

Michael Ruse

The Naturalist Challenge to Religion



Michael Ruse (b. 1940) presents a comprehensive case for a naturalist worldview that embraces both methodological naturalism and metaphysical naturalism. Rather than seeing methodological naturalism as worldview neutral, Ruse argues that it actually helps the case for metaphysical naturalism because it rules out forms of explanation that look for causes beyond the natural realm. So, Ruse's case for metaphysical naturalism is heavily influenced by how he sees the role of methodological naturalism. He cites methodological naturalism's ability to explain the origin and structure of organisms without appeal to divine design and even its ability to explain religion as a purely human phenomenon without assuming it relates to a divine realm.

“Naturalism” is one of those words with many meanings. When I was a teenager growing up in England, it was a euphemism for “nudism.” With some regret, it is not this sense that is the subject of this discussion. Another sense is that of “philosophical naturalism.” Here one is referring to an intention to let one’s philosophical discussions be as science-like and science-based as possible. You will see evidence of this philosophy in action in this paper, but again it is not the main focus of discussion. Getting to the point, and certainly not that distinct from philosophical naturalism, are two senses that have been much in the public forum in the past twenty years—and these are my focus. On the one hand, we have “methodological naturalism,” trying to understand the world in terms of unbroken law. No appeal to supernatural interventions is allowed. On the other hand, we have “metaphysical

naturalism,” claiming that there is nothing beyond this natural world. No gods or such things. Today, many methodological naturalists are also metaphysical naturalists. This would be true of so-called “New Atheists” like Richard Dawkins.¹ But today and in the past there have been methodological naturalists who deny metaphysical naturalism. This is true of the great seventeenth-century chemist Robert Boyle who spoke of the “wisdom of God” in making the world like a clock “where all things are so skillfully contrived that the engine being once set a-moving, all things proceed according to the artificer’s first design,” and where there is no need of “the peculiar interposing of the artificer or any intelligent agent employed by him.”² Early in this piece, I am going to focus primarily on methodological naturalism, although at the end I address metaphysical naturalism.

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THE CASE FOR METHODOLOGICAL NATURALISM

I argue that methodological naturalism is true in the sense that it embodies the proper procedure for acquiring knowledge. Although I recognize that not all would agree, I take it that at a general level today, four hundred years after the Scientific Revolution, no special pleading is needed to make this case. The world does run according to law, and increasingly we know the nature of those laws and how they operate. Repeatedly, things that seemed anomalous or difficult to explain have found a solution, according to unbroken law. If a strange body appeared in the heavens, no one would think it something outside law and explicable only in supernatural terms. If a new and unpleasant disease strikes, for instance the HIV crisis of the 1980s, even those who would imbue the event with theological significance would agree that there will be natural causes, as indeed proved to be the case. Note that pseudo-scientists such as the late Immanuel Velikovsky who explained biblical phenomena like the parting of the Red Sea in terms of comets and the like did not go beyond law.³ His problem was that the laws to which he appealed were known only to him and to no one else! Note also that the reason why many religious scientists today—one thinks for instance of someone like Francis Collins who was head of the Human Genome Project—feel absolutely no tension between their religion and wholehearted methodological naturalism is that it works and because it works they feel that they can better reveal and understand this wonderful world that came at the hand of its Creator. Far from feeling uncomfortable with methodological naturalism, such believers welcome it as a tool ultimately provided by God. Using our powers of reason and observation is precisely what is meant by being made in the image of God.

So why go beyond the general level? Why not end the discussion right now? Obviously because there are those who think that there is more to be said and that, when said, it can be seen that methodological naturalism is inadequate. Let us therefore respond to some of these naysayers. Start with those who simply invoke miracle, meaning events that go beyond the

merely unexpected or especially meaningful to the actual violation of the laws of nature.⁴ The raising of Lazarus from the dead for instance or the Angel Moroni showing Joseph Smith the hiding place of the Golden Plates that when transcribed gave rise to the *Book of Mormon*. I take it that at some level you really cannot argue against people who believe in these sorts of things, but that if you are prepared to enter the realm of evidence and reason then (for the sorts of reasons that David Hume expounded) it really is more reasonable to conclude that, even if something did happen, it is more likely explicable in natural terms than by invoking the unseen supernatural. So let us move on to other arguments.

