NATURALISM NEED NOT BE "MADE SAFE": A RESPONSE TO WILLIAM ROTTSCHAEFER'S MISUNDERSTANDINGS

by Willem B. Drees

Abstract. In this article, I respond to William Rottschaefer's analysis of my writings on religion and science, especially my *Religion, Science and Naturalism* (1996). I show that I am not trying "to make naturalism safe," as Rottschaefer contends, but rather attempting to explore options available when one endorses naturalistic approaches. I also explain why I object to the label "supernaturalistic naturalism" used by Rottschaefer. Possible limitations to naturalistic projects are discussed, not as limitations imposed but rather as features uncovered.

Keywords: empirical theology; limit questions; naturalism; William Rottschaefer; supernaturalism; underdetermination.

William Rottschaefer (2001) has written an extensive analysis of my work. He poses challenges, some of which I address below. So far, so good. One welcomes critics who read our writings carefully. However, Rottschaefer misrepresents the nature of my project significantly, as I argue below—and before judging whether a project is successful or flawed, it is good to understand the nature of the project, the kind of claims made and results desired. Furthermore, Rottschaefer dismisses too easily possible limitations to naturalistic projects, not as limitations imposed (as he suggests) but rather as features uncovered. Thus, in this response I offer comments on the nature of my project and on the possibility that naturalism has inherent limitations.

Let me begin with one disclaimer. I have published in religion and science for some twelve years. I have not been on a single track all this time, nor have I always been consistent in my terminology. There are differences between my analysis of cosmology (Drees 1990; 1993) and

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later studies with a major emphasis on evolutionary views, in which I began to use the word *naturalism* (Drees 1996) but did not use the notion of *constructive consonance*, which was important to the earlier work. I am not ready yet for a single synthesis; my arguments and choice of vocabulary are related to contexts and audiences. I am involved in ongoing explorations, a quest rather than a system. If, on the way, I have misinterpreted certain persons, I apologize. Rottschaefer suggests that I have not done justice to Karl Peters (Rottschaefer 2001, 449 n. 9). I may well have made mistakes of this kind in my survey and assessment of the field. In the last few years I have become more aware of the variety among the many interesting naturalistic (and pragmatist, empirical theological, process philosophical, and other revisionist) approaches in the United States.

ON THE NATURE OF MY PROJECT: MISUNDERSTANDING VERBS

When Rottschaefer describes my project in the title of his contribution as "How to make naturalism safe . . . ," he already starts on the wrong foot. Such a title suggests that I consider naturalism by itself to be dangerous and hence in need of additional constraints to make it safe.

I rather enjoy the project of a naturalistic understanding; it frees us from superstitions and fears. My agenda is not "to make safe." I explore the strengths, limitations, and implications of our modern scientific understanding of reality. I do not propose a "limited" naturalism, as Rottschaefer writes (2001, 410), as if I were imposing constraints on permissible forms of naturalism. I am rather in the business of figuring out whether naturalistic positions have any intrinsic limitations. Let me make a comparison to Gödel's famous analysis of mathematics, not with respect to rigor (which our arguments do not have in any way comparable to Gödel's), but in kind. Gödel was not imposing limitations on derivability and provability in deductive systems such as arithmetic; he was making a case for certain limitations intrinsic to the nature of these mathematical endeavors. Rottschaefer's title suggests that I am seeking a particular modification of naturalism that would be safe for a particular religious agenda. I do not want to modify it but seek to understand its successes *and* its limitations—that is, if there are such limitations; this needs further argument (e.g., on limit questions; see below).

Rottschaefer writes in the introduction to his article: "In Drees's view naturalism supports supernaturalism. . . ." Let me focus here on the verb *support* rather than the noun *supernaturalism*, to which I will return below. The line I generally take—though I may occasionally have expressed myself differently—is not that of support, but rather of seeing what naturalism allows for, and in this respect I have come to the conclusion that there are multiple options rather than a single one. For instance, in the penultimate section of my *Religion, Science and Naturalism* (Drees 1996, 259–

74), I argue for naturalism's consistency with an atemporal transcendence, while in the preceding section I consider emergentist approaches such as process metaphysics, of which I write, "The attempt to develop such an alternative view of fundamental structure is legitimate" (1996, 258). At the end of my *Beyond the Big Bang* I consider three types of religious and areligious responses (Drees 1990, 194f.); earlier in the same book I consider three major research programs in cosmology, those of Stephen Hawking, Roger Penrose, and Andrej Linde, as genuine options—though radically different in their metaphysical commitments and implications (Drees 1990, 41–75; see also Drees 1991).

