

# Naturalism

By Daniel Ray

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**Concept Attribution:** Thales of Miletus

**Date:** 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C.

## INTRODUCTION

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The 7<sup>th</sup>-century Greek philosopher Thales of Miletus once proposed that “all is water.”<sup>1</sup> Thales is believed to have been the first to attempt to understand and explain “the world without invoking the intervention of the gods.”<sup>2</sup> Thales and his contemporaries, Anaximander, and Anaximenes, through their observations and discoveries together lay the intellectual foundations for the West in understanding the cosmos without any reference to gods or divine causality.

Later in the mid-5<sup>th</sup> to early-4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. another Greek thinker, Democritus, proposed that “The first principles of the universe are atoms and empty space. Everything else is merely thought to exist.”<sup>3</sup> The 18<sup>th</sup>-century French mathematician Pierre Simone Laplace (1749-1827) developed a rigorous probability calculus regarding astronomy and the physical world. He is alleged to have been asked by Napoleon where God fit into his equations. Laplace is believed to have replied, “Sire, I have no need of that hypothesis.”<sup>4</sup>

The late Cambridge physicist Dr. Stephen Hawking, agreeing with Laplace’s deterministic theorems, said that “a complete set of laws fully determines both the future and the past. This would exclude the possibility of miracles or an active role for God...It is, in fact, the basis of all modern science.”<sup>5</sup> His own personal

M-theory predicts that a great many universes were created out of nothing. Their creation does not require the intervention of some supernatural being or god. Rather, these multiple universes arise naturally from physical law. They are a prediction of science.<sup>6</sup>

Science writer John G. West has noted that the famed 19<sup>th</sup>-century naturalist Charles Darwin, who pioneered the theory of natural selection in 1859, believed that sans a Creator, “natural selection and the laws of heredity acting on the material world produced mind, morality, and civilization.”<sup>7</sup> West notes that Darwin’s “theory had the consequence of making a materialistic understanding of man and society finally credible.”<sup>8</sup>

By the time of Darwin, the vastness and majesty of divine creation, along with God’s immanent, active role in upholding the cosmos had been increasingly marginalized by 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>-century natural philosophers (and later scientists) who were explaining most everything in terms of impersonal mechanisms and forces. If God did exist, He was a disinterested overseer. This “disenchantment of the world” began as “Wild places were exorcized, the scary legends connected to them were debunked by humanist thinkers,” writes Charles Taylor. “Mountains and plains were harmonized, brought together in the single ordered space of maps, and scientific theory.”<sup>9</sup> Culturally and scientifically speaking, the idea of God soon became irrelevant. As Taylor observes, “the political organization of all pre-modern societies was in some way connected to, based on, guaranteed by some faith in, or adherence to God, or some notion of ultimate reality” but today, “the modern Western state is free from this connection...Religion or its absence is largely a private matter.”<sup>10</sup>

In his book and highly acclaimed 1980 TV series *Cosmos: A Personal Voyage*, the late planetary astronomer Dr. Carl Sagan uttered what is arguably the most memorable summation of a naturalistic worldview, “The cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be.”<sup>11</sup>

## DEFINING NATURALISM

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Sociologist Craig M. Gay observes that “From a scientific and technological point of view, God’s existence is largely irrelevant. He has been left to inhabit only that space defined by our ever-

diminishing scientific ignorance, and so has become the doubtful 'god-of-the-gaps.'<sup>12</sup> If today's purveyors and prognosticators of popular science are correct, such a "god-of-the-gaps" will eventually disappear altogether in the face of an ever-burgeoning naturalistic conceptualization of the cosmos.

What then, is naturalism? Richard F. Carlson states that "naturalism is a philosophy, a metaphysical system of beliefs about the universe and the place of humanity in the universe, a universe completely and adequately described by science *and nothing else*."<sup>13</sup>

It is important here to distinguish between two kinds of naturalism. One is *metaphysical naturalism (MN)*, as defined by Carlson above. The other is *methodological naturalism* which is not principally committed to naturalism as a philosophy or worldview, but to a method for acquiring information about the physical world. Generally considered *methodological naturalism (mn)* is the idea that one can obtain information about the physical world through various empirical investigative experiments and tests without reference to God or the supernatural. Those who ascribe to *mn* do not necessarily accept *MN* or reject the idea or existence of God, they simply make no reference to God or the supernatural in their *methods* of investigating the cosmos.

The principal focus for this Profile, is *metaphysical naturalism*. Carlson observes that *MN* for many includes the belief that

[S]cience reveals a single manifold existence (called *nature*) that contains an unbound (so far) plethora of interconnected phenomena involving great spans in size, mass, and time – from the submicroscopic to the extent of the cosmos, from the minute electron to the galaxies, and from the Plank time ( $10^{-43}$  seconds) to the age of the universe ( $4 \times 10^{17}$  seconds).