A major problem for (methodological) naturalism was the existence and nature of organisms. In the opinion of some today it still is a major problem. The distinctive thing about organisms is that they are what the biologists call “adaptively organized,” that is they are not just thrown together randomly but are complex, integrated, and above all functioning—they work towards ends, thus seeming to display what Aristotle called “final causes.”⁵ Mountains and rivers have no purpose or point. Hands and eyes do have purposes, respectively grasping and seeing. But how can organisms come about without some designing intelligence, a deity who makes them and sees that they or their parts serve specific ends? Immanuel Kant thought it impossible. “We can boldly say that it would be absurd for humans even to make such an attempt or to hope that there may yet arise a Newton who could make comprehensible even the generation of a blade of grass according to natural laws that no intention has ordered; rather, we must absolutely deny this insight to human beings.”⁶

In the opinion of naturalists, it was Charles Darwin who solved this problem. In his *On the Origin of Species*, published in 1859, he argued that all organisms are the end product of a long, slow process of change, natural selection. More organisms are born than can survive and reproduce, those that are successful (the “fitter”) have features not possessed by the unsuccessful and that over time this leads to change—but change of a particular kind, namely in the direction of adaptive advantage, features showing final cause.

Let it be borne in mind how infinitely complex and close-fitting are the mutual relations of all organic beings to each other and to their physical conditions of life. Can it, then, be thought improbable, seeing that variations useful to man have undoubtedly occurred, that other variations useful in some way to each being in the great and complex battle of life, should sometimes occur in the course of thousands of generations? If such do occur, can we doubt (remembering that many more individuals are born than can possibly survive) that individuals having any advantage, however slight, over others, would have the best chance of surviving and of procreating their kind? On the other hand, we may feel sure that any variation in the least degree injurious would be rigidly destroyed. This preservation of favourable variations and the rejection of injurious variations, I call Natural Selection.⁷

That's all there is to it. Organisms are what Richard Dawkins has called "survival machines."⁸ Of course, after Darwin we are no longer Aristotelians, in the sense of believing that there are special life forces—what the French philosopher Henri Bergson called *élans vitaux*—directing organisms or their parts to ends. So strictly speaking final causes in the traditional sense are no more. However, we are still using the metaphor of design because natural selection does produce design-like entities—the eye really is like a telescope—so Darwinian biologists feel perfectly comfortable in using final-cause language in an attenuated fashion. Mountains and rivers are not design-like. The language of purpose is inappropriate. Eyes and hands are design-like. The language of purpose is appropriate, if only because it has great heuristic value. Why does the well-known dinosaur stegosaurus have diamond-like plates along its back? By thinking in terms of design we can come up with an answer. As it happens they are just like the heat-transfer plates you find in electric-producing cooling towers, and today's favored paleontological hypothesis is the plates on stegosaurus served the function of catching sunlight and thus heating up the cold-blooded vertebrate in the cool of the day and then dissipating calories when the vast amounts of vegetation it consumed started to ferment and over-heat the brute.

IS NATURAL SELECTION ADEQUATE?

From the time of Darwin on there have been a spate of objections. Some focus on the origin of life itself. Recently both the religious (Calvinist) philosopher Alvin Plantinga⁹ and the secular philosopher Thomas Nagel¹⁰ have complained that Darwinism does not explain the ultimate origin of organisms from the non-living, that it never will, and that this is a severe challenge to naturalism. Frankly, one would have a little more sympathy for this objection if either of the critics gave evidence that they had made the slightest effort to look at the pertinent science, but one suspects that, as with believers in miracles, it would not make the slightest difference if they had done so. For the record, it is certainly true that the origin-of-life problem has not been cracked and probably won't be for some time. But to say no progress has been made is just ridiculous.¹¹ It is known now that to carry information probably the early life forms used the macromolecule RNA rather than (as most organisms today) the macromolecule DNA, because RNA has the ability to self replicate. It is suspected that rather than lightening striking warm ponds full of chemicals and thus (literally) sparking life, as Darwin rather suspected, early life may have been formed on the lips of the deep-sea vents where the continents are coming up from the depths. In addition, more processes of this nature are likely appear in future research. Although the origins of life is a difficult problem, the lure of Nobel Prizes is attracting more and more scientists to the field. It promises great rewards.

