

## WEEK 4 | DEISM & NATURALISM

### HOW TO JUDGE A WORLDVIEW

John Byl gives three criteria for judging a worldview that will be helpful as we begin our discussion of alternatives to the Christian worldview:<sup>1</sup>

- 1) Consistency: This concerns the internal coherency of a worldview. That is, does it follow the basic laws of logic, or does it contain internal contradictions? Byl writes:

If a worldview *W* contains a contradiction, then any proposition—no matter how absurd—can be derived from *W*. . . A simple way of looking at this is to note that if *B* and *not B* are both true then the *law of non-contradiction* no longer applies. Truth is then indistinguishable from falsity. The laws of logic are thus no longer relevant. Since no proposition, then, has any definitive truth value, all meaning is lost. Therefore, any worldview containing a contradiction leads to absurdity. A worldview containing a contradiction is said to be *incoherent*.<sup>2</sup>

In short, a worldview containing any internal inconsistencies collapses on itself and must be adjusted. As we evaluate different worldviews we will be on the lookout for these sorts of contradictions.

- 2) Experience: The basic presuppositions of a worldview should not carry with them implications that contradict our experience. As an example of this, radical materialism denies the existence of our conscious inner life—even though we all experience our conscious inner life.
- 3) Livability: A true and coherent worldview should be practical—one should be able to consistently live out its implications in the real world. Any worldview that has tenets that cannot be coherently upheld in the real world should be called into question.

We will return to these three criteria as we evaluate each worldview in turn, asking ourselves whether that philosophy can pass the litmus test they offer.

### CLOCKMAKER & CLOCK: FROM THEISM TO DEISM TO NATURALISM

The modern age began when René Descartes uttered those famous words, “*cogito, ergo sum*,” or “I think, therefore I am.” With that phrase Descartes established human reason as a

---

<sup>1</sup> Borrowed from John Byl, *The Divine Challenge: On Matter, Mind, Math, and Meaning* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2004), 20-21.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

reliable source of knowledge about the world and assigned to mankind the ability to find truth apart from divine revelation. The rise of the scientific method—pioneered by men like Sir Francis Bacon—gave mankind the ability to systematically apply that reason to the most pressing questions of the day. This powerful combination of rationalism and empiricism had, in the minds of many, bestowed on man the ability to unlock the greatest mysteries of the universe apart from any outside, or divine, assistance. In short, the need for God had (allegedly) been removed. This process can be traced in three movements:

## I. THE NEW ASTRONOMY

From the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC and into the Middle Ages, the teachings of the Greek philosopher Aristotle dominated cosmology and how mankind viewed its place in the universe. Aristotle taught a geocentric cosmology, in which the universe was organized into concentric spheres. All matter was made up of four elements (earth, water, air, fire) which vertically based on their weights. Earth was heaviest and, thus, at the center of the universe. The outermost spheres, the heavens, were made of a fifth element (what he called ‘aether’) that was incorruptible and superior to the corruptible elements found on earth. He believed that all physical matter has its own natural way of movement which is uninfluenced by any other body of matter. This view of the universe was pervasive for millennia; even today we see its influence in the common notion that heaven is ‘above’ and hell is ‘below,’ a schematic based on Aristotelian cosmology.

In the year 1543 a seismic shift would occur in the realm of cosmology that would alter the scientific and religious landscape of Europe and, ultimately, the entire world. Copernicus published his seminal work *De Revolutionibus* in which, based on his observations of planetary motion, he postulated that the sun, not the earth, was at the center of the universe. This Copernican Revolution was the stimulus of a greater revolution: The Scientific Revolution.

During the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, groundbreaking advancements in science and philosophy would have profound impacts on the way mankind understood creation and his place in it. Galileo’s observations of the moons of Jupiter led him to support the heliocentric model advanced by Copernicus and added to it by proposing a circular orbit of the planets in our solar system. Johannes Kepler furthered Galileo’s work, seeking to find mathematical principles active in nature, eventually improving on the heliocentric model by identifying that the orbits of planets were elliptical, not spherical.

The work of John Newton is often viewed as the high point of the Scientific Revolution. When he discovered the law of gravity, he provided mathematical proof for the heliocentric model and showed that the universe could be understood as governed by mathematical principles.

