

Book Symposium: Religion, Science and Naturalism by Willem B. Drees

BROKEN-BACKED NATURALISM

by J. Wesley Robbins

Abstract. Willem Drees's stated purpose in *Religion, Science and Naturalism* is to maintain the continuing importance of religion in human life while being honest to the sciences. His preferred way of doing that is an example of what John Dewey once called "broken-backed naturalism." In contrast, Deweyan humanism accomplishes Drees's purpose in a more thoroughly naturalistic way. It does not bifurcate the world into the domain of the sciences—the natural world—and the domain of religion—the provider of answers to limit questions about the world as a whole, which fall outside the scope of the sciences.

Keywords: humanism; naturalism; timeless transcendent God.

While reading, and thinking about how to respond to, Willem Drees's *Religion, Science and Naturalism*, I was reminded of an earlier dispute between George Santayana and John Dewey about, among other things, how to incorporate religion into a naturalistic worldview.¹ Dewey described Santayana's naturalism as "broken backed" because of Santayana's dualistic distinction between the mechanism of nature and the life of the mind and his relegation of religion to the latter, epiphenomenal realm.

Drees tells us early on that in his estimation naturalism is "the most adequate view of the world given contemporary natural science" (Drees 1996, 10). He describes his own naturalism as "physicalistic" (Drees 1996, 11). He accepts a naturalistic, evolutionary account of the origin and development of both science and religion. However, when it comes time to say what the relationship of religion to the natural world is, Drees

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endorses the Christian notion of a timeless transcendent God on whom the natural world in its entirety is constantly dependent as “a good perspective for a theological view which is consistent with science” (Drees 1996, 261).

Drees assures us that his notion of the constant dependence of the natural world on God does not “assume a dichotomy *in* the natural world” (Drees 1996, 45). That may be the case. But, while the sciences are about a natural world that Drees characterizes in terms of six claims (Drees 1996, 12–18), religion, at least the Christian version, is about something outside this domain, something to which the six claims that define naturalism do not apply. The resultant naturalism is at least as broken backed as Santayana’s. It actually is a dualistic, indeed supernaturalistic worldview, whatever else Drees may choose to call it.

I want to consider why, in order to harmonize religion with the natural sciences, Drees, the self-described naturalist, ends up with what amounts to a supernaturalistic worldview. I address this paradox as a Deweyan pragmatic humanist. My naturalism is thoroughgoing. It treats both science and religion as different ways for human beings to deal with the single natural world that Drees characterizes in his six claims. Deweyan humanism is a version of religious naturalism that differs significantly from those Drees rejects. As such, it is an option that accomplishes Drees’s purpose of harmonizing science and religion in a way that takes them both seriously, but without his dualism.

Drees ends up endorsing the Christian posit of a transcendent God for three reasons: (1) to accord the Christian religious tradition a cultural, cognitive status comparable to that of our scientific traditions, (2) to answer persistent so-called limit questions about the natural world as a whole, and (3) to set a regulative limit to the imaginative ideals we come up with in our particular historical traditions. In the remainder of this essay I will present my differences from Drees as responses to these three claims.

Cognitive status, for him, is a matter of beliefs more or less accurately representing reality. The cognitive status of our cultural practices is a function of whether or not they incorporate beliefs that are more or less accurate representations of the world. If the practices incorporate beliefs of this sort, they are realistic. If they do not, they are not realistic practices. As a pragmatist, I do not consider beliefs to be representations at all. Consequently, the cognitive status of beliefs and their attendant practices is a matter of their usefulness to us and nothing more.

Clearly, Christians have professed belief in a transcendent God. Given his commitment to a representational view of beliefs, Drees has little choice but to endorse this posit, if he is to take the Christian religious tradition seriously compared to the natural sciences. Otherwise, he must

rate it a nonrealistic sort of discourse. Although he is careful not to claim the same sort of descriptive accuracy for it that he does for science, he does claim that we need to retain the Christian reference to a supernatural God in order to accomplish purposes 2 and 3 above.