Some objections focus on adaptations. The so-called Intelligent Design Theorists—expectedly, enthusiastically endorsed by Plantinga and Nagel—argue that some biological, adaptive phenomena are so complex that they could not have been formed by natural selection. All of the parts must be in place simultaneously for the adaptation to work, and this natural selection could not produce. Michael Behe¹², a leading spokesperson for the cause, highlights the bacterial flagellum and the blood-clotting cascade as instances in point. To which one can simply say that biologist after biologist has shown that these

examples do not stand up.¹³ Before one gets into the business of turning to alternative explanations, aka God, one should think more carefully about the biology. To take just the blood-clotting cascade, there are about thirty, different, sequential, chemical reactions that have to occur. But the case is not irreducibly complex—a major anchor of Intelligent Design Theorists. There are lots of existing organisms with simpler cascades, just parts of the mammalian one. It is just not true that when you take one step out everything falls apart. Natural selection could quite well have done the job, move by move.

THE PROBLEM OF HUMANS

There are other objections, all of which have been rehearsed *ad nauseam* in the literature. Moving along, let us rather turn to a somewhat more interesting problem.¹⁴ What about human beings and other so-called higher organisms? Naturalism can do a good job on some of the issues here, for instance about free will. Most naturalists embrace the position known as “compatibilism” meaning that free will and causal determinism can co-exist, because free will is truly opposed to constraint and has nothing directly to do with being bound by the laws of nature.¹⁵ Indeed, most naturalists would argue that unless you are bound by the laws of nature you are crazy, not free. The person who shows love and compassion because she was trained to do so by her parents deserves moral praise. The hypnotized person is constrained and is not guilty of any crimes committed in such a state. The person who tears his clothes off in public for no reason at all is simply mad and not a moral agent at all.

Naturalism can also go a long way to explain some preferences and character dispositions and the like. Sexual orientation for instance is now generally understood in terms of fetal development and is not some mysterious phenomenon laid on us without rhyme or reason. But what about consciousness itself? Part of the problem here is that people disagree about the nature of consciousness and its place in the world. They may not disagree about the science—and we have learned a huge amount about the science of

the brain and the mind. The question is what it all means. For those who are ultimate reductionists, like Daniel Dennett¹⁶ and Paul Churchland¹⁷ and Patricia Churchland,¹⁸ consciousness is simply a matter of brain waves and that is it. Explain brain waves naturally—and we are well on the path to doing that—and you have explained consciousness. Others are not so sure. Sentience seems to be more than brain waves. Even if you are not a Cartesian dualist, thinking material things and mental things different substances, and some are today, you want more. Indeed there are those today who think that the mind-body problem is insoluble for folk like us with our limited thinking abilities¹⁹ Whether this is so or not, you need more than reductionism.

But do you need more than naturalism? It is not obvious that you do. Even if you think that the mind will never be explained, you do not necessarily have to think that there is anything supernatural involved. It is just that our evolution has not given the mental apparatus to solve such problems and, in any case, everything we do know about mind-body interactions points to them being governed by law. The mind seems to follow rules no less than the brain. Although the philosophers David Hume and Immanuel Kant approached matters from very different perspectives, they agreed (and were surely right in agreeing) that we don't think randomly but conceptualize the physical world in terms of cause and effect. If we hear a strange noise we look for a cause and are not satisfied until one is located. Relatedly, you alter bits of the brain and you affect the mind in what become predictable fashions. There is the sad case of the American, rail-road worker Phineas Gage, whose brain was partly destroyed by an iron rod thrust through his head. Although he recovered physically, he was much changed mentally and psychologically. From a hard-working, moderate responsible man, he became someone unreliable, much given to bad language. He had to give up his job on the rail-road and exhibited himself as a freak in Barnum's American Museum.

