IDEA
Intelligent Design and Evolution Awareness Center

Naturalism Primer

(often equated with “materialism”)

"**naturalism**. In general the view that everything is natural, i.e. that everything there is belongs to the world of nature, and so can be studied by the methods appropriate for studying that world, and the apparent exceptions can be somehow explained away. ... In metaphysics naturalism is perhaps most obviously akin to materialism, but it does not have to be materialistic. What it insists on is that the world of nature should form a single sphere without incursions from outside by souls or spirits, divine or human, and without having to accommodate strange entities like non-natural values or substantive abstract universals."

(Lacey A., in Honderich T., ed., "The Oxford Companion to Philosophy," Oxford University Press: Oxford UK, 1995, p.604)

Is science *Really* based upon naturalism?

Consider these quotes by evolutionists:

*"[I]f a living cell were to be made in the laboratory, it would not prove that nature followed the same pathway billions of years ago. But **it is the job of science to provide plausible natural explanations for natural phenomena.**"*

(*Science and Creationism, A View from the National Academy of Sciences*, 2nd Edition (1999), emphasis added)

"The statements of science must invoke *only* ***natural things and processes***. ... The theory of evolution is one of these explanations."

(*Teaching About Evolution and the Nature of Science*, National Academy Press, 1998, pg. 42, emphasis added)

"It was Darwin's greatest accomplishment to show that the directive organization of living beings can be explained as the result of a natural process, natural selection, ***without any need to resort to a Creator or other external agent***...[Darwin's] mechanism, natural selection, ***excluded God as the explanation...***"

(Francisco Ayala, "Darwin's Revolution," in *Creative Evolution?!*, eds. J. Campbell and J. Schopf (Boston, Mass.: Jones and Bartlett Publishers, 1994), pp. 4-5, emphasis added)

"Science, fundamentally, is a game. It is a game with one overriding and defining rule. Rule No. 1: Let us see how far and to what extent we can explain the behavior of the physical and material universe in terms of ***purely physical and material causes, without invoking the supernatural.***"

(Richard E. Dickerson, "The Game of Science." *Perspectives on Science and Faith* (Volume 44, June 1992), p. 137, emphasis added)

"Darwinism ***rejects all supernatural phenomena and causations.*** The theory of evolution by natural selection explains the adaptedness and diversity of the world ***solely materialistically.***"

("Darwin's Influence on Modern Thought" E. Mayr, *Scientific American*, pg. 82-83, (July 2000), emphasis added)

"[F]or many evolutionists, evolution has functioned as something with elements which are, let us say, akin to being a secular religion ... [A]t some very basic level, ***evolution*** as a scientific theory makes a **commitment to a kind of naturalism,** namely, that at some level one is going to ***exclude miracles and these sorts of things*** come what may."

("Nonliteralist Antievolution," Ruse, Michael, AAAS Symposium: "The New Antievolutionism," February, 1993, Boston, MA., emphasis added)

"[W]e 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*** to create an apparatus of investigation and a set of concepts that produce material explanations…that ***materialism is absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door.***"

(Lewontin, Richard, *Billions and Billions of Demons*, New York Review of Books, January 9, 1997, p. 28., emphasis added)

"If there is one rule, one criterion that makes an idea scientific, it is that it **must invoke naturalistic explanations** for phenomena … it's simply a matter of definition—of what is science, and what is not."

(Eldredge, Niles, 1982, *The Monkey Business: A Scientist Looks at Creationism*, Washington Square Press, emphasis added)

"…any statement concerning the existence, nonexistence, or nature of a **creator or creators is not science** by definition and has no place in scientific discussion."

(Pine, R.H., 1984, "But Some of Them Are Scientists, Aren't They?" Creation/Evolution, Issue XIV, pp. 6-18, emphasis added)

Is naturalism beneficial for science?

The Four so-called benefits of naturalism:

1. **Religious / A-religious Benefit:** Frees us from unproven metaphysical doctrines or so-called moral absolutes based upon superstition or other "non-rational" modes of seeking knowledge.

Response: But what if the metaphysical realm is real and interacts with the natural world? Wouldn't scientists therefore want to know about it and look for observable signs of its interaction?

2. **Empirical Benefit:** Leads to knowledge based upon the universally observable, the repeatable, the testable, the "facts" that are available to all.

Response: Why must observations be universally available only if we assume naturalism is true?

3. **Methodological Benefit:** Provides ideal philosophical framework from which to seek knowledge--basic assumptions of science, such as uniformitarianism, are unchallenged.

Response: Science should minimize its assumptions and just stick to explanations based grounded in observations of how we observe the world works. This can be done without assuming naturalism. Perhaps uniformitarianism should be tested, and not assumed. Perhaps investigation will reveal that it is not always true. Wouldn't this be progress for science?

4. **Pragmatic Benefit:** It requires persistence and does not allow one to give up, for if the natural is all there is, and we can truly understand the natural, then an explanation must exist.

Response: Science should seek truth no matter where the evidence leads and not limit its knowledge. Persistence is a good value for scientific investigation, but it may lead to non-naturalistic explanations just as much as naturalistic ones. Naturalism is not required to have the value of persistence.

Does intelligent design challenge naturalism?

- Strictly speaking, intelligent design theory says nothing about the nature of the designer, and is not an appeal to the supernatural, and therefore does not prove or disprove naturalism.
- But many of the so-called benefits of naturalism are said to apply to any intelligent causation, not just "non-natural" or "supernatural intelligent causation."
- Thus, effectively speaking, the way naturalism is implemented in science, intelligent design challenges naturalism.
- Would accepting intelligent design cause science to lose any of the so-called benefits of naturalism?
    (1) **Religious / A-religious Benefit:** Intelligent design does not rely upon faith, divine revelation, or any form of superstition in making the design inference. It does not challenge this benefit.
    (2) **Empirical Benefit:** Intelligent design is inferred based upon observations available to all, and is inferred strictly based upon empirical observations. It does not challenge this benefit.
    (3) **Methodological Benefit:** Intelligent design implies that some causes are not the strict laws of physics and chemistry. Intelligent design could challenge some methodological benefits of naturalism--such as uniformitarianism.
    (4) **Pragmatic Benefit:** Detecting design requires persistence and rigor, and design should only be inferred under the proper conditions. Evolution could still be inferred if the evidence warrants--intelligent design does not block that. Intelligent design does not challenge this benefit.

Conclusions:

1. Naturalism is the governing philosophy of science today.
2. Naturalism purports to have some benefits, but those benefits could be had if naturalism was jettisoned from science.
3. Intelligent design theory could, but doesn't necessarily challenge the naturalistic philosophy. Intelligent design cannot determine if the designer was "natural" or "supernatural." Regardless, the way naturalism is used by science, intelligent design theory does challenge naturalism because naturalism tends to exclude any intelligent causation, regardless of whether or not it is a "natural" or "supernatural" intelligent agent.
4. Intelligent design theory does not infringe upon religious benefit, empirical benefit, or pragmatic benefits of naturalism.
5. Intelligent design could challenge the methodological benefit--but science should minimize its assumptions, so this is not a problem.
6. Scientists who support naturalism in science oppose intelligent design because they mistakenly think intelligent design theory threatens some of the so-called "benefits" of naturalism which science seeks to protect. Those which intelligent design actually threatens are bad for science.
7. Intelligent design doesn't really threaten any of the so-called benefits of naturalism. In fact, it frees science from an unproven metaphysical philosophy.