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## *Is Methodological Naturalism Question-Begging?*

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It is often asserted that politics makes strange bedfellows, but it is equally true that this happens in philosophy and theology. A case in point is the doctrine of methodological naturalism. Diametrically opposed in many of their views, a great number of theists, agnostics and atheists nevertheless agree that methodological naturalism must be presupposed in any investigation of the physical world. My goal in this paper is to demonstrate that, whatever their metaphysical views, proponents of methodological naturalism typically commit the fallacy of *petitio principii*, that is, begging the question.

One difficulty that immediately arises is that neither methodological naturalism nor the fallacy of begging the question is as easy to define as one might initially think. Commenting on methodological naturalism, Alvin Plantinga writes that

[p]art of the problem . . . is to see more clearly what . . . methodological naturalism is. Precisely what does it come to? Does it involve an embargo only on such claims as that a particular event is to be explained by invoking God's creative action directly, without the employment of "secondary cause"? Does it also proscribe invoking God's indirect creative action in explaining something scientifically? Does it pertain only to scientific explanations, but not to other scientific assertions and claims? Does it also preclude using claims about God's creative action, or other religious claims as part of the background information with respect to which one tries to assess the probability of a proposed scientific explanation or account?<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Alvin Plantinga, "Methodological Naturalism? Part 1," *Origins & Design* 18 (1997): 12.

Neither is it always easy to decide what constitutes “begging the question.” A standard treatment is to define *petitio principii* as “assuming what is to be proved.” This is helpful so far as it goes, but it is not always easy to reach agreement on the circumstances under which the objection that someone has “assumed what is to be proved,” and hence begged the question, is warranted. On pain of trivializing the charge of begging the question, it seems that the extreme view of Sextus Empiricus and John Stuart Mill that all deductive arguments commit this fallacy should be rejected, as should DeMorgan’s equally extreme view that no multipremised argument can be accused of this fallacy.<sup>2</sup> Rejecting either extreme seems justified, but it leaves one with the often difficult task of deciding under what circumstances it is appropriate to accuse someone of committing the fallacy of *petitio principii*. In light of these difficulties, it is an important preliminary task to make clear how I use the term “methodological naturalism” and to offer a diagnosis of what goes wrong in instances of begging the question.

Regarding the doctrine of methodological naturalism, it seems that its core claim is that no physical event should ever be explained as having been directly caused by a nonnatural agent. Those who espouse methodological naturalism claim that it is in principle illegitimate to posit a nonnatural cause for a physical event.<sup>3</sup> If God is assumed to act in nature He must be assumed to act through natural secondary causes. Thus, whatever one’s metaphysical beliefs concerning the existence of God, one must adopt *methodological atheism* in explaining the occurrence of physical events.<sup>4</sup> Any suggestion that a physical event might have as its direct and immediate cause a supernatural agent is not to be countenanced.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Sextus Empiricus *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 2.195-7; John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic* (London: Longmans, Green, 1843), 120; Augustus DeMorgan, *Formal Logic* (London: Taylor and Walton, 1847), 295-302.

<sup>3</sup> In his recent article, “God, Libertarian Agency, and Scientific Explanations: Problems for J. P. Moreland’s Strategy for Avoiding the God of the Gaps,” *Philosophia Christi* 4 (2002), Steven B. Cowan takes methodological naturalism to be the view “that science must seek only natural explanations for any phenomena that it might investigate” (125).

<sup>4</sup> Nancey Murphy, “Phillip Johnson on Trial: A Critique of his Critique of Darwin,” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 45 (1993): 33.

<sup>5</sup> For example, although he is not a metaphysical naturalist, Paul Davies insists that

[t]he notion of God as a cosmic magician meddling with matter, moving atoms around and rearranging them is offensive not only on scientific grounds but on theological grounds as well. I’m sympathetic to the idea that overall the universe has ingenious and felicitous laws that bring life and indeed intelligence into being, and sentient beings like ourselves who can reflect on the significance of it all. But I loathe the idea of a God who interrupts nature, who intervenes at certain stages and manipulates things. . . . It would be a very poor sort of god who created a universe that wasn’t right and then tinkered with it at later stages. (Paul Davies, “Origins of Life,” interview by Ira Flatow, National Public Radio, 14 May 1999, quoted in Del Ratzsch, *Nature, Design, and Science* [Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2001], 198 n. 19)

Many of the standard fallacies discussed in textbooks on critical thinking can be successfully analyzed as instances of deductively invalid arguments. Clearly this is not the case for *petitio principii*. Whatever goes wrong in arguments that beg the question, it is not that they are deductively invalid. If I deduce the conclusion, "Dogs are more intelligent than cats," from the premise, "Dogs are more intelligent than cats," I am begging the question of whether it is really true that dogs are more intelligent than cats, but I can scarcely be accused of deriving a conclusion that does not follow with logical necessity from the truth of the premise.