What about that very distinctive human phenomenon, morality? For obvious reasons, religious people tend to think that moral codes rise above the purely natural. And a lot of secular people would agree.

Thomas Nagel²⁰ has been leading the charge recently. But even those who might be favorable to evolutionary thinking often worry about the status of morality. After all, did not David Hume²¹ himself say that you cannot derive moral norms from claims about matters of fact? This led people like G. E. Moore²² to argue that morality falls into the realm of the non-natural. Of course, even if you argue this, it does not necessarily follow that this means you are in the realm of the supernatural. Perhaps there is some sort of non-natural domain that is entirely secular. One suspects that a lot of mathematicians would favor this option too, because they tend to be Platonists, thinking that they are discovering mathematical truths rather than inventing or creating them. One obvious way out of this dilemma is to argue that moral truths are not truths like matters of fact. Perhaps they are not truths at all but simply reports on feelings. Or, they are (to use a term very popular in the mid twentieth century) expressions of emotions²³ In either case, as such, they are entirely natural. (You cannot pull quite the same trick with mathematics, because its truths are obviously not emotions. But you could argue analogously that they are not so much matters of fact but reports on relations between matters of fact or some such thing.)

To be autobiographical for a moment, emotivism always struck some people—hardened naturalists—as not just wrong but as immoral. To say that the condemnation of murder or rape is only an emotion is to trivialize very deep judgments about heinous acts that we take to be morally wrong. Rape is really unacceptable in a way that transcends individual emotions. It is not just a matter of my being personally offended by it. It would be wrong if no one ever felt bad about rape. That towards the end of the War, the Russian soldiers all had a good time, and that their leaders thought that the German women deserved it, does not make rape morally acceptable. All in all therefore we seem to have a bit of an impasse. Make morality non-natural and obviously you go beyond the bounds of methodological naturalism. You may not be in the world of the super-natural, but you are in some limbo beyond this world. Make morality natural and you run into David Hume's prohibition against trying to get morality from statements about

matters of fact. Deny that morality is factually true in some sense, classify it as all a matter of emotions, and you seem to flounder on the fact that now morality is subjective, just relative to individuals and times and places, and that goes strongly against our sense that morality is objective, more than just a matter of opinion but binding whether recognized or not.

A number of thinkers, particularly those sympathetic to the Darwinian approach to human social behavior—human sociobiologists or evolutionary psychologists—think that one can explain moral feelings and behaviors as the result of natural selection.²⁴ Basically those of us who are nice tend to get more out of life than those of us who are nasty. Darwin himself spotted this: “as the reasoning powers and foresight of the members became improved, each man would soon learn that if he aided his fellow-men, he would commonly receive aid in return. From this low motive he might acquire the habit of aiding his fellows.”²⁵ But even if you accept all of this you might still complain that it doesn't solve Hume's problem. It gives you an explanation of why we are moral, but it doesn't tell you that morality is true. It doesn't justify morality.

Perhaps however we need to look at things in a different way. Could it be that the emotivists were right and that all we have with morality is a bunch of emotions that fuel us to be moral? We don't have any reference to any matters of fact, natural or non-natural. However where the emotivists were wrong, or at least incomplete, was in thinking that morality means nothing more than a bunch of emotions—“rape is wrong” translates out into “I don't like rape” perhaps with the addition “I don't want you to rape either.” “Rape is wrong” really means “rape is wrong,” meaning “rape refers to some objective fact—true beyond our feelings—about its wrongness.” The Darwinian point of relevance here is that there really is no objective fact beyond us. So in a sense, morality is an illusion—or at least our sense that morality is objective is an illusion, because my feelings are certainly not illusory. But why all of this? Because if we did not think morality was objective, before long it would break down as we began cheating. If rape isn't really wrong, then why stay back when others move forward? So the entirely natural case is that

morality—the objectivity of morality that is—is an illusion put in place by our biology to make us social animals, because social animals are selected over non-social animals.

