphysical stopping point, nature itself. Yet positing the supremacy of nature, the total physical system, is not science; it is a confident metaphysical assertion. In trying to prove that there need not be a self-existent reality, he has accepted that there must indeed be some self-existent reality. The looming choice is between God and Nature as the Ultimate Reality, the Self-existent Fact. The theist asks: is the self-existence or self-creation of the universe we know a better explanation of its existence, or is God's creating the universe a better explanation? Since the cosmos appears contingent, as Grünbaum admits at the outset, the theist argues that God must be the necessary being upon whom it depends. Compared to naturalism, then, theism is a more plausible explanation of why the cosmos exists because it clearly recognizes the possibility that a powerful personal deity could create a finite cosmos. It is not so clear, however, that naturalism can make it plausible metaphysically that the cosmos is either eternal or created itself.

Beyond the question of the sheer existence of the cosmos, which theism appears to answer better, Christian understanding provides further insight into why a powerful and loving personal deity would actually choose to create: to give the gift of finite personal existence and the invitation to relate to God. With this central goal, key features of the actual universe—rationality, morality, relationality, and the like—are explained better by reference to the rational, moral,

relational God described in Christian theological teachings. I will develop such points as we proceed.

DOES THE PROBLEM OF EVIL MAKE ATHEISM RATIONALLY PREFERABLE TO THEISM?

Before discussing how Christian theism explains significant features of the universe we inhabit, let us consider the argument that the phenomenon of evil is strong evidence for atheism. William Rowe reasons as follows: it is likely that gratuitous evils exist; but if God exists, then no gratuitous evils exist; therefore, it is likely that God does not exist.⁹ Gratuitous evil is commonly defined as evil which is not necessary to a greater good or the prevention of an evil equally bad or worse. Rowe defends the factual premise that probably there are gratuitous evils by arguing that neither Skeptical Theist Defense (which claims that finite human cognitive abilities cannot fathom how the infinite divine wisdom arranges the relationship between evils and greater goods) nor the array of familiar theodicies (which propose free will, natural law, soul-making, and other greater goods as justification for evils) make it unreasonable to believe that there is gratuitous evil.

Philosophers on both sides have largely conformed to Rowe's restrictions on the debate. The first restriction is to assess the effect of evil on the probability of theism without consideration of other evidence that could raise or lower the probability of theism. Second, Rowe stipulates that he is discussing *restricted standard theism* (standard theism apart from any other claims about God, etc.) and does not consider any form of *expanded standard theism* (i.e., standard theism conjoined with other claims about God, etc.). Yet, when summarizing his position, Rowe unwittingly abandons his own restriction on allowable evidence:

... in this age of reason and science, for many human beings the idea of God no longer plays an *essential, rational* role in explaining the world and human existence. The idea that human suffering may be divine punishment for human sin and wickedness is no longer a credible explanation for many educated human

beings. My own inclination is to think that given the horrendous evils in our world, the absence of the God who supposedly walked with Adam and Eve in the garden is evidence that there is no God.¹⁰

Rowe is saying that the deliverances of reason and science—i.e., other evidence in addition to evil—contribute to a naturalistic (nonsupernaturalistic) explanation of reality which rings truer to modern sensibilities than outmoded religious explanations. For him, all that reason and science tell us tips the rational scales more markedly for atheism. In expressing his considered position, Rowe unwittingly abandons his “restricted standard atheism” and gestures toward some form of “expanded standard atheism.” In effect, he augments his atheism with a naturalist vision of the world. This makes my point that neither theism nor atheism contain enough information to explain the complex reality we face.

Christian theists have spent too much time attacking the factual premise of the argument, which Rowe reasonably grounds in two ways: first, in considering many evils, we can see no point or purpose or higher good; second, the large number of apparently gratuitous evils makes it likely that at least some of them are really gratuitous. Both philosophical realism, which assumes the general reliability of our moral assessments, and theological orthodoxy, which affirms that our capacity for moral judgment and evaluation is a divinely bestowed gift, support acceptance of the factual premise. My own instincts are that orthodox Christian theists should spend time exposing fallacies in the theological premise that God would not allow gratuitous evil.¹¹ The Christian narrative states that God willed that there be personal beings that could freely choose the great good of loving him and their fellows. Free will, in effect, is the power to bring about various goods as well as many evils which the world would be better off without. Moreover, God embedded these finite personal beings in a physical order, which runs more or less by its own lawful processes that may not always accommodate our agendas or needs. The burden on the Christian thinker is not to show that every evil is necessary to a greater good or that evils in aggregate help make this a better world; instead it is to argue effectively that this is a good kind of world on the whole because it is one in which nondetermined

freedom occurring within stable structure allows for very great goods, such as relationship, love, self-giving, and noble achievements.

