

# **ATHEISM: A GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED**

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continuum

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## CHAPTER 2

### THE ATHEIST WORLDVIEW

*The clash of civilizations in the world today is not between socialism and capitalism, or Islam and the West . . . but between the spirit of the Scientific Revolution . . . and those persons north, east, south, and west who define themselves by the authority of holy books, tradition, or prophets.*

*Chet Raymo, When God Is Gone, Everything Is Holy*

British philosopher Antony Flew, one of the most perceptive atheists of the late twentieth century, underwent an intellectual conversion in 2004. Believing that honest thinkers must always “follow the argument wherever it leads,” Flew moved from an overt denial of God’s existence to a rather cerebral version of deism. The move was prompted by his conclusion that the existence and complexity of the universe as well as the origin of life are inexplicable in the absence of a divine Creator. Flew is clear that the God he now believes in isn’t theistic, and that he in no way can be called a Christian. Instead, his deity is an intelligent but impersonal First Cause (a notion of God more fully explored in the next chapter).

Predictably, Flew’s conversion has dismayed his erstwhile fellow atheists. Responses have ranged from reasoned rebuttals to rather hysterical charges that Flew is in his dotage. In response, Flew defends himself by posing a somewhat barbed challenge to his former fellow atheists: “What would have to occur or to have occurred to constitute for you a reason to at least consider the existence of a superior Mind?” (Flew 2007, p. 88).

At first glance, this seems a perfectly reasonable question, not the least because atheists and theists have been asking similar ones of each other for centuries. *What would it take for you to believe in God?*

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*What would it take to shatter your belief in God?* The assumption behind these questions is that changing one's mind merely means adding or subtracting beliefs—reaching a tipping point, as it were—and that if one can simply pile up or take away enough of them, the scales will move one way or the other.

There are some situations which this rather mechanical understanding of decision-making fits. If I'm sizing up a job applicant, I'm likely to reach a point in ticking off the information on her resume at which my uncertainty about her qualifications rolls over into approval or disapproval. If I'm in the market for a new car, I read consumer reports and tote up pros and cons of different models until I finally reach a tipping point and make my choice. In both cases, what it takes to decide are enough facts to enable me to say yea or nay.

But when it comes to God-belief, the question, popular as it is, is misplaced. Atheism—at least a reflective, thoughtful atheism—isn't embraced by refuting an argument for God's existence or rejected because of a single "religious" experience. This is because the atheist's denial of God's existence is but one strand—although an absolutely integral one—in a much more complex web of belief that, taken as a whole, constitutes a full-fledged worldview. Worldviews are basic ways of looking at reality, cognitive and emotional lenses through which we apprehend and relate to the world around us. They aren't built out of a simple accumulation of facts, nor can they typically be easily dismantled, precisely because what we accept as factual and reject as illusory is in large part determined by our worldview perspective.

The worldview through which the thoughtful atheist examines the world around him is "naturalism." By contrast, the theist's worldview is "supernaturalism." For atheists and theists to change their minds about God would mean that they'd have to either completely throw over their respective worldviews, or so seriously modify them that they come to look through very different lenses indeed. The first task is well-nigh impossible, and the second extremely difficult. This isn't to deny that atheists occasionally become theists and theists sometimes do lose their faith and embrace atheism. It's only to say that merely fiddling with a belief here or a belief there within the framework of their old worldviews isn't likely to lead to the change of mind that Flew is asking about. An atheist operating from a naturalistic worldview probably can't in all honesty imagine what Flew wants him to—that is, a reason to take God-belief seriously—because his

worldview doesn't allow for even the possibility of such a thing. (He may contrive a reason for the sake of the argument, of course, but it will only be pretending.) Even if God Almighty were to appear before him and announce Himself, the atheist would probably chalk the experience up to a psychotic episode—that is, would explain it in terms of his basic naturalistic orientation. By the same token, a convinced theist who reads experience through the worldview of supernaturalism is unlikely to be able to come up with a hypothetical that would demolish his belief in God. He could always chalk up a sudden bout of apostasy to a sinful failure of faith. Physicist Chet Raymo is quite correct to see the conflict between these two worldviews as fundamental.

In this chapter we'll explore the contours of the naturalism which grounds atheism, contrast it with the supernaturalism alternative, and examine the question of whether there's any way for the two to declare a detente. As we'll discover, some atheists believe that they can co-exist while others vehemently disagree. But before that, we need to examine the nature of worldviews a bit more closely.

### WHAT IS A WORLDVIEW?

The German word for worldview, *Weltanschauung*, literally means “looking at the world.” As mentioned earlier, a worldview is a core of basic assumptions, beliefs, values, and commitments about reality that colors the way we think about the world and the things in it (including ourselves), how we relate to others, and what kinds of hopes or fears we have about the future. Personal factors as well as cultural ones coalesce to form worldviews. The fact that I'm born in a particular place and time, with a specific ethnicity, gender, and social position, all contribute to my way of looking at the world. But so does my psychological temperament and physical health, my personal experiences and memories, and my private talents and weaknesses.

