



Why Methodological Naturalism?

S. Joshua Swamidass

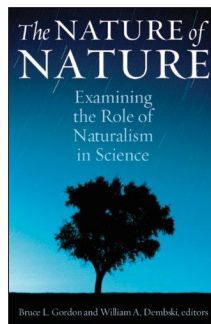
<https://peacefulscience.org/articles/methodological-naturalism/>



Mainstream science seeks “our best explanation of the world, *without considering God.*” This limiting clause, “without considering God,” is the rule of Methodological Naturalism (MN).

Currently, science does not search for all sorts of Truth. Rather, science is limited effort to explain the world on its own terms, without invoking God, His action, or intelligent design. There is a “line in the sand” in science, where consideration of God is explicitly disallowed by MN. Far from denying God’s existence, this way of doing science is strongly motivated by theism.

For those that doubt that MN is the current rule in science, and that it is applied to exclude ID, the William Dembski edited volume *The Nature of Nature* asks the right question on its back cover...



The culture war over theism versus atheism, traditional values versus secular progressivism, and transcendent versus material reality has focused on science as the prize. **Who gets to define science?**

The answer is simple. For the foreseeable future, **scientists get to define science.** Partly to stay out of the culture wars, scientists have defined science to include MN. This rule is a “line in the sand” that excludes both claims of both creationism and atheism from science itself. This does not exclude consideration of God in science-engaged philosophy and theology. Scientists can consider God in their philosophy and theology too, but in this must be clearly separated from their “science.”

A Treaty and a Schism

Within science, MN functions as a treaty, but it also opens a schism.

On one hand it is a treaty. MN enforces a “cease fire” between the atheists and theists in science that respect it, by excluding scientific claims of creation, ID, and atheism. Of course individual scientists can still believe any of these things in their personal lives, and explore them academically in science-engaged philosophy, but they cannot make these claims within science itself.

On the other hand, disagreement about MN opens a schism between the ID movement and those that choose to live under this ceasefire (including myself) by accepting MN as the rule of science. Those that do not like MN feel unfairly excluded from science, and the rest of us feel efforts to end MN threaten the peace.

So Science Is Limited

MN makes obvious that science, as we know it, does not seek *all* Truth. Some object to this limitation, but they make...

an unwarranted jump from the fact that science is trying to discover truths, to the claim that science is trying to discover all sorts of truths. But some people, in particular theists, might think that some truths aren’t amenable to scientific investigation.

— [Hans Halvorson \(Christian Philosopher\)](#)

Of course, there are good reasons theists might accept limits on science. We do not think all truth is accessible to science.

The scientific method has limitations: it might not be well-tuned for the discovery of every kind of truth. And of all people, a theist is most likely to think that some truths aren’t of the right sort to be fit into a scientific account of the world; some truths simply don’t fall under general laws, nor can they be accurately represented by means of mathematical models. That’s why a theist shouldn’t expect to find God in science — because science works by restricting itself to a more manageable kind of fact.

— [Hans Halvorson](#)

As a scientist and a Christian, this makes sense to me. This is why I like MN. It makes clear that science has limits, and focuses in a useful way on what it best equipped to study.

Then Science Is Blind to God

If science enforces MN, then it is obviously blind to God, His action, and His design. As writes the non-theist Eugenie Scott about science’s blindness,

Because creationists explain natural phenomena by saying “God performed a miracle,” we tell them that they are not doing science. This is easy to understand. The flip side, though, is that if science is limited by methodological [naturalism] because of our inability to control an omnipotent power’s interference in nature, both “God did it” and “God didn’t do it” fail as scientific statements. **Properly understood, the principle of methodological [naturalism] requires neutrality towards God; we cannot say, wearing our scientist hats, whether God does or does not act.**

— [Eugenie Scott](#)

The key point here is that science, because of MN, is entirely *neutral* to God. Questions about His action and design are outside its domain. Science can neither prove nor disprove God's action (or design) in our world. It is intentionally and hopelessly blind here. This is not because evidence for creation does not exist in nature, but because science itself cannot consider creation.

Methodological Naturalism and Design

MN decidedly does *not* rule out intelligence as a causal factor in mainstream science.¹ For example, both sexual selection and artificial selection are important mechanisms of change that (1) invoke animal or human intelligence and (2) are entirely accepted in evolutionary theory. Likewise, SETI and fraud detection are accepted domains of scientific inquiry, and look to detect the action of hypothetical and known (respectively) intelligence.

In contrast with these other areas, ID seems to require a God-like being (i.e. God) to be the designer. This is why ID is held, by most scientists, to be ruled out from consideration with in science by MN.

So, rather than ruling out intelligence in general, MN rules out *divine* intelligence as a causal factor.

