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A PROPERLY SCIENTIFIC NATURALISM CAN BE COMPATIBLE WITH CLASSICAL THEISM

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One might think at first glance that naturalism excludes any form of theism by definition. This article argues to the contrary that proper scientificity requires that a naturalist remain open to the possibility of the truth of the classical theistic conception of God in particular. The only alternative is for naturalism to devolve into an anti-theistic bias and ideology, forsaking the claim to being properly scientific.

The thesis to be argued in this article is that a properly scientific naturalism can be compatible with classical theism. Such a proposal can seem at first glance preposterous and nearly obviously false. This is because 'naturalism' and 'theism' are typically seen as mutually exclusive philosophical approaches. In order to demonstrate their compatibility, therefore, it will be necessary carefully to define what is meant by 'classical theism', 'naturalism', and 'proper scientificity'.

Classical theism defined

At its core, 'classical theism' as it is understood here affirms that there is an absolute and fundamental reality upon which everything else depends for its existence in every passing moment. It refers to this absolute reality as 'God', although it would be a mistake to understand classical theism *per se* as attributing to this God everything which one might happen to associate with the notion of 'God' or 'a god' on the basis of the contingencies and accidents of one's historical and cultural circumstances.

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Many of the different religions of the world not only affirm the existence of God so defined but also make various other claims about it. This is why one must distinguish classical theism as a strictly philosophical position from its appropriations and developments in different religious and spiritual contexts. For example, it is traditional in Christianity to refer to God with the personal pronoun 'He', although nothing about classical theism as such demands this. Moreover, one might associate the absolute reality with the depictions of God in the various scriptures with which one happens to be familiar, imputing to it a certain personal nature and the dynamic sort of life which is characteristic of persons. But it is not essential to classical theism that God be defined in explicitly and univocally personal terms, and there are prominent figures in the classical theistic tradition who go out of their way to deny that such language is straightforwardly adequate in describing the being of God. In this sense, the Christian theologian and philosopher St John of Damascus can be cited: '[I]t is clear that God exists, but what He is in essence and nature is unknown and beyond all understanding' (1954: 170). Statements such as these are very common in the Christian classical theistic tradition and ought to be kept in mind when one encounters language that seems to attribute to God more personal characteristics such as knowledge and moral qualities.

St John of Damascus emphasizes that what God is in essence and nature is unknown and beyond human understanding. But this by itself does not mean that nothing whatsoever can be said about God. There is a long-standing 'apophatic' tradition in classical theism which affirms that, although it is not possible to know what God is in itself, it is nevertheless possible to know what God is not. The knowledge of what God is not comes about through a consideration of the 'work' that God does as that absolute and fundamental reality upon which everything else depends for its existence. Nothing that would undermine or compromise

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the absoluteness and fundamentality of God can be said of it, making it possible in this way to know what God is not.

At the same time, insofar as classical theism posits God as that upon which everything else depends for its existence in every passing moment, it also suggests a way in which the more 'personalist' language of the different world religions and spiritualities can be interpreted. More specifically, this language need not be interpreted as affirming anything of God in itself but rather as describing the things that owe their existence to it. For example, the affirmation that God is 'good' can be understood as a way of affirming that the things that owe their existence to God are good. So also, the affirmation that God is 'loving' can be understood as proposing an interpretation of the things that owe their existence to God as being good for human beings and intended for their flourishing. Of course, it is another matter altogether whether adopting such a stance towards the things that depend upon God is ultimately true or properly motivated. It can be understood as something of a hermeneutic 'venture' or 'wager' which is not at present knowable. The point to be understood here is in any case that classical theism, which understands God primarily through the lens of ontological absoluteness and fundamentality, is compatible with but does not require the more 'personalist' language opted for in some religious and spiritual traditions.