The essential problem in a question-begging argument is that its premises (or premise) provide no leverage against those who doubt the truth of the conclusion. The conclusion that dogs are smarter than cats follows with logical necessity from the premise that dogs are smarter than cats, but if I doubt the truth of the conclusion there is no way that appealing to the premise can allay that doubt. This makes clear that we assess arguments not only in terms of their logical structure but also in terms of their probative function. There must, therefore, be a sense in which, at least initially, one is more sure of the premises of an argument than of its conclusion. The difficulty in instances of *petitio principii* is that there is no sense in which the premises are more evident than the conclusion. As Douglas Walton notes,

[t]he basic problem with a fallaciously question-begging argument is that the *only* way to support one of the premises as evident is by a route of argument that includes the conclusion as part of the evidence. . . . The pre-evidence of the premises as a set of propositions requires that the conclusion be in evidence as well, thus ruling out the non-evidence of the conclusion. Hence an argument that begs the question can never be a probative argument.<sup>6</sup>

I have said that it is not always easy to recognize instances of begging the question. One difficulty, and perhaps the easiest to recognize and compensate for, is that the subtleties of ordinary language sometimes allow a premise to be restated as a conclusion, albeit in different words.

Another difficulty is that in more complex cases the fallacy of begging the question generally occurs in arguments that are circular. The problem here is twofold. First, although we are quite rightly suspicious of circular arguments, not all circular arguments are instances of *petitio principii*. Walton is correct in his observation that

[i]f an argument is discovered to be circular, or even if there is some feeling that the argument may be circular, immediately strong suspicions about the argument are evoked. . . . Such an immediate leap to declare an argument untrustworthy may be an error, however, for in

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<sup>6</sup> Douglas N. Walton, *Begging the Question* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), 40.

some cases a circular argument can perform a legitimate function in a context of reasoned dialogue. What needs to be shown is that the circle, if there is one, somehow interferes with the function of the argument, in its proper context, of using the evidences of the premises to support the conclusion. Essentially, this means showing that the structure of the argument systematically interferes with the operation of the principle of evidential priority in that context. Hence the finding of circularity in an argument should not, in itself, be regarded as sufficient evidence to declare that the argument must commit the fallacy of begging the question.<sup>7</sup>

Second, even in instances where there exists question-begging circularity, such circularity may not be easy to recognize. Provided the circle is large enough, it can be very easy to miss the fact that one has indeed traveled in a circle in the course of the argument.<sup>8</sup>

A further difficulty is that it is not always easy to formalize arguments occurring in ordinary language. In everyday discourse, arguments frequently contain unstated implicit premises. Discerning whether unstated premises exist and if so what they should be taken as stating requires a sensitivity to context and there are instances where one interpretation will render an argument as an instance of begging the question, whereas another interpretation will suggest it is entirely legitimate. Demonstrating that an argument begs the question is a very effective method of criticizing it, but the charge that an argument begs the question is, in many instances, difficult to substantiate.

It has been well said, however, that the fact that there exists twilight should not convince us that we cannot distinguish day from night. Recognizing the existence of cases where it is difficult to judge whether the charge of begging the question is warranted scarcely suggests that there are not clear instances of *petitio principii*. One very reliable indicator that the fallacy has occurred is when an apparently open argument or discussion is presented in such a way that it guarantees that only one point of view will prove acceptable. It is for this reason that we are so strongly suspicious of circular arguments, since they often function in such a way that they preclude the possibility of obtaining further evidence pertinent to resolving the issue in dispute. Thus we smile at the story of the thief who, when questioned by his two cohorts regarding why he should receive two of the four jewels they stole, replies that it is because he is the leader, and,

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

<sup>8</sup> Thus, Irving Copi and Keith Burgess-Jackson, in *Informal Logic*, 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995), comment that “not every instance of the fallacy of begging the question is transparent. . . . Sometimes the fallacy occurs in long argumentative passages (chain arguments) in which it is difficult to keep track of the various premises and conclusions. The recipient may not realize that he or she has conceded the very point that is in issue” (101).

when questioned why he should be considered the leader, replies that it is because he has two of the four jewels.<sup>9</sup> The point, of course, is that in instances of begging the question a claim that is apparently open to dispute and which requires the marshaling of further evidence for its support, is presented in such a way that it cannot possibly be rejected. Essentially, one of the disputants in the argument is only apparently, not genuinely, willing to shoulder the burden of proof required to establish her view.<sup>10</sup>

My contention is that proponents of methodological naturalism typically commit the fallacy of *petitio principii*. The questions which are begged may vary, depending on a proponent's metaphysical views. What is characteristic, however, is that methodological naturalism is asserted in a manner that precludes any marshaling of evidence against it.

Metaphysical naturalists may be inclined to suggest that they cannot be accused of question-begging in endorsing methodological naturalism, since this methodology is simply a logical extension of their metaphysical views. If one has good reason to believe there exist no nonnatural entities, then one can hardly be faulted for adopting a methodology which refuses to countenance nonnatural causes.

What this suggestion ignores is that metaphysical naturalists typically assert the truth of naturalism on the basis of Ockham's Razor. Very few naturalists are willing to argue that it can be demonstrated that the existence of nonnatural entities is logically impossible. Rather, they assert that there is insufficient evidence for the existence of such entities and that one should, therefore, refuse to posit them.

It seems, however, that the existence of physical events which are best explained on the hypothesis of a nonnatural cause would meet the requirements of Ockham's Razor and thus constitute evidence for a nonnatural entity. For the metaphysical naturalist to adopt a methodology which holds that it is never, even in principle, legitimate to posit a nonnatural cause for a physical event, is to guarantee that the requirements of Ockham's Razor will not be met. This begs the question of whether there exists sufficient evidence to justify belief in nonnatural entities and thus disbelief in metaphysical naturalism, since what is being proposed is a methodology that, by its refusal to countenance the legitimacy of ever postulating a nonnatural cause

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<sup>9</sup> This is a standard example used in many textbooks on informal logic. Walton, in the preface to *Begging the Question*, attributes the story to the French comedian Sacha Guitry.