Many ID proponents point out that, within science, they are only trying to recognize "design," without explicitly considering the designer. The results of "intelligence" without considering any mind in particular. Various reasons are given for this distinction. However, I cannot think of any cases where science considers "design" or "intelligence" while sharply avoiding talk of the nature of the designer or mind behind it. This is for pragmatic reasons. Science recognizes design by modeling the mind that produced it. And the ID limitation on considering the designer seems arbitrary and is without a parallel in modern science.

Mainstream science only considers design with very careful attention to that which the proposed designer is and is not capable. This provides guiding limits to inquiry, so the design hypothesis is falsifiable and mechanistic. Divine design is different, because God can do anything however He likes. While theories of natural intelligence have limits, divine intelligence can explain everything. There is, therefore, no guard against using "design" to explain what is really our ignorance of the natural world.

There probably is no way around this problem. Science cannot hope to model how God designs in any authoritative way. Nor have ID most proponents² shown any interest or success in articulating the design principles underlying the patterns we see in nature. As Michael Behe (the well known ID proponent) aptly puts it, "The reasons that a designer would or would not do anything are virtually impossible to know unless the designer tells you specifically what those reasons are." I agree. There are fundamental problems with modeling God's mind. This makes detecting divine design intractable with scientific methods.

I am well aware that ID proponents blur the distinction between Divine Design and design, partly to argue ID should be part of science.

1. This section was added on August 16th to clarify some confusion by ID proponents about how MN applies to design and intelligence.

2. Walter ReMine's *Biotic Message* is one notable, but unsuccessful, exception.

However, this blurring obscures science's clear reasons for excluding ID from science. There is no case in science where design is detectable independent of modeling the mind that produced it; but ID's designer appears to be a divine mind. This is why one cannot scientifically consider ID without violating MN as it is currently understood.

A Small Change?

ID proponents often express a genuine sense of injury and exclusion. As one well-known ID proponent wrote to me why he opposed MN, "It's used mainly to squelch legitimate and badly needed debate." MN seems very unfair. Some assert, "We can remove MN from science without breaking it; removing MN is just a small change, a tweak."

This sentiment is surely heartfelt, and is meant as a genuine request to for inclusion. However, I am convinced that removing MN from science would, in fact, break science by ending a long-standing treaty between atheists and theists in science.

In a genuine effort for dialogue, I ask for the ID community, if they still care to remove MN from science, to help me understand why removing MN will not break science.

Is There An Alternative?

While mainstream science includes MN, some seek to find an alternative. A whole conference seeks to find one. However, is there really an alternative to MN that would make sense in science? I do not think so. If we end MN in science, what will replace it? I do not think there is any good candidate.

To those that think they have an answer, consider these questions. There are a large number of questions grouped in six themes: (1) the place of creationism, (2) the role of religious texts, (3) excluding atheism, (4) the Resurrection, (5) the present work of God, and (6) peace in science.

I assert that there is no way to answer these questions in a coherent and consistent way. Failing this, removing MN will seriously risk disrupting the peace and function of science. Removing MN might break science.

Creationism

There are several creationist camps that try to use science to justify their positions. For example, there is (1) Young Earth Creationism (YEC), which is exemplified by the *Institute for Creation Research* and Ken Ham's *Answers in Genesis*, (2) Progressive Creationism (PC), which is exemplified by Hugh Ross's *Reasons to Believe*, (3) Theistic Evolution (TE), which is exemplified by *BioLogos*. This list, of course, is not exhaustive.

1. Without MN, will this new version of science include (a) all of these camps, (b) some of these camps, or (c) none of them?
2. If any creationist camp is included (a) or (b), how will the differences between these camps (and atheists) be resolved? Clearly there are longstanding disagreements rooted primarily in theology, not science or evidence. How will scientists adjudicate

theological disagreements between these camps? If you think this is possible, why do disagreements between these camps persist outside of science?

3. If some creationist camps are included (b), what consistent rule other than MN will determine which camp is within science and which group is not?
4. If none of these creationist camps are included (c), what consistent rule other than MN will include ID but exclude creationism?
5. If you exclude anyone (b) or (c), why would the excluded camps agree with the new exclusionary rule?

Religious Texts

There are some that seek to include the claims of religious texts (e.g. the Bible or the Koran) as scientific evidence.

1. Would (a) both religious texts be excluded, (b) both included, or (c) just one included?
2. If religious texts are excluded (a), if not MN, on what basis are they excluded? If there is no consistent basis for their exclusion, will this not just import intractable theological debates into science?
3. If the claims of at least one religious text are included (b) or (c), how will science adjudicate the scientific meaning of the text's claims? Does this mean that theology is a necessary sub-discipline of science? How are the long standing theological debates (e.g. between young and old earth creationism) to be resolved?
4. If only one religious text is included (c), what is the consistent basis for excluding the other text? Why would proponents of the excluded text agree to this new exclusionary rule?