It should be noted that all the above men were self-identified theists who searched for order in creation because they believed that creation reflected its creator. As Johannes Kepler wrote,

I consider it a right, yes a duty, to search in a cautious manner for the numbers, sizes, and weights, the norms for everything He has created. For He Himself has let man take part in the knowledge of these things. . . For these secrets are not of the kind whose research should be forbidden; rather, they are set before our eyes like a mirror so that by examining them we observe to some extent the goodness and wisdom of the Creator.

John Newton would affirm this statement, seeing a “sovereign-passive” relationship in the mathematical laws present in the universe. To Newton, mechanical laws of nature were evidence of God’s providence.

## II. THE WATCHMAKER

The groundbreaking discoveries by men like Galileo, Kepler, and Newton had an unintended consequence: they made the world appear mechanistic instead of organic. The universe seemed to run like a clock, with no need for active divine involvement. This would have significant consequences when combined with two other threads of thinking that arose during the Scientific Revolution: rationalism and empiricism.

When the French philosopher René Descartes uttered his famous phrase “I think, therefore I am,” he was engaged in an all-consuming thought experiment. He was seeking the “Archimedeal point,” that one firm, immovable, self-evident point of truth upon which all knowledge could be constructed. He went about this by doubting everything in the hopes that he would come across something that he could not doubt, thus finding his immutable truth. Indeed, he found it—his own doubt. The one thing he could not doubt was that he was doubting. He was thinking and, thus, he must exist in order to think and doubt. Or: “I think, therefore I am.” From there, he reasoned God must exist. The significance of this finding cannot be overstated: Descartes had broken from the dominant historical philosophies which based our existence on God’s existence and reversed the order, basing God’s existence on his own existence. Primacy had been given to human reason, and rationalism was born.

While Descartes was developing his rationalistic philosophy in what is today the Netherlands, Sir Francis Bacon was developing an equally novel and ground-breaking epistemology of his own. Bacon, a professing Christian, is the father of the scientific method. Being skeptical of human reason, he favored the inductive method of reasoning, repeatedly observing a phenomenon and drawing inferences from his observations. In doing this he suspended any knowledge of teleology, or purpose, for what he observed.

Bacon's method would become the bedrock of modern science, and it was picked up by men like Gottfried Leibniz and Robert Boyle to support the idea of a mechanical universe that ran much like a clock. Leibniz and Boyle were intending to combat the organic and mystical view of the universe but unintentionally introduced an entirely mechanistic view that required no divine intervention whatsoever.

The foundation for deism had been laid by theistic scientists like Kepler, Bacon, and Boyle, but it was in the realm of philosophy that it was given form. The French philosopher Voltaire emphasized the empirical approach of Bacon's scientific method while shedding his Christian beliefs. His magnum opus, *Encyclopedie*, was meant to be "a compendium of all knowledge" and was to be acquired through reason and empiricism as a means of escaping the superstition of religion. David Hume emphasized naturalistic philosophy which states that only natural (as opposed to supernatural or spiritual) laws and forces operate in the world. Simon Laplace argued for a deterministic mechanism of the universe, one in which "the god-hypothesis" was wholly unnecessary. He saw the work of Newton, Descartes, and Boyle as satisfactory in explaining the natural world to the point that God was no longer needed. As John Hedley Brooke writes,

The clockwork analogies of Boyle and Descartes, though lodged in the theologies of nature that remained Christian in inspiration, were to appear perfectly at home when lodged in deistic philosophies—in the anti-Christian literature of the Enlightenment. For Voltaire, in the eighteenth century, the clockmaker God was to be an attractive alternative to the gods of established religions.<sup>3</sup>

Theism had been replaced by deism. God is a Watchmaker who created and set the universe in motion to run on its own without any necessary intervention. God might be the Creator of the world, but He was no longer its sustainer and thus unnecessary. Samuel Clarke writes, "The notion of the world's being a great machine, going on without the interposition of God, as a clock continues to go on without the assistance of a clockmaker; is the notion of materialism and fate, and tends (under the pretense of making God a supramundane intelligence) to exclude providence, and God's government in reality of the world." God is transcendent, but He is no longer immanent, a shift in thinking that would give rise to widespread agnosticism.