I do have my preferences and offer my own constructions, but my interpretations are not presented as the only reasonable option. I consider the habit of some analytical philosophers of treating theology and metaphysics with Bayesian arguments or other forms of probabilistic reasoning to be often inadequate to the issues at hand, because we do not have the means to set up probabilities at all. I do think we can explore interpretations of what reality might be, but I am not convinced that we can quantify probabilities or even table a strong argument for one position as better supported than some alternatives. To some extent Rottschaefer seems to grant me my pluralism when he criticizes my use of underdetermination (which he rejects, but which he thereby treats as an element in my ideas), but he neglects this in his more general description of my approach.

My perception of the way interpretations are underdetermined by solid knowledge allows for a playful attitude. We can play with ideas and indulge in thought experiments, even though we have to be careful about the kind of claims that can be based on models and thought experiments (Drees 1996, 115–23). It is in this context that Rottschaefer mistakenly ascribes to me adherence to "Platonic theism," but my analyses of timelessness in the context of modern cosmology are more explorative and less meant to result in a definitive preference (e.g., see the differences between Drees 1993, 344–55 and 360–65). In *Religion, Science and Naturalism* (1996) I made more use of notions of emergence, for example, when discussing human morality and mathematics (1996, 204–10, 213–21).

Let us return to the sentence of Rottschaefer that introduces the word *support*: "In Drees's view naturalism supports supernaturalism by revealing both an epistemic and a moral distance between the transcendent and the human" (Rottschaefer 2001, 408). An epistemic distance is not a positive argument. Once one has argued that there are good reasons to be agnostic with respect to certain issues, one may still have preferences with respect to possible ways of dealing with these issues but cannot claim that the same material that reveals the epistemic distance also delivers epistemically warranted forms of "support." Hence, I emphasize that limit questions are "questions, not evidence" (Drees 1996, 269). The moral distance is, as far as I know of my own work, never used as cognitive support; I will come back to its function later, as Rottschaefer confuses moral motivation (in humans) and evaluation (of the world we live in).

ON THE NATURE OF MY PROJECT: MISUNDERSTANDING NOUNS

In the title of his article, Rottschaefer labels my position "Supernaturalistic Naturalism." I want to stress that I have never used this label; the only other context, to my knowledge, where the label *supernaturalism* was used for my position was also in *Zygon*, in an article by Wesley Robbins (1997). I not only have never used the label *supernaturalism*, I want to distance myself from it. The label may be adequate if one defines supernaturalism with sufficient care, but for almost all understandings of the term, I would not be in favor of it.

Rottschaefer uses the first of his many endnotes to distance his use of the word *supernatural* from "its traditional sense of the Christian theistic God. Rather I [Rottschaefer] use it in the more literal sense of a being beyond the natural world" (2001, 447 n. 1). Still he cannot keep himself from infusing the word *supernatural* with elements of the Christian concept of a deity with personhood and other such characteristics; even talking of "a being beyond the world" in the sentence quoted above is highly loaded with the Christian theistic tradition. I do not feel comfortable with speaking of "*a* being" as an entity or about using the word *beyond* as a spatial term in this context. Words like *source*, *ground*, and *mystery* are my attempts to avoid such supernaturalisms (see also Drees in press). I doubt even more whether I ever used the plural "supernatural realities" (Rottschaefer 2001, 417) or applied features of the ontology of the natural world to "the supernatural world" (p. 435)—language that suggests too much an independent, spatially distinguishable world in itself.

Not only does he label my position "supernaturalistic naturalism," but he also uses the label rhetorically when he contrasts this with his own "scientific naturalism." It may come as a surprise to some readers of Rottschaefer's analysis that another reviewer branded my approach, with some justice, as a "materialistic naturalism" that would be too narrow to allow for genuine religion (Griffin 1997). Dismissing my work as supernaturalistic naturalism is an either/or strategy that is rhetorically effective but does not clarify any real issues, for example, about what science does or does not imply.

ON MISUNDERSTANDING MY PROJECT: EXPLAINING RELIGION

Rottschaefer is unclear about the particular focus of his own article and of my book *Religion, Science and Naturalism* (1996). In the abstract he writes that I have proposed a "naturalistic account of religion." However, a few lines later he says that I believe my position offers "the best philosophical account of the natural world" and provides "the opening for a supernaturalistic understanding of religion and theology" (Rottschaefer 2001, 407).