Although everyone looks at the world through a set of basic beliefs and commitments, it's not necessarily the case that the core is deliberately examined or articulated. Quite frequently, the worldview serves as the important but unnoticed backdrop against which our lives transpire (or, to remain loyal to the word itself, the lens through which we view the world). At moments of crisis or intense confusion we may remove the lens or it may be shaken off us long enough for us

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to examine it. But for the most part, with most people, it's simply taken for granted.

Worldviews may be imagined as a set of concentric circles. The innermost circle is the core, containing all the root beliefs that give the worldview its particular character. The outwardly expanding circles are peripheral beliefs. The former are axiomatic, simply accepted as givens. When they are consciously articulated, they aren't typically argued *for* so much as argued *from*. They are neither explanations, theory, nor method, but instead serve as the crucible from which one's understanding of reality and self-identity, ethical values, political positions, evaluative standards, and so on are all generated. The peripheral beliefs that cluster around them may be confirmed, modified, or rejected by appeals to logic, experience, or consistency. But the core axioms themselves are taken as self-evident. Moreover, the selection of what will count as a cause for modification or rejection is itself shaded by them. There is, then, a certain inevitable circularity at play here. Worldviews color our way of thinking about the world, and our thinking about the world confirms our worldviews.

To what extent peripheral belief change can affect core beliefs is an open question. The usual flow seems to be outward: core beliefs influence the nature of our peripheral beliefs. W. V. Quine, who tended to use the expression "web of belief" rather than "worldview," argued that beliefs on the outer edges of the web can be modified or even abandoned with no or only minor alterations to the core (Quine and Ullian 1978). But if we apply the analysis of scientific revolutions offered by Thomas Kuhn to worldviews, it may be that exposure to countervailing ideas and values eventually can so undermine the outer integrity of a worldview that its holders must question the inner core. In this case, the flow would be inward: disruption of peripheral beliefs can lead to deep reflection on what has been taken up to that point as axiomatic. Of course, there's no necessity that this occur. Auxiliary explanations loyal to the core commitments frequently can be spun that account for countervailing evidence. But this strategy, if pursued too far, results in a heaviness at the edges that unbalances the entire worldview (Kuhn 1996).

Regardless of how worldview modification transpires, one thing seems to be clear: given the interconnectedness of the beliefs that make up our worldviews, they must be examined in a body rather than singly. Any given hypothesis or claim rests upon a complex

foundation of background assumptions—the worldview’s core beliefs—and these must be taken into consideration. Consequently, there is no single crucial experiment or test that can be invoked to settle the issue between two competing worldviews. A challenged peripheral belief can usually be modified or dropped in response to challenges without damaging the core assumptions. And what that means is that a variety of competing hypotheses can be compatible with the available evidence.<sup>1</sup>

One final word about worldviews before we examine naturalism. I said earlier that most of us probably have never articulated to ourselves or others the core beliefs that make up the nucleus of our worldviews. But one way of inferring what they are is through the observation of behavior. Practice will often reveal genuine core beliefs, even if they can’t easily be spoken by their holders. Recall the discussion in the previous chapter about *de facto* belief and *de facto* nonbelief. If asked, a person who’s a *de facto* nonbeliever will insist that she is religious, that she accepts the existence of a deity, and so on. But her practice, which makes no room in her daily life, moral decision-making, or fundamental loyalties for any religious-tinted considerations whatsoever, gives the lie to both her own self-understanding and how she identifies herself to others.

## NATURALISM

The worldview that undergirds atheism is one whose deepest core belief is that the natural world is all there is. The theoretical model generated by that core belief is sometimes called “materialism,” but a better label, for reasons we’ll see shortly, is “naturalism.”

Naturalism in the atheist sense needs to be distinguished from what’s often called “scientific” or “methodological” naturalism. The latter is the basic investigative principle of the sciences: only those explanations for phenomena which can be scientifically tested should be sought or accepted, and this automatically precludes any hypothesis that rests its case in part or in whole on “occult”—non-natural—postulates. Scientific testability in turn is defined by the hypothetical-deductive method, which consists of observing natural phenomena, formulating a hypothetical explanation for them, predicting future occurrences based on the hypothesis, and testing the accuracy of the prediction. The conclusions arrived at are always susceptible to further scrutiny, revision, or rejection. The mark of a good scientific

conclusion, in fact, is that it remains testable and hence falsifiable. A dogmatic hypothesis is a bad hypothesis. On the other hand, a hypothesis which is so squishy that it claims to accommodate any number of exceptions is also dubious. Likewise, statements about the world based on subjective or intuitive appeals that are beyond confirmation are inappropriate objects of scientific scrutiny. They may in fact be true, the methodological naturalist will allow. But they can't be scientifically tested<sup>2</sup> (Fales 2007, pp. 123–4).

Methodological naturalism is the standard operating procedure of working scientists. One need not be an atheist to employ it. In fact, a good case could be made for the claim that methodological naturalism of a sort is the working assumption of the person in the street who goes to physicians instead of faith healers when ill or consults the Weather Channel rather than a ouiji board when planning a picnic. The person who believes that natural explanations for his illness are better than occult ones may believe in God. So may the working scientist who endorses methodological naturalism (although the percentages here are lower<sup>3</sup>). Both may even pray, attend public worship services, and so on. But if they do, they must find some way to square their religious faith with their methodological naturalism. (We'll return to this issue shortly.)

