

Divine Action and Divine Transcendence

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THEISTIC NATURALISM AND "SPECIAL" DIVINE PROVIDENCE

by Christopher C. Knight

Abstract. Although naturalistic perspectives are an important component of their accounts of divine action, most participants in the current dialogue between science and theology eschew a purely naturalistic model. They believe that certain events of divine providence require a special mode of divine action, over and above that inherent in naturalistic processes. The analogy of human providential action suggests, however, that a strong theistic naturalism can account for these events. This model does not depend on a particular notion of God's relationship to time and is not inherently implausible from a scientific perspective. Although it can be interpreted deistically, the model also is consonant with a nondeistic theology that may be described as involving a pansacramental or incarnational naturalism.

Keywords: divine action; naturalism; panentheism; pansacramentalism; providence

"NONINTERVENTIONIST" DIVINE ACTION

Debate about divine action has been a central feature of the dialogue between science and theology of the last few decades. One of the main characteristics of this debate has been the widespread belief among its participants that divine agency must be seen not in terms of supernatural intervention as traditionally understood but rather as "continuously at work

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in a way consistent with the known laws of nature,” so that it is proper to “refuse the word ‘intervention’ . . . as the way to speak about divine acts” (Polkinghorne 1996, 41).

It should be noted, however, that it is potentially misleading to speak of this understanding of divine action as a “noninterventionist” one, as some do. Admittedly, its advocates have abandoned the God-of-the-gaps model and the view of supernatural action in which the laws of nature are temporarily set aside in bringing about events of “special” providence. This does not mean, however, that they have adopted the sort of strong theistic naturalism in which divine providence is limited to the general sort that arises from the autonomous working of laws of nature that have been designed by a benevolent creator. In a traditionalist manner, those who follow the newer model still assume that, at least occasionally, there occur genuine divine “responses” to events in the world (intercessory prayer, for example) that bring about events of “special” providence. In their understanding, these events would not—or at least would be very unlikely to—occur if the laws of nature were not in some way divinely manipulated to bring them about. They come about only because God is able to respond to events in the world *through* the laws of nature, using them in a way analogous to that in which other agents use tools.

The mainstream “noninterventionist” model has not, then, abandoned interventionism in the widest sense of the term. It has simply abandoned the particular kind of divine intervention assumed in classical supernaturalist accounts. Just as in those accounts, it is still presumed that there are two possible outcomes to any given situation: the one that will be brought about if nature is simply sustained in being by God, and the different one that will come about if God chooses to respond to the situation in a way that goes beyond the general providence inherent in this sustaining action. In this respect, the “noninterventionist” model has just replaced one mode of interference—that in which the laws of nature are set aside—with another.

The guidance of the laws of nature that is required by this viewpoint is possible, it is argued, because there exists some sort of temporal causal joint (or perhaps a whole range of such joints) through which the laws of nature may be manipulated by God for particular providential ends. This argument is made plausible, for many, by its advocates’ ability to speculate about the nature of possible causal joints in a scientifically literate way. Candidates for such a joint range from the concept of “whole-part constraint” (Peacocke 1995) to the “cloudy unpredictabilities of physical process, interpreted . . . as the sites of ontological openness” (Polkinghorne 1996, 40).

THE NATURALIST DIMENSION

There are important differences of opinion among those who advocate this kind of account of divine action that go far beyond differences about mechanism. These disagreements are expressed in a number of ways but often come down ultimately to differences of opinion about how naturalistic perspectives should be taken into account. On the one hand, it is widely acknowledged that at least some of the purposes of God are fulfilled through the coming to fruition—without additional divine guidance—of the intrinsic potentialities of the cosmos. In this sense, a naturalistic component of God's action as creator is unchallenged. On the other hand, there is considerable disagreement about the scope of this naturalistic analysis, in particular about whether the providential action that is held to require causal joint explanation should include aspects of God's action as creator.

At one end of the spectrum lies Arthur Peacocke, for whom the increasing complexity of the universe since its beginning is to be understood entirely naturalistically. Not only, he says, is it “chance operating within a lawlike framework that is the basis of the inherent creativity of the natural order, its ability to generate new forms, patterns and organizations of matter and energy” (Peacocke 1993, 65). In addition, it is now clear to the theist that “God creates *through* what we call ‘chance’ operating within the created order, each stage of which constitutes the launching pad for the next” (1993, 119). This perspective leads him to see God's creative action as being one of essentially “exploring” the inherent, divinely ordained potentialities of the cosmos. He therefore makes a clear distinction between God's creative and providential action, seeing only the latter as requiring causal joint explanation. Because of this, he actually describes himself as a “theistic naturalist” (Peacocke 2007). As we have seen, however, his theistic naturalism is not of the strong kind and should perhaps be described as a form of “weak theistic naturalism” (Knight 2007a).

