



<https://doi.org/10.26520/mcdsare.2018.2.72-76>

MCDSARE: 2018
International Multidisciplinary Scientific Conference on the
Dialogue between Sciences & Arts, Religion & Education

THEISM AND METHODOLOGICAL NATURALISM

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Abstract

No theist should hold that scientific accounts of the world are (or could be) comprehensively true because of the nature of methodological naturalism and induction. First, periods of so-called normal science treat regnant theories as true, but induction about the history of science tells us that we have little reason to be confident that these judgments are in fact true. Hence, induction about the history of science counts against our ability to claim that contemporary theories produced by induction are true. But, that is self-defeating. Second, no theist can avoid the specter of occasionalism. Suppose an apple falls on your head. The naturalistic account of what happened is that certain constants and spatial relations made it the case that the apple struck you in the head. The miraculous account might be that God himself was the agent that struck you with the apple. To the observer, it might be the case that there is no empirical difference between the two circumstances. Methodological naturalism does not have the power to show that the second account is false even though it is forced to conclude that the first account is true. But, that is arbitrary. So, while methodological naturalism is problematic for the naturalist, it is even more so for the theist.

Keywords: Methodological Naturalism; Theism; Occasionalism; Induction;

INTRODUCTION

Most scientists are committed (implicitly or explicitly) to the doctrine of methodological naturalism. Methodological naturalism is defined variously in the literature, but it usually involves a commitment to the principle of causal closure, i.e., the doctrine that all physical phenomena have (only) physical causes. Many scientists are likewise committed to scientific realism, which is the view that science is a truth-conducive enterprise or that scientific terms and theories refer. In this paper, I discuss some difficulties that these commitments present for theism.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

There are numerous articles that defend the principle of causal closure (e.g., Kim 1998; Papineau 1993), and it is widely recognized as basic assumption of operational science. In spite of the broad implicit commitment to the principle, the principle has recently come under renewed scrutiny (Gibb 2016). Likewise, there are voluminous debates on scientific realism (Liston 2018). This paper does not

discuss this literature per se. In other words, it does not ask whether in principle scientific realism is justifiable or whether in principle causal closure is justifiable. Neither does it ask whether scientific realism or causal closure are true. Instead, this paper discusses whether scientific realism and methodological naturalism are compossible with the thesis of theism.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Is the triad of scientific realism, methodological naturalism, and theism mutually consistent? In other words, does it make sense to believe that science proceeding according to normal practice, including a commitment to causal closure, is truth-conducive while also believing that God exists?

4. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

My claim is that given the nature of science, i.e., (a) its intrinsic method of empirical observation and induction and (b) its posterior assumption of about physical causation, theists should not be scientific realists. In *Research Methods*, I discuss (a) and (b) separately in order to show that either they are undermined on their own terms or that they are inconsistent with theism. Hence, the triad contains theses that are either singly incorrect or jointly inconsistent. Hence, one or more of them should be abandoned

5. RESEARCH METHODS

5.1. Scientific Realism and Induction

The first thing to see is that even a thesis as common as scientific realism is not one that comes free. Hence, here I enter a complaint about scientific realism that is available to both the theist and the non-theist. Of course, the point is not that this argument gives special reason for the theist to refrain from holding scientific realism. Instead, it is an example of a problem with scientific realism that is exacerbated by methodological naturalism for the theist. Hence, this argument is the first of two that provide cumulative support for the claim of the paper. The argument is that induction itself counts against the rationality of thinking that any given scientific account is true. In other words, even if we could accept scientific accounts as the kinds of accounts that could be true, we have no reason to think any of our accounts are true on the basis of the root of scientific argument, which is induction. One can borrow from Kuhn to see the point (Kuhn 1962). The history of science has produced, as a pattern, as series of formulas and theories that turned out to be wrong according to the judgment of later thinkers. Usually theories are declared dead when a sufficient number of anomalous observations arise together with some better method for describing the phenomena that the current model describes. In any case, the new theory is adopted in place of the old, and the theory of the day is acclaimed as the correct theory. But, I think is surprising. It has the flavor of the folklore about the medical community's indecision regarding whether newborns should sleep on their stomachs or backs.

