

NATURALISM AND SUPERNATURALISM: A FALSE DICHOTOMY

By David F. Coppedge, June 2008

Background: The primary reason given by our secularist culture for denying Bible-believers a voice in science and public policy is that religion gives *supernatural* explanations, whereas science provides *natural* explanations. “Natural” things are generally thought to be more “real” than supernatural things.

Thesis: The natural-supernatural distinction evaporates on close inspection. Secularists resort to supernatural explanations, too. And if God exists, it is only “natural” to include Him in explanations. Moreover, only the Christian worldview provides the preconditions for explaining anything at all.

Challenge: It’s time for Bible scholars and preachers to fight back against secularist attempts to marginalize their views in the marketplace of ideas. Secularists cannot defend the natural-supernatural distinction. They can only think and reason by “helping themselves” to Biblical concepts that are alien to naturalistic philosophy. We must “cast down” their imagination.

Text: I Corinthians 2:11-16

A. The urgency of the issue.

“Thanks to the theory of evolution, naturalism is now the dominant religion of modern society.... Naturalism has now replaced Christianity as the main religion of the western world, and evolution has become naturalism's principal dogma.” (John MacArthur, *The Battle for the Beginning*, Introduction)

B. The dichotomy stated by secularists.

“Creationism, creation science, Intelligent Design (ID), or any other spiritual concept, involve events or phenomena that cannot be tested, verified, or repeated through scientific methodology and, therefore, cannot be measured using scientific practice. Because science is limited to explaining natural phenomena through the use of empirical evidence, it cannot provide religious or ultimate explanations.” (Geological Society of America Talking Points on Creation and Evolution)

“2. Science relies on evidence from the natural world, and this evidence is examined and interpreted through logic....

3. Science cannot be used, by definition, to study events or phenomena that cannot be perceived by natural or empirical senses and do not follow any natural rules or regularities.

11. Explanations on how the natural world changes based on myths, personal beliefs, religious values, mystical inspiration, superstition, or authority may be personally useful and socially relevant, but they are not science...

13. Science does not prove nor disprove religious or spiritual beliefs, nor does it replace either. Science provides a method of understanding the natural world only.” (GSA Talking Points)

“Science and religion are different. Scientific explanations are based on human observations of natural processes the explanation of material facts by supernatural forces is not admissible in science. Religious explanations of the universe, in contrast to science, are based upon belief in certain forces that are beyond the realm of human understanding. Many religions also depend on a faith that certain documents are infallible.” (NCSE Talking Points on Science and Religion)

Note that these claims specifically target Biblical explanations as being unscientific.

C. Definitions.

Since the word “natural” is key in these assertions, it is important to define *nature* and *natural*. Many definitions of naturalism, unfortunately, embed the word in the definition:

“Naturalism is the view that every law and every force operating in the universe is natural rather than moral, spiritual, or supernatural.” (MacArthur)

“Naturalism is the belief that natural forces alone are sufficient to explain everything that exists.” (Colson and Pearcey, *Total Truth*)

This is as unhelpful as saying, “Chocolate is any food that has chocolate in it.”

Ambiguity.

“But there are few terms more equivocal, more ambiguous, that have more multiple meanings, than the term ‘nature’.” (Dr. Alan Charles Kors, intellectual historian, Univ of Pennsylvania)

Variety of definitions.

1. An entity’s essence or ideal: Plato’s forms, Aristotle’s natural places, human nature.
2. Probable occurrences: It is natural for parents to care for their children (but not all do).
3. Normal instead of monstrous or perverse: normal tissue instead of cancer.
4. Common sense: “Naturally, I’ll take the lower price over the more expensive brand.”
5. The great outdoors: Nature preserves; the Nature Conservancy.
6. Wild vs domestic: free range chickens, wild mustangs, natural habitat vs. zoo or lab.
7. The sum of traits that distinguishes an entity from other entities.
8. Habit or instinct: To do a thing by nature; I’ve done it so often it’s “second nature.”
9. Unadorned vs artificial: Face without makeup, shaving, body piercing, clothes.