Many think, however, that even a weak theistic naturalism of the kind advocated by Peacocke manifests too great a surrender to naturalistic perspectives. For John Polkinghorne, too strong an emphasis on the naturalistic aspect of God's action as creator can lead to “an implicit deism . . . whose nakedness is only thinly covered by a garment of personalized metaphor.” In addition to what he calls the “impersonal, relatively deistic mode” of divine action, it is necessary, he contends, to recognize additional divine guidance through a causal joint mechanism of the sort that he categorizes as “creatorly action in a more personal mode” (Polkinghorne 1994, 78–79).

It may be (as argued in Knight 2003) that Polkinghorne's insistence on this is related to his rejection of Peacocke's panentheistic understanding of the relationship between God and creation. That this is not the only issue at stake, however, is evident from the way in which Philip Clayton—just

as much of a panentheist as Peacocke—has voiced objections to Peacocke’s account of divine action that are similar to Polkinghorne’s. Clayton not only believes that Peacocke’s view of the causal joint of “special” providence needs supplementing. He is also, like Polkinghorne, uncomfortable with the naturalistic overtones of Peacocke’s views of revelation and Christology (Clayton 1997, 220–27). Indeed, he goes beyond Polkinghorne’s perspectives in his contention that human mental activity involves “a level of reality that breaks the bond of naturalism” (Clayton 2000, 699)—a view that implicitly challenges aspects of Peacocke’s naturalistic stress on emergent properties.

THEISTIC NATURALISM

The scope of naturalistic understanding, then, is a major issue in the current dialogue between science and theology, and one of the problems of clarity in this area, as we have seen, is that the term *naturalism*, as Willem B. Drees has noted (2000, 850), does not refer to a “single, well-defined philosophical position” but rather indicates “family resemblances among a variety of projects.” It is important that weak forms of theistic naturalism are recognized as such so that when, for example, not only supporters of Peacocke but also advocates of the very different process-philosophy understanding (Griffin 2001, for example) describe their approaches to divine action as naturalistic, we make a clear distinction between their weak versions of theistic naturalism and the strong version that denies any mode of divine causality other than that in the general providence inherent in the design of the universe.

Moreover, if we must recognize accounts such as those of Peacocke and Griffin as fully theistic but only weakly naturalistic, we also must recognize other theological accounts as strongly naturalistic but only questionably theistic. Some strongly naturalistic models (such as Drees 1996) tend toward an essentially instrumentalist understanding of religious language. Others (Hardwick 1996, for example), while not questioning the referential nature of theological language, construe this in a valuational rather than an ontological way, which makes it problematical for them to speak of God as agent. It is important to state that the model on which I focus in what follows is not only strongly naturalistic, in the way that I have indicated, but also fully theistic, in the sense that reference in theological language is affirmed in such a way that at least some notion of divine agency is sustainable.

The model I advocate exemplifies the approach that Drees labels *theistic naturalism* and that I, for the reasons indicated above, label *strong theistic naturalism*. This model affirms the ontological reality of the God who at the very least sustains in being the universe that he has “designed” with a providential end in view. It thus asserts not merely that a naturalistic un-

derstanding of temporal causality *can* be interpreted theistically, as Drees acknowledges to be the case; it contends also that Drees's reservations about this position are unfounded and that a naturalistic understanding of causality *should* be interpreted theistically. While denying that the cosmos is ever interfered with, in either a supernaturalist or a weakly "noninterventionist" way, this strong theistic naturalism affirms, as Drees rightly notes, "an ontological form of transcendence . . . via a scheme of primary and secondary causes, with the transcendent realm giving effectiveness and reality to the laws of nature and the material world governed by them." In such a theistic naturalism, as he goes on to say, God may be seen as "the ground of all reality and thus intimately involved in every event—though not as one factor among the natural factors" (Drees 2000, 851).

"SPECIAL" PROVIDENCE

A strong theistic naturalism of this sort has, for some, clear advantages over a more conventional theism. Among other things, it allows the vexed question of precisely how God affects the world—the temporal causal joint problem—to be seen as a false one, and it extends the widespread recognition that God should not be understood as a thing among things to embrace the parallel recognition that God is not a cause among causes. Nevertheless, many think that there is one major objection to strong theistic naturalism that outweighs all possible advantages: As usually presented, strong theistic naturalism seems unable to acknowledge that the human experience of God's "special" providence—of revelatory vision or of answer to intercessory prayer, for example—is anything other than an illusion or a misinterpretation of coincidence.