Induction about the history of science itself seems to indicate that we have more ground to believe that regnant scientific theories are wrong rather than right. Since scientists have always been wrong to this point, it seems like special pleading to assert that they have it right this time. Now, sometimes this criticism is seen as overly pessimistic (Psillos 1999; Park 2014). But, it is simply an observation about a pattern in history. Utility, though much to be valued surely, is simply not coincident with truth. What is strange is the sunny optimism of science that it will succeed in giving a comprehensively true account of anything on the basis of the fact that it has produced more effective medicines and feats of engineering. After all, Roman bridges remain standing to this day, and the Romans believe that a nymph caused the river to flow under them. One might retort that the history of science also shows that whenever a theory has been found wanting science has repudiated the theory and moved on. In other words, induction about the history of science might lead us to think that we will continue to discover flaws in regnant theories and make necessary adjustments. Fair enough, one thinks, but usually science goes beyond that (at least among its evangelists) to the further claim that the steady improvement in the sophistication and utility of the sciences has a definite terminus at which we will have a unified theory of everything. But, that kind of optimism is surely not warranted on the basis of the history of the enterprise. It draws on some

eschatological hope which is certainly a shadow and might rightly be called an intellectual opium for the masses.

5.2 Methodological Naturalism and Theism

In 5.1, I argued that induction is not a sufficient basis from which to expect true ontological conclusions, particularly those of the ‘totalizing’ explanatory kind offered by scientific theory. The point of that argument was to suggest with the literature that there are reasons one might reject scientific realism independent of one’s other commitments. In this section, I develop this argument by appeal to a reason that theists in particular should not be scientific realists, which is the cost of methodological naturalism. One could, of course, hold to scientific realism without holding to methodological naturalism, but I am not aware of any place in the literature where such a system is teased out. I am not here principally offering an argument that methodological naturalism ought to be rejected as a criterion for scientific explanation. Rather, I am arguing that theists especially have a reason to treat as dubious the scientific explanations that are permissible on methodological naturalism.

Take this very serious case as an example:

Suppose an apple falls on your head. The naturalistic account of what happens in such an instance is that certain physical constants and spatial relations made it the case that the forces upon the apple caused it to strike you on the head. You were standing under the tree (or, in any case, passing beneath it). The wind blew against the branch with a certain amount of force, which broke the stem holding the apple to the branch. Then, gravity happened: the apple was attracted to the ground and everything else according to some regular math. Your head intersected the trajectory of the apple as it was attracted to the ground by science.

Call this the naturalistic account (or, if you prefer, the physical account). Of course, this is the account that we are predisposed to believe and the one that seems likely to be true in some sense. Nevertheless, there are many (perhaps many, many) other accounts that are equally possible and likely that are equally plausible. For example, suppose the cause of the apple’s hitting your head is that an angel was directed by God to strike you on the head with an apple as a gentle reminder to call your grandmother (whose birthday it is and who bakes the world’s best apple pies). He does this in response to your prayer of the previous evening in which you begged that you not forget your dear grandmother’s birthday. The angel assumes control of the apple by divine power and smacks you on the head with it. You rub your head for a moment and then run off to call grandmother.

Or suppose that God stops time and hits you with the apple directly (perhaps because you are very pious and He deigns to answer your prayer directly).

Or suppose that a demon is attempting to draw on your sinful desires, so, having had such success with fruit before, he hits you in the head in order to elicit a profane slur from you.

One imagines that the number of such accounts is limited only by one’s imagination and patience.

In any case, the methodological naturalist must choose the naturalist or physical account because only that account fits the doctrine of his controlling assumption. But, naturalism can give us no reason to prefer that account over the others. Theism gives us no reason to disbelieve the ‘miraculous’ accounts. So, why favor the first account? If one says, because it makes the most sense, or is the most regular, or the most natural, then one begs the question. If one says because science is impossible without some scope limitation (which surely is true), it still does not follow that methodological decisions to limit the scope of possible explanations lead to us to true accounts.

If one says we have no reason to believe the miraculous account because a naturalistic explanation satisfies the data, then one again begs the question. If one does not beg the question in that case, then one needs to provide some argument for why the naturalist account should be preferred as true simply because it fits the data. If one says the naturalist account is to be preferred because the account is based on publicly-available information, one says what is simply false – since the observational data might be identical in all cases. The publicly-available data does not include mathematical descriptions of the motion of the apple: it includes the observation that the apple appears to be moving.