D. Biblical uses of *nature*, *natural* also vary; require understanding of context.

Positive or neutral connotations:

1. Moses: at death, his natural force was unabated (Deu 34:7).
2. James: the man who sees his natural face in a mirror (James 1:23)
3. James: the tongue sets on fire the course of nature (James 3:6)
4. Paul: does not nature itself teach you? (1 Cor 11:14)
5. Homosexuals exchanged the natural use of the woman for that which is against nature.
6. Perverted people in the last days: without natural affection (2 Tim 3:3)
7. Uncircumcision which is by nature (Rom 2:27)
8. Jews by nature (Gal. 2:15): i.e., born Jews.
9. Pagan who does “by nature” the things of the Law (Rom 2:14)
10. Natural body vs spiritual body (1 Cor 15:44)

Negative connotations:

1. What they do naturally as brute beasts (Jude 10); i.e., human “nature” should be moral.
2. The natural man receives not the things of the Spirit of God (1 Cor 2:14).
3. By nature the children of wrath (Eph 2:3)

True Biblical categories do not characterize the things of God as “supernatural”:

1. Visible vs invisible (Col 1:16, Heb 1:3, Rom 1:20)
2. Corruptible vs incorruptible (1 Peter 1:23, Heb 12:27)
3. Present vs future (Rom 8:38)
4. Earthly vs heavenly (Heb 9 tabernacle)
5. Of the earth vs of heaven (Adam vs Christ, 1 Cor 15:47)
6. Primary vs secondary causation (Gen 8:22, Job 38:33 predictable ordinances vs miracles)
7. Natural and special revelation: how about “natural theology”!

The Bible treats Invisible, future, and heavenly things just as “real” as their counterparts.

E. Definitions of nature as usually understood by naturalists.

1. Material things: in the beginning were the particles.
2. Closed system of causes and effects. (May include laws of nature and mathematics.)
3. Empiricism: that which is accessible to the senses, at least in principle.
4. That which is real. (Assumes anything taken on "faith" is unreal.)
5. That which science can study.
6. That which is accessible to unaided reason.

Naturalists most often define nature/natural by what it is NOT:

1. Not religion or faith.
2. Not superstition, fantasy, or illusion.
3. Not miracles.
4. Not intelligent causation.
5. Not God of the gaps.
6. Not revelation (especially the Bible).

Like calling 7-Up "The Un-cola," these definitions leave *natural* poorly constrained.

F. The categories "natural" and "supernatural" cannot survive careful scrutiny.

Note: the prefixes "super-" and "supra-" mean *above, beyond*. But actually, anything outside the natural box can be considered supernatural, supranatural, non-natural, extranatural, or unnatural. Either something is in the natural box or it is not. It is time to ask serious questions.

Are these *empirically observable* entities natural?

- Magnetism and gravity (mysterious forces acting at a distance; can describe but not explain).
- Consciousness. A person in a coma suddenly awakens; what happened?
 "Or consider nature itself, which most of us feel is smart. Yet, it supposedly arose randomly from inert matter. So we have this universe, which is basically as dumb as gravel. A few billion years ago, some witless bits of carbon, oxygen, and hydrogen slammed together for awhile until out popped Kobayashi the Japanese competitive eater who devours hot dogs. How carbon and oxygen atoms should have ever developed a taste for frankfurters is mysterious. But there you have it, and it probably happened on other worlds, too. We're left with a combo plate: Some of the universe is smart, some of it is dumb. We're never quite sure where to draw the line." —Bob Berman, *Astronomy* Nov 2007
- Art and music. Cave paintings reflect a self-awareness: this is something "new" in nature.
- Placebo effect. A sick person takes a sugar pill and gets cured. How is that to be explained?

Are these *unobservable* entities natural?

- Black holes and singularities.
 - Quarks and the strings of string theory (too small to observe; theoretical).
 - Dark matter and dark energy. Cosmologists claim they make up 95% of the universe.
 - Interiors of stars and the earth: can only be observed indirectly or theoretically.
 - One-time events, like the Big Bang or the Origin of Life.
 - History... and "prehistory".
 - The multiverse: the last resort of cosmological scoundrels to escape the design inference.
- Why should secular scientists, who freely discuss these things in their journals and conferences, get away with invoking unobservables, but deny this right to others?

F. Scrutinizing the natural/supernatural distinction, continued.

Are these *concepts used by scientists* natural?

- The laws of nature and the concept of causation.
 - Mathematics.
 - Information. The meaning of a message is orthogonal to the medium that conveys it.
 - Language and communication of ideas, as in peer review.
 - Reason. The darling word of the Enlightenment is an immaterial concept.
 - The scientific method (whatever that is). Methods use material things, but are not material.
 - Philosophy of science. Everyone has one, whether they employ it thoughtfully or not.
 - Objectivity and Fairness: e.g., giving proper attribution to others.
 - Mind over matter. Lift your arm. What was the “natural” cause of that *willed* action?
 - Categories, such as species in biology and formations in geology, are human constructs.
- None of these things can be circumscribed by naturalistic categories. They deal in the realm of CONCEPTS. Concepts are not material.

G. Preconditions of intelligibility (a term used by Greg Bahnsen) require Biblical worldview.

Only the Christian worldview gives meaning to *concepts* that are required to do science.