Of course, the Christian story further addresses the damage to God's creation caused by the misuse of creaturely free will and the large variety of natural evils as well. Those arguing for bare theism can only speak of these matters as logical possibilities within God's creation, but historic Christian teaching affirms these things as fact. Furthermore, the Christian narrative contains more penetrating insights that shift emphasis away from God's willing or allowing evils in order to achieve greater goods or prevent evils equally bad or worse. One insight is that openness in God's creation to alternative outcomes, at the level of personal agency as well as natural process, makes possible gratuitous evils. A further insight is that, given that bad things happen in God's world, God works redemptively with those who suffer those evils in order to bring some good. There is no pressure on Christian believers to accept the principle that God meticulously arranges the world such that every evil which happens is necessary to a greater good. Rejecting this principle eliminates the theological premise—which means that gratuitous evil, although a difficult reality both intellectually and emotionally, does not have the evidential force for atheism that Rowe and other critics think.

THE EXPLANATORY POWER OF CHRISTIAN THEISM VERSUS ATHEISTIC NATURALISM

I showed above how Christian theism can answer attempts to undercut classical cosmological reasoning and to use evil as a major anchor for atheism. These and other points need to be pursued in greater technical detail—not as a highly circumscribed debate between theism and atheism but as a full-scale conflict between the worldviews of Christian theism and atheistic naturalism. The conflict, as I see it, pertains to the explanatory power of these worldviews with respect to a wide range of important phenomena. The realities on the following list provide a good start:

Consciousness and self-consciousness	Morality
Mind and rationality	Agency
Truth	Value
Personhood	Biological evolution
Free will and responsibility	Science

There is no shortage of theories explaining the items on this list, their existence and status, within a naturalistic philosophical framework. These theories are presented in technical detail in scholarly books and journals and surface in popular venues as well. My claim is that Christian theism explains these facts better than atheistic naturalism.

The claim that one hypothesis—in this context, a worldview taken as a large-scale hypothesis—explains certain facts better than another hypothesis is conceptually linked to the claim that those facts are much less surprising on the first hypothesis than on the second. More precisely, the truth of each statement that a certain reality exists and/or has certain operations and functions is antecedently more probable on the first hypothesis than on the second. In this comparison of the explanatory power of worldviews, I will argue that the truth of statements about the existence and operation of items on my list is much more surprising on atheistic naturalism than on Christian theism. Put differently, the antecedent probability of the truth of any of these statements is much greater on the assumption that Christian theism is true than on the assumption that atheistic naturalism is true. Moreover, all such statements about phenomena on my list, in aggregate, describe a certain kind of universe with a very particular structure and texture—and it is a theistic universe.

As we begin, consider this question: antecedently, if we assume atheistic naturalism to be true, what would we expect reality to be like? Would we expect reality turn out to contain the items on my list, with all we know from human experience about their operations and functions? My point is that these phenomena are much more natural, more fitting, more likely to arise, within a universe described by Christian theism than in a naturalistic universe.

What I consider the repeated failures of naturalists to make good sense of the phenomena under discussion constitute good reasons to reject atheistic naturalism. Furthermore, other reasons for accepting atheistic naturalism (and rejecting theism) are weaker than their billing—as I argued in regard to arguments by Grünbaum and Rowe. As I see it, then, an intellectually sophisticated understanding of distinctively Christian theism explains important features of our world much better than atheistic naturalism does.

An example of the kind of argument I am making has been set forth by Paul Draper, who contends that the facts of pain and pleasure (including their relation to biological goals) are more likely on the assumption that the universe is indifferent to human values and agendas than on the assumption that the universe is created and guided by God. Draper argues that the relevant facts are antecedently (without reference to any other information) much more probable on the “Hypothesis of Indifference” than on theism. Put another way, the facts of pain and pleasure are much more epistemically surprising if theism is true. Yet these facts are exactly what we would expect if the universe is essentially indifferent. Although the Hypothesis of Indifference is entailed by some other views, including religions with indifferent deities, it is clearly entailed by atheism, which is the official competitor here to theism.¹²

To make his point, Draper uses this general formula:

$$P(x/H).$$

P here is probability, x is some stated evidence, and H is some hypothesis. So the formula reads: the probability of x given H, or of x on H. Letting O be the statement of the evidence regarding pain and pleasure in the world, HI be the Hypothesis of Indifference, and T be theism, Draper’s contention is that $P(O/HI) > P(O/T)$. This is highly controversial, since I have already alluded to why the God of Christian theism allows a great deal of openness to nondetermined outcomes in the creation, including the distribution of pain and pleasure, making the attempt to support atheism by the facts of pain and pleasure more difficult than Draper thinks. Moreover, Draper holds other information in abeyance and explicitly

assumes that nothing else raises the probability of theism.