Not all methodological naturalists, then, are atheists. But all atheists are both methodological and what might be called “ontological” naturalists. They don't just insist that scientific hypotheses must be kept free of occult explanations. They argue that scientific explanations are legitimate because there is nothing in reality that can't be understood ultimately in material, physico-chemical, naturalistic terms. For the ontological naturalist, there is nothing apart from nature, and nature is self-originating, self-explanatory, and without overall purpose. Some naturalists are ruthlessly reductionistic (they're sometimes called “strict” or “scientistic” naturalists<sup>4</sup>), believing that all phenomena, including mental states, are nothing more than physical states. But others argue for an “emergent” naturalism which recognizes that certain emergent complex phenomena such as mental states can't be totally explained in terms of lower levels of complexity. Instead, they require explanations appropriate to their level—both explanations which are nonetheless naturalistic.

Both reductionistic and emergent naturalists are monists who hold that naturalistic explanations can and should be applied across the board (although not necessarily in a reductionistic way) in order to



develop integrative generalizations. Atheist Paul Kurtz calls such an enterprise “coduction.” “Contrasted with induction and deduction,” he writes, “this means that we coduce explanations that cut across scientific disciplines in order to develop a more comprehensive cosmic outlook.” At the very least, naturalists “need to make every effort to develop a ‘synoptic perspective’.”<sup>5</sup> (Kurtz 2007, pp. 28–9).

This being said, it’s been noted by more than one philosopher that even though we live in an age in which naturalism is the going paradigm (especially among scientists and philosophers), there’s remarkably little precision about just what is meant by either the word “naturalism” or “nature.” Naturalists are generally good at providing negative descriptions of their position—thus Kai Nielsen says that “naturalism denies that there are any spiritual or supernatural realities . . . . There are no supernatural realities transcendent to the world”—but not so good at positive descriptions—naturalism “is the view that anything that exists is ultimately composed of physical components” (Nielsen 1997, p. 402; Goetz and Taliaferro 2008, p. 9). What remains murky is how to understand “physical,” beyond the stipulative claim that it’s the opposite of “spiritual.” What is the nature of nature? How do we identify what’s natural and what’s not? What standards can we invoke that aren’t circular? These are the sorts of questions which prompted Roy Wood Sellars to characterize naturalism as “vague” and “general,” a tendency rather than a clear belief (Sellars 1922, p. vii). Philosopher Barry Stroud expresses this ambiguity well by comparing the word “naturalism” to “World Peace.”

Almost everyone swears allegiance to it, and is willing to march under its banner. But disputes can still break out about what it is appropriate or acceptable to do in the name of that slogan. And like world peace, once you start specifying concretely exactly what it involves and how to achieve it, it becomes increasingly difficult to reach and to sustain a consistent and exclusive ‘naturalism’. There is pressure on the one hand to include more and more within your conception of ‘nature’, so it loses its definiteness and restrictiveness. Or, if the conception is kept fixed and restrictive, there is pressure on the other hand to distort or even to deny the very phenomena that a naturalistic study . . . is supposed to explain (Stroud 2004, p. 22).

## THE CLASH WITH SUPERNATURALISM

Naturalism can be described as the belief that the natural world is a closed system: nothing exists outside of it, so nothing influences it from without. By contrast, supernaturalists embrace a worldview whose deepest core belief is that reality is dualistically open, divisible into natural and supernatural realms that interact in one way or another. They agree for the most part with the naturalist's description of the physical world, but disagree with the claim that there's nothing apart from nature. In addition to nature, there is an irreducible realm of spiritual reality which isn't bound by physical laws, and this realm infuses the physical world with a deep meaning and purposefulness. The most obvious example of the supernatural is God, who exists as pure spirit outside space and time. But humans also participate in the supernatural insofar as they possess nonmaterial souls capable of surviving the death of their physical bodies. Moreover, the existence of both God and soul is knowable, although not by the methods employed in the sciences. Spiritual disciplines such as prayer, meditation, and fasting free the mind of material distractions and make it more receptive to the possibility of an encounter with spirit. In addition, experiences such as private revelations are valued for the insights into spirit they can provide. This isn't to say that the supernaturalist will accept at face value reports of private religious illumination, but only that she's more willing than the naturalist to take them seriously. Finally, the supernaturalist usually believes that fundamental truths about the realm of spirit are available in the sacred scriptures of her faith tradition.

Exactly how the natural and the supernatural interact with one another, and where the borders of one ends and the other begins, is something of a mystery. A traditional theist is likely to claim that God is separate from creation but perfectly willing to influence it from time to time through miraculous intervention. A pantheist, on the other hand, will argue for a much more immanent concept of spirit, claiming that divine intelligence is present throughout every aspect of creation. Regardless of the relationship between matter and spirit, supernaturalists ultimately conclude that the material realm is less real than the spiritual one, dependent on the spiritual one (that is, that God regulates, either immediately or distantly, the physical world), and displays, for those who know how to spot them,

tokens of the divine Artist's attributes. These tokens include beauty, intelligence, goodness, and order.