<sup>10</sup> It is this feature that distinguishes question-begging arguments from arguments that might simply be accused of employing a false or questionable premise. In a question-begging argument, a premise (or premises) which should be open to challenge is presented in such a way that a challenge cannot be mounted. The argument thus insulates its conclusion from any possibility of being shown to be false and commits the fallacy of begging the question.

for a physical event, precludes any marshaling of evidence in favor of non-natural causes.<sup>11</sup>

It might be suggested that the metaphysical naturalist can escape the charge of begging the question if she justifies her metaphysical naturalism on the basis of the problem of evil. This will only be true, however, if she

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<sup>11</sup> It might be suggested that the metaphysical naturalist who espouses methodological naturalism is not guilty of begging the question, but rather employs a premise that can be disputed. If we take the metaphysical naturalist to be making an argument along the following lines, that:

- (1) If one is a metaphysical naturalist then one should be a methodological naturalist, i.e., refuse ever to postulate nonphysical entities as the cause of physical events;
- (2) One should not believe in nonnatural entities without good evidence;
- (3) There is no good evidence for nonnatural entities;
- (4) Therefore one should accept metaphysical naturalism and, by logical extension, methodological naturalism,

it seems far from evident that any question has been begged, though the nonnaturalist may want to claim that premise (3) is false.

Imagine, however, the following conversation between the metaphysical naturalist (MN), who has just made the above argument, and her nonnaturalist critic (NN).

NN: I disagree that there is no good evidence for nonnatural entities. I propose to show you that there is evidence that nonnatural entities cause some physical events.

MN: Such evidence cannot exist.

NN: Why not?

MN: Because any investigation of the causes of physical events must employ methodological naturalism, i.e., must assume that it is never, even in principle, legitimate to posit a non-natural cause for a physical event.

NN: Why should one accept methodological naturalism?

MN: Because there is good reason to think metaphysical naturalism is true and methodological naturalism follows logically from the truth of metaphysical naturalism.

NN: Remind me once more of your good reason for thinking metaphysical naturalism is true.

MN: The good reason for thinking that metaphysical naturalism is true is that there is no good evidence that nonnatural entities exist.

NN: Would methodological naturalism ever permit one to posit a nonnatural entity as the cause of a physical event?

MN: No. I have already made that clear.

NN: Let me get this right. Your acceptance of metaphysical naturalism is based on the fact that there exists no evidence that nonnatural entities ever cause physical events?

MN: Yes.

NN: And your endorsement of methodological naturalism follows from your acceptance of metaphysical naturalism?

MN: Yes.

NN: This seems question-begging. You endorse metaphysical naturalism on the basis that there exists no evidence that nonnatural entities ever cause physical events, yet adopt a methodology that rules out the possibility of ever recognizing evidence of nonnatural causes. You are using your metaphysic to justify your acceptance of methodological naturalism, but your acceptance of methodological naturalism serves to guarantee that even if evidence for the existence of nonphysical causes exists it can never be recognized as such.

embraces the logical form of the problem of evil, that is, the claim that the statements “God exists” and “Evil exists” contradict one another.<sup>12</sup> This form of the problem of evil has few defenders, even among the most ardent of metaphysical naturalists. Much more popular is the evidential form of the problem of evil, which holds that the amount of evil in the world makes God’s existence improbable. If the metaphysical naturalist does embrace the evidential form of the problem of evil, then she must concede that should enough positive evidence for God be forthcoming, this evidence could outweigh the negative evidence from evil against God’s existence. It is therefore question-begging for a metaphysical naturalist who argues against God’s existence on the basis of the evidential form of the problem of evil, to adopt methodological naturalism, since it is a methodology which excludes the possibility of postulating a supernatural cause for any event. Such a methodology guarantees that even if there exist events directly caused by God’s intervention in the natural order, their occurrence can never be considered as providing positive evidence for God’s existence. It will not do for the metaphysical naturalist to suggest that she has justly weighed the evidence for and against God’s existence if she adopts a methodology which guarantees that, even if positive evidence for God’s existence exists, it will not be seen as such.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> In considering the possibility that metaphysical naturalism can be justified on the basis of the problem of evil, I am making the assumption that the metaphysical naturalist’s chief opposition is some form of theism which sees God as all powerful, all knowing and all good. It is only on this view of God that appealing to the logical form of the problem of evil will hold any weight as a possible justification of methodological naturalism. Note further, that it is on the basis of the assumption that the metaphysical naturalist’s chief opposition is theism, that I leave aside the objection that, at least *prima facie*, it seems there might exist nontheistic nonnatural entities.

<sup>13</sup> At the risk of repeating much of what was said in note 11, imagine the following conversation between a theist (T) and a metaphysical naturalist (MN) who justifies metaphysical naturalism on the basis of the evidential form of the problem of evil and who then attempts to justify methodological naturalism on the basis of metaphysical naturalism.

MN: If one is a metaphysical naturalist then one should be a methodological naturalist, i.e., refuse ever to postulate nonphysical entities as the cause of physical events. One should not believe in nonnatural entities without good evidence. There is no good evidence for nonnatural entities. Indeed, in the case of God, the chief candidate for a nonnatural entity, the existence of evil constitutes positive evidence against His existence. Therefore one should accept metaphysical naturalism and, by logical extension, methodological naturalism.

