

The World According To Naturalism

By Martin Pickup

A traveler's potential destination is determined by where he begins his trip. If you are in Tampa, Florida, you can drive a car to New York, to Houston, or to Los Angeles. But you can't start in Florida and drive a car to London. To drive to London, you've already got to be in England. Where one begins predetermines where one can end up.

That's true not only when it comes to traveling, but also when it comes to logic. Our presuppositions—the fundamental assumptions we make as we begin the process of reasoning—determine the kind of answers we will consider to a given question as well as the kind of answers we won't consider.

Naturalism: An Imaginary Room

Let us imagine ourselves awakening one morning inside a room with no doors and no windows, with no entrances or exits of any kind—a room where nothing can leave and nothing can enter, where nothing from the outside can affect in any way what goes on inside. In such an imaginary room, one thing is certain: anything that might happen in this room will be the result of forces within the room itself. Our imaginary room allows only what is inside its walls to have an effect upon it or us.

If an object we had never seen before were suddenly to appear in our room, we would not conclude that the mysterious object originated from outside, because the room we have imagined makes that explanation an impossibility. Should we be unable to explain how anything in our room could give rise to such a unique phenomenon, we would lament our

ignorance but still rest assured that nothing from without had penetrated within, for our room does not permit such a thing to occur. So we have imagined it.

Naturalism is the worldview of our current, scientific age. People who hold to this presupposition imagine that the universe in which we live is just such a room as described above. They believe that the natural realm is a self-contained system that cannot be affected by any outside force. This material world is all that exists. There can be nothing else—no supernatural realm outside our own. Naturalists deny that there even is an “outside,” because our world—i.e. our “room”—is all there is.

So how does a naturalist explain the existence of the natural realm? His presupposition will allow only two possibilities: either the natural realm has always existed, or it came into existence by itself. In naturalism, there can be no God who created the universe.

Paul Davies, a renowned evolutionary scientist, illustrates well the naturalistic presumption: “We have to grow up and give up the notion of the cosmic magician who waves a wand to create atoms and then life. There’s no need to invoke anything supernatural in the origins of the universe or of life. I have never liked the idea of divine tinkering.”¹ Davies chooses to presume that the natural realm could not have been created by a supernatural being and could never be affected by a supernatural force. He begins his scientific investigation of the universe by assuming that no supernatural power could have created or set in motion any of the physical realities of our world.

But how can Davies (or any other atheist) be certain that his presupposition of naturalism is correct? How can he say dogmatically that this material universe is all that exists?

¹ Quoted in *The Wedge of Truth*, p. 57.

The fact that he has “never liked the idea of divine tinkering” tells us something about his own personal preferences, but it doesn’t provide evidence of naturalism. The fact that nature functions according to physical laws says nothing at all about the question of whether something exists outside of this natural realm. How can any atheist claim that the universe definitely originated on its own and that there was no God who created the material realm and the processes of nature?

For one to know that there definitely is no supernatural realm and that God absolutely does not exist, one would have to have personal knowledge of all things. Since no atheist has such all-encompassing knowledge, his denials of God’s existence amount to nothing. Arlie Hoover offers a good analogy to demonstrate this point.

Suppose, for example, that you had a bag of marbles and wanted to prove that there were no black marbles in the bag. To do that, you’d need to see all the marbles in the bag and you’d need to see them all at once. Unless you met these conditions you could never prove your assertion. In this illustration, the bag is the universe and you’re saying that there’s no God in the bag. Do you know all there is in the bag?²

A strict position of atheism amounts to the claim that one has definite knowledge of all that exists, yet this is more than any human being may claim. The same is true with regard to the presumption of naturalism itself. To affirm that nature is all that exists implies that one’s knowledge is extensive enough to enable him to deny that the supernatural can possibly exist. But unless one has total knowledge of all that exists, how can one make such a confident claim?

² A. Hoover, *Dear Agnos* (College Press, 1992) 16-17.

What grounds is there even to believe it? The fact that I am living in a material realm that we call nature, and that all I observe in nature is material, does not argue that there cannot be another realm that is of a different order—i.e. a supernatural order.

Naturalism Stacks the Deck

Acknowledging that a supernatural realm could exist does not, of course, make it so. So what evidence might one offer of the existence of a supernatural realm? The only empirical evidence (i.e. evidence perceivable by the human senses) would be if something from another (supernatural) realm penetrated into our material realm and caused something to occur that the material realm could not produce on its own. Such a phenomenon would be what is commonly called “a miracle.” But it is here that the presupposition of naturalism shows its true colors. It is a presupposition that not only precludes the possibility of a God, it disallows the consideration of any evidence of alleged miracles. When one presupposes that the material realm is all that exists, or at least that it is impenetrable by any supernatural power, then logically miracles cannot occur. To be more specific, if someone presupposes naturalism, it prevents him from considering any evidence that Jesus of Nazareth might really have performed miracles and proven his claim to be the Son of God. Naturalism renders a negative judgment upon the Bible’s claims before the Bible is even allowed to present its evidence.

Some people don’t start their reasoning process quite where a naturalist does, but they start very close to it. We might call them *practical naturalists*. These people are willing to accept the existence of something outside the material realm, perhaps even a “God” of some kind who made the world. But they will not permit this God to have any effect upon the world. God may have made the world, but according to this view, he is not allowed to have a hand in

the affairs of his creation. Everything that occurs, or has ever occurred, must be explained solely by causes within nature. The room that this kind of naturalist imagines may not be all there is, but it is still a room where nothing from the outside may enter.

When it comes to the question of whether a miracle might have occurred, naturalism has an inherent bias that supernaturalism does not. Because it presupposes that nature is all that exists, naturalism disallows any consideration of a possible supernatural explanation of a given phenomenon. In other words, naturalism is a worldview that disallows a consideration of the very empirical evidence that could prove it wrong. Supernaturalism doesn't have this problem. The supernaturalist worldview doesn't necessitate that there be a supernatural explanation of a given phenomenon, it just doesn't forbid the possibility. As a result, the supernatural worldview doesn't preclude the possibility of God or the possibility of miracles. Supernaturalism doesn't say that there must be a God, it is just open to a consideration of theism. Supernaturalism doesn't say that miracles must occur; only that hypothetically they might occur, and so potential evidence for miracles should be evaluated.

Naturalism refuses to consider the evidence for Jesus' miracles. It stacks the deck. It's like a student taking a multiple-choice test, but on his answer form there is only an A possibility and no B. The supernaturalist presupposition is more objective and fair. It does not deny that natural occurrences are the norm. Within its framework, unexplained events would be presumed to be of natural causation unless there is good evidence to persuade otherwise. But the point is simply that supernaturalism does not preclude at the outset the possibility of there being a "B answer"—i.e. a supernatural possibility. It is a worldview that is willing to consider the possibility that there may be evidence of a supernatural event

Where one begins predetermines where he can end up. Naturalists refuse to consider the evidence for Christianity's claims, and they end up as unbelievers. It is not surprising. My appeal to unbelievers is for them to be open-minded enough to start their intellectual process somewhere other than naturalism. I ask no one to assume at the outset that there is a God, or that the Bible is the word of God, or that Jesus is his Son. But I do urge people not to assume that the belief that nature is all that exists is anything more than what it is—a theory, an imagined reality that may or may not be true.

I urge people to consider the evidence for another explanation of reality. I suggest that the room where we live may not be all that there is, that it might have been built by someone, and that maybe ... just maybe ... our room has a door.