A supernaturalist is quite likely to find the questions the naturalist asks both fascinating and important. But he finds additional ones that the naturalist dismisses as meaningless or unanswerable equally if not more important. Think back to Antony Flew's move from atheism to deism. Flew writes that there are three questions which he found increasingly inescapable—Why does nature obey laws? How did conscious, purposeful life arise from matter? Why is there anything at all instead of nothing?—and that the more he thought about them, the more persuaded he became that they could only be answered by postulating an intelligent Designer (Flew 2007, p. 89). For Flew the deist, and certainly for theists, these questions simply can't be avoided. They cry out for answers. But a naturalist finds nothing necessarily compelling about them, and likely looks upon them irritably as obfuscations. *Why does nature obey laws?* Who knows? It's enough that it does. *How did conscious life arise from matter?* Whatever the answer, it's necessarily one that fits into a naturalistic framework. Don't make it out to be a spiritual mystery. *Why is there something rather than nothing?* How is such a question even to be understood, much less answered? Stick to puzzles that are solvable.

The difference between the naturalist and supernaturalist worldviews has been interestingly conveyed by two sets of metaphors, one proposed by Daniel Harbour and the other by Daniel Dennett. Harbour contends that naturalism is "Spartan" while supernaturalism is "baroque." A Spartan worldview makes "the minimal number of assumptions." A baroque worldview, on the other hand, is "richly embellished, coming complete with a set of beliefs about what exists, why those things exist, how they came to exist, and so on." The former's small number of working assumptions leaves room for continuous exploration and revision. The latter's heavy baggage "forbids revision of the basic assumptions" (Harbour 2001, pp. 10–11).

Dennett, while probably agreeing with Harbour's Spartan/baroque distinction, takes a different tack by focusing on the difference in causal flow offered by the two worldviews. According to Dennett, supernaturalism presumes that the origin of the universe, the direction in which it's moving, and any meaning discernible in it all flow from divine will. God has a plan and this plan serves as both blueprint and engine for the course of cosmic history. This is a "skyhook" way of

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thinking: attributing everything to a from-the-bottom-down heavenly or supernatural cause under the assumption (or delusion, Dennett thinks) that spirit directs matter in a way science cannot fathom. Naturalism, on the other hand, adopts a “crane” lifting-from-the-bottom-up understanding of the world. There’s no need to appeal to mysterious “final causes,” as Aristotle might say, to explain the world. The impersonal laws of nature, discovered by observing the physical world rather than spinning top-heavy theologies, are sufficient explanations (Dennett 1995, pp. 73–80).

Harbour, Dennett, and all other atheists obviously favor the Spartan, craned worldview of naturalism. They think that the baroque skyhooked one of supernaturalism is not only false but dangerously so because, as mathematician David Shotwell says, “if you admit the supernatural into your calculations, anything goes” (Shotwell 2003, p. 49). The thought experiment he uses to illustrate his point is a perfect example of the baroque busyness of supernaturalism deplored by Harbour. As a “rival hypothesis” to scientific physicalist accounts of matter, says Shotwell,

Let us assume that each subatomic particle is inhabited by a ghostly little gremlin. Each gremlin maintains the existence of its particle by a continuous creative act and is in instantaneous telepathic communication with all of the others. By this means they cooperate to produce the universe and its lawful behavior. (p. 49)

The gremlin hypothesis, continues Shotwell, offers an explanation for “everything that exists and every event that occurs”—and it can also conveniently clear up the puzzle about why evil exists in a universe created by a benevolent God (more of this puzzle in Chapter 4). All we have to do is posit that the gremlins “are mischievous and, in some respects, malevolent” (p. 49). But of course this is all absurd, as Shotwell intends it to be in order to imply that more conventional skyhook explanations are equally so. Neither the gremlin nor the God hypothesis is needed to explain the behavior of subatomic particles. In fact, they’re positive obstacles to understanding it.

Obviously, the atheist assumption that naturalism is the better—and, indeed, the only rational—way of thinking about reality is denied by supernaturalists. Surprisingly, though, straightforward theistic efforts to grapple with the challenge of naturalism have been remarkably sparse. Catholic theologian John Haught admits that the

typical response of Christian thinkers to naturalism has been to ignore it and blithely continue writing about God as if the modern scientific understanding of the world didn't exist (Haught 2000, p. 28).

Sometimes, particularly with fundamentalist theists, the claims of naturalism are ignored because they're dogmatically denied. But such denial is not only bizarre when it entails outlandish beliefs such as those preached by Young Earth advocates or creationists, it's also remarkably inconsistent. As astronomer Owen Gingerich (himself a theist) points out, the very people who "take in stride the modern technology of cell phones, laser scanners, airplanes, and atomic bombs" refuse to accept "the implications of the science" that invented them. This is a paradox, he concludes, that deserves sober reflection (Gingerich 2006. p. 11).

Less crudely, theists can also sidestep the naturalist challenge not by explicitly denying it but by bracketing it so that its claims are kept radically separate from the claims of supernaturalism. This separatism is generally based on the claim that science and religion deal with two different sorts of problems. Science is concerned with questions about physical or natural causes, and religion is more concerned with the ultimate meaning of things. So long as science and religion stick to their respective concerns, there's no need for a clash over which perspective is sounder. The two are separate but equal.<sup>6</sup>

But the problems this approach creates are obvious. Bracketing can be a disguised form of denial that shoves the naturalist challenge to the sidelines and makes it easy to ignore. That this is frequently the practical consequence is revealed by the fact that very few theists, as Haught noted, are well acquainted with what the scientific community has to say about the natural world. If they were, they might be less confident in their beliefs. Finally, the separate-but-equal thesis doesn't offer a compelling justification for the bifurcated view of knowledge it endorses (divided between scientific and religious discourses) nor the apparent diminution of God's sovereignty which its pigeonholing of religion suggests.