T: I disagree that there is no good evidence for nonnatural entities. I propose to show you that there is evidence that God causes some physical events and that this positive evidence for God outweighs any presumed negative evidence based on the existence of evil.

MN: Such positive evidence cannot exist.

T: Why not?

MN: Because any investigation of the causes of physical events must employ methodological naturalism, i.e., must assume that it is never, even in principle, legitimate to posit a non-natural cause for a physical event.



Theists who are proponents of methodological naturalism can scarcely be accused of implicitly using metaphysical naturalism to justify methodological naturalism and then arguing for the truth of metaphysical naturalism on the basis of the result of a methodology which precludes any explanatory appeal to nonnatural causes. They do, however, very often beg other important questions. The most frequent of these concerns the means by which God accomplishes His purposes in the physical universe. Theists who are methodological naturalists typically insist that God accomplishes His purposes in the universe exclusively through natural secondary causes. Thus, for example, Howard Van Till argues that theists should adopt the “robust formational economy principle.” This is the assumption that there are no gaps in the formational economy of the universe. In Van Till’s view, the universe should be seen as “fully gifted” in the sense that the capacities

T: Why should one accept methodological naturalism?

MN: Because there is good reason to think metaphysical naturalism is true, and methodological naturalism follows logically from the truth of metaphysical naturalism.

T: Remind me once more of your good reason for thinking metaphysical naturalism is true.

MN: The good reason for thinking that metaphysical naturalism is true is that there is no good evidence that nonnatural entities exist. Further, given that evil constitutes evidence against the existence of God, the primary candidate for a nonnatural entity, it seems clear that metaphysical naturalism is justified.

T: Would methodological naturalism ever permit one to posit a nonnatural entity as the cause of a physical event.

MN: No. I have already made that clear.

T: Let me get this right. Your acceptance of metaphysical naturalism is based on the fact that there exists no evidence that nonnatural entities ever cause physical events?

MN: Yes. That along with the evidence provided by the existence of evil.

T: And your endorsement of methodological naturalism follows from your acceptance of metaphysical naturalism?

MN: Yes.

T: This seems question-begging. You endorse metaphysical naturalism on the basis that there exists no evidence that nonnatural entities ever cause physical events, yet adopt a methodology which rules out the possibility of ever recognizing evidence of nonnatural causes. You are using your metaphysic to justify your acceptance of methodological naturalism, but your acceptance of methodological naturalism serves to guarantee that even if evidence for the existence of nonphysical causes exists it can never be recognized as such.

MN: Are you not forgetting that evil constitutes positive evidence against God’s existence?

T: Assuming that evil does in fact constitute evidence against God’s existence, it only makes God’s existence improbable if there is not a body of positive evidence that outweighs the body of negative evidence. By adopting methodological naturalism you guarantee that such a body of positive evidence will not be recognized, even if it exists. You use your metaphysical naturalism to justify methodological naturalism and you use methodological naturalism to justify your metaphysical naturalism. Your metaphysical naturalism supposedly justifies your methodological naturalism, but your methodological naturalism serves to insulate your metaphysical naturalism from any possible challenge. This is viciously circular. It begs the important question of whether there exists sufficient evidence to justify belief in nonnatural entities and thus disbelief in metaphysical naturalism.

of matter are sufficient to account for the actualization of all structures and events in the history of the universe without positing the direct intervention of its Creator.<sup>14</sup>

But on what grounds is the assumption that God works exclusively through natural secondary causes to be justified? All the great theistic religions seem to claim precisely the opposite. They all claim events that seem best explained in terms of God acting directly in nature. It seems difficult, for example, to think of Jesus' multiplication of the loaves and fishes as an event that would naturally occur in the history of a "fully gifted" creation.

One might, I suppose, attempt to evade this difficulty by suggesting that no such events occurred. The problem underlying this suggestion is that there seem no textual grounds for suggesting that those who recorded these events did not intend their reports to be taken literally or that there is any source or tradition which is free from miracle claims.<sup>15</sup> The insistence that such events did not actually occur seems based on the view that God only works through natural secondary causes. This, however, is to argue in a vicious circle. On the basis of the claim that God only works through natural causes we are assured that accounts of miracle cannot be taken seriously. We are then assured on the basis of a "demythologized" Scripture that there is no record of God directly intervening in the physical universe. The upshot of this suggestion is to multiply the number of questions that are begged. The claim that God works exclusively through secondary causes remains an ungrounded assumption, and to it has been added the further ungrounded assumption that Scriptural accounts that suggest the direct intervention of God are not to be taken literally.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Howard Van Till, "Science and Christian Theology as Partners in Theorizing," in *Science and Christianity: Four Views*, ed. Richard F. Carlson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 195-234. Van Till does not like the term "methodological naturalism," since he thinks that "it is often given such a malodorous association with ontological or metaphysical naturalism that it cannot convey anything but a negative attitude toward the concept that it represents" ("Is the Creation's Formational Economy Incomplete? A Response to Jay Wesley Richards," *Philosophia Christi* 4 [2002]: 117). It is nevertheless true that the position he espouses is essentially that of methodological naturalism as I have defined it. Thus, he writes that "in contrast to all forms of episodic creationism . . . I envision no gaps (formed by missing capabilities) in the Creation's formational economy—ontological gaps of the sort that would necessitate occasional episodes of form-imposing supernatural intervention in order to actualize at least some of the structures and life forms that comprise the Creation" ("Is the Creation's Formational Economy Incomplete?" 114).