IS NATURALISM INCOHERENT?

I don't want to go on making the case for methodological naturalism because by now I am sure you can see the course these kinds of arguments are going to take. But before I move to some brief remarks about metaphysical naturalism, let me make mention of an argument by Plantinga that has been attracting much attention in the past two decades.²⁶ He does not make the sharp distinction between methodological naturalism and metaphysical naturalism that governs this discussion, but essentially his point is that methodological naturalism collapses in on itself as an attempt to find real—reliable, interpersonal, objective—knowledge about the world, and that the only escape is to reject metaphysical naturalism in favor of some kind of theistic belief that guarantees knowledge in the realm considered by the methodological naturalist. Presumably then you could go on doing science on a day-to-day basis without bringing in explicit mention of God; although, as a consequence, now you are freed up to do so, and as it happens Plantinga himself shows considerable sympathy for the Intelligent Design movement.

Plantinga argues that the whole (methodological) naturalistic program collapses in on itself, because it is incoherent. If you are a (methodological) naturalist, then (as we have been doing) you will take a Darwinian approach to human nature. But then (as we have been doing) you will admit that sometimes selection may and will deceive us for our own good. We cannot always trust our beliefs. Generalizing, Plantinga claims that we can never know which beliefs to trust or not to trust, including those of evolution, and so everything collapses in paradox. Somewhat cheekily he quotes Darwin: "With me the horrid doubt always arises whether the convictions of man's mind, which have been developed from the mind of the lower animals, are of any value or are at all trustworthy. Would anyone trust in the convictions of a

monkey's mind, if there are any convictions in such a mind?"²⁷ As a matter of fact, Darwin immediately excused himself as a reliable authority on such philosophical questions, but this somewhat awkward point goes unmentioned. As does the fact that Darwin was explaining why he saw purpose in life, something one might have thought Plantinga would have welcomed.

What does one say? Well one thing we can say is that selection does not deceive us randomly but for good reason, as was suggested in the morality case, and because we are deceived it does not follow that we cannot find out about it, as in the morality case. So the case is clearly not as dire as Plantinga suggests. His own favored example is thinking one is at a major feast in an Oxford college, discussing atheism with one's famous philosophical neighbor, when really one is fighting off crocodiles in the jungle. But the fact is that selection doesn't work that way. Arguing philosophy is not the key to killing crocs. Believe me, I live in Florida and I know. (We are mainly into alligators, but we do have crocodiles.)

Yet could you not say that in some general sense we could be living in total deception? In some systematic way selection could be shifting all of our beliefs out of kilter, rather like someone in a factory with red lighting thinks that all of the products are red? So although we might be able to tell reality from illusion within the system—we can tell when a product is flawed or not—we cannot tell how things really are? My suspicion is that there may be something to this but we have been aware of the point at least since Kant if not Hume. All of our knowledge comes through our human faculties. If they distort reality, so be it. The best we can have is some kind of coherence theory of truth rather than a strict correspondence theory—the best we can do is to make all of our judgments hold together coherently—but this (a position that Hilary Putnam²⁸ calls "internal realism") really is quite enough. As always, one is reminded of Hume, this time on skepticism. Really, philosophically, there is no escape. But psychology rescues us.

²¹ Most fortunately it happens, that since Reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, Nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and

lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras. I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends. And when, after three or four hours' amusement, I would return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strained, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther."²⁹

METAPHYSICAL NATURALISM

Accepting, if only for the sake of argument, that methodological naturalism has been defended successfully, we turn now to metaphysical naturalism. We saw that not all methodological naturalists are metaphysical naturalists. But we must take care not to be overwhelmed by authority. However much we may honor Robert Boyle, for instance, remember he was writing two hundred years before Darwin. After 1859 he may well have sung a different song from that he sang back in the seventeenth century. So, taking into account all that we now know, let us therefore ask the basic question for ourselves. Should methodological naturalists be metaphysical naturalists?