Excluding Atheism from Science

MN, properly applied, excludes claims that science has disproven God. Because science never considers God, it cannot claim to rule out His existence or action. This has become a place of common ground for scientists of all beliefs, and has justified efforts to remove atheistic statements from science textbooks.

1. Even leaving the rule of MN aside, most scientists do not find design arguments compelling. In light of this, how would you prevent science from concluding theism is false without the rule of MN?
2. Currently claims that science disproves theism are dismissed as obviously outside the domain of science. In principle, would science be able to provisionally conclude that theism was false if we end MN?
3. Most scientists are atheists and are not motivated to install theism in science. Most scientists, including many Christian scientists like myself, do not find the design arguments convincing. Why do you think removing MN is a good strategy, and why is it worth the risk of introducing atheistic conclusions officially into science?

The Resurrection

Because of MN, most people agree that science cannot consider the claim that Jesus rose from the dead. MN rules out the hypothesis of God's action at the outset, which clarifies that science is useless in considering the key claims of our faith. To be clear, science can firmly establish that dead people could never rise from the dead, without God's action. But under MN, science cannot specifically consider the strong evidence for the Resurrection.

1. Would you (a) allow science to explicitly consider the Resurrection, or (b) disallow the Resurrection from consideration?
2. If you choose (a), what if science concludes that the Resurrection did not take place? How would you explain why science concludes this? How would you prevent an intractable theological argument about this? How would you protect Christians from being kicked out of science for believing in the Resurrection? Why is the hope of having science affirm creation worth more than the real risk that science will specifically reject the Resurrection?
3. If you choose (b), what is the basis, if not MN, for preventing science from determining the Resurrection did not occur?

Ultimately, for those of us that care what science teaches, we have to wonder. Would we prefer a creation-affirming resurrection-denying science to a creation and resurrection silent science? I prefer the later, and cannot imagine why we would prefer denying the resurrection to silence.

The Present Work of God

Theists believe that God is at work in our world, perhaps answering prayer, working through the Holy Spirit, and more.

1. Should science be (a) permitted to determine if God is really at work in the world today or (b) somehow excluded from making this determination?
2. If you choose (a), are you not concerned about science ruling out theism because no scientific proof of God's present work can be advanced? How would you prevent this from descending into an intractable theological debate?
3. If you choose (b), what is your basis for keeping this outside of science's domain? Is it common to claim a distinction between historical vs. operational science distinction to explain why science cannot consider the Resurrection. If you did this in 4, what is your basis for excluding the present work of God from science's domain?

Peace in Science

Currently, all that follow MN in science can operate without reprisal, no matter what they might believe outside of science. We are allowed to consider God in our philosophical reflections in our scientific work, but when doing science itself we leave this aside.

1. Without this cease-fire in effect, how will you protect Christians in science from reprisal? If you have this ability, how have you been unable to protect ID proponents from reprisal in science?

2. Recall, there is a long ecumenical tradition in science. Atheists, Catholics, Calvinists, Lutherans, Muslims, Jews, and Agnostics have all worked peacefully in science, even in times of violent religious strife. How will you protect this ecumenical tradition if you remove the rule of MN from science?
3. There are longstanding and emotional debates between different types of creationists and atheists, which are not resolved with evidence or reason. What will keep these acrimonious debates (in which scientists usually have no interest) outside of science?
4. Why exactly is the label “science” so important? Why not just pursue Truth in science-engaged theology and science-engaged philosophy? This is already allowed and is not as controversial like ID’s attempts to fight its way into science.

The Way Forward

I see a few ways forward from here.

First, perhaps there is a consistent way of answering these questions. Seeing this, I might be convinced to think differently about MN. At the

References

<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/b87f/6aa76e8021aa34e6db1045cb71074f05015f.pdf>
<http://philsci-archive.pitt.edu/11003/1/metnat3.pdf>
<https://ncse.com/religion/science-religion-methodology-humanism>

very least, I will understand the ID movement better. Of course, I have no authority to change the rules, but at least I would understand.

Second, the ID movement could focus on making the strongest philosophical cases (in science-engaged philosophy, but not science itself) to explain why the design inference is valid. ID could make sense as a philosophy or theology of science. This would mean giving up on opposing MN in science, and it would mean giving up on the label “science.”

The second option is hard for the ID movement because, it seems, they want the label “science” for the design inference. Why is this so necessary? Why is science so trusted and desirable? Science is just the human effort to study nature, with strict and idiosyncratic rules, and does not (currently) consider God. Why do we need science for theology?

So these are my questions. I invite all thoughtful responses.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sexual_selection
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Selective_breeding
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Search_for_extraterrestrial_intelligence
<http://www.am-nat.org/site>