<sup>15</sup> I should qualify this claim by noting that I am speaking of the theistic tradition I know best, namely Christianity. For a good introduction to the study of New Testament texts see Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987). Especially relevant to the discussion at hand is chapter 3, which deals with accounts of miracles.

<sup>16</sup> None of what I have just said denies that particular literary genres affect the way in which metaphysical, scientific, or other conclusions should be drawn from the texts of scripture.

Another attempt to justify the claim that God must be conceived as operating exclusively through secondary natural causes is the suggestion that this claim is implied by the perfection of God. On this view, any direct intervention by God into the created order implies that God did not get things right the first time around. Thus, David Jenkins insists that “a God . . . [who inserts] additional causal events from time to time into . . . [the] universe to produce particular events or trends . . . would be a meddling demigod, a moral monster and a contradiction of himself. . . . God is not an arbitrary meddler nor an occasional fixer.”<sup>17</sup>

A variation on this theme is to suggest that any direct intervention by God into the created order would be coercive and that God’s perfect love is inconsistent with coercion.<sup>18</sup> This line of argument has a decidedly Deistic flavor.<sup>19</sup> As in the case of the Deists, the implicit claim seems to be that the

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Rather, my point is that the acknowledged need to employ literary sensitivity all too often becomes a thinly veiled pretext to employ a gratuitous naturalistic methodology. What seems apparent in many instances is that a certain reading of the text is being imposed by a prior commitment to methodological naturalism. Such imposed readings should scarcely be regarded as instances of literary sensitivity.

<sup>17</sup> David Jenkins, *God, Miracle, and the Church of England* (London: SCM Press, 1987), 63-4.

<sup>18</sup> Van Till, for example, argues that one of the theological reasons he espouses his Robust Formational Economy Principle (RFEP) is “that form-imposing interventions appear to be instances in which God would overpower elements in the Creation, coercing them into configurations different from what they were equipped to actualize, thereby violating the being that was once given to them at the beginning” (“Is the Creation’s Formational Economy Incomplete?” 114).

It is noteworthy that in response to the suggestion that the RFEP is at odds with such concepts as creation from nothing, miracles, incarnation, resurrection and answered prayer, Van Till writes the following:

An easy answer to these objections is to remind the reader that there is nothing in the RFEP that necessarily rules out any of these concepts. The RFEP does make divine form-imposing interventions *unnecessary* for the forming/assembling of new creatures in time, but it does not rule out God’s ability or freedom to act in any way that is consistent with God’s character or will. *But this easy answer must, in all candor, be supplemented by saying that I do believe that traditional ways of depicting divine action in the Creation deserve a thoughtful re-examination in light of what we have come to know about the Creation since these traditional theological formulations were crafted.* (“Is the Creation’s Formational Economy Incomplete?” 116, emphasis added)

I do not wish to read too much into Van Till’s short and somewhat cryptic remark, but the question it raises is whether he wishes to demythologize Christian Scripture in the sense of denying that certain events, such as Jesus’ multiplication of the loaves and fishes, literally occurred. If this is what he has in mind the suspicion arises that his reading Scripture in this manner is based not on sound exegetical principles, but a question-begging adherence to his RFEP.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Annet, a Deist writing prior to David Hume, makes essentially this argument in *Supernaturals Examined in Four Dissertations on Three Treatises* (London: F. Page, 1747): “if

perfection of God implies that His creation of the universe be along the lines of a maintenance free machine. Thus, on this view, the relation of God to creation appears to be that, apart from originating and upholding the existence of the physical universe, God must leave the natural order absolutely alone. Creation may be designed in the sense that its initial boundary conditions lead to certain felicitous results, but any subsequent direct intervention is out of the question.

Leaving aside our earlier concern that such a model a priori rules out the accounts of miracle found in all the great theistic religions, it is noteworthy that this account of God's relation to creation is assumed rather than argued. Why it should be thought that God's perfection implies a creation in which God does not directly intervene rather than one in which He does is never discussed. Neither is it made clear why one should equate God's intervention in the natural order with coercion.

Certainly, it seems possible to develop alternative models of the relation of God to creation which do not employ such assumptions. A violin, for example, is as much a product of design as a maintenance free machine, but it is designed precisely to be intervened upon, and one would hardly suggest that in being played it is a victim of coercion. Equally, it deserves emphasis that creation includes free rational agents made in the image of God. There appears no a priori reason to think that in interacting with such agents God must operate solely through secondary causes. It seems clear, therefore, that the assertion that the perfection of God implies a natural order in which God never directly intervenes begs the important question of how this claim is to be justified.<sup>20</sup>

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God ever acts by a different method than that of his standard laws; it must be either because he could not foresee the consequences, which is like blundering in the dark; or he foresaw it would be needful; and then it would be like a blunder in the design and contrivance; or he foreknew and determined his own works should not answer his own ends without his mending work, which is worst of all" (44).