Ironically, the most influential defender of a separate-but-equal understanding of naturalism and supernaturalism is an atheist: the late paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould. He calls his thesis NOMA: Non-Overlapping Magisteria. (*Magisterium*, of course, is Latin for "authority.") According to Gould, the naturalist claims of science and the supernaturalist claims of religion are based upon two different kinds of authority, both equally legitimate. Trouble arises when

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one authority encroaches or overlaps onto the other. But when kept in their separate spheres, difficulties disappear.

*The lack of conflict* between science and religion arises from a *lack of overlap* between their respective domains of professional expertise—science in the empirical constitution of the universe, and religion in the search for proper ethical values and the spiritual meaning of our lives. (Gould 2003, p. 193)

Gould points out that science and religion aren't the only two magisteria or "domains of teaching authority." There's also the magisterium of art, for example. Nor does he draw the neat and well-defined border between the two that some theists would wish. He concedes that the two frequently "bump up" against one another, "interdigitating in wondrously complex ways along their joint border" (p. 196). But for all that, maintains Gould, the distinction between the two is still fairly clear: science asks "what is the universe made of (fact) and why does it work this way (theory)," while religion focuses on "questions of moral meaning and value" (p. 195).

The on-going historical clash between science and religion is usually more complex than the individual battles fought in it suggest, because the particular issues that trigger spats always reflect the more global disagreements between naturalist and supernaturalist worldviews. One of the most obvious points of contention has to do with authority. The naturalist insists that reason and empirical knowledge exert the ultimate authority. The supernaturalist counters that inspiration and faith are also important authorities in understanding the world.

Gould is well aware of this more fundamental disagreement about authority, and NOMA is intended to address it. Allowing two compatible but separate authorities, each with their own proper domains, allows for a "mutual humility" that encourages conversation between theists and atheists. This humility stems from the fact that NOMA reins in both science and religion from treading on one another's turf. "If religion can no longer dictate the nature of factual conclusions residing properly within the magisterium of science, then scientists cannot claim higher insight into moral truth from any superior knowledge of the world's empirical constitution" (p. 201).

Apparently the National Academy of Sciences agrees. In a 1998 statement, the Academy declared that the "root" of the worldview

conflict is a “misunderstanding of the critical difference between religious and scientific ways of knowing.” Religion seeks to answer questions about cosmic and personal purposefulness, while “science is a way of knowing about the natural world” and limits itself to natural cause explanations. “Whether God exists or not is a question about which science is neutral” (National Academy of Sciences 1998, p. 58).

Some atheists may be able to live with Gould’s NOMA model by telling themselves that since religion is illusory anyway, it’s to the good that its authority is contained by sharply delineating it from the sciences. But others find Gould’s argument both false and bewildering. Richard Dawkins is one of them. In one of his more generous moments, he describes NOMA as “bending over backwards to positively supine lengths” to placate religionists, and dismisses it as a “Neville Chamberlain” kind of accommodationism (Dawkins 2006, pp. 55, 67). In a less generous mood, he alternates between opining that Gould “couldn’t possibly have meant” what he said in defense of NOMA, suggesting either confusion or dishonesty on Gould’s part (Dawkins 2006, p. 57), and decrying NOMA as “a cowardly flabbiness of the intellect” (Dawkins 2003, p. 205).

But when one cuts through his histrionics, Dawkins’ fundamental objection to NOMA is worth heeding. He argues that Gould’s drawing of impermeable (even if interdigitating) borders between science and religion is an inaccurate description. Science and religion constantly influence one another; it’s unrealistic that things could be otherwise. Religion appeals to facts in its efforts to explain why the universe has deep, divinely-ordained meaning. Science appeals to value in its efforts to monitor its goals, prioritize its agendas, and watchdog its treatment of human and animal experimental subjects. The boundary between his two magisteria is more porous than Gould allows.

Even worse, according to Dawkins, is religion’s inevitable drive to absorb science.

[I]t is completely unrealistic to claim . . . that religion keeps itself away from science’s turf, restricting itself to morals and values. A universe with a supernatural presence would be a fundamentally and qualitatively different kind of universe from one without. The difference is, inescapably, a scientific difference. Religions make existence claims, and this means scientific claims.<sup>7</sup> (Dawkins 2003, p. 208)

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It's worth pointing out that even a few theists agree with Dawkins' observation that religion makes existence claims, and that therefore it necessarily steps on science's toes. But unlike Dawkins, they applaud this, seeing it as a more reasonable understanding of the relationship between the two. Anglican theologian Alister McGrath offers an alternative to NOMA which he calls POMA: Partially Over-lapping Magisteria. He argues that science and religion interpenetrate in the subject matter they investigate and the methods they use, and that recognizing this opens up exciting "possibilities of cross-fertilization" (McGrath 2007, p. 19). McGrath fails, however, to give even a semi-specific account of what he means by "partial" overlap. And for Dawkins and many other atheists, POMA is even less acceptable than NOMA. Recognizing either is allowing the camel's nose in the tent: the moment one concedes that there is a supernatural dimension to reality, the worldview of naturalism comes crashing down and science becomes something quite different from what naturalists conceive it to be.