My project is not as clinically restricted as Draper’s because I survey a range of important facts beyond pain and pleasure. I also evaluate full-orbed worldviews rather than the opposing proposals of indifference versus divine oversight. Even Draper’s remarks in several locations suggest that he believes that a combination of atheism, naturalism, and evolution is the proper intellectual context for an indifferent universe. The shape of my overall argument is that the fact that there is a finite universe containing rational, moral, personal agents is extremely surprising given atheistic naturalism (AN). Yet, these things are not surprising, given the view of Christian theism (CT) that there is a supremely powerful, intelligent, loving, creative being who would bring into existence a world reflecting aspects of its own nature. Remember Leibniz’s principle, which requires a sufficient reason not merely for the existence of something but for “why it is thus and not otherwise.” We need to know why the reality we inhabit is the way it is. After all, the actual world could have been totally different, with very different characteristics. Intrepid naturalists try their best to make sense of the realities in question based on their metaphysical resources. E. O. Wilson is confident that “all tangible phenomena, from the birth of the stars to the workings of social institutions, are based on material processes that are ultimately reducible, however long and tortuous the sequences, to the laws of physics.”¹³

For instance, the naturalist view of consciousness is that it arises from and operates at the deepest level according to the processes of nonconscious matter. Compared to theism (which holds that God is a conscious being), it seems clear that $P(C/T) > P(C/N)$: that the probability of consciousness arising is greater given theism than given naturalism. The same goes for mind, rationality, morality, and that special aspect of personhood which we call self-consciousness. The generic theistic God serves as a more plausible metaphysical basis for these realities than does matter, which is intrinsically nonrational, nonmoral, and nonpersonal. Distinctively Christian insights go further in describing the nature of God as Trinitarian, which implies that God is essentially a relational

being whose chief feature is self-giving love. Classic Christian understanding, then, makes it quite understandable why the infinite Trinitarian God would will into existence a created order that contains finite personal beings that possess self-consciousness, relational capacity, moral capacity, the power of agency to perform actions, and many other rich characteristics. At this juncture, a Hoosier saying from my early years echoes in my thoughts: water cannot rise higher than its source. To resist the materialist reduction of consciousness, mind, morality, and personhood and to insist that these things are of a higher order of reality than matter does not necessarily commit the orthodox Christian theist to extreme or untenable forms of substance dualism. In the doctrines of creation, incarnation, and sacrament, matter has great value, allowing Christian philosophers freedom to explore how concepts of personhood and its attributes can be understood holistically and how matter may serve as a medium for higher things of personal life.

Naturalists, by contrast, must shoulder the almost unbearable metaphysical challenge of showing—without attendant strain on our credulity—how key features of the actual universe are explained better in terms of matter and its operations. The metaphysical burden is evident in remarks by naturalists who are still pitching away, generally by invoking science. John Searle frankly admits that the biological sciences have no idea how consciousness arose from non-conscious matter and favors physical factors over consciousness as the explanatory principle for human actions, such as getting married or speaking up at a meeting.¹⁴ Protesting (methinks, too much) atheist David Brink says: “Assuming materialism is true, mental states supervene on physical states, yet few think that mental states are metaphysically queer.”¹⁵ Really?! Is it just as reasonable to think that mind comes from the nonmental as from the mental, say, from a supreme being that has mental states?

Denying that human moral judgment has objective status, Michael Ruse and E. O. Wilson contend that

What Darwinian evolutionary theory show is that this sense of “right” and the corresponding sense of “wrong,” feelings we take to be above individual desire and in some fashion outside biology, are in fact brought about by ultimate biological processes.¹⁶

Ruse explains further that the objectivity of morality “is a *corporate illusion* that has been fobbed off on us by our genes to get us to cooperate.”¹⁷ In resisting the reduction of morality to biology, the Christian theist can accept that genetics and a host of other evolutionary factors are involved in mediating our moral sense while cautioning that the explanatory scope of biology is too limited to explain all aspects of morality. Claims that morality is “nothing but” genetics and “not objective” are outside the purview of biology and reveal the background assumption of naturalism. On the related issue of value in the universe, Erik Wielenberg has even ventured the hopeless naturalist thesis that “From valuelessness, value sometimes comes.”¹⁸ Naturalist theories of morality and value are doubly problematic both in being ontologically implausible and in undercutting the ability to identify genuine evil to cite in the central argument for atheism. In terms of antecedent probabilities, I maintain that objective morality (M) is more probable in a universe described by Christian theism: $P(M/CT) > P(M/AN)$. Furthermore, as with other items on my list, the many efforts by naturalists to reinterpret morality, explain it away, reduce it to some material process are unconvincing. Likewise, real value (V) is more probable given Christian theism: $P(V/CT) > P(V/AN)$.