<sup>20</sup> In his "A Reply to Howard J. Van Till," *Philosophia Christi* 4 (2002), Jay Wesley Richards notes the question-begging tendency of such arguments. He writes:

The question-begging tendency of RFEP is evident in the . . . terms Van Till uses to describe its detractors. He speaks of "episodic creationism," "missing capacities," "an interventionist concept of divine creative action" and "gaps." . . . One sentence [of Van Till's] in particular reveals this problem: "One of the theological reasons I am inclined toward [RFEP] . . . is that form-imposing interventions appear to be instances in which God would overpower elements in the Creation, coercing them into configurations different from what they were equipped to actualize, thereby violating the being that was once given to them at the beginning." This argument assumes that the only alternative to RFEP is one in which God first equipped certain natural entities to actualize one thing, and then decided to reconfigure them—against their original purpose—to do something else. No one actually holds such a position. The issue in question is whether God intended certain natural entities to have such capacities. For perhaps God did not intend for, say, inorganic chemicals

A possible reply to the arguments I have developed is that the adoption of methodological naturalism is justified not on the basis of metaphysical naturalism or theological views concerning how God must work, but rather on the basis that it is a prerequisite of doing science. What is at issue in employing methodological naturalism is not the metaphysical view one holds, but rather what it takes to investigate the universe scientifically. Concentrating on the metaphysical or theological views of particular adherents of methodological naturalism is a red herring, since it obscures the real justification for adopting methodological naturalism.

Promising though it might initially appear, this response is seriously flawed. No less than other justifications for adopting methodological naturalism, it is question-begging. The basic problem with this response is that it assumes that methodological naturalism is metaphysically neutral. It assumes without argument that the methodology one employs can be neatly separated from one's beliefs about the nature or possible nature of reality. Not only is this assumption far from self-evidently true; it seems simply false. If, for example, I believe that there exist, or may possibly exist, mental states that play a causal role in determining bodily behavior, it makes no sense to adopt methodological behaviorism, since its adoption guarantees the development of psychological theories in which mental states either do not exist or play no causal role in bodily behavior. Only if I am already convinced that mental states do not exist or play no causal role does it make any kind of sense to insist on methodological behaviorism as a prerequisite of developing psychological theories. To insist on its employment in the absence of any justification for disbelieving in the existence of mental states or their causal powers is to beg the question of whether it should be adopted.

Methodological naturalism seems a sensible approach to scientific theorizing if one believes that nonnatural agents do not exist, or that if they do they never intervene in the operation of the physical universe. If, however, one believes that a nonnatural agent, say God, exists and might possibly intervene in the operation of the physical universe, it will seem wrong-headed to adopt a methodology that forbids positing any such intervention. Insisting that methodological naturalism be adopted implicitly commits one either to the claim that nonnatural agents do not exist or to the claim that if

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to self-assemble into living things under certain law like conditions. If that is the case, then it is not a violation of their initial being to be transformed into living things by divine activity, direct or other wise. . . . In this way Van Till's assumptions are transformed into conclusions, bypassing the actual arguments of his critics. This is unfortunate. (120-1)

they do they never intervene on the natural order.<sup>21</sup> This, however, begs the important question of whether such claims can be justified.<sup>22</sup>

Yet another attempt to justify methodological naturalism is to claim not that it is a prerequisite of scientific inquiry, but rather that it is an inductive generalization based on the results of science. Given the success that science has achieved in explaining the events and structures of the world in terms of natural causes, might it not be suggested that the adoption of methodological naturalism can be justified on inductive grounds?

Such an attempt to justify methodological naturalism is inadequate on several grounds. First, it does not do justice to the insistence of those espousing methodological naturalism that nonnatural explanations of physical phenomena are to be rejected in principle. Far from being an inductive generalization open to disproof, methodological naturalism appears as an a priori rejection of the possibility of there ever existing sufficient evidence to postulate a nonnatural cause for a physical event. Thus, for example, proponents of intelligent design are typically dismissed not on the basis that they have not produced enough evidence for their views, but on the basis that such evidence is in principle impossible. Certainly the willingness of prominent critics of intelligent design to label any appeal to divine intervention as self-contradictory nonsense and to insist that “in dealing with questions about the natural world, scientists *must* act as if they can be answered without recourse to supernatural powers”<sup>23</sup> suggests that methodological naturalism is generally espoused as something other than an inductive generalization subject to falsification. Stephen Meyer is thus correct when he writes,

[s]urely the point at issue is whether there are independent and metaphysically neutral grounds for disqualifying theories that invoke

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<sup>21</sup> I do not wish this point regarding the relation of one’s methodology to one’s prior beliefs to overshadow the larger points about evidence I have made earlier in the paper. Regardless of one’s particular beliefs, one needs to maintain certain fundamental evidential allegiances, whether in metaphysics, religion, science or other human endeavors. Thus, methodological naturalism, which skews from the outset what will count as evidence and what form genuine explanations can take, cannot be considered adequate.

<sup>22</sup> One critic of my argument objects that it would be wrong to operate on the assumption that nonnatural agents are going to interfere with the natural order and thus that it is entirely permissible to take as a working assumption that, even if nonnatural agents exist, they do not intervene on the natural order.

This objection misses the mark, inasmuch as advocates of methodological naturalism do not propose it as a tentative hypothesis which allows that in certain instances the evidence could be such as to justify belief in the intervention of a nonnatural agent upon the natural order. Rather, advocates of methodological naturalism insist that it is never, even in principle, legitimate to posit the intervention of a nonnatural agent upon the natural order. Methodological naturalism functions, therefore, not as a tentative working hypothesis, but as an explanatory straitjacket.