This is nature, and this is all that is, according to naturalists.<sup>14</sup> Atheist and philosopher Graham Oppy defines naturalism as a "claim" which is, "Roughly, the conjunctive claim that (a) there are none but natural causal entities with none but natural causal powers and (b) well-established science is our touchstone for identifying natural causal entities and natural causal powers."<sup>15</sup>

Atheist and former Oxford biologist Richard Dawkins believes that

the only watchmaker in nature is the blind forces of physics...Natural selection, the blind, unconscious automatic process which Darwin discovered, and which we now know is the explanation for the existence and apparently purposeful form of all life, has no purpose in mind.<sup>16</sup>

Christian philosopher R. Scott Smith observes that *MN* remains to this day a "dominant paradigm in at least the western universities. By and large, naturalism simply is taught as fact in most every academic discipline, especially in the natural sciences."<sup>17</sup> Smith further notes that there is also a "fact-value dichotomy" introduced and assumed in *MN*. He argues that within the *MN* paradigm

...science is *the* set of disciplines that gives us knowledge of facts, truth, and reality. Of course, for a discipline to even be considered a legitimate science, those practitioners must follow methodological naturalism [*mn*], which brackets out appeals to nonnatural agents or entities, thereby helping to reinforce philosophical [or metaphysical] naturalism. On the other side of this dichotomy, disciplines such as religion, theology, and ethics have been relegated to the realm of mere opinions, personal preferences, and values, and thus they do not give us knowledge of reality.<sup>18</sup>

## CRITIQUE OF NATURALISM

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Philosopher and atheist Thomas Nagel poignantly observed in *Mind and Cosmos – Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False*, his scathing 2012 critique of evolutionary naturalism, that "Evolutionary naturalism provides an account of our capacities *that undermines their reliability, and in doing so, undermines itself*."<sup>19</sup>

In other words, if our cognitive capacities developed by means of purposeless, haphazard biochemical processes, we have no *a priori* reason to trust our cognitive faculties, to include the conclusions about nature we have reached through the use of our minds.

Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga suggests as Nagel does, that naturalism provides a "defeater" for itself. Plantinga observes that

First, the probability of our cognitive faculties being reliable, given naturalism and evolution, is low. (To put it a bit inaccurately but suggestively, if naturalism and evolution were both true, our cognitive faculties would very likely not be reliable.) But then according to the second premise of my argument, if I believe both naturalism and evolution, I have a *defeater* for my intuitive assumption that my cognitive faculties are reliable. If I have a defeater for *that* belief, however, then I have a defeater for *any* belief I take to be produced by my cognitive faculties. That means I have a defeater for my belief that naturalism and evolution are true. So my belief that naturalism and evolution are true gives me a defeater for that very belief; that belief shoots itself in the foot and is self-referentially incoherent, therefore I cannot rationally accept it.<sup>20</sup>

In other words, if our mind and intellectual faculties are the emergent properties of a purposeless, random amalgamation of particles we have no reason to trust them to be giving us an objectively “true” perspective of the cosmos and our place within it any more than we would rely on a can of split-pea soup to give us accurate driving directions.

Another inherent problem with naturalism is its often-blurred categorical confusion between causation and description. As Steven C. Meyer has noted, “Laws of nature describe how nature operates and how different parts of nature interact with one another; they don’t cause the natural world to come into existence in the first place.”<sup>21</sup>

Whether scientists speak of natural selection, the force of gravity, the strong or weak nuclear forces, or the electromagnetic force, these are at bottom merely *descriptions* of what one sees in the physical world. These laws and concepts, however, have no physical power to do *anything*. They are inert, just as the word “arise” has no power to get you out of your chair. What physical work is going on isn’t generated by an equation or abstract law, any more than a speed limit sign has any *inherent* power to force you to step on the brake.

It is paramount to understand that the tacit epistemological foundation of *MN* is rooted in *metaphysics*. That is, naturalism itself is a set of intangible *ideas*, a *philosophical interpretation* of the physical world which, ironically, makes it impossible to test by scientific means. And herein is perhaps the ultimate self-defeating aspect of naturalism, namely that it cannot be determined or demonstrated to be true by the very methods it claims are epistemically sacrosanct. In short, one cannot use the methods and tools of science to show that the natural world is all that exists.