Deism has proven to be a highly unstable worldview as history has progressed, morphing from a 'warm' deism (somewhat close to a traditional theistic worldview)—often expressed as a *moral therapeutic deism*—to a 'cold' deism held by many intellectuals that describes an intelligent First Cause that kickstarted the universe but nothing more, having no ongoing involvement in the natural world. Why has this view been so unstable? James Sire highlights several that are worth noting:<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> John Hedley Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> These are primarily drawn from Sire's discussion in *The Universe Next Door*, 52–53.

- 1) Human reason replaced revelation as the authority for understanding ultimate reality, i.e. God. “Once the concept of God was up for grabs,” Sire writes, “there was no stopping his being reduced from the complex Christian theistic idea of God to a minimal, simple force or abstract intelligence... what replaced the biblical God was a variety of gods, each with fewer and fewer features of personality.”
- 2) Human reason replaced revelation as the authority for morality, assuming that the universality of human nature would lead people to agree on what was right and wrong (in other words, they hoped that human nature would be the transcendent point of reference for morality). This has not proven the case, for people simply do not agree on matters of good and evil. Later philosophers saw in this the basis for moral relativism.
- 3) Deists reject the notion of the fall and regard the current state of the universe as normal, so that “whatever is, is right.”<sup>5</sup> If this is so, then there is no such thing as morality—there is only matter, what “is.”
- 4) The universe was regarded as “a system closed to reordering,” meaning all human action is determined. If this is the case, then there is no meaning or significance to our choices. In fact, there is no significance to humans at all; we are just cogs in the universal clock. “Human significance and mechanical determinism are impossible bedfellows.

For these reasons (and others), deism was historically a transitional worldview, one that would inevitably lead to a further drift from historical Christian theism. “In intellectual terms the route is this: In theism God is the infinite-personal Creator and sustainer of the cosmos. In deism God is reduced; he begins to lose his personality, though he remains the Creator and (by implication) sustainer of the cosmos. In naturalism God is further reduced; he loses his very existence.”<sup>6</sup>

### III. THE UN-ORIGINATOR

The early 19<sup>th</sup> century would see the dismantling of the “god-hypothesis” completed with the publishing of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*. In *Origin of Species* Darwin laid out the mechanism of natural selection as an explanation for the diversity of life seen on earth. Natural selection describes the process in which organisms with a phenotype better adapted for survival in a particular environment survive and reproduce at a higher rate than

---

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man: Epistle 1*, stanza X. He closes his poem with these lines:

All discord, harmony, not understood;  
 All partial evil, universal good:  
 And, spite of pride, in erring reason’s spite,  
 One truth is clear, Whatever is, is right.

<sup>6</sup> Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 56. I would contend that, in deism, God ceased to be the Sustainer of the universe. That role was now attributed to the natural laws at operation in the universe. Granted, some deists would identify natural law as “god,” but this seems a more recent innovation and more closely aligned with naturalism than with the deism that arose in the Enlightenment.

those of less suitable phenotypes. Through this process, species gain new inheritable traits and behaviors and, over time, evolve into different and diverse organisms.

Darwin had been deeply influenced by Charles Lyle's *Principles of Geology*, which posited uniformitarianism—as opposed to catastrophism—in which the same forces we now observe at work shaped the universe over a vast expanse of time. He also favored Thomas Malthus' theories on population growth laid out in *Essay on the Principle of Population*, which posited that competition led to a better-adapted species overwhelming an inferior species. Perhaps the greatest influence on his thinking, however, was not a scientific argument but an event. As Darwin embarked on his voyage upon the HMS Beagle and developed his theory, he was in the midst of grieving the loss of his beloved daughter Anne. Darwin, who was originally a theology student, could not reconcile her death with the existence of a benevolent God and was desperate to explain life that did not require God at all.

In proposing evolution, Darwin had done just that. Whereas the philosophers of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries removed the need for God as Sustainer, Darwin had removed the need for God as Creator, thus rendering Him unnecessary altogether.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The worldview that arose out of this period of scientific advancement is naturalism, the belief that the natural world—that which can be observed with the senses—is all that exists, to the exclusion of anything supernatural or divine. Truth is objective and unlocked by applying reason through the scientific method, a process which seeks to remove any sort of variable or bias so that the raw data will inevitably point to the unadulterated truth regarding the question being asked. Despite the current backlash against objectivity, the power of science still holds sway in society. Belief in the supernatural is still regarded as irrational in light of the virtually unquestioned authority of science's explanatory power.