If one says that the naturalistic account should be chosen because of the consensus of scientific experts, one appeals to a bankrupt principle. This defense is sometimes given in the area of string theory: “according to this principle, non-experts are expected to base their opinion about the content and status of

theories in a well-established scientific field largely on the assessments by those who have established themselves as experts in the field” (Dawid 24). We might translate this principle into English as the “trust us” principle. Not only is the principle non-empirical, it appeals to little more than condescension. If one can invoke such an appeal to an authority, why not theism? After all, such an appeal rests primarily on the intuitions of prominent scientists and neither on matters internal to scientific theorizing or external observation.

If the naturalist account is to be preferred because science is impossible without some scope limitation (which surely is true), it still does not follow that methodological decisions to limit the scope of possible explanations leads to us to true accounts. Finally, if one says the naturalist account is to be preferred because it is useful, fecund, testable, or parsimonious, then the truth of the account is no longer the criterion and we have shifted ground. In that case, why concern oneself with whether the account is true?

If one appeals to parsimony (non-empirical, though that would be), the theist (but not the naturalist) should favor strong occasionalism because that account only requires one principle of action – God’s direct willing. Now, we might have reasons on a specific brand of theism (say, Islam) to think that angels do not hit people with apples, but that is beside the point. If we decide upon methodological naturalism because we have theological reasons for believing that God does not interfere (or send His angels to interfere) with the ‘natural’ world, that would still be insufficient - because God could have so acted in this instance. So, unless we have an argument to the effect that God could not have so acted in this instance, then the naturalist explanation of the apple falling is at best possibly true. But, the angelic accounts are also possibly true (unless someone can provide us an argument that they cannot be true).

I suppose an obvious retort could be an abductive argument for the truth of causal closure. Causal closure is the thesis that physical events have only physical causes. If this thesis is correct, then methodological naturalism follows along in tow. The abductive argument for closure would ask the question: what would we expect to be true if causal closure was false? We would expect to see physical events taking place without physical causes, or better we would expect to see “physical effects that are causally unexplainable in terms of physical causes” (Tiehen 2421). But, notice that somethings being explainable in some particular way does not guarantee that the explanation is true. For example, the apple hitting your head because a demon intended to tempt you explains the data, but few people are persuaded that such an explanation is a good one. Of course, the theist has reason to believe the God interacts with His world, so any explanation that voids this reason should be passed over.

This last comment I take to be the chief obstacle of MN for the theist, namely, it requires that theists discount God in the process of evaluating scientific theories. But, this invokes an inconsistent triad:

- (1) Methodological Naturalism
- (2) Scientific Realism
- (3) Ontological Dependence of Creation on the God.

An orthodox view of creation (in any major monotheist religion) holds that God not only created everything but that he sustains it in existence (Damien 129; Gunton 2004). Of course, this means that any statement about how the world works will be incomplete unless it acknowledges (even implicitly) that the world works at all because God is the center. Now, someone might object that the consistency and order of the universe is implicitly attributed to God – but on methodological naturalism that cannot be true because methodological naturalism discounts any non-physical explanans automatically. So, if we come to some set of interpretations that we have no means to adjudicate between on so-called “scientific grounds,” then a theist should be able to have recourse to other means, say, theism. The proponent of methodological naturalism cannot demand something more robust from the theist than he demands from himself.

6. CONCLUSION

Theists have at least two strong reasons not to be scientific realists on methodological naturalism. The first is the generic problem of induction with regard to the history of scientific

explanation. In other words, the first reason is not unique to theists but is common to anyone who considers the issue regardless of other commitments. The purpose of this discussion is not to exhaustively engage the literature's discussion, but to reinforce the idea that each of several theses discussed in the paper is not true a priori. The second reason is peculiar to major forms of theism, whether Judaism, Islam, or Christianity, and notices that methodological naturalism discounts theories out-of-hand that are not in principle impossible or even implausible on generic accounts of any monotheist religion, regarding God's power or conservation of creation. Hence, the theist has more reason than even the naturalist to be dubious about scientific realism on methodological naturalism. I conclude that the triad of scientific realism, methodological naturalism, and theism is not consistent. Assuming that theists have independent philosophical or religious reasons for holding to theism, theists should give up scientific realism or methodological naturalism. Alternatively, a vital commitment to scientific realism and methodological naturalism might be reason to reconsider theistic belief. In either case, one or more of the triad should be abandoned. A revised draft of this paper was originally presented at the Randomness and Foreknowledge Conference, Dallas, TX 2014.

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