In point of fact, though, Gould's NOMA may not be the threat that atheists like Dawkins suppose. A close examination of it reveals that Gould is doing little else than invoking a species of the fact/value distinction made famous by David Hume.<sup>8</sup> Although Gould uses the word "religion" to describe one of his separate-but-equal magisteria, what he means is more along the line of ethical values than belief in the supernatural. "Nature just is," writes Gould. "We cannot use nature for our moral instruction." Therefore, "I will . . . construe as fundamentally religious (literally, binding us together) all moral discourse on principles that might activate the ideal of universal fellowship among people" (Gould 1999, pp. 195, 62). This is a definition of religion which some supernaturalists and all theists might find necessary but certainly not sufficient. It makes no place for God and could just as easily be applied to secular humanism.

If any one should be concerned about Gould's NOMA, in fact, it's the theist. Dawkins fears that Gould's model, if accepted, would change the very way in which we look at the universe, flipping us from a naturalist to a supernaturalist worldview. There's some merit in this concern. But what Gould more likely has done is to pay lip service to "religion" while stripping it of any real importance. He tells us, after all, there is no intrinsic meaning or purpose to nature, and he insists that this is a *fact* established by the magisterium of science rather than simply a matter of interpretation or speculation



(pp. 178–9). This, along with his curiously anemic definition of religion, necessarily means that religious claims cannot but be vague and quite ignorable epiphenomena, and that the only real game in town is the solid scientific magisterium. This clearly isn't what Gould intended, but it's a fair interpretation of what he actually said. It's also an understanding of religion that a naturalist can live with.

### THE UNIVERSE IS JUST THERE

In a famous 1948 BBC radio debate between Jesuit priest F. C. Copleston and atheist Bertrand Russell, one of the topics of conversation was the contingency argument for God's existence. (We'll examine this argument in the next chapter.) Copleston tried to get Russell to admit that the universe must have some sufficient reason for being, and that this reason can only be the existence of a divine Creator. Russell replied by saying that he didn't see why the universe should have a reason for being. Copleston parried by asking if, therefore, Russell supposed the universe to be "gratuitous," and Russell's reply has become quite famous: "Well, the word 'gratuitous' suggests that it might be something else; I should say that the universe is just there, and that's all" (Russell and Copleston 1964, p. 175).

Russell's response to Copleston perfectly encapsulates the naturalist position: the universe is just what it is, and there's no point in looking outside it for explanations or answers as to *why* it's the way it is. Dawkins reminds us, and Russell would certainly agree, that "not every English sentence beginning with the word 'why' is a legitimate question . . . . Some questions simply do not deserve an answer" (Dawkins 2006, p. 56). Trying to get in back of nature, somehow to lift the veil and see the "why," is a long-standing temptation in the West, and it can hardly be denied that it served as an impetus for the rise of modern science. But as the naturalist sees it, supposing that the answer to the "why" must be supernatural is a foolish temptation encouraged by centuries of superstition. There is no veil to lift. The universe just is, a brute fact that needs no reason outside itself to account for its being.

The point may be put in a slightly different way: the search for a foundation must stop somewhere, and for the naturalist, the physical universe is a much better place to stop than a mysterious God. As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, every worldview is circular to the extent that it presupposes certain basic beliefs and then interprets

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facts about the world by appealing to those beliefs. The rock-bottom belief of naturalism is that any explanation about the world must come from within the world because the world is all there is. If that means dismissing certain “why” questions as undeserving of an answer, so be it.

But even allowing that certain “why” questions such as the three that nudged Flew toward deism persist, and granting that all worldviews are circular to one degree or another, the atheist contends that his worldview is still a better account of reality than supernaturalism. Any worldview generates a description of the way things are. As such, it’s reasonable to suppose that competing worldviews may be judged by the same standards that have been tried and proven effective in the examination of any pair of conflicting descriptions. These standards include simplicity, coherency, intelligibility, and testability.

In all four, the atheist believes that naturalism bests supernaturalism. As Harbour pointed out, the supernatural worldview is baroque, cluttered with all sorts of spiritual entities—not the least of which is God—for which there simply isn’t any evidence, whereas naturalism accepts only those claims which can be empirically verified or logically defended. The messier the worldview, the more opportunity for error, and naturalism is much less messy than supernaturalism. Moreover, naturalism is the more coherent of the two, precisely because it isn’t saddled with the burden of relating two completely different substances, matter and spirit, to one another. In addition, naturalism is intelligible while supernaturalism isn’t. Naturalism has an explanation for causes in comparison to which supernatural explanations come across like Shotwell’s gremlins: fascinating and fun to speculate about, perhaps, but ultimately implausible. Finally, the claims of naturalism are publicly testable, and testable moreover in a way that definitely allows for the possibility of rejecting some and verifying the truth of others.