- The correspondence theory of truth: faith that our sensations correspond to external reality.
- Laws of logic, which refer to things that are necessarily true.
- Truth: that which is timeless, universal, necessary, and certain.
- Honesty. Scientists are appalled at the rise of fraud in research. They sign Codes of Ethics.
- Integrity: Without *character* qualities, science is doomed. Character is moral, not material.
- Conscience. What is one’s conscience composed of?

Just as a computer cannot boot up an operating system without a BIOS, a human body cannot employ reason without a BiOS (Bible Input-Output System).

“The proof of Christianity is not that you can prove it to be true. It is that without it, you cannot prove anything.” (Greg Bahnsen, philosopher of science)

H. Supernaturalism is inescapable.

Gödel’s theorem (mathematics) showed that one cannot validate a system with reference to only the members of the system. Arithmetic, for instance, cannot be validated with arithmetical operations and numbers. In addition, within any system, questions will arise that cannot be answered with reference to entities inside the system. This principle can be extended to nature.

One ID scientist stated this as the “Question of the Week – or Millennium”:

“Given a finite space-time-matter-energy manifold, a closed but expanding universe, that is completely governed by natural processes (theoretically computable algorithms) that are controlled by the laws (axioms) of physics ... Is it inevitable that features or structures will appear within that universe that require assembly algorithms that are exogenous [extra-natural] to that universe? Think Gödel.” (on a private newsgroup, 6/20/2008).

Naturalism confers the attributes of God onto matter. It is pantheism in disguise.

“Since it is assumed that this matter is increate and eternal . . . it must have produced, from its own resources, everything that has appeared in the universe.... The total amorphous mass has been able to organize itself, to become animated and to endow itself with consciousness and thought. It is clear that if matter is to be looked at in this way it has to be credited with very great resources, great wisdom and positive genius....” —Dr. Claude Tresmontant.

What we are left with, therefore, is the science of one religion (pantheism) battling the science of another religion (Christianity) for the right to a hearing in the public arena.

I. Naturalists are guilty of worldview plagiarism.

Naturalists can only argue propositions by “helping themselves” to concepts outside their natural box. Notice how Eugenie Scott does this by referring to *philosophy, understanding, belief*, and other immaterial concepts while claiming she believes there is nothing beyond matter/energy:

“I could say, speaking from the perspective of my personal philosophy, that matter and energy and their interactions (materialism) are not only sufficient to understand the natural world (methodological materialism) but in fact, I believe there is nothing beyond matter and energy. This is the philosophy of materialism, which I, and probably most humanists, hold to. I intentionally added "I believe" when I spoke of my personal philosophy, which is entirely proper. "I believe," however, is not a phrase that belongs in science.” (NCSE website)

Late astronomer Robert Jastrow sensed that material substances are insufficient:

“I'm what's called a materialist in philosophy... it means that I believe the world consists entirely of material substances. And when you specify those substances, the atoms and molecules and the forces by which they interact, you've done it all there isn't anything more to be said or inserted into your model of the universe. That's what my science tells me, and I've been a scientist all my life. But I feel it unsatisfactory. In fact, it makes me uneasy. I feel I'm missing something, but I will not find out what I'm missing within my lifetime.”
From *The Privileged Planet* DVD, bonus features, Q&A. (Jastrow died Feb 8, 2008)

J. Time to go on offense. When a naturalist tries to steal goods from the smorgasbord of Christian concepts without paying the price (Christian presuppositions), we must slap their hand (in love).

Step 1: Catch them in the act:

“...modern science operates under a rule of methodological materialism that limits it to attempting to explain the natural world using natural causes. Materialist Evolutionists go beyond the methodological materialism of science to propose that the laws of nature are not only sufficient to explain all of nature and evolution, but that the supernatural does not exist.
—Eugenie Scott, *Science, Religion and Evolution*, 2001, NCSE website.

Step 2: Reductio ad absurdum: Since “natural” is an ambiguous term, we can freely substitute a nonsense word “gibbleflix”:

Translation: “...modern science operates under a rule of methodological gibbleflixism that limits it to attempting to explain the gibbleflix world using gibbleflix causes. Gibbleflix Evolutionists go beyond the methodological gibbleflix of science to propose that the laws of gibbleflix are not only sufficient to explain all of gibbleflix and evolution, but that the super-gibbleflix does not exist.” Q.E.D.

Proverbs 26:4-5 (NKJV):

4. Do not answer a fool according to his folly, lest you also be like him.
(Don't fall into the trap of using his worldview presuppositions, which are nonsense.)
5. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.
(Show how his presuppositions reduce to absurdity).

Bible teachers: It's time to stop being intimidated by the naturalists' false dichotomy, and take the lead in the marketplace of ideas. Through Christ and His Word we have the high ground.

Closing text: 1 Corinthians 1:27-31.