When we examine Clayton's opposition to strong theistic naturalism, we find that it does not rely simply on what Drees calls his "package of pantheism and an anthropology with dualistic elements" (2000, 853). Clayton, like many others, sees acknowledgment of the events usually ascribed to special providence as precluding a fully naturalistic position. For similar reasons, even Peacocke—who has perhaps done more than anyone to foster a naturalistic view of God's action as creator—has taken up a "response" model as far as special divine providence is concerned (Peacocke 1995). Both seem to believe (as indeed do most of its advocates) that a strong theistic naturalism is necessarily tied to a belief in providence like that of the deists of the eighteenth century, in which, for example, intercessory prayer can have no effect beyond that of influencing the sensibilities of those who indulge in it.

This argument for eschewing a strong theistic naturalism is not as conclusive as often seems to be assumed. Not only can the double-agency concept of divine action that is associated with the classical view of God's eternity be developed in a way that allows for a fully naturalistic account of

divine providence. In addition—and quite apart from any technical argument about the relationship of a temporal cosmic process to a God who is assumed to be beyond temporal categories (see Knight 2007b, 124–33)—a simple human analogy suggests a way in which even a temporal God might have arranged all divine providence naturalistically. This argument is based on the observation that human providence—for example, parents’ financial support of their student children—can be given in any one of three ways:

1. It can be entirely unmediated: “Here’s your regular allowance—and some extra cash for the repairs that your car needs.”
2. It can be entirely mediated—for example through fixed instructions to a bank: “Transfer such-and-such an amount every month to my daughter’s bank account, and, in addition, if she provides invoices for repairs to her car, transfer to her account the amount necessary to cover those repairs.”
3. Depending on circumstances, it can be either mediated or unmediated: “The money that comes automatically into your bank account will cover only your everyday expenses, so here’s some more for your car repairs.”

In practice, unless constrained by legal requirements such as those involved in setting up a trust fund, human parents usually do not opt for the second of these mechanisms, entirely mediated. They recognize that their wisdom is limited, that they are unable to generate a set of “if . . . then” statements that could cover all possible circumstances in which extra support would be appropriate. In practice, therefore, they opt to support their children either through the first of these mechanisms—the equivalent of all divine providence being of the “special” sort—or the third, which is equivalent to the usual model of divine providence, in which the general providence built into the creation is occasionally supplemented by acts of special providence.

The wisdom of the God in whom most theists believe is, however, not limited in the way that human wisdom is. There is therefore no reason why this God’s providence must include a special mode of action. The “fixed instructions” inherent in the natural world could, at least in principle, have been so arranged that there is no need to supplement the general providence provided by the character of that world. Moreover, these fixed instructions need not be of the rather clumsy kind suggested by my human analogy. Precisely how God may have set up providential fixed instructions in a more elegant and economical way may be hard to guess, but it is not entirely beyond conjecture.

MECHANISMS FOR NATURALISTIC SPECIAL PROVIDENCE

Naturalistic understandings of human psychology often have manifested characteristics that are at least suggestive of divine providence. For some, indeed, this has been an important aspect of both their understanding and existential appropriation of the concept of providence. For Christopher Bryant, one of the most profound commentators on the relationship of psychology to the Christian faith, it was C. G. Jung's

idea of the self, the whole personality, acting as a constant influence on my conscious aims and intentions in a manner that I was powerless to prevent, that brought home to me the inescapable reality of God's rule over my life . . . I came to understand that to resist God was to run counter to the law of my own being; God's judgement worked through a kind of inbuilt psychic mechanism; it was self-acting and imposed from within me . . . similarly the renewing grace of God begins to heal and liberate those who submit to this inner law. (Bryant 1983, 38–44)

This type of psychological understanding of providence can be extended to account for revelatory experience in the way that Peacocke (1993, 202) seems to demand when he asks, "how does our understanding of God's interaction with the world including humanity relate to revelatory human experiences of God?" Karl Rahner, in particular, has explored the psychological basis of revelatory visionary experience, analyzing it theologically as "a kind of overflow and echo of a much more intimate and spiritual process . . . which the classic Spanish mystics describe as 'infused contemplation'" (Rahner 1963, 138–39). This approach, as I have argued elsewhere (Knight 2001, 23–42), may be extended nonreductionistically in such a way that even primary revelatory experiences—the resurrection appearances of Christ, for example—are susceptible to analysis in psychological terms.

To extend this sort of psychological understanding of divine providence to incorporate events in the external, empirical realm is, admittedly, more problematical. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the Jungian framework to which Bryant points does suggest a way in which a naturalistic model of divine providence can include such events and provide, in doing so, a naturalistic affirmation of the reality of "response" to intercessory prayer. Although Bryant does not take up this aspect of Jung's thinking, Jung himself was fascinated by what he saw as the reality of "synchronicity"—the way in which internal psychic states seem to have the effect of evoking, or coinciding with, significant external events. Such meaningful coincidence may, he suggested, point to "an as yet unknown substrate possessing material and at the same time psychic qualities" (Jung 1959, 145).