#### **NATURALISM & ONTOLOGY: WHAT YOU SEE IS WHAT YOU GET**

The ontology of the naturalistic worldview is simple: matter is all that there is. The universe a closed system—there is nothing that exists outside of it, and there is no spiritual realm that exists alongside it. Matter is the prime reality. The famed astrophysicist Carl Sagan puts it quite succinctly: “The Cosmos is all that there is or ever was or ever will be.”<sup>7</sup> In the naturalistic worldview the cosmos takes the place of God as the eternal prime reality. Though most people who hold a naturalistic worldview might not readily confess that, virtually everyone agrees that something does not come from nothing. There must be something for there to be anything, something preexistent from which everything in the universe is derived. Naturalists would deny that this pre-existing prime reality is transcendent; rather, since matter is all there is, then matter in some form (whether as energy or a mix of matter and energy) has always existed.

---

<sup>7</sup> Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* (New York: Random House, 1980), 4.

Over the last 50 years, theories have arisen postulating that the universe arose out of “a singularity at which space-time curvature, along with temperature, pressure and density, becomes infinite.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, time and space came into being at the same time—as opposed to space coming into existence at a certain point in ancient history—so that there was no “before” the singularity. This event is commonly referred to as the Big Bang.

The Theory of General Relativity and observations by Edwin Hubble found that the fabric of space-time itself is expanding, giving the impression that galaxies are spreading out away from us, with galaxies farther away appearing to be receding from us at a faster rate. What this means is that the volume of the universe is expanding and, as it spreads out, the matter in the universe cools and becomes less dense. Extrapolate this process backwards and we would find that in the past the universe was more dense, hotter, and more uniform (causing a variety of significant changes to how the universe operated). Extrapolate back far enough and you’d find yourself with the singularity. In the singularity all matter and energy in the universe was concentrated in a single point so that the density and temperature of that singularity would be approaching infinity. In this state the laws of physics break down and would not even be in operation. At the beginning of “time,” this singularity exploded and all the matter and energy it contained was propelled outward. The natural laws of physics began to operate. Over time matter coalesced into larger and larger bodies, eventually forming stars, planets, etc., and the universe as we know it came into being.

This has long been the prevailing theory regarding the origins of the universe, but more recent discoveries have cast it into doubt. If the above were true, we would expect to find temperature fluctuations of immensely large amplitude in the Big Bang’s “afterglow,” but we do not.<sup>9</sup> These findings have led theoretical physicists to disregard the theory of a singularity, instead hypothesizing that the Big Bang arose from an inflationary state in which the universe, full of energy, expanded to a point in which it was stretched flat, that energy was converted to matter and radiation and resulted in the Big Bang (at least, that’s the simple version!). How long did this inflationary period last? No one can know. How did it start? No one knows. Perhaps there was a singularity that later gave rise to inflation, that gave rise to the Big Bang, but we don’t know and can’t know.

In 1981 Stephen Hawking proposed an answer to this problem in what he considered his most significant idea: that the universe had, indeed, come from nothing. His “no-boundary proposal,” based off of the wave function of the universe envisions,

---

<sup>8</sup> J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 477.

<sup>9</sup> Ethan Siegel, “There Was No Big Bang Singularity” (Forbes: July, 2018), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/startswithabang/2018/07/27/there-was-no-big-bang-singularity/?sh=6fbb7a2e7d81>

the cosmos having the shape of a shuttlecock. Just as a shuttlecock has a diameter of zero at its bottommost point and gradually widens on the way up, the universe, according to the no-boundary proposal, smoothly expanded from a point of zero size. Hartle and Hawking derived a formula describing the whole shuttlecock—the so-called “wave function of the universe” that encompasses the entire past, present and future at once—making moot all contemplation of seeds of creation, a creator, or any transition from a time before.<sup>10</sup>

“Asking what came before the Big Bang is meaningless, according to the no-boundary proposal,” Hawking said, “because there is no notion of time available to refer to.”<sup>11</sup> At the rounded-off bottom of the shuttlecock time ceases to exist and is replaced by pure space, so that time is something that arose in the universe but was not present at its “beginning.” Yet this theory has its shortcomings as well. For one, there remains no answer for the spontaneous appearance of “something” from nothing, no matter what shape it takes. Further, the appearance of the universe still required a pre-existent space for it to emerge into, so that there actually wasn’t “nothing” but something, even if that something is defined by the absence of space, time, and matter. In reality, science’s best attempts to describe the origins of the universe hit a dead end.