But what possible test is there for rejecting a religious claim? What faith tradition can’t absorb challenges to its claims simply by appealing to mystery and God’s inexplicable will? As New Atheist Sam Harris notes, “faith is nothing more than the license religious people give one another to keep believing when reasons fail” (Harris 2006. p. 67). All of this, says biologist E. O. Wilson, makes the naturalistic worldview “superior” to the religious one, and he specifically applauds “its repeated triumphs in explaining and controlling the physical world; its self-correcting nature . . . ; its readiness to examine all subjects sacred and profane; and [its capability] of

explaining traditional religion by the mechanistic models of evolutionary biology” (Wilson 1978, p. 201).

In all fairness, however, it may be the case that naturalism isn't quite as spartanly efficient as its defenders suppose. The two most successful physical “theories of everything” going today, general relativity and quantum mechanics, are incompatible with one another. Moreover, philosopher of science Nancy Cartwright argues that the entire concept of natural law upon which the sciences rest may need re-thinking. We don't live in an elegantly uniform universe where the same physical laws apply neatly across the board. Instead, our world is “dappled” or patchworked. Science can perceive (or perhaps contrive) pockets of order in the natural world by cobbling together any number of different scientific theories. But no single one of them is sovereign (Cartwright 2008). Considerations such as these suggest that naturalism may have a certain baroque messiness to it that either must be uneasily tolerated or which invites (and perhaps demands) reexamination of basic naturalist assumptions about matter, causation, and physical laws.

### IS NATURALISM A RELIGION?

A frequently heard challenge is that naturalism has the status of a religion among its defenders. It's not entirely clear what's meant by the claim, although one suspects that a “you have your own religion, so why do you begrudge me mine?” tactic is probably in play. The point seems to be that the naturalist's conviction that nature is all there is itself is an expression of faith with its own tradition, dogmas, blindspots, and intolerances. After all, the truth of the naturalist perspective is no more “provable” than that of supernaturalism. Opting for it, then, must involve a leap of faith.

“Faith,” of course, is a difficult word to define. Its meanings run a gamut from the maximal of religious faith (which itself is open to any number of interpretations: is it intellectual acquiescence to certain unverifiable propositions? trust and hope in things unseen? a particular kind of lifestyle? an openness to being?) to the minimal of confidence in inductive generalizations (the assurance, for example, that the sun will rise in the east tomorrow morning). All understandings of faith include some degree of believing without full proof. The question is at what point believing without full proof becomes irrational.

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In what sense could naturalism be a faith? In the first place, it clearly isn't a religious faith, if by that we mean a system of beliefs that accepts the existence of a supernatural God. Instead, it's a self-consciously secular worldview. But, second, we've already noted that all worldviews inevitably include some fundamental beliefs that either are not provable or are justified circularly, and so bootstrapping from first principles is a necessity. Naturalism is no exception to this rule, but neither is supernaturalism or any other systematic perspective. What counts are the inferences that one makes from these axiomatic first principles and how well they make sense of experience. As Chet Raymo observes, "Every explanatory system refers back upon itself. [But] it is the timbre of the web and the way the web makes empirical verification possible that give us confidence that we are doing something right" (Raymo 2008, p. 32). So if what makes naturalism a faith in the eyes of its critics is its acceptance of certain unprovable core beliefs, then the charge is true but rather trivial. Finally, of course naturalists place rational trust in inductive generalizations about the nature of reality and the occurrence of future events. But this minimal kind of faith is the stuff that lubricates everyday living. So once more, if this is what the theistic challenge has in mind, the accusation is true but undamaging.

This being said, it must be admitted there's at least one motive among many naturalists that has a faith-like aroma. It may not be quite accurate to call naturalism a "faith," but supernaturalists who make the charge may be picking up on it.

For all his loyalty to scientific methodology, it would be disingenuous of the naturalist to insist that he's arrived at his position exclusively by way of an objective, clinically detached scrutiny of the facts. Naturalists no less than supernaturalists lean in the direction they do partly out of intellectual conviction, but also partly out of inclination. The naturalist *wants* the universe to be all that there is, just as the supernaturalist *wants* there to be a God. Each has a personal, emotional stake in his respective position that goes beyond intellectual assent. Philosopher Thomas Nagel offers a forthright confession of this role of personal desire in choosing worldviews.

I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, I hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope there

is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that. (Nagel 2001, p. 130)

Nagel's choice of words is illuminating. In any other context, expressions like "I *hope* there is no X! I *don't want* there to be an X," would suggest wishful thinking. In his psychological account of religious belief (which we'll examine in Chapter 5), Sigmund Freud argued that theists base their belief in the existence of God—their faith, in other words—on wishful thinking. But wishful thinkers, he continued, are almost always in error because they interpret reality as they desire it to be, not as it is. Their picture of reality is a wish-fulfillment rather than a reliable snapshot.

It's a fair question to ask of naturalists how much of their confidence in their worldview is wishful thinking born of deep personal commitment to a particular model of the universe. Theologian Alister McGrath (who's also a trained biochemist) argues that "nature is open to many legitimate interpretations. It can be interpreted in atheist, deist, theist and many other ways—but does not demand to be interpreted in any of these" (McGrath 2007, p. 23). What he means is that a careful scrutiny of natural phenomena entails no single metaphysical interpretation, religious or otherwise. To claim otherwise is going beyond both the facts on the ground as well as the canons of scientific methodology. This may be an honestly mistaken over-reach, or it may be a move that's motivated by personal desire—Freud's wishful thinking.