The opening sentence of the article suggests again that the focus is on an account of religion. My book was actually much broader in scope than the explanation of religion. With respect to religion and theology, three projects can be distinguished:

1. The explanation of religions as clusters of phenomena and practices (rituals, myths) in a wide variety of human cultures. Such an explanation can be naturalistic (e.g., rituals are functionally selected by the cohesion they provide to societies) or supernaturalistic (e.g., sacrifices are demanded by the gods, a divine command theory in morality).
2. The explanation of theologies (as packages of ideas, found in a wide variety of human cultures) can be naturalistic (e.g., as projection, as affirming power structures, as mistaken answers to meaningful questions) or supernaturalistic (as revealed truth).
3. Theologies can in their content be naturalistic (in the way they speak of values, existence, etc.), supernaturalistic (in the entities they allow), or otherwise.

Of course, if one opts for a supernaturalistic explication or justification of religious practices or theological ideas, one cannot avoid being also a supernaturalist in the content of one's theology. However, not all other combinations are equally clear-cut.

I opt for a naturalist understanding of religion (as practices arising in hominid evolution) and also of theologies (as ideas that should be understood in their historical context). Despite all the subtle variations Rottschaefer brings to the issue, we do not fundamentally disagree about human epistemic capacities in this respect. Thus, I consider him totally mistaken to suggest that I would subscribe to the following: "Purely naturalistic accounts of religion fail by taking the sciences too seriously" (Rottschaefer 2001, 413; see in contrast my discussion of evolutionary understandings of religions, Drees 1996, 210–13, 221–23).

However, through the argument about limit questions—which is not an argument about the explanation of religions, theologies, or other phenomena in human culture—I do allow for a limitation on naturalism, a limitation that brought Rottschaefer to the label "supernaturalistic naturalism." I reject his label, but I do acknowledge that we disagree on limit questions and hence on the feasibility of a naturalistic understanding of reality as a whole, which has consequences for the theologies I consider justified.

Even though such a theology may be considered supernaturalistic in Rottschaefer's terms, it should be noted that there is no need to invoke a supernaturalistic *explanation* of my theological ideas; I do not add to human natural capacities special knowledge claims based on revelation, religious experience, or the like. I consider such appeals to special knowledge intellectually suspicious as well as politically problematical, as they allow an escape from public argument. Thus, I do not claim anything beyond the confines of methodological and epistemological naturalism. My claims regarding limitations to the naturalistic project can be understood as arising from argument and reflection, rooted in knowledge of the world. The views I subsequently articulated are shaped by personal preferences which may be intelligible on the basis of personal history and cultural circumstances: if I had been substantially exposed to Indian ideas rather than those of modern Western Europe, I probably would have dealt with the limitations in a different way. This self-understanding fits my arguments about traditions as historically shaped languages and ways of life, open to revision but at the same time appreciated as a valuable and useful part of our heritage.

Hence, I accept a naturalistic understanding of religions as well as of theologies (including my own views). However, accepting a naturalistic understanding need not determine truth; we can understand mistakes, falsehoods, and truths. Nor does a naturalistic understanding of any phenomenon prevent it from being of a remarkable character. An example is the abstract conceptual "world" of mathematics, which may arise naturalistically but at the same time has many features that are not natural in the ordinary sense of the word—that is, there is a major difference between any real, physical triangle and the triangle of a mathematician's theorem.

A naturalistic understanding of reality may be complete and self-contained, but it need not be. That is the issue of limit questions. Let me stress again that these limit questions and any speculative answers suggested are not about the explanation of actual religions as human practices and ideas (accounts of theology) but are part of our theological-metaphysical explorations of reality (theological accounts). Rottschaefer seems to identify the naturalistic understanding of religions and theologies with the content our theologies need to have. However, this short-circuits important issues. In my opinion, the understanding of religions is distinct from the presentation of a metaphysical view as a possible interpretation of reality. I am not even sure how we can ever get the two together—the religious traditions, which are naturalistically understood but draw on a repertoire of traditional, supernaturalistic images, and the metaphysical answers we may think of in relation to the limit questions. They come together in human lives but do not necessarily fit together as intellectual projects (Drees 1996, 280 ff.).