Despite the many seemingly insurmountable problems faced, scientists are persistently hopeful that the answers will be found. For our purposes, we must recognize that in all of the above discussion there lies a significant presupposition: that the universe is a closed-system. That is, there is nothing outside the cosmos and it is not open to reordering from the outside either by a transcendent god or by self-transcendent, autonomous human beings. There is no spiritual realm, there is only the physical universe; no immaterial, only material; no mind, only matter.<sup>12</sup> Based on this view most naturalists are determinists, believing that the universe is held together by “an inexorable, unbreakable linkage of cause and effect.”<sup>13</sup>

One question for which no answer will be found in the naturalistic worldview is *why* the universe exists. If the universe is the prime reality, then the reason for its existence must be found within itself; it must be necessary and self-existent. Yet, it seems as though the universe’s existence is not necessary but contingent—it could have been different (it is not necessary that it be as it is), and so its current state must be contingent/dependent on something outside of itself that caused it to be as it is. In other words, the universe is dependent, not independent or self-existent, and thus it cannot be the necessary prime reality from which all other existence proceeds. Naturalism lacks a sufficient First Cause of our universe.

---

<sup>10</sup> Natalie Wolchover, “Physicists Debate Hawking’s Idea That the Universe Had No Beginning” (Quanta Magazine, June 6 2019), <https://www.quantamagazine.org/physicists-debate-hawkings-idea-that-the-universe-had-no-beginning-20190606/>

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Hawking, in a lecture at the Pontifical Academy in 2016.

<sup>12</sup> It should be recognized that this is a self-refuting statement. The statement itself is an immaterial thought.

<sup>13</sup> Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 61.



## NATURALISM & ANTHROPOLOGY: MATTER OVER MIND

### I. MATERIAL THINGS

What does naturalism teach about mankind and what it means to be human? The answers to these questions stem directly from naturalism's ontology. Because the matter is all there is, human beings are material beings, lacking any immaterial aspect like a soul. We are made only of matter. Because the universe is a closed system held together by unbroken cause and effect, a system that cannot be affected or reordered by any transcendent personality, human action is viewed as machine-like because the human mind is just a function of material processes. Complex machines, no doubt, but machines all the same. As Julien Offray de la Mettrie wrote, "Let us conclude boldly that man is a machine, and that in the whole universe there is but a single substance with various modifications."<sup>14</sup> Because we are made only of matter and do not transcend it in any way, we are subject to the same laws as matter.

How does naturalism explain human personality? Because matter is all that there is, personality too is described in purely materialistic terms. Francis Crick, one of the discoverers of the structure of DNA, opens his book *The Astonishing Hypothesis* by saying, "The Astonishing Hypothesis is that 'You,' your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules."<sup>15</sup> Thus, all the things that we think distinguish us from animals are merely the outcomes of physical-chemical processes, and personality is an illusion caused by those process in the brain. There is no mind, only matter.

### II. EVOLVED THINGS

The dominant naturalist view today is to see mankind as the latest species to appear on the evolutionary ladder. That is, we are the product of an accumulation of genetic mutations over time in response to environmental factors in which certain phenotypes were "selected" because they proved to be more advantageous than other phenotypes. Over time these new mutations led to increasingly complex species, culminating in humanity, whose greatest adaptation is our cognition and the ability it gives us to subdue nature and repurpose it for our own ends. The proposed process and mechanism of evolution has itself evolved over time as new scientific discoveries have shown older models insufficient to explain the incredible diversity of life on

---

<sup>14</sup> Julien Offray de la Mettrie, *Man a Machine* (1747), in *Les Philosophes*, ed. Norman L. Torrey (New York: Capricorn, 1960), 177.