Many, perhaps, will dismiss this as Jung at his most idiosyncratic and speculative. We should not forget, however, that similar conjectures have been evoked by the way in which quantum mechanics poses significant questions about the relationship between the empirical, observed world and the mind of the observer. In particular, there are intriguing echoes of

Jung's observations in the statement of physicist David Bohm that "if matter and consciousness . . . could be understood together in terms of the . . . notion of order, the way would be open to comprehending their relationship on the basis of a common ground" (Bohm 1980, 197).

Whether the existence of and relationship between Jung's "unknown substrate" and Bohm's "common ground" can ever be demonstrated and explored, of course, remains problematic. However, given that the relationship between consciousness and matter has arisen as a concern within both psychology and physics, it is clear that an extension to empirical phenomena of a naturalistic, psychological account of divine providence is far from being unthinkable.

Extension of this perspective to the sort of phenomena usually deemed miraculous, moreover, is possible in terms of a concept that Polkinghorne has noted (albeit with a different intention). As he points out, physicists are now quite used to what they call changes of "regime," which bring about new phenomena that may not have been anticipated or even seemed possible. Perhaps the most obvious example is the phenomenon of superconductivity in which, in certain materials, electrical resistivity suddenly disappears when a sample is cooled to below a certain threshold temperature. This, Polkinghorne notes, provides a good example of how discontinuities in behavior, seemingly inexplicable when first encountered, can be the result of underlying continuities at the level of physical law. What we call the miraculous may be the result of an analogous change (Polkinghorne 1986, 74). As I have indicated elsewhere, this approach to miracles can be expanded in both philosophical and theological terms (Knight 2007b, 34–39, 86–95).

These suggested mechanisms for extending the scope of general providence admittedly are somewhat speculative. This is not a major drawback, however, because their purpose here is not to provide a definitive account of the mechanisms involved in divine providence. They serve simply to indicate that a naturalistic understanding of the events usually ascribed to "special" providence is not intrinsically implausible from a scientific perspective. The naturalistic understanding that I have outlined does not depend upon the validity of any particular account of the mechanisms through which divine providence may operate. It depends, rather, on an acceptance of the general belief that lies behind speculation about such mechanisms: that God's creation, with its inbuilt "fixed instructions," is far subtler and more complex than our present scientific understanding indicates. This belief does challenge the facile attitude that is now common, in which naturalism is taken to preclude the possibility of paranormal phenomena. It does not entail an understanding of the creation that the theist (even if opposed to strong theistic naturalism) is likely to find unacceptable. Indeed, opposing accounts of divine providence often make a general assumption of much the same kind.

BEYOND DEISM

We have seen that many of the events usually ascribed to special divine providence are susceptible to naturalistic analysis in a way that is theologically intriguing, philosophically coherent, and scientifically plausible. The immediate issue that arises from this general model of divine providence is not so much a philosophical or scientific question as a more broadly theological one. It is that of whether, if this naturalistic model of all divine action is accepted, we are forced back to a position that is essentially that of the deists of the eighteenth century in which God is seen as little more than an absentee landlord who has designed the cosmos and then set it in motion.

As far as the philosophical aspects of the model are concerned, such a return would not be incoherent. Because many would find this theologically unacceptable, however, it is important to note that a deistic interpretation is not the only possible one. In particular, it is important to recognize that a panentheistic account of God's relationship to the cosmos takes us immediately beyond the absentee-landlord concept because, if the world is in some sense "in God," as many now believe (see Clayton and Peacocke 2003), God can hardly be a distant observer. A panentheistic version of a strong theistic naturalism will in fact strongly reinforce the latter's basis in the notion that God is "the ground of all reality and thus intimately involved in every event" (Drees 2000, 851).

It would seem, then, that a specifically panentheistic naturalism can offer a model that, in addition to all the advantages of the more general strong theistic naturalism that I have outlined, avoids the most obvious problems of a deistic view. Because of this, a strong panentheistic naturalism offers, if not yet a model that can command widespread acceptance, a research program of considerable importance that can be pursued in a number of ways. Some of these ways will be specifically theological in content, such as that which arises from the pansacramental or incarnational naturalism that I myself advocate (Knight 2007b). Other approaches will be based on the more explicitly philosophical or scientific questions that arise from the model. At this stage, however, no one of these lines of approach can be taken as definitive. What is important for all of them is simply to recognize the validity of the conclusions of this paper: that a strong theistic naturalism, even before its deistic overtones are removed through a panentheistic expansion, is not incompatible with a belief in divine providence that goes well beyond the deistic understanding of that term.

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