<sup>23</sup> Douglas Futuyma, *Science on Trial* (New York: Pantheon, 1983), 170, emphasis added.

nonnaturalistic events, such as instances of agency or intelligent design. To assert that such theories are not scientific because they are not naturalistic simply assumes the point at issue. Of course intelligent design is not wholly naturalistic, but why does that make it unscientific? What noncircular reason can be given for this assertion? What independent criterion of method demonstrates the inferior scientific status of nonnaturalistic explanation?<sup>24</sup>

Second, the suggestion that methodological naturalism can be justified on inductive grounds seems to beg an important question insofar as it assumes without argument that, prior to the rise of modern science, theologians and philosophers typically inferred that God was the immediate cause of any event they did not understand. Richard Bube, for example, finds it possible to assert, without any supporting argument, that “in earlier days it was both possible and common to sustain a religious interpretation of the world by looking directly to God as the immediate Cause of those physical and biological events that human beings were then unable to describe or understand.”<sup>25</sup>

Although widely entrenched, this claim is false. It is historically and philosophically naive to suggest that thinkers such as Augustine and Aquinas were willing to posit the direct intervention of God simply on the basis of ignorance. Both thinkers distinguished between direct (primary) and indirect (secondary) divine action. Both held that supernatural interventions in nature take place, but neither argued for such interventions on the basis of ignorance of how secondary causes operate. Nor are Augustine and Aquinas unique in this respect. The philosophy and theology of the Middle Ages was simply too sophisticated to allow the positing of God’s direct action solely on the basis of ignorance of natural causes. Thus John Reynolds notes that “neither the scholastic nor the Byzantine scholar postulated divine action only in those places where the science of the day failed. In fact, like Augustine, both were willing to allow for direct and indirect divine action. The philosopher-theologians of the period gave natural and theological reasons for any postulated instance of direct, divine action.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Stephen Meyer, “The Methodological Equivalence of Design and Descent,” in *The Creation Hypothesis*, ed. J. P. Moreland (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 82.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Bube, *Putting It All Together* (New York: University Press of America, 1995), 57.

<sup>26</sup> John M. Reynolds, “God of the Gaps,” in *Mere Creation*, ed. William Dembski (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 326.

Reynolds goes on to comment that it is equally a mistake to suggest that ancient philosophers were willing to posit God's direct action as a substitute for knowledge of natural causes. As an example, he notes that Plato

postulated solutions to problems of natural science based on two principles: induction from astronomical observation and deduction from recollected Forms. When God or demigod is invoked as explanation, it is for carefully described teleological or observational reasons. . . . [T]he craftsman or demiurge of *Timaeus* 30 is invoked to act as a mediator between the World of the Forms and the World of Becoming in which humans live. He is postulated not because of a gap in human knowledge but as the only entity fit to fill such a metaphysical space. Neither God nor a demigod is ever invoked merely to cover a gap in knowledge.<sup>27</sup>

Third, the suggestion that methodological naturalism can be justified on inductive grounds begs a further important question, inasmuch as it assumes that the progress of science has provided natural explanations of events traditionally thought to be the result of supernatural intervention. The widespread acceptance of this claim tends to obscure the fact that it is generally simply asserted, rather than argued for. This is unfortunate. Claims of divine intervention in the natural order are usually made in the context of discussions of miracle and discussions of the origin and development of living entities. It is far from evident, however, that the progress of science has made it easier to provide a natural explanation of events traditionally viewed as miracles, or to provide an explanation solely in terms of natural causes of the origin and development of living entities.<sup>28</sup>

With regard to what have traditionally been understood as miracles, the advance of science has diminished, rather than enhanced, the prospect of explaining such events naturalistically. Thus, for example, advances in our knowledge of physiology have not made it less, but rather more, difficult to provide an explanation of events such as the Virgin Birth or the Resurrection in terms of natural causes. Indeed, it is precisely the difficulty of providing a natural explanation of these events that leads many critics to deny that they

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 327.

<sup>28</sup> Both here and in my preceding discussion of Bube's claim that earlier thinkers posit non-natural intervention simply on the basis of ignorance, it has been suggested that I have been harsh in raising the charge of begging the question. Would it not be more accurate to suggest that these are instances of ungrounded, possibly false, assumptions?

I would certainly agree that they are ungrounded assumptions. This should come as no surprise, since ungrounded premises are a necessary condition of a question-begging argument. The justification for raising the further and more serious charge of question-begging is that advocates of these positions typically ignore any request to provide grounding for these assumptions. It is this entrenched tendency, even in the face of criticism, "to assume what needs to be argued for" that justifies the further charge of question-begging.



occurred; though this is to beg the question of whether all events can be explained naturalistically.<sup>29</sup>

