

Naturalism and Science: Nothing In Common
Keith Rice, August 2009

Naturalists¹ believe that the observable physical world is all that exists. Most naturalists pride themselves in their use of science—an allegedly neutral means of obtaining knowledge that leads an objective person to reject irrational beliefs such as gods, angels, miracles, etc. In this polemic I would like to argue that naturalism and science actually have nothing in common: science not only fails to verify naturalism and refute the supernatural, but naturalists actually have no basis for using science at all, in any sense. Indeed, it will be argued that science is an entirely Christian endeavor.

First, let us suppose that we are asking an atheist the question, “Why do you, a naturalist, align yourself so closely with science?” I can imagine the standard answer would go something like this:

"Atheists value science because both atheism and science are inherently naturalistic. That is, most atheists hold to metaphysical naturalism—the belief that the universe is comprised only of phenomena that can be studied by the natural sciences. Science, of course, is the most reliable method humans have up to this point for attaining knowledge. Moreover, science assumes that naturalism is the case (methodological naturalism). When we do science, we essentially assume that the natural world is all there is, with no outside, unpredictable influence by divine beings. Since science presupposes naturalism, and since it is the most reliable means of attaining knowledge, it is not surprising that most atheists give science a critical role in their epistemology."

Seems to make sense, no? Surely science and atheism are two peas in a pod. And surely atheism is rational, as a result, right? Here are my contentions:

Science is not a reliable source of knowledge

The notion that science does not furnish humans with knowledge (justified, true belief) is completely repugnant to the modern mind, even those who reject the humanistic obsession with scientific progress. Yet it is not hard to argue that science is an unreliable source of knowledge—even an impossible one.

Seven reasons:

1. Scientific experiments always assert the consequent, which is a logical fallacy. Example: "If Einstein's theory of relativity is correct then gravity bends light. Gravity bends light, therefore Einstein's theory of relativity is correct." Indeed, Bertrand Russell, the famous atheist philosopher of science, made the following admission:²

All inductive arguments in the last resort reduce themselves to the following form: "If this is true, that is true: now that is true, therefore this is true." This argument is, of course, formally fallacious. Suppose I were to say: "If bread is a stone and stones are nourishing, then this bread will nourish me; now this bread does nourish me; therefore it is a stone, and stones are nourishing." If I were to advance such an argument, I should certainly be thought foolish, yet it would not be fundamentally different from the argument upon which all scientific laws are based.

¹ Though not all atheists are naturalists, I use the two terms interchangeably in this paper.

² Russell appears to be using “inductive” synonymously with “abductive” in this example. Technically, inductive arguments do not assert the consequent, although abductive arguments do.

2. The premises of scientific arguments are established via induction, yet inductive conclusions (deriving universal propositions from particular observations) are unverifiable. Example: "Having established that $F = m \cdot a$ based on all observed instances, we may now conclude that F will equal $m \cdot a$ in the future and all across the universe." (Note: I am aware that Newton's 2nd law does not apply in many instances; I am simply providing an example.) Frequently it is stated that induction, even if it cannot provide an infallible conclusion, can at least provide us with a high probability of truth. Even this is not true, because scientists have no way of knowing what percentage of their observations are incorrect.

3. Scientific observation is subject to error, and scientists are biased. Science is performed by humans, therefore it is only as reliable as the humans performing the science. Misreadings, bad memory, and poor equipment are a few examples. Furthermore, the scientist may have an agenda—he or she may hope a particular result is the case, and read the data accordingly.

4. Equations are selected, not discovered. When scientists develop laws such as those found in an engineering textbook they develop the equations by fitting data points. They will also calculate, using an arbitrary standard, the margin of error. An infinite number of points exist within this margin of error, yet only one set of points is chosen from which an equation will be derived. Since an infinite number of point sets is possible, an infinite number of curves and therefore equations is possible. What is the probability that the correct equation has been found? One divided by a number approaching infinity, the limit of which is zero.³

5. Scientific laws only describe ideal situations. I'll borrow from Gordon Clark:

"The law of the pendulum states that the period of the swing is proportional to the square root of the length. If, however, the weight of the bob is unevenly displaced around its center, the law will not hold. The law assumes that the bob is homogeneous, that the weight is symmetrically distributed along all axes, or more technically, that the mass is concentrated at a point. No such bob exists, and hence the law is not an accurate description of any tangible pendulum. Second, the law assumes that the pendulum swings by a tensionless string. There is no such string, so that the scientific law does not describe any real pendulum. And third, the law could be true only if the pendulum swung on an axis without friction. There is no such axis. It follows, therefore, that no visible pendulum accords with the mathematical formula and that the formula is not a description of any existing pendulum."