<sup>15</sup> Francis Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis* (New York: Touchstone, 1994), 3.

earth. Even the most recent models are fraught with difficulties and can really only be described as implausible.<sup>16</sup>

This view of man has significant implications, some of which we will become clear in our discussions on epistemology and ethics. One that should be noted here is the complete loss of teleology—purpose. By reducing humanity to the outcome of impersonal forces in the universe plus time plus chance, humanity loses any sort of value or purpose in life. We are the product of purposeless matter and energy, and thus we too are purposeless. Birth, death, and everything in between become insignificant and inconsequential events, blips on the evolutionary timeline. Because there is no immaterial aspect to man, he ceases to exist at death. There is no afterlife.

### III. CONCLUSION

This is the story, the metanarrative, of naturalism. The story is that there really is no story at all. There is the universe, and man is a part of that universe. There is nothing special or significant about us. We came on the scene and eventually we will exit stage left, and the universe will continue on as though nothing has happened. Life has no meaning or purpose. It becomes clear why naturalism, when taken to its logical conclusion, ultimately leads to nihilism (more on that next week). This flies in the face of our natural intuition. In fact, one must ask why, if this is true, do naturalists engage in scientific inquiry or seek answers to the big questions of life at all? Why do so many become so enraged when people of faith disagree with their conclusions? Why do so many fight for freedom from religion and free moral determination? The reality is that few naturalists live consistently with their conclusions. Despite the logical outcome of materialism—that there is no meaning or purpose in life—nearly every materialist lives as though there are things that actually *matter*.

It is important to reiterate that the above discussions on both naturalistic ontology and anthropology rest on a basic presupposition that undergirds this worldview: materialism, the belief that there is nothing apart from the material universe. This belief is presupposed, not proven. In fact, Richard Dawkins in his book *The Blind Watchmaker* writes that biology is the study of “complicated things that give the appearance of having been designed for a purpose.”<sup>17</sup> This is a significant admission because it exposes Dawkins’ prior held beliefs that lead him to propose evolution as the mechanism of life. The evidence did not lead Dawkins to this

---

<sup>16</sup> For detailed critiques of modern evolutionary theory, see J.P. Moreland and Stephen C. Meyer, et al., *Theistic Evolution: A Scientific, Philosophical, and Theological Critique* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017) and Stephen C. Meyer, *Darwin’s Doubt: The Explosive Origin of Animal Life and the Case for Intelligent Design* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013). Though we would find areas of disagreement with the authors of these works, they expertly dismantle evolutionary theory and show that intelligent design is the only adequate explanation for the diversity of life we find on earth.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker* (New York: Norton, 1987), 1.

conclusion; rather, Dawkins—and the vast majority of naturalists—presupposed materialism and sought a way to explain life that aligned with that presupposition.<sup>18</sup>

## NATURALISM & EPISTEMOLOGY: MATTER IS MASTER

One of the outcomes of the scientific revolution was the belief that only through reason applied through induction (the scientific method) could reasonable knowledge—truth—be gained. Thus, the rationalism of Descartes and the empiricism of Locke and Hume are wed. Methodological naturalism is the prevailing philosophy lying behind scientific inquiry. It claims that “scientific answers can make reference only to natural, physical causes for any effects that we observe.”<sup>19</sup> From the outset, this excludes revelation and any sort of innate intuition (like the conscience) as sources of knowledge, and replaces God with man as the starting point of philosophy. As Sire summarizes, “Human knowledge, then, is the product of natural human reason grounded in its perceived ability to reach the truth about human beings in the world.”<sup>20</sup>

The last part of that quote is significant. Sire tells us that, in this epistemological system, there is a “perceived ability” to acquire true knowledge about the world as it actually is. In other words, naturalism is operating on a set of assumptions without which it could not function. For example, empiricism must presuppose:<sup>21</sup>

- 1) A conscious, reflecting, purposeful self
- 2) Truth and the laws of logic
- 3) Objective rational standards
- 4) The ability of our mind to affect our body
- 5) An objective, physical world
- 6) Other minds similar to our own
- 7) Objective language
- 8) The reliability of our senses and mind
- 9) The orderliness and comprehensibility of the world
- 10) The uniformity of nature
- 11) The applicability of mathematics and the existence of numbers
- 12) The existence of values, regarding knowledge, ethics, aesthetics, and method

The problem arises when one asks *on what basis* does the naturalistic worldview ground these assumptions? How does a random, purposeless universe produce a purposeful self? On what basis do we distinguish between truth and falsity? How do we know that there is correspondence

---

<sup>18</sup> As John Byl reminds us, “We explain reality in terms of our presuppositions, but the presuppositions themselves must be accepted on faith” (Byl, *The Divine Challenge*, 15).