Two further points should be made about the issue of miracles. First, the methodological naturalist does not provide an alternative naturalistic explanation of events such as the Virgin Birth or the Resurrection, but rather the hope that someday such an explanation will be forthcoming. This a priori insistence that the issuing of promissory notes concerning the future availability of naturalistic explanations is always to be preferred over the possibility of explaining an event in terms of nonnatural causes begs the important question of what grounds can be given for thinking this insistence is justified. It should be noted that, assuming there are good grounds for thinking that events traditionally regarded as miracles have occurred, the theist is in a position to be more respectful of the scientific enterprise than is the naturalist. Faced with examples such as the Virgin Birth or the Resurrection, the methodological naturalist must be prepared to reject or revise the presumed laws of nature which led her to expect different results. This places her in the position of questioning what on other grounds appear to be basic, well-evidenced, accurate statements of the laws of nature. In short, she is forced to adopt a position of radical skepticism concerning the claims of science as it presently stands, while simultaneously issuing promissory notes of dubious value concerning what it will in the future be able to explain in terms of natural causes. She provides not an alternative naturalistic explanation, but the hope that someday such an explanation will be forthcoming, despite the fact that the advance of science seems to make it increasingly unlikely that an explanation in terms of natural causes will emerge. This is in sharp contrast to those who are open to the possibility of nonnatural intervention in nature. Positing nonnatural explanations of events traditionally viewed as miracles enables one to offer an account of how it is possible to accept the occurrence of such extraordinary events without abandoning the basic trustworthiness of our scientific knowledge of how nature works.<sup>30</sup> For those who are open to the possibility of nonnatural intervention, the issue is not whether we are entitled to trust our knowledge of how nature behaves in the absence of nonnatural intervention, but whether there occur events which indicate such intervention into the usual order of nature.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> To insist that if an event cannot be explained naturalistically, e.g., Jesus' multiplication of the loaves and fishes, then it cannot have really occurred, and on this basis to rule out as unhistorical any reports of such events, is to beg the question of whether it should be assumed that all events can be explained naturalistically.

<sup>30</sup> For a fuller elaboration of this point, see Robert Larmer, *Water Into Wine? An Investigation of the Concept of Miracle* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's, 1988), 17-30, 51-73.

<sup>31</sup> This point is made very nicely by C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (London: Centenary Press, 1947), 72.

Second, it deserves emphasis that the events traditionally viewed as miracles do not occur as mere anomalous surds, but as part of a larger pattern that itself needs explanation. Mary, for example, does not simply find herself pregnant while still a virgin, but has a vision in which she is told that this will occur. Nor do things stop there. Joseph, understandably concerned about Mary's pregnancy, is reassured in a dream of Mary's fidelity, and Elizabeth, Mary's cousin and herself unexpectedly pregnant, prophetically recognizes the importance of the child Mary carries. More elements of the account could be mentioned, but enough has been said to make clear that any naturalistic explanation of the Virgin Birth requires not simply an explanation of how a virgin could be pregnant with a male child, but the teleological pattern in which the event is embedded.

Considering the issue of the origin and development of living entities, it is also far from evident that the advance of science has provided good inductive grounds for thinking that an explanation entirely in terms of natural causes will be forthcoming. With regard to the origin of living entities, advances in science show that even the simplest living things are far more complex than was previously realized. This complexity strongly resists naturalistic accounts of its origins, and when such accounts are attempted they are notoriously speculative.<sup>32</sup> Any appeal to inductive generalization as justifying methodological naturalism as an approach to investigating the origin of life founders on the fact that our experience uniformly suggests that the degree of complexity displayed by living things is the result of intelligent design. To insist otherwise seems not only question-begging, but false.

It is also far from clear that we can explain exclusively in terms of natural causes how, once originated, an early form of life could give rise to the tremendously diverse and complex forms of life that followed.<sup>33</sup> This is not to deny that natural causes play some sort of explanatory role. It is to claim that the insistence that issues of how life developed and diversified be approached on the basis of methodological naturalism is question-begging. To refuse to consider any hypothesis which posits the direct intervention of a nonnatural agent imposes an explanatory straitjacket that does little justice to the actual data.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Although an evolutionist and no friend to theories involving supernatural intervention, Robert Shapiro makes this abundantly clear in *Origins: A Skeptic's Guide to the Creation of Life on Earth* (London: Heinemann, 1986). See especially 119-20.

<sup>33</sup> A good summary of the issues and the evidence that bears upon them can be found in W. R. Bird, *The Origin of Species Revisited*, 2 vols. (Nashville, TN: Regency, 1991); see especially 1:41-391.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Michael Denton, *Evolution: A Theory in Crisis* (New York: Adler and Adler, 1985), 185.

I have been arguing that those who adopt methodological naturalism typically beg important questions concerning its justification. In closing, I wish to emphasize that rejecting methodological naturalism in no way prohibits scientists from searching for natural causes of physical phenomena.<sup>35</sup> The issue is not whether it is legitimate to look for natural causes of physical phenomena, but rather the question-begging insistence that under no circumstances is it permissible ever to posit the direct intervention of a non-natural agent into the physical order.

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<sup>35</sup> One tends to meet the objection that rejecting methodological naturalism would preclude any progress in science.

For example, an objection such as the one Guy Robinson makes in "Miracles," *Ratio* 9 (1967): 159, presumes that there are no criteria to distinguish events best understood to be the result of nonnatural interventions in nature, from events best understood as signaling an inadequate understanding of natural processes. This presumption seems mistaken both with regard to issues of miracle and issues of the origin and development of life. Regarding the issue of miracle, see Larmer, *Water into Wine?* 51-9. On detecting nonnatural intervention in the origin and development of life, see William Dembski, "Signs of Intelligence: A Primer on the Discernment of Intelligent Design," in *Signs of Intelligence*, ed. William Dembski and James Kushiner (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2001), 171-92.