Physicist Owen Gingerich makes a similar point. The moment that the naturalist says anything more about the universe than what can be verified in a physical or scientific sense, he's gone beyond the limits of the method he claims to follow and sailed off into the waters of metaphysics (Gingerich 2006, p. 101). Speculation about the existence of God or the supernatural is perfectly legitimate. We have a right to decide how we will think about the deep-down nature of the universe. But the choice is a matter of nonscientific opinion or ideology which is hard to separate from personal preferences. The naturalist who claims to know that there's nothing beyond nature is entitled to his opinion. But he has no warrant for believing that his naturalism can support the claim.

Nagel's confession also suggests another factor that, along with wishful thinking, is viewed by philosopher Robert Solomon as a religious characteristic: belonging. Solomon says that the traditional

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way of thinking about religion is to see it as a matter of belief. Traditionally, the understanding has been that what one believes defines one's membership in a religion. But Solomon thinks that beliefs are "for the most part" secondary when it comes to religion. After all, "many adherents to the major religions of the world do not understand the belief of their particular religion." What *is* primary is the sense of belonging to a group of like-minded individuals who place their trust in something greater than themselves, and investing intellectually and emotionally in the group to such an extent that one's own identity becomes dependent upon it. Belonging bestows a sense of orientation, a place to stand from which to view and cope with the world. Belonging provides a home base (Solomon 2002, p. 12).

The urgency with which Nagel voices his need for the universe to be godless, for nature to be all that there is, suggests that he is invested in belonging to a particular community—the community of naturalists—which provides him with a reference point, a place of safety, and a barricade across which to fire when he's uneasily confronted by "intelligent and well-informed" theists. If other naturalists are similarly invested in a need to belong to a community of like-minded believers, then once again it may not be too off the mark to see naturalism as possessing at least some of the hallmarks of religion. Considerations like these may account for naturalist John Searle's disapproving observation that there is a sense in which naturalism "is the religion of our time . . . . Like more traditional religions, it is accepted without question and it provides the framework within which other questions can be posed, addressed, and answered" (Searle 2004, p. 48).

## THE VIRTUE OF HUMILITY

The worldview of ontological naturalism is the foundation on which the atheist ultimately denies the existence of God and the supernatural. Although it's sometimes identified by its proponents with science, I hope enough has been said here to suggest that naturalism, although rightfully associated with a scientific outlook, is also metaphysically speculative, and that commitment to it hinges on temperament and desire as well as a rational appraisal of the way things are. Neither of these factors necessarily falsify it, much less point to the truth of supernaturalism. But they do caution against a too-easy conviction

that naturalism, when compared to supernaturalism, is pellucid. They encourage an atheistic naturalism whose defenders argue for it, as Kai Nielsen says, “in a fallibilistic, and sometimes even in a moderately skeptical, manner . . . ‘Dogmatic atheism’ is not a pleonasm and ‘fallibilistic atheism’ is not an oxymoron” (Nielsen 2001, p. 30).

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Readers who know something about the philosophy of science will recognize here an allusion to what’s known as the Duhem-Quine thesis, the argument that it’s impossible to test any scientific hypothesis in isolation. For a good summary of the thesis, see Gillies (1998).
- <sup>2</sup> An excellent summary of the scientific method was written by 72 Nobel laureates (and others) in 1987 as an *amicus curiae* brief in *Edwards v. Aguillard*, one of the recent test cases on the teaching of creationism in public schools. It includes a statement about the goals of science. The brief may be accessed at [www.talkorigins.org/faqs/edwards-v-aguillard/amicus1.html](http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/edwards-v-aguillard/amicus1.html) (accessed December 15, 2009).
- <sup>3</sup> For data on scientists who are also God-believers, see Beit-Hallahmi (2007).
- <sup>4</sup> Sorel (1994) offers an excellent analysis of scientism.
- <sup>5</sup> Kurtz’s “coduction” is very much like E. O. Wilson’s (1998) “consilience.” Adapted from William Whewell, consilience (which literally means “jumping across”), occurs when inductions generated from one class of facts coincide with inductions from other facts: thus a “jumping across” conventional disciplinary boundaries.
- <sup>6</sup> For more on religious separatism, see Haught (2000, pp. 28–44).
- <sup>7</sup> It’s worth pointing out that this drive to absorb isn’t characteristic only of religion. All worldviews seek to explain reality in a totalizing way.
- <sup>8</sup> The distinction, which we’ll return to in Chapter 6, is intuitive. Factual statements *describe* (“is”), while value statements *prescribe* (“ought”). More specifically, factual statements reflect discoveries while normative ones reflect consensus. Hume argued that the former are never derivable from the latter. “In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remarked, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary ways of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when all of a sudden I am surprised to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, *is*, and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought*, or an *ought not*. This change is imperceptible; but is however, of the last consequence. For as this *ought*, or *ought not*, expresses some new relation or affirmation, ’tis necessary that it should be observed and explain’d; and at the same time that a reason should be given; for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it” (Hume 1972, p. 203).