There is not space to work through each item on my list and argue at length for the explanatory superiority of Trinitarian Christian theism over atheistic naturalism, but the general logic of my approach should now be clear. I think it is extremely unlikely that a universe constituted by the realities we have surveyed here is a naturalistic one. Given naturalism, I don’t think we would expect it to be this way at all. However, given Christian theism’s description of an infinite personal, creative, loving, holy, self-giving God, it is not simply that the finite realities of personhood, rationality, morality, and so forth are not improbable. In fact, I would maintain that they are quite likely to some degree. Given the explanatory superiority of the Christian view, evil and suffering (and Draper’s pain and pleasure) must be fit into this framework, but these difficult phenomena cannot constitute the ultimate rebuttal of the framework.

CHRISTIAN THEISM AS THE PROPER WORLDVIEW HOME OF SCIENCE AND EVOLUTION

Naturalism fleshes out its vision of reality by enlisting science and the evolutionary findings of science. Considering the use of science is instructive at this stage. For naturalism, the method of science—confirming and disconfirming theories in light of empirical evidence—is typically proclaimed as the only form of bona fide knowledge of reality. However, for the Christian theist, created reality has various dimensions that must be known on their own terms. God has given finite rational creatures appropriate powers for knowing these different aspects of reality, such that there is empirical knowledge, moral knowledge, interpersonal knowledge, and so forth. This deconstructs the false dichotomy between authentic knowledge as empirical/objective/scientific, on the one hand, and faith as not knowledge because it is allegedly nonempirical/subjective/nonscientific, on the other. So, empirical knowledge of the material world is highly validated in classical Christian understanding as one mode of knowledge or epistemic portal through which we gain knowledge about the created universe. The intellectual imperialism of insisting that science the only form of knowledge or the highest form of knowledge must be rejected.

Among the many truths of science, the truths of evolution—both about the cosmos and the biological sphere—are intimately incorporated into the naturalist narrative. Both naturalists and many religious believers take these truths to be impossible or staggeringly difficult to reconcile with a classical Christian vision of the world and the human enterprise. However, this perception is based on a presentation of Christian faith rooted in religious fundamentalist subculture that that is barely over one hundred years old. It is completely out of touch with the great theological doctrines and themes that form the rich intellectual framework of historic Christian orthodoxy. For example, the classical doctrine of creation entails that all finite realities are originated and sustained by God—and therefore that all truths about them are God's truths. There are simply many types of truths about many aspects of created reality and a variety of ways of knowing them.

Therefore, orthodoxy does not insist that the Bible somehow foreshadows or contains detailed scientific information. The doctrine of creation clearly underwrites the amazing constellation of truths about God's world that become strongly confirmed by our created powers and procedures independently of the pages of scripture.

Behind any truth-claims are the methods that generate them. Here again, both atheists and religious fundamentalists treat science and religion as providing mutually exclusive types of explanation. This false dichotomy envisages the respective aims of science and religion as being competitive—that is, as providing the same kind of explanation for the same kinds of things—such that, if they differ, only one can be correct. Naturalists think that the science of evolution explains the origin and present configuration of the world, thus invalidating religious explanations. Biblical literalists, by contrast, insist that the Book of Genesis provides the correct explanation—and even extract scientific claims from it (e.g., regarding a young earth, the instantaneous creation of humans with no animal ancestry, etc.). I have nothing to say in defense of this approach which imposes an alien empirical grid on the biblical creation narrative while missing the profound theological understanding that emerges from it! Wisdom from the doctrine of creation allows us to collapse the dichotomy between legitimate modes of explanation. From the doctrine of creation—which entails that there is a wonderfully complex creation and that humans are endowed with various powers for knowing about it—we see that different modes of knowledge provide different kinds of explanation of different things, or at least different aspects of the same things. Concerning human beings, for example, the theological and metaphysical commitments of classical Christian faith explain our ultimate origin in God, the need for relationship with God, and God's transformative purposes for us. Information that science provides about human beings includes the increasingly detailed biological facts about human origins and development, reminding us of our embeddedness within the animal realm. These two explanatory approaches are not mutually exclusive but provide

complementary perspectives on our humanity that the Christian worldview integrates into a unified whole.