6. Scientific data must be interpreted within a paradigm that is unprovable by science and yet must be taken for granted. For example, consider "uniformitarianism"—the idea that all natural processes operate today at the same rate. This paradigm automatically discounts models with rates that vary throughout time, yet no scientific evidence can be offered for uniformitarianism. The position must simply be asserted. We might argue, then, that a paradigm is correct if it is coherent but coherency only affirms a lack of contradictions, but if the data is interpreted according to the paradigm then the data could never disprove the paradigm.

7. Science may work to accomplish our desired goals (pragmatism), but that doesn't make scientific conclusions justified. Many beliefs can produce desired results, but that does not make them true. For example, a particular jungle creature may believe that touching a dead creature will cause it to inherit its property of "lifelessness" (i.e., the creature will die). In refusing to touch dead animals, then, the creature may reduce its likelihood of acquiring a disease. Yet the creature's motivating belief was false.

By calling science "knowledge" we are essentially saying that conclusions of invariably fallible, biased, and fallacious arguments are justified. (In which case, nearly every proposition could count as knowledge,

³ <http://www.mathsisfun.com/calculus/limits-infinity.html>

making the term meaningless.) Not an impressive standard of justification, yet atheists still feel confident in flaunting science as the “most reliable means of obtaining knowledge”. It is tempting to balk at these criticisms as too persnickety, but we must bear in mind that nothing is taken for granted in epistemology. “P could be true because it helps me meet my desire ends” is not acceptable in ultimate worldview considerations. For one, we have no way of determining the likelihood that P is true so even if we had a standard for what probability is tolerable it would be of little value. Moreover, who would determine the tolerable probability? How would they justify that value?

I am not trashing science, only trying to put it in its place. We can assume that scientific conclusions are **rationally inferred** for the following reasons:

- God created humans in His rational, intelligent image and commands us to subdue the earth—implying that our exploration of nature is meaningful (Gen. 1:26-28, Prov. 25:2)
- God is upholding the universe in an orderly fashion (Gen. 8:22, Col. 1:15-17)

In other words, we are unjustified in believing scientific conclusions, but as persons who affirm the truths of scripture we are justified in using science to help us explore and subdue the creation (our desired end). This is a pragmatic goal, and science is a pragmatic endeavor. But science does not give us knowledge.

The presuppositions that make science rational cannot be justified within a naturalistic worldview

I just noted that science requires important assumptions. Let me expand upon them:

1. The human mind is rational, his or her or her senses are reliable, and he or she or she desires truth (i.e., a reason to think he or she or she will be honest)
2. Our experiences correspond to an external, natural world
3. Physical laws and constants are uniform throughout the universe and do not change across time

My third contention with the atheist is that, given evolutionary naturalism, he or she has no way of justifying at least the second two points. Any attempt to verify 2 and 3 using science merely begs the question. Point 1 may be justified on evolutionary grounds (i.e., a non-rational creature with unreliable senses that rejects honesty could not possibly survive), but even then we're being charitable by trusting the testimony of a person whose trustworthiness is the precisely the thing in question.

Most atheists will appeal to axioms, claiming that they take 1, 2, and 3 **axiomatically**. (An axiom is a “self-evident” assumption.) Some problems with this common position:

1. Axioms need to be self-authenticating (necessarily true) if they are to be justifiable. (“Self-evident” is little more than an appeal to one’s own experience.) Obviously asserting that P as a starting point doesn't make P the case. Examining 1, 2, or 3, we must conclude that they are not self-authenticating.
2. Even if the atheist agrees to hold to just one of 1, 2, and 3 axiomatically, what can be deduced from 1, 2, or 3? Very little. And so the atheist has hardly begun to furnish himself with a cogent epistemology, let alone a comprehensive worldview.
3. Propositions themselves by themselves carry no authority, only persons do. Assuming the atheist decides to hold to the uniformity of nature (UoN) as axiomatic—how does he or she know to do this? He must have decided to do so on his or her or her own authority. After all, the UoN did not reveal itself to the atheist and tell the atheist to do so. Did the atheist discover the UoN, then? And what did he or she use to discover it? Let's call this method M. M must be more foundational than UoN, therefore the UoN cannot count as the first principle. But how did the atheist know to use M? Regress sets in. The atheist

can do nothing more than appeal to his or her own word as the final authority. The atheist's first principle must simply be that he or she is the ultimate authority—the final arbiter of truth.

Science cannot justify itself

This criticism is directed toward positivism, not secular atheism in general. Tying in to the previous point, it is also humorous to note that science cannot justify itself. Science can only test that which is empirical, and science only exists as a method in one's mind. What experiment could test the proposition, "Science is a reliable source of knowledge?" We might say that positivism is "self-referentially incoherent." Once again, the escape is to hold to the scientific method axiomatically, but this falls prey to all of the aforementioned difficulties.