LIMIT QUESTIONS

I will not discuss in detail the reflections of Rottschaefer on epistemological and methodological naturalism. I agree that method and ontology are intertwined. However, the history of science shows that it is a mistake to put all the defining weight on method alone, because coherence in insights is also a desideratum and effective criterion (Drees 1996, 9, 144). In the particular contexts indicated, I gave my reasons for beginning with an ontological definition of naturalism rather than a methodological or epistemological one (Drees 1996, 21f.). If Rottschaefer prefers to use the terms slightly differently, I do not see a major disagreement or a genuine challenge, though we could continue the conversation on various formulations and their classification. Thus, despite the number of pages he spends on this, I move on to our more genuine disagreement, on limit questions.

Again, let me point out that I am not seeking to prohibit human attempts but merely have become convinced that our knowledge will turn out to be limited, and hence, there will always be an element of not knowing, of mystery. Why will knowledge fall short? As I see it, the limitations are due to the nature of the questions, not primarily to human nature—extraterrestrials would have similar problems. We should not limit human research. To the contrary, if we do not pose questions, there will be no reason to speak of mystery. Mystery seems to me appropriate only when we ask certain questions very persistently, consider them to be meaningful and well formulated, and at the same time have good reasons to believe that there can be no resolution within our ordinary framework. By definition, then, mystery cannot be an explanatory notion, but neither can it be an imposed end to a quest or conversation.

Rottschaefer argues that there are no such questions. One example he discusses at some length is the question, Why is there something rather than nothing? (2001, 431). He refers to Adolf Grünbaum, who has argued that this question is not problematic at all.

The argument of Grünbaum is that "scientists take certain states of a phenomenon to be states that do not require explanation" (Rottschaefer 2001, 431f.). I agree that this attitude is true to scientific practice. Normally, scientists explain phenomena on the basis of a wide range of assumptions about (the reality of) previous states and laws of nature that they take for granted at that moment. Rottschaefer exemplifies this with the transition from Aristotelian to Newtonian conceptions of motion—where the explanandum changed and not only the explanation. This example raises the issue clearly: what is assumed within a framework of scientific explanations may not be self-evident from outside that framework. A future scientific framework might explain what is assumed in the current framework; I fully agree that limit questions are temporally indexed (Rottschaefer 2001, 430; Drees 1996, 18). However, such a future framework would have its own unquestioned (and within that framework unquestionable) assumptions.

Rottschaefer appeals to Grünbaum's view that "existence does not require an explanation" (Rottschaefer 2001, 432). It may be too strong to claim that it *requires* an explanation. It suffices that existence is unexplained and hence allows for a meaningful question—whether this is subsequently answered in theological terms or otherwise or left happily unanswered.

After referring to the theistic tradition of speaking of God as the sort of being whose nature it is to exist, Rottschaefer argues that one could offer an "alternative atheistic account of the existence of the world" based on the claim that for the fundamental particles "it is their nature to exist" (Rottschaefer 2001, 432). Whether this is still a naturalistic claim within the strictures imposed by Rottschaefer seems disputable. Besides, necessary existence of fundamental constituents seems at odds with current scientific knowledge—all particles that are around nowadays are understood to have arisen out of earlier states of a different kind.

I once studied in some detail the proposal by Stephen W. Hawking and J. B. Hartle of "the wave function of the Universe," which was supposed to do away with questions of why the universe exists, because the wave function would describe the probability "for the universe to appear from Nothing" (Hartle and Hawking 1983, 2961). My analysis convinced me that the absence of arbitrary boundaries (which is a remarkable feature of the Hartle-Hawking proposal) does not do away with all questions. The "nothing" out of which the universe appears is not an absolute nothing, as one needs laws of nature and a reality with some definable measure (units of time, units of space, or something else) to which the language of probabilities applies. Besides, probabilities have to be normalized (defining the total probability as 1). In the Hartle-Hawking proposal, this is the normalization of the wave function for the universe, requiring that the probability of having a universe is 1. Thus, the wave function does not describe the probability of various universes on the basis of nothing but rather describes the probability that a certain state is there, given that there must be a universe (Drees 1987; 1990, 71–73).

Let me emphasize again that I am not arguing here for a theistic and against a self-explanatory view of reality, but rather for the meaningfulness of questions that can be answered in different ways, without our scientific knowledge offering substantial support for any of these answers. Once we claim to be at the limits of genuine knowledge, we cannot at the same time claim knowledge that extends beyond these limits. That there are such questions is not just a logical possibility; it is a contingent fact about our world and the history of ideas. This contingent fact, which seems, however, to be in line with unavoidable characteristics of our knowledge, because knowledge always assumes certain categories (the Kantian tradition), is always limited physically by our perspective from a particular locus in place and time, and is formulated in mathematical terms, with all the peculiarities that mathematics has revealed about its own limitations (e.g., Gödel).