<sup>19</sup> John A. Bloom, *The Natural Sciences: A Students Guide* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 53.

<sup>20</sup> Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 65.

<sup>21</sup> Borrowed from Byl, *The Divine Challenge*, 23-24.

between our sense perception and the real world? How do we explain the uniformity of nature? Paul Davies writes,

The conundrum is this. If the universe is simply an accident, the odds against it containing any appreciable order are ludicrously small. If the big bang was just a random event, then the probability seems *overwhelming* (a colossal understatement) that the emerging cosmic material world would be in thermodynamic equilibrium. . . . As this was clearly not the case, it appears hard to escape the conclusion that the actual state of the universe has been ‘chosen’ or selected somehow from the huge number of available states, all but an infinitesimal fraction of which are totally disordered. And if such an exceedingly improbable initial state was selected, there surely had to be a *selector* or *designer* to ‘choose’ it.<sup>22</sup>

Simply put, for the universe to exist as it does statistically *demand*s a Designer. To believe otherwise flies in the face of reason and science.

The problems go further. Empiricism must assume that the physical laws present in the natural world are operative in all places at all times; it assumes that the same causes have the same effects, regardless of where or when they occur. Otherwise, the inductive reasoning used in the scientific method has no validity. Unfortunately for the naturalist, if the universe is a closed system that operates at random without any purpose or guidance, there is no justification for inductive reasoning. Why? Because, logically, in that universe it is not necessary that future, unexperienced events resemble past, experienced events. No matter how consistent our past experiences have been, there is no guarantee that it has been so elsewhere at different times. Atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell gives a helpful (and humorous) illustration of this problem. He describes a chicken who has been well fed every day of its life and so, based on induction, assumes this will continue uniformly in the future. This assumption does not hold, for “The man who has fed the chicken every day throughout its life at last wrings its neck instead, showing that more refined views as to the uniformity of nature would have been useful to the chicken.” He goes on to say,

. . . in spite of the misleadingness of such expectations [of uniformity], they nevertheless exist. The mere fact that something has happened a certain number of times causes animals and men to expect that it will happen again. Thus our instincts certainly cause us to believe the sun will rise tomorrow, but we may be in no better position than the chicken which unexpectedly has its neck wrung.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Paul Davies, *God and the New Physics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983), 168.

<sup>23</sup> Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912), 98.

Russell recognizes that science “habitually assumes” the uniformity of nature in its quest for truth. This brings us to a significant fact about science/empiricism/the scientific method: it is not equipped to make truth claims. As Russell says, “probability is all we ought to seek.”<sup>24</sup>

Despite what is so often heard in our culture, science does not produce truth. The scientific method can only provide levels of confidence in a hypothesis under certain conditions. One of the first, basic rules you learn when conducting laboratory research is that any good hypothesis must be subject to revision or outright rejection. In other words, a good hypothesis is one that has the quality of falsifiability—the inherent possibility of being proven false. Thus, no theory can be understood as undeniably true at all times and in all circumstances.<sup>25</sup> Today most scientists would admit they are not seeking truth but utility—what works.

Time could be taken to address each assumption a naturalistic worldview makes and show how, based on the presuppositions of that worldview, each assumption is unsupported and unsustainable.<sup>26</sup> What becomes evident is that, despite its claims, naturalism operates on the basis of theism.

## **NATURALISM & ETHICS: THERE ONLY IS**

The problems inherent in the naturalistic worldview are most explicit in the area of ethics. Because the universe is a closed system comprised only of the material, there is no foundation for universal moral norms. In other words, naturalism lacks an infinite point of reference that provides moral absolutes against which moral actions can be judged. Further, because truth can only be obtained through the application of the scientific method, we are denied the possibility of acquiring knowledge about morality. Empiricism says we can only observe what *is*, without any ability to determine what *ought* to be. As Byl writes, “naturalism must postulate that all norms—whether rational, mathematical, or moral—are merely human inventions. Truth and falsity, right and wrong, good and evil are thus reduced to mere human opinion or convention.”<sup>27</sup>

Atheist philosopher David Hume famously challenged the idea that moral arguments can be inferred from observations of non-moral events—that *ought* can be inferred from what *is*. Now known as Hume’s guillotine, Hume recognized that an inference of this type is invalid unless there is a supporting ought premise. He writes, “For as this ought, or ought not, expresses some new relation or affirmation, it is necessary that it should be observed and explained; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new

---

<sup>24</sup> Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, 102.