Well, "yes," is the obvious answer. If we understand the opposite to metaphysical naturalism to be some kind of theism—belief in a God who intervenes, and perhaps more explicitly the God of Christianity—then methodological naturalism wipes out much that is claimed under this banner. Certainly it wipes out the possibility of more extreme religious claims, for instance those based on a literal reading of the early chapters of Genesis. You cannot be a methodological naturalist and believe in Adam and Eve, the unique starting pair of humans. That goes against modern paleoanthropology. This is why we can go beyond someone like Boyle who still thought that much of the Bible is literally true. Of course, you might with reason respond that biblical literalism is hardly traditional Christianity. While it may be true that people like Boyle took literally much of the Bible, at least since St. Augustine (400 AD), Christianity has had within it the principle that if the science dictates otherwise, then seemingly factual claims in the Bible like those about Adam and Eve must be interpreted metaphorically. Biblical literalism is an idiosyncratic form of

American, Protestant Evangelicalism, from the first half of the nineteenth century. It is not the only alternative to metaphysical naturalism.

While this is true, you might think nevertheless that, however moderate your theism, methodological naturalism still inclines one to metaphysical naturalism. If you can explain the world without God, then as Pierre-Simon Laplace responded to Napoleon when asked why in one of his books he made no reference to the deity: "Sire, I had no need of that hypothesis." Surely, for more moderate religion, something like Occam's Razor kicks in. You no longer need a designer to explain organisms, for instance. And morality does not need a divine backing. Perhaps methodological naturalism does not give a full and satisfying explanation of everything, sentience for instance, but generally you can get by with it and simply admit ignorance about the rest. You are not forced into God belief. So why go that way?

My suspicion is that at this point the theist is going to say something like this. (Actually it is not a suspicion, because this is precisely what Alvin Plantinga says.) We do not have a level playing field with two disjuncts—"methodological naturalism and nothing more equaling metaphysical naturalism" or "methodological naturalism plus something more (God) equaling theism"—where the former is simpler than the latter and hence is to be preferred precisely for that reason. What we have is "methodological naturalism and nothing more equaling metaphysical naturalism" or "methodological naturalism and a special sense that God does exist equals theism." This is very different because the new disjunct is bringing something new to the table and simplicity no longer is definitive. Of course, in Plantinga's case we have something even more, namely "those parts of methodological naturalism that can be rescued without falling into confusion plus a special sense that God does exist equals theism." Either way, faith is now part of the equation. Alvin Plantinga follows Calvin in thinking it a gift bestowed by God. "There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity." This we take to be beyond controversy. To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretence of ignorance, God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty."³⁰

*Sense no
divine*

Ruse miscombines this argument!

Of course, the trouble here is one of circularity. If you are in the faith sphere then that is definitive. But what if you are not? Calvin/Plantinga says that this is because of original sin, but this is to beg the question rather. If you are in the faith sphere that kind of excuse is compelling but if you are not in the faith sphere, that kind of excuse is not compelling. Could it not be that we are mistaken? Plantinga thinks that we can get out of our troubles by rejecting metaphysical naturalism and appealing to God. Simply put, a good God would not let us be deceived systematically in the way that methodological naturalism seems to allow. However, if this kind of move is not familiar, then it should be! Plantinga is retreading the path of Descartes in the *Meditations* who thought that the appeal to clear and distinct ideas was safe because this was guaranteed by the deity. Unfortunately, as critic after critic has pointed out, before getting to God Descartes supposed that there might be an evil demon who would systematically deceive us (even about mathematics), and, as critic after critic has pointed out, once having let loose that demon, how can one ever be truly sure that a good God who will vanquish the demon does really exist? In Plantinga's case, how can he—and even more, how can we—be sure that that certain conviction that Plantinga has that God exists and guarantees knowledge is genuine and reliable? How can Plantinga deny that his conviction is really just a matter of self-delusion? What response is there to the claim that Plantinga wants to believe in God and so he does? He might be right, of course, but one can forgive the naturalist (methodological or metaphysical) for being somewhat skeptical. The fact that Plantinga believes that his conviction is genuine and self-confirming is a matter of his psychology and not a philosophical argument.