## **BIBLICAL RESPONSE**

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For the Christian, the Lord Jesus Christ is preeminent in all and over all the heavens and earth (Gen. 1; John 1; Col. 1; Heb. 1). He alone is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6) and from Him all facts and values find their epistemic ground. He alone knows all and is the Arbiter of reality, from the most distant star to the rightness and wrongness of our moral ontology, Jesus is Lord (Acts 4:12; 17:24-31; Phi. 2:11). For the naturalist to declare that nature is all there is requires the claimant to be *at least* be omnipresent and omniscient. After all, he is making an *a priori* claiming that there is (likely) no omniscient being superintending the cosmos and all its multitudinous cares and events within it. The naturalist would have to know *everything* and be *everywhere* at once, and thus be like God himself, the age-old temptation offered by the adversary to Eve in the garden (Gen. 3). The late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Dutch theologian Herman Bavink observed that such

Unbelief requires enormous effort. There is no proof available to it. To prove there is no God one would have to be omniscient and omnipresent, that is, to be God. Human beings cannot resist the recognition of a Supreme Power, at the very moment they deny the true God, they fashion for themselves a false God. Thus, philosophical atheism, naturalism, and materialism again and again change into pantheism. The religious impulse is universal.<sup>22</sup>

Implicitly or explicitly, by attempting to usurp Christ’s preeminence in creation, like Sagan declaring the cosmos is all that has ever been or will be, the naturalist is thus exhibiting the very characteristics of the God whom he denies. As the Apostle Paul declares in Romans, God has indeed left us with His indelible and manifold witness through what His breath and hands have made. “For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.”<sup>23</sup>

Those “invisible attributes” of course include His omniscience, omnipotence and omnipresence. Paul also proclaims that the Lord Jesus Christ is the One by whom “...all things were created, *both*

in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things have been created through Him and for Him.”<sup>24</sup>

The all-encompassing declaration of naturalists from Thales to Hawking, that nature is all that exists, as theologian John M. Frame notes

...goes far beyond any possible observations. It is the language of a man sitting in an armchair, dogmatically asserting what the whole universe must be like. The *all*-statements of these thinkers represent human reason as vastly exceeding its limits. This is rationalism, an awe over the power of reason that turns it into a god.<sup>25</sup>

Rather than telling a tale of a long, slow, unguided and “blind” natural process, the created realm bespeaks of God’s invisible attributes in wondrously manifold ways. Bavink catalogues the many facets of creation to which God compares Himself.

God is compared to a lion (Is. 31:4), an eagle (Deut. 32:11), a lamb (Is. 53:7), a hen (Matt. 23:37), the sun (Ps. 84:11), the morning star (Rev. 22:16), a light (Ps. 27:1), a lamp (Rev. 21:23), a fire (Heb. 12:29), a spring or fountain (Ps. 36:9; Jer. 2:13), food, bread, drink, water, ointment (Is. 55:1; John 4:10; 6:35, 55), a rock (Deut. 32:4), a refuge (Ps. 119:114), a tower (Prov. 18:10), a stronghold (Ps. 9:9), a shadow (Ps. 91:1; 121:5), a shield (Ps. 84:11); a road (John 14:6), a temple (Rev. 21:22)...<sup>26</sup>

Through the prophet Isaiah, God declares to king Cyrus,

For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens (He is the God who formed the earth and made it, He established it and did not create it a waste place, but formed it to be inhabited), I am the LORD and there is none else.<sup>27</sup>

And instead of encouraging an omniscient presumption, the heavens inspire King David to marvel and wonder at God’s care for him. “When I consider Your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have ordained; what is man that you take thought of him, and the son of man that you care for him?”<sup>28</sup>

The heavens themselves are ceaselessly proclaiming God’s glory in a silent language that has served for countless centuries as the basis for the scientific enterprise in the West. If the universe were not created by God, there would be no capacity for us to understand it. The regularity of the cosmos, its very intelligibility as we understand it through the rich and enigmatic language of mathematics, is precisely part of God’s indelible and awe-inspiring glory. As David expresses, “The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the works of His hands. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night reveals knowledge.”<sup>29</sup>

## Notes

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- 2 Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* (New York: Random House, 1980), 177.
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- 6 Hawking and Mlodinow, *The Grand Design*, 8-9.
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- 14 Copan, Longman III, et. al., *Dictionary of Christianity and Science*, 469.
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- 16 Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies – Science, Religion, & Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 14.
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- 18 Smith, *Naturalism and Our Knowledge of Reality*, 1.
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- 23 Romans 1:20, NASB.
- 24 Colossians 1:16.
- 25 Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology*, 53.
- 26 John Bolt, editor, Herman Bavink, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 169.
- 27 Isaiah 45:18.
- 28 Psalm 8:3-4.
- 29 Psalm 19:1-2.



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