One might typically associate the notion of 'theism' with the affirmation of the existence of God minimally understood as an omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect being. On the one hand, these notions can to some extent be incorporated into the more 'apophatic' classical theism being proposed here, so long as the relevant rules of interpretation are being followed carefully. The 'omnipotence' and 'omniscience' of God have to be understood *negatively* as denials of anything which would undermine the absoluteness and fundamentality of God and *positively* as a description of the way in which the things which depend on God for their existence ought to be understood. For

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example, the idea that God is omnipotent could be understood as saying that God is the ultimate source of all possible power. As for 'moral perfection', a classical theist may have to deny that God is a moral agent at all and thus that moral goodness or perfection is attributable to it. And the sense in which God is understood as a 'being' in classical theism is perhaps controverted. St John of Damascus goes so far as to say that God 'does not belong to the number of beings, not because He does not exist, but because He transcends all beings and being itself' (1954: 172). Precisely what this means is not exactly clear, but it could perhaps be interpreted as follows. God 'transcends all beings' in the sense that God is not a being, namely not an individual thing with properties. And precisely by not being an individual thing with properties, God therefore transcends 'being itself'. The notion of God affirmed by classical theism as it is presented here must therefore be held in sharp distinction to the understanding of God as an 'omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect being' one might more commonly encounter in certain contemporary philosophical and religious circles.

The essential claim of classical theism is therefore the following: there is an absolute and fundamental reality upon which everything else depends for its existence at every passing moment. This absolute and fundamental reality cannot be known in itself. Even so, it is possible to know what God is not: nothing that would compromise the absoluteness and fundamentality can be rightly attributed to it. And it is possible to interpret the 'personalist' language of the various religious traditions in a way that is compatible with the apophatic insistence in classical theism on the unknowability of God in itself, so long as this language is interpreted as describing the things which depend upon God for their existence rather than as describing God in itself.

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Naturalism defined

Whereas classical theism was relatively easy to define, it is not easy to say exactly what naturalism is supposed to affirm. On the one hand, naturalism seems most easily and straightforwardly defined as the denial of the reality of any supernatural beings such as 'ghosts, goblins, gods and other spooky entities' (Ritchie 2008: 2). The naturalist is one who believes only in 'natural' realities. On the other hand, naturalism is committed to the well-established sciences as the definitive sources for knowledge of reality. The naturalist at the very least refuses to admit the reality of anything excluded by the findings of well-established science and will perhaps remain in a posture of agnosticism at best with respect to the existence of anything not strictly required by these same findings. At a basic level, then, it would seem that naturalism is committed to (i) the denial of the supernatural and (ii) the affirmation of the scientific description of reality.

One can therefore distinguish between the 'anti-supernatural' and 'scientific' aspects of naturalism. This is roughly equivalent to the distinction Graham Oppy (2020) makes between 'ontological' and 'epistemological' naturalism. Such a dual characterization of the naturalist position raises certain important questions. Is the rejection of the supernatural founded upon a prior commitment to the findings of well-established science, or does the naturalist cling to science because of a prior rejection of the supernatural? The two stances are not logically equivalent. Well-established science is presently incomplete and in principle subject to revision, whereas the anti-supernaturalist stance seems to consist in an *a priori* ontological rejection of a certain purported category of being. Suppose that an ideal scientist from the future were to travel back to the present time and to inform the community of naturalists that the well-established ideal science of the future affirms the existence of an absolute and fundamental reality upon which the existence of everything depends in every passing

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moment – in other words, the existence of God as conceived in classical theism. In these hypothetical circumstances, the committed 'anti-supernaturalist' would find a reason to reconsider her confidence in science, whereas the committed 'scientific' naturalist would thus be motivated by scientific naturalism itself to admit the truth of classical theism. It would therefore seem that 'scientific' naturalism is in principle compatible with the truth of classical theism, whereas 'anti-supernaturalism' is not, even at the possible cost of the rejection of science.

But this thought experiment only raises a more fundamental question about the nature of the 'natural', its distinction from the 'supernatural', and its relation to what is posited by well-established science. In this matter, it will prove helpful to consider the 'minimal' characterization of naturalism proposed by Oppy (2020).