As a religious humanist and a pragmatist, I do not need to endorse or retain its references to a supernatural deity in order to take the Christian religious tradition seriously. The problem for us thoroughgoing naturalists is whether, and how, to transfer those references to God into the physicalistic natural world that Drees himself describes as “the whole of reality that we know of and interact with” (Drees 1996, 12).

In my view, Drees’s broken-backed naturalism is reactionary. His realistically motivated theological conservatism constitutes an obstacle to the sort of religious inquiry and innovation that Deweyan humanism exemplifies with respect to traditional Christianity.

Drees, the would-be naturalist, paints himself into the supernaturalist corner that I have described in the following way. He begins auspiciously enough by agreeing with the classical pragmatist line, which says that human intellectual capacities, considered as evolutionary products, operate in ways that are selective, interested, and localized. These limitations also apply to the outgrowths of those capacities—for example, the scientific and religious practices that are useful to us in various ways. However, in the case of modern science, Drees contends that we need to do more than recognize its usefulness to us in order to do justice to its cognitive status. We need to say that our scientific practices incorporate theoretical representations that connect, however tenuously, with the character of the world itself (Drees 1996, 137). Drees claims that we need to posit this realistic representational connection, suitably qualified, between our scientific theories and the world in order to explain their nonrepresentational usefulness to us—their predictive value for instance. “It is hard,” he says, “to have wrong beliefs which none the less support right behavior, and even harder to persistently modify wrong beliefs on the basis of new experiences with the world into other wrong beliefs, which are again successful . . .” (Drees 1996, 20–21).

Drees treats religion, like the sciences, as selective, interested, localized products of our evolutionary past. Among other things, our religious traditions enable us to feel at home in the world and give us prophetic leverage to distinguish the way things are from the way they should be. Typically religions serve these purposes with reference to entities other than the things of the natural world that current scientific theories are about. Drees does not dismiss or try to reinterpret all such references to supernatural entities. Instead, he endorses one of them, namely, the Christian belief in a timeless God upon whom the things of the natural world constantly depend for their being. This God, according to Drees,

provides an answer to speculative, limit questions about the natural world in its entirety that are beyond the scope of the sciences (Drees 1996, 266–72). It also provides a practical, regulative limit to the imaginative ideals that arise in the course of our cultural traditions, relativizing them in the name of an impartiality to which they aspire at least implicitly but which they do not embody (Drees 1996, 280–2).

Why would a self-described naturalist choose to endorse this Christian reference to a supernatural deity? Dewey proposed transferring the union of being and value in the traditionally conceived supernatural deity to the unifying of actual conditions with imagined ideals that occurs in the practices of human communities. This relocates an important “religious function” from a putatively supernatural realm and places it squarely within the natural world.

So far as I can see, Drees’s commitment to scientific realism prohibits him from considering this more consistently naturalistic option. Were he to accept some form of Deweyan religious humanism in order to harmonize science and religion, that (by his lights) would diminish the cognitive status of religion compared to the sciences. Religion would be of merely human use, whereas the sciences would be that and more. The latter, as realistic representations, embody (however imperfectly) an impartial view of things that the former would completely lack. Drees is not willing to have religion end up on the wrong side of this invidious distinction between realistic and nonrealistic discourses when compared with the sciences. Thus the need for his concession to supernaturalism, however minimal and qualified it may be.

Suppose that scientific realism is what keeps Drees from accepting a completely naturalized version of Christianity to go along with his naturalistic account of science. Why not ditch scientific realism and treat religion and science evenhandedly, as products of past innovative thinking that are of different uses to us now, both subject to further innovation as need be?² Drees offers two reasons for not doing so. We need the posit of accurate representation between our scientific theories and the world, he says, in order to explain the usefulness of those theories as well as the methodologies that generate them. And we need that posit in order to avoid the implausible situation of having “wrong beliefs which none the less support right behavior” (Drees 1996, 20).