We seem to be caught in a dilemma. Metaphysical naturalism will be appealing if you are a metaphysical naturalist but, if you are not, then it will not appeal! It seems to be a matter of choice. Not so fast! Here the metaphysical naturalist will probably say that methodological naturalism is stronger than so far realized. Here are two arguments to that effect. First, an argument found in Darwin but not pushed by him to its limit, as it has been by later writers like Harvard and specialist and sociobiologist Edward O. Wilson, is

that one can give a naturalistic account of religion and once one has done that, that is it. Wilson thinks religion is favored by selection because it fosters a sense of group identity and with this we get a driving sense of purpose. Wilson then moves readily from the claim that religion has been explained to the further claim that religion has been explained away. "If this interpretation is correct, the final decisive edge enjoyed by scientific naturalism will come from its capacity to explain traditional religion, its chief competition, as a wholly material phenomenon."³¹ A second argument, one that is pushed by Darwin, is that methodological naturalism tightens the screw on the problem of evil to the point where belief in a god—certainly the Christian God of love and power—is unreasonable.

With respect to the theological view of the question; this is always painful to me.—I am bewildered.—I had no intention to write atheistically. But I own that I cannot see, as plainly as others do, & as I sh^d wish to do, evidence of design & beneficence on all sides of us. There seems to me too much misery in the world. I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent & omnipotent God would have designedly created the *Ichneumonidae* with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars, or that a cat should play with mice. Not believing this, I see no necessity in the belief that the eye was expressly designed.³²

These are important arguments, but as they stand neither is definitive (as Darwin recognized even if Wilson does not). Take first the question of the natural origins of religion. If one thinks that something like the conversion of Saul is a miracle, outside the course of nature, then one is hardly a methodological naturalist, so one is not in this discussion. If one is a methodological naturalist and wants to take religion as true, then presumably one is going to say that miracles and such things are natural but what makes them miraculous is the meaning behind the events, not the events themselves. And the point is that if one is such a methodological naturalist, then religion is putatively a natural phenomenon and one positively expects therefore that it will have a natural origin. Saul being blinded on the road to Damascus cannot have a supernatural interpretation. It is all in the meaning that this man who set out to persecute

Christians ended by being their greatest apostle. So surely the very fact that one can give a naturalistic explanation of religion is no more necessarily devastating to the truth claims of the religion than that one can give a naturalistic explanation of the way the eye can see the train speeding down the track is necessarily devastating to the claim that the train is coming one's way and that it would be wise to step out of its predicted path.

Likewise one might say that the pain and suffering in the world is a problem for an all-loving, all-powerful God. But it is not a new problem with Darwinism and Christians do have answers. In particular, if God was to create through law, and there are surely good reasons to think that He had to do this, otherwise He would have had to make creatures very different (if through miracles then no traces of an evolutionary past), then perhaps He could only have created using natural selection. Without this mechanism, he would not get the adaptations he needed. (Richard Dawkins of all people pushes this line of argument.) So perhaps the suffering is a necessary part and parcel of the creative process.

METHODOLOGICAL NATURALISM DOES LEAD TO METAPHYSICAL NATURALISM!

Let me make one final response by the metaphysical naturalist. First, let us agree that religion has a natural origin and let us agree that so long as you don't insist on the supernatural you expect a fully natural explanation—although let us not forget that a good many theists would not agree to this. They want a miraculous virgin birth and so forth and methodological naturalism won't let you have this. At which point of course (repeating an argument given earlier in this essay) the methodological naturalist will say that it is not an evenly balanced either/or, with miracles being as proper an option as no miracles. Methodological naturalism shows that miracles are really not on the table. If you want to say that Mary's pregnancy was meaningful in a special way that is one thing. If you want to say that Mary got pregnant without the help of Joseph, that is another thing and simply not allowed.