Science cannot verify naturalism

Even if science could furnish us with knowledge, naturalism is a metaphysical position and metaphysical assumptions cannot be tested by science. Carl Sagan famously summarized metaphysical naturalism as, "The cosmos is all that is, or was, or ever will be." But what scientific experiment could possibly test this? Not only is science unable to test a universal, but science *assumes* that the natural world exists—which is a consequence of belief in metaphysical naturalism. In other words, an atheist cannot use science to verify a precondition of science without begging the question. The atheist can only assert metaphysical naturalism as true on his or her say-so, or claim that metaphysical naturalism is his or her axiom—a troublesome road we need not revisit.

Science does not presuppose methodological naturalism

Scripture, as shown, provides the justification for the preconditions of science. We see then that science does not presuppose naturalism. But when we perform scientific experiments, do we not at least "pretend" that naturalism is true? After all, if God is causing events that violate the laws of nature then we have a reason to doubt that our science is worthwhile.

This position, however, assumes that God acts randomly in the universe, purposefully causing confusion. It is simply a straw man against the biblical view of science. God states that He is not the author of confusion (1 Cor. 14:33). When God performs a miracle, He does it for a specific purpose (e.g., to demonstrate His uniqueness and power). If miracles are not exceptions to what is **normally** the case then they would not be miracles in the first place.

Instead of assuming God isn't there, scientists must assume that God is there, constantly upholding the universe by the word of His power. God causes all events. That He causes all events in an orderly, predictable fashion is precisely why science is possible.

Deflating a Common Criticism

The standard rebuttal to what I have presented in the last paragraph is simply this: why the *Christian* deity? Why not Allah? Why not the Flying Spaghetti Monster (FSM)? Surely the Christian God is arbitrarily filling the needed role. Four points:

1. And why not the atheist? And which atheist? After all, the atheist presupposes that he or she is the ultimate authority regarding the preconditions of science. The charge of arbitrariness cuts both ways.
2. Is the atheist arguing that the FSM *is* providing the preconditions for science? Is he or she now a theist? In that case, share more about your worldview and I will use other arguments against you, but probably not those found in this paper.

3. Is the atheist arguing the FSM *could* provide knowledge? A god that “could” provide the preconditions of science doesn’t tell us anything about what actually is the case. I am arguing that the Christian God *actually* is providing the preconditions because He *actually* does exist and has revealed Himself—two prerequisites for knowledge. It is not enough to construct a hypothetical knowledge-giver in one’s mind. This only gives hypothetical knowledge. We see, then, that the claim, “Christianity is the precondition of knowledge” is not arbitrary. The Bible attests that God exists necessarily, in which case it begs the question against Christianity to argue that God *could* be replaced by another deity. Likewise, “theism in general” does not provide knowledge because we know nothing about “theism in general” until “theism in general” reveals itself/himself/herself—in which case “theism in general” ceases to be “theism in general.”
4. This criticism does nothing to shield naturalism from the *reductio ad absurdum* presented in this paper.

The Heart of the Matter

Take these four points in consideration, the heart of the matter is this: the atheist is simply *not persuaded* to accept Christianity. Of course, persuasion is not a criterion for proof. What is the atheist doing, then, other than flaunting his or her unbelief? Yet I am already aware that he or she will not be persuaded, since his or her problem is not intellectual but moral. After all, it is the Holy Spirit alone that persuades a person, by sovereignly regenerating his or her mind such that he or she believes that which he or she formerly suppresses: that God is the authority. And in desiring to know that God is the authority his or her newly regenerated mind logically concludes that he or she should accept the whole of scripture as well, including his or her need for a savior—a savior who delivers us not only from wrath but from irrationality. Therefore, in mocking Christianity as arbitrary using a criticism that 1) applies to him as well and 2) does nothing to vindicate his or her position, he or she merely reminds of something we already knew: that he or she is unregenerate.

Of course, I do hold to the Bible presuppositionally—I take God at His word, and I am justified in doing so. (Why I am justified in doing so is another discussion.) Scripture says that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (Prov. 1:7). If this is the case then I should be able to construct a successful *reductio ad absurdum* of all non-Christian worldviews. The *reductio* is merely a *demonstration* of an argument that is sound because it has valid form and true premises. So, while my argument is sound, it is also unpersuasive. (Arguments become less and less persuasive as the circularity becomes more apparent.) And that is why I offer the *reductio*: to demonstrate, in a tangible way, the soundness of my argument. If, indeed, God is the precondition for science then I should be able to demonstrate that the naturalistic foundation for knowledge is unfeasible. And that is what I have shown in this paper. But by emphasizing the question-begging nature of my argument (once again, an empty criticism) the atheist hopes to divert attention away from his or her serious problem: science and naturalism are mutually exclusive.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the naturalist makes or implies many false claims concerning science. Instead, we have seen that:

1. Science is not a source of knowledge.
2. Science does not, and cannot, presuppose naturalism.
3. Science cannot verify metaphysical naturalism.
4. Science is not antagonistic toward Christianity, nor vice versa, and instead presupposes Christianity.

Science is entirely a Christian endeavor and has nothing to do with naturalism. To borrow a phrase from Irina Dunn, "Science needs naturalism like a fish needs a bicycle."