The second reason may apply to certain antirealist views of scientific theories. It does not apply to the pragmatist view of what beliefs are and of their relationship to the rest of the world. Donald Davidson’s statement that, although beliefs are true or false, they do not represent anything, summarizes this view.³ This statement applies to all beliefs—scientific, religious, and others. Whatever antirealists may hold about scientific theories, we pragmatists do not take theoretical physics to consist

of false, or fictional, beliefs that are nonetheless useful to us. We take it to consist of many true beliefs connected to, and supported in various ways by, a mass of mainly true scientific and commonsensical beliefs, all of which are of immense value to us in predicting and controlling various aspects of the world in which we live.⁴ None of these mostly true beliefs is a representation of anything. The beliefs are better understood to be rules of action. The implausibility that Drees describes, of having “wrong beliefs which none the less support right behavior,” is not one that pragmatists must address. We have no need to posit a relationship of representational accuracy between our scientific theories and the world in order to avoid it.

That leaves the first of Drees’s reasons: explaining the usefulness of scientific theories and methodologies to us. Take evolutionary biology as an example. If we want to relate every living thing on earth to every other living thing, we have Darwin’s magnificent conceptual and linguistic tool with which to accomplish that purpose. Scientific realists tell us that if we want to explain evolutionary biology’s usefulness to us, we need to posit that this Darwinian tool represents reality in a more or less accurate way. This purported representational relationship, however, is of no more explanatory value when applied to Darwinian biology than it would be if applied to earth-moving equipment in order to explain its usefulness to us.

If we want a better understanding of how earth-moving equipment works for us, we turn to theories about the behavior of exploding gases in cylinders, the resulting motion of pistons, and the like. These provide some idea of the causal mechanisms that take us from not being able to move earth efficiently to being able to do so. The theory of scientific realism does nothing of the kind. It provides no clue to the causes that take us from not being able to relate living things to one another genealogically to being able to do so.

Then what good is the theory of scientific realism? With a nod to William James, it speaks to the hankering that some people still have for a God’s-eye view of things. Absent those aspirations, the theory loses its interest. Drees’s realistic explanation of scientific method portrays it as a way to approximate the impartiality of a God’s-eye view. Under a different, Jamesian description, scientific method has evolved into a complex set of procedures that safeguards its users against unwanted surprises. That is nothing to sneer at or to take lightly, but it is not disinterested.

Drees wants us to make these highly useful procedures, which serve a very human interest, into something more than that. The appeal of his realistic explanation depends entirely on whether one aspires to a God’s-eye view of things. The theory of scientific realism is no more disinterested or impartial than the theories whose utility it is supposed to

explain, theories that by Drees's own account are selective, interested, and localized in character.

Deweyan humanism includes an intellectual self-image in which the desire to see things as God sees them plays no role. Its portrait of a science and a religion that are both about the things of the natural world is not an account of what our scientific and religious traditions have been to date. It is a proposal for what they, and we, might become and for how we might be better off in that eventuality. Drees's insistence that we continue to endorse the thesis of realism for our science and the thesis of a transcendent God for our religion places a needless roadblock in the way of this Deweyan experiment. Perhaps Drees means to argue that there is something essentially human about the desire for a God's-eye view of things and its attending theory of scientific realism. Short of making that case, nothing other than the inertia of tradition stands in the way of reinterpreting both science and religion as tools, fashioned and refashioned in the course of our history here on earth, that enable us in different ways to cope in, and with, the natural world. Viewed in this pragmatist way, science and religion are already on a level playing field. There is no need for Drees's endorsement of the Christian posit of a transcendent God to keep religion, however minimally, on a cognitive par with science conceived of in terms of scientific realism.

Questions of cultural, cognitive parity aside, I turn to the second and third of Drees's reasons for endorsing the Christian posit of a timeless transcendent God. Drees, in effect, contends that there are things this God can do that the things of the natural world cannot. Of course, our having no need for these things to be done leaves the door open for completely naturalized versions in which religion, as well as science, is about the natural world and nothing apart from it. According to Drees, the Christian posit of a timeless transcendent God on whom the natural world in its entirety constantly depends answers persistent limit questions about the natural world as a whole and serves as a regulative limit on the imaginative ideals that particular cultural traditions generate over time.