But even if we agree on natural origins, let us not forget also that there are natural origins and natural origins and these influence our thinking. If I think there is a body in the field because the cadaver dog is scratching frantically at the soil, then even if I don't yet see the body it is still reasonable to think it there. But if I think the body is there because a psychic told me that it was there, it is not reasonable to think it there. Even if the body turned out to be there, it would still not be reasonable to think it there. Now the trouble with religion is that it falls into the second category not the first. The methodological naturalist agrees with Hume on this matter, we get religious ideas because we make mistakes about inanimate objects being living and it all goes from there. "We find human faces in the moon, armies in the clouds; and by a natural propensity, if not corrected by experience and reflection, ascribe malice or good will to everything, that hurts or pleases us."³³ Take the start of a religion closer to our time than Christianity and hence easier to get the full details and in which most of us do not have an emotional investment that is going to cloud our judgment. Joseph Smith started the Mormon Church in the 1820s and 30s, based on supposed revelations in Western New York State. This was not a normal time around there. It became known as the "burnt over" district because of all of the religious sects that were spawned there—Mormons, Adventists, Spiritualists, not to mention a lot of Shakers and the communal-sex Oneida Society and a lot more. Looking at it disinterestedly from outside, the methodological naturalist is going to say that we had a time and place of mass hysteria and true nuttiness. Apart from anything else, they couldn't all be right. Isn't it then more reasonable to say that Mormonism has nothing to do with Jesus Christ and everything to do with a less-than-rational but obviously charismatic person, one who was clearly willing to bend the truth to burnish his own claims and status, and who persuaded others to take him seriously? One of the Bernie Madoffs of the religious world? And if we feel this way, then shouldn't sauce for the Mormon gander be sauce for the more-conventional Christian goose? Those poor old disciples had so much invested in Jesus being the Messiah that on that fateful Easter Sunday they simply couldn't

face up to the fact that he was dead and buried, and so made up a collective story about his being risen?

Second, take up again the problem of evil. Even if methodological naturalism can explain the reason for some of the evil, a huge amount remains. And the point is that, methodological naturalism having explained away all of the compulsive reasons for theism—the organization of organisms, for instance—the way is now clear for the problem to have full and definitive effect. Take the brutal story in the Brothers Karamazov of the little child who injured the paw of the landowner's dog. Locked up all night and then in the morning stripped naked, the kid is hunted down like a wild beast and torn to pieces. Truly does Ivan say:

While there is still time, I hasten to protect myself, and so I renounce the higher harmony altogether. It's not worth

the tears of that one tortured child who beat itself on the breast with its little fist and prayed in its stinking outhouse, with its unexpiated tears to 'dear, kind God'! It's not worth it, because those tears are unatoned for. They must be atoned for, or there can be no harmony. But how? How are you going to atone for them? Is it possible? By their being avenged? But what do I care for avenging them? What do I care for a hell for oppressors? What good can hell do, since those children have already been tortured? And what becomes of harmony, if there is hell? I want to forgive. I want to embrace. I don't want more suffering. And if the sufferings of children go to swell the sum of sufferings which was necessary to pay for truth, then I protest that the truth is not worth such a price.³⁴

That is why the methodological naturalist says that going on to metaphysical naturalism is not just an inference justified by reason; it is an inference that is morally obligatory.

? Isn't morality an illusion?

NOTES

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STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Ruse endorses both methodological naturalism and metaphysical naturalism. How would you define these two positions in your own words? Do you agree with Ruse that methodological naturalism favors metaphysical naturalism? Is theism less likely or less plausible if methodological naturalism is the only legitimate procedure for explaining phenomena in the world?
2. Ruse disagrees with Alvin Plantinga’s contention that the probability is low that our rational powers are reliable if naturalism is true but higher if theism is true. Review Ruse’s reply and evaluate.
3. Having read this essay by Ruse, can you now, in your own words, rehearse what might be called the naturalist explanation of consciousness? Of morality? Of religion?
4. According to Ruse, how does evil factor into the case for naturalism?