Although all truth is God's truth, wherever it may be found, no particular truth about creation, however interesting or complex, carries its own interpretation. It must be interpreted and put in perspective by some metaphysical vision. This is why I, as a proponent of classical Christian theism, have no intention of surrendering any truths of science—including the truths of evolution—to the philosophical naturalists. The Christian doctrine of creation teaches that matter, physical stuff, is good and that human beings, as rational-moral-soulful animals, are very good, made in God's image. The doctrine of the Incarnation teaches that God wants to identify with—to be so closely bonded with—humans that, in the Second Person of the Trinity, he became one with Jesus of Nazareth, a physical person. By extension, in the affirmation the goodness of being human and of God's good purposes for humanity, we also have the affirmation of animality and all of the biological processes that characterize it. This merely begins the Christian interpretation of humanity. Empirical details about how we arose from lower forms, up through higher primates, are for science to continue to discover. Yet these details do not change the Christian theological understanding of humanity. Human dignity, value, and destiny do not depend either on our being instantaneously created, without evolutionary process, or on (as once thought) our planet being at the center of the local solar system.

Evolutionary facts highlight the important role of chance within the framework of physical reality, from the Big Bang's ostensible chance occurrence to the random genetic variation and occasional random shift of environmental conditions. Naturalists at one extreme and biblical literalists at the other assume a dichotomy between chance and divine purpose. Doctrinaire naturalists wrongly conflate chance within the physical order studied by science with the idea that the universe itself occurred by chance and is without purpose, a metaphysical assertion beyond the purview of science. On the other side, some religious believers mistakenly conclude that divine sovereignty is ineffectual in a world involving chancy,

contingent—i.e., nondetermined—outcomes. However, classical Christian orthodoxy embraces nondetermined contingency in the created world in its commitment to libertarian free will. This is not, as many deterministic naturalists characterize it, a form of indeterminism. We might also say that the nonpersonal physical creation operates with a "freedom" analogous to moral and metaphysical freedom in the human realm. In other words, the physical creation operates with a significant degree of chanciness within lawful structure—contingency and necessity form the warp and woof of our material existence. There is no implication from orthodoxy that chance is inimical to the purposes of God; indeed, contingency is viewed as that great open space in which God influences, guides, and interacts with creaturely responses.

Whether we consider the very existence of the cosmos, the troubling presence of evil, the appearance of rational-moral-relational-personal-physical beings, scientific methodology, or important scientific findings about evolution and its chance aspects—it seems clear to me that a doctrinally rich Christian theism has far more explanatory power, more intellectual potency, than atheistic naturalism. I think that a reasonable all-things-considered comparative judgment would surely be that a universe bearing the important features we have surveyed is far more antecedently likely on a Christian view than on a naturalist view.

Of course, naturalists continue to insist that God is either outmoded or invalidated as an explanatory concept. In his book *Encountering Naturalism: A Worldview and Its Uses*, Thomas Clark states that science is the method for explaining everything, leaving no need for God as the "unexplained explainer." This statement is odd, and terribly unself-aware, since all worldviews make an initial posit: they project some ground of being or ultimate fact that sheds light on all other features of existence. Naturalists simply posit a different "unexplained explainer": physical nature. So, the naturalist is in the unavoidable and unenviable position of arguing that consciousness comes from the nonconscious, mind from the nonmental, morality from the nonmoral, and so forth. Unfortunately, this approach is hopelessly reductionistic, downgrading important realities to something

they are not and thus distorting them. None of this denies the intimate relation to physical entities and processes that these realities have, but it does identify naturalist failures to explain these realities exclusively in physical terms. So, I ask, what exactly is it about positing matter as ultimate that makes it likely in any significant degree that these amazing things would arise? Even an interesting reductionistic argument here or there cannot outweigh the comprehensive explanation of these realities offered by Christian theism.

For Christianity, the Triune God as the Fundamental Fact anchors all explanations of all other things, allowing us to see important finite realities

more clearly and in proper perspective. It is much more natural, much more fitting, much less logically and metaphysically strained, to say that finite consciousness, mind, morality, personhood, and agency come from an infinite being who has consciousness, mind, morality, and is himself a personal agent. The other items on our list can also be understood for what they really are. All of these characteristics are parts of a coherent and interrelated universe created by the Christian God—including the challenging parts, such as chance, evil, and unbelief. C. S. Lewis expressed the point well: “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.”¹⁹

NOTES

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