It is worth noting that Darwin's first American defender, Asa Gray, used the distinction between primary and secondary causality, along with the notion of the constant dependence of the natural world upon God, as a central element in his efforts to make evolutionary biology religiously palatable. Gray simply took it for granted that this distinction, and its attendant division of labor between the natural sciences and philosophy, was a permanent feature of our mental and cultural landscape. That, however, is just the question. Are we bound to ask questions about primary causality to which a timeless, transcendent God is an answer?

The early pragmatists, influenced by Darwin, emphasized the changeability of the human mind with respect to the questions that we find

interesting and worth asking. Viewed in that way, Drees's limit questions about the natural world as a whole are themselves historical contingencies. They do not reflect a perennial concern that is of the essence of the human mind. Both James and Dewey attributed the success of modern science, at least in part, to a loss of interest in and disregard for questions about primary causality so far as the explanation of natural phenomena is concerned. One way to understand pragmatism is to see it as an extension of this loss of interest in and disregard for questions about primary causality into philosophy, so that it would become more like science in that respect.

Dewey is explicit about this. He attributes cultural, including scientific, progress to changes in interest and attention rather than to methodically generated gains in representational accuracy. In that vein, he proposes that philosophical concerns about the meaning and value of life are better served by focusing attention and energy on figuring out ways to improve the world in the time we have than on questioning why we have a world, and where meaning and value come from, in the first place. To the extent that this shift of interest and attention away from questions about primary causality takes hold, Drees's endorsement of the Christian posit of a timeless transcendent God loses its point.

Regarding the second use for this Christian posit, Drees claims that it is important to have a way to relativize the imaginative ideals that particular human communities formulate and devote themselves to over time. He suggests that the Christian transcendent God serves this purpose by being an unachievable, impartial ideal that keeps us from claiming for our interested, local ideals an impartiality that they do not have.

But again, such a regulative limit is relevant only if we think of ourselves as in some way privy to an impartial, God's-eye view of things. If we do not suppose that we can view the world through God's eyes in the first place, then there is no point in invoking a regulative limit on our imaginations to keep us from claiming that we have attained such a view. The pragmatist self-image, crafted by James and Dewey, is of finite intelligences whose conceptions of the actual world, as well as utopian projects for changing it, are selective, interested, and localized through and through. To the extent that this intellectual self-image takes hold, Drees's endorsement of the Christian posit of a timeless transcendent God for practical purposes also loses its point.

Drees tells us that he wrote this book with two purposes in mind: to survey the science-and-religion field and to spell out his own position therein. He succeeds admirably in the first of these. In particular, Drees's criticisms of Alvin Plantinga's call for theistic science are on target and well deserved.⁵ His rejection of arguments purporting to extend the umbrella of scientific realism by analogy to theology is well considered

and just.⁶ His account and rejection of religious empiricist claims about the fundamentally organic, even panpsychic, character of the natural world (which the sciences abstract from and thus tend to miss) is balanced and completely justified.⁷

I have chosen to focus on what I consider to be Drees's one major misstep, his endorsement of the notion of divine transcendence of the natural world. This, as Dewey said of Santayana, breaks the back of Drees's naturalism. I have tried to show here that this is an avoidable error. We can do justice to the importance of both science and religion in our lives with reference only to the things of the natural world. James and Dewey began to fashion a vocabulary with which to do that. Contemporary pragmatists are refining it. Were Drees to avail himself of this vocabulary, his naturalism would be thoroughgoing, not dualistic.

NOTES

1. For a wonderful account of this dispute that pays special attention to the theistic and humanistic religious options involved, see Shaw (1987).
2. For a pragmatist story about how a completely naturalized version of Christianity might come about, along with a response to conservative theological objections to this kind of religious innovation, see Robbins (1992).
3. For a fuller account of the view of beliefs surrounding this statement, see Davidson (1989).
4. See Rorty (1991) particularly pages 159–60, for a more detailed discussion of the Davidsonian notion that most of our beliefs are true.
5. For a pragmatist response to Plantinga's claim that the combination of "metaphysical naturalism" and evolutionary theory is irrational, see Robbins (1994).
6. For a pragmatist reaction to extending scientific realism to theology, see Robbins (1987, 1988).
7. For a neopragmatist criticism of religious naturalism, see Robbins (1989, 1993).

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