<sup>25</sup> This was first identified in Karl Popper’s Theory of Falsification, which is meant to demarcate science from non-science, and remains an important criterion of real scientific investigation today.

<sup>26</sup> For a thorough treatment of naturalism’s inability to sustain itself, see John Byl’s *The Divine Challenge*.

<sup>27</sup> Byl, *The Divine Challenge*, 42.

relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it.”<sup>28</sup> In other words, factual statements are logically different than moral statements, so by themselves they cannot determine what people ought to do or not do. The moral argument rests on a premise or presupposition that is not derived from non-moral observations. It must come from somewhere else.

For example, it would seem reasonable to say that someone ought not punch you because it causes you bodily harm. This logic is not derived from factual observations about the harm done, however. It rests on an underlying presupposition that bodily harm is a *bad thing*. Where does that presupposition come from, and can it be shown to be true? For Hume, moral or value judgments don’t come from logical deductions but from sentiments or feelings. He writes, “Morality. . . is more properly felt than judged of; though this feeling or sentiment is commonly so soft and gentle, that we are apt to confound it with an idea, according to our common custom of taking all things for the same, which have any near resemblance to each other.”<sup>29</sup> Simply put, people ‘feel’ when something is right or wrong. Morality becomes centered on the individual and their feelings, and nothing short of moral relativism logically follows.

Hume seemed to think that mankind shared a sort of moral sense that operates virtually the same in most human beings so long as that sense is not clouded by misinformation or perverted by self-interest. This is where Hume’s argument fails the test of experience, because everyone recognizes that no one is ever perfectly informed, entirely unbiased, and entirely selfless. Essentially what Hume’s moral system demands is a morally perfect person who can function as a universal standard of right and wrong, yet this person does not exist in the worldview of naturalism.

The many arguments made by naturalists attempting to ground morality in the natural world are all dashed against the same rock: inevitably they must assume a value premise which they cannot justify. If right and wrong are determined by what leads to human flourishing or what makes society better,<sup>30</sup> we must ask how one determines what is ‘better’ and what constitutes ‘flourishing.’ Without an infinite point of reference—without a transcendent and personal God—the answers to these questions lie either with the individual or with society. Regardless, morality becomes relative to where you are and when you are.

In 1850 Lord Alfred Tennyson penned *In Memoriam A. H. H.* as an elegy for his late friend Arthur Hallam. In it, he well describes the result of losing God and holding to a naturalistic worldview:

---

<sup>28</sup> David Hume, *Treatise on Human Nature*, Book III, Part I, Section I.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, Book III, Part I, Section II.

<sup>30</sup> This seems to be the conclusion of Sam Harris’ *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* (Free Press, 2011). His argument does not convince, for he must ground it in his own experience of what is good for society, no matter how hard he tries to ground that ‘good’ in scientific observation.

Man, her last work, who seem'd so fair,  
Such splendid purpose in his eyes,  
Who roll'd the psalm to wintry skies,  
Who built him fanes of fruitless prayer,

Who trusted God was love indeed  
And love Creation's final law—  
Tho' Nature, red in tooth and claw  
With ravine, shriek'd against his creed —

There is no love, only “Nature, red in tooth and claw.”

## CONCLUSION

At the end of the day, the apparent conflict between science and faith is not one of feelings versus fact; it is a conflict of worldviews. See the words of Harvard geneticist Richard Lewontin:

We take the side of science in spite of the patent absurdity of some of its constructs. . . because we have a prior commitment, a commitment to materialism. It is not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the phenomenal world, but, on the contrary, that we are forced by our *a priori* adherence to material causes... and... material explanations, no matter how counter-intuitive, no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated. . . Moreover, that materialism is absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine foot in the door. To appeal to an omnipotent deity is to allow that, at any moment the regularities of nature may be ruptured, that miracles may happen.

Naturalism is a religion, a religion that requires faith in a worldview that cannot be held consistently and that does not match the human experience.