Let me make two side remarks about limit questions and mystery. There are two risks involved, one intellectual and one personal. Intellectually, claiming too easily that there are unanswerable questions (or, formulated differently, questions that allow for multiple reasonable answers) may well tempt theologians and others into playing down the significance of the knowledge we have acquired—which answers many questions convincingly and which excludes many of the answers humans have given in the past and still give today. At the personal level, I want to suggest that there is also a human risk involved in claiming "mystery"; similar dangers arise in claims to revelation or intuition. In human relationships, claiming to possess knowledge that is not available to others and that cannot or will not be shared or laid open to criticism is often a way of elevating ourselves over others. It also creates an atmosphere of suspicion and thus problematic human relationships. That too is a reason not to deny anyone the right to pose all questions imaginable, even though we can argue subsequently that some questions are not well formulated, are conceptually confused, or are not answerable by science.

At the end of his discussion of limit questions, Rottschaefer (2001, 436) concludes, "not only is it clear that there is no evidential underdetermination, but it also seems that empirical theological hypotheses are preferable to Drees's Platonic theism." I have offered some examples and arguments for why I take underdetermination seriously. I would have appreciated it greatly, however, if Rottschaefer had not only announced that the comparison with "empirical theological hypotheses" results in victory for the empirical hypotheses but had also spelled out these hypotheses in greater detail.

MORALITY

Let me also comment on Rottschaefer's discussion of my views on morality. He writes (2001, 411) that I "argue that one must diminish cognitive potential in order to ensure proper and effective moral motivation." I hope I did not curtail intellectual pursuits for such purposes. In *Religion, Science and Naturalism* I actually argued that we can understand moral motivation in the context of a naturalistic view (1996, 204–10, 213–21). I explicitly distinguished such questions about an evolutionary understanding of moral motivation from our evaluation of evolutionary reality. That is where I see a persistent moral ambivalence, which may be demonstrated by referring to classical writings such as Voltaire's *Candide*, Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, and Thomas H. Huxley's lecture ([1893] 1989) on "evolution and ethics." It is not just whether we are moral animals or even what the nature of our regulative ideals is, as I allow for a procedural view of ethical justification (Drees 1996, 216–20), but whether we want to argue that deep down this world is morally good or rather prefer to underline its ambiguity (Drees 1990, 208f.; 1996, 213f.; 223–35).

Rottschaefer suggests that I claim that this evaluatory concern "strengthens [my] underdetermination argument" (2001, 438). In my perception, however, underdetermination is not a consequence of such moral considerations but an issue arising in relation to knowledge, exemplified, for instance, by competing research programs in cosmology (Drees 1990; 1991).

Rottschaefer also suggests that my approach suffers from the problem of how one can know the moral good if this is identified with an unknowable abstract source (2001, 439). However, this turns the issue upside down and misses the way I understand our use of religious language. I reject a divine command theory, for reasons similar to those Rottschaefer gives (as if something would be morally right because God commands it, and also for its dependence on problematic concepts such as revelation). But I hold that we use religious language, including the concept of the divine, to speak of what we consider to be of supreme value. Thus, in the last chapter of *Beyond the Big Bang*, I speak of "constructing a consonant God" (Drees 1990, 196), while in *Religion, Science and Naturalism* (1996) I emphasize the notion of regulative ideals. The concept *God* is used in both cases to articulate human ideals. To some extent the situation is analogous to that of mathematics: one need not be a strong realist regarding abstract mathematical entities, nor does one need to treat mathematical discovery as perception of such a timeless realm, in order to avail oneself of the language of mathematics as expressing something significant.

CONCLUSION

Rottschaefer and I agree on many things, especially on the importance of science, when it comes to understanding human beings, including their moralities and religions, on problems with supernaturalistic interventions as exceptions to regular processes, and on the problems with divine command theories. We also have differences of opinion. When Rottschaefer writes in his final lines that he proposes "a worldview that includes a religious dimension that has cognitive status, is open to epistemic assessment, and has possible justification" (2001, 447), I am intrigued and interested but for the time being disagree, seeing religions as interpretations rather than as cognitions. I do not mind such disagreements. However, reading and rereading Rottschaefer's analysis, I am increasingly disappointed at its title and at the way his article seems to seek disagreement rather than constructive engagement; he could have been constructive by developing more explicitly the benefits of the empirical theology he favors. As it stands, his article is of limited use not only in understanding my work and my motivation but also in understanding and appreciating the perspectives of empirical theology.

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