Oppy defines the four dimensions of naturalism as follows. In its ontological dimension, naturalism affirms the following: 'Natural reality exhausts causal reality: there are none but natural causal entities with none but natural causal properties' (8). In its epistemological dimension, naturalism affirms: 'Well-established science is our touchstone for identifying the denizens of causal reality' (8). From this it follows that naturalists 'accept all of the causal entities, causal properties, and causal explanations accepted by well-established science', whereas they 'do not accept any causal entities, causal properties, or causal explanations that are not accepted by well-established science' (8–9). In its psychological dimension, naturalism affirms that the only entities with mind are 'either relatively recently evolved biological organisms or else downstream constitutive or causal products of the activities of relatively recently evolved biological organisms' (9). And finally, evaluative naturalism maintains the following: 'There is no part or aspect of reality that is divine, or sacred, or worthy of worship' (10).

How does the ontological dimension of naturalism relate to its epistemological dimension? Oppy says that ontological naturalism excludes the existence of ancestor

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spirits, angels, ghosts, gods, vampires, telekinesis, clairvoyance, karma, and the like (8). This rejection is presumably motivated on the grounds that such realities would not count as 'natural'. These he calls 'putative causal entities' and 'putative causal powers'. What he writes also suggests that the rejection of such entities is apparently motivated by their current status in contemporary well-established science: 'Where the status of putative causal entities, putative causal properties, and putative causal relations remains controversial among relevant scientific experts, naturalists who are not themselves numbered among the relevant scientific experts reserve judgment about those putative causal entities, putative causal properties, and putative causal explanations' (9). The 'natural' would therefore seem to be defined in terms of what is put forth by well-established science. The ontological dimension of naturalism as the affirmation of only 'natural' entities is founded upon the epistemological dimension, which defines the 'natural' as that which is posited by well-established science.

The psychological and evaluative dimensions of naturalism as described by Oppy have to do with the properties of natural entities. In this sense, they are further specifications of the commitments of ontological naturalism. But insofar as ontological naturalism is founded upon epistemological naturalism, it would therefore seem that the psychological and evaluative dimensions of naturalism are themselves informed by what happens to be put forth by well-established science. And science takes place within history and is subject to revision. There is no 'well-established science' that is not a well-established science of some particular time. And it is possible that the well-established science of the future will adopt a different attitude towards those entities which are presently considered 'putative'. Naturalism therefore presently affirms that the only entities with minds are 'relatively recently evolved biological organisms' only insofar as this is what the well-established science of the present day seems to suggest. But if a

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future science were to suggest otherwise, then it would be required by a properly 'scientific' naturalism to think otherwise. This is in fact what happened when Newton proposed his universal theory of gravitation (Ritchie 2008: 4–5). Similarly, naturalism does not admit the existence of anything divine or sacred or worthy of worship only insofar as present well-established science does not demand this. But if a future science were to demand otherwise, then it would be a consequence of properly 'scientific' naturalism to admit as much.

It therefore seems that Oppy's 'minimal' characterization of naturalism is in principle compatible with the truth of classical theism. Granting the priority of its epistemological dimension relative to all the others, naturalism can be understood as admitting the existence of only 'natural' entities, 'natural' being defined with reference to what is posited by well-established science. But what constitutes 'well-established science' differs according to time and place. Science is always in principle revisable and paradigm shifts are unpredictable. It is possible in principle that future science will affirm the existence of a foundational and absolute reality upon which everything else depends for its existence in every passing moment. This would amount to a scientific discovery of the truth of classical theism. And if one grants this possibility, then it follows that a scientific naturalism can be compatible with classical theism.

Proper Scientificity Defined

Classical theism has been defined as the view that there is a foundational and absolute reality upon which everything depends for its existence in every passing moment. This is what it refers to when it speaks of 'God'. Naturalism has been defined as the view which maintains that reality is entirely 'natural', where the 'natural' is what is posited and recognized by well-established science. In this sense, naturalism is possibly compatible with the truth of classical

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theism as long as a future well-established science posits the existence of such a foundational and absolute reality as the classical theistic position means by its use of the term 'God'. But one final question remains. Could it ever be 'properly scientific' to posit the existence of such a thing? It is at this point that the anti-supernatural dimension of naturalism becomes relevant once more.

One particularly attractive way of thinking about 'proper scientificity' is as follows. 'Proper scientificity' means proceeding as far as possible in one's scientific descriptive enterprise on the basis of the disclosure of the object to be known rather than from prior conceptions and prejudices. It means describing a thing in the terms that the thing itself demands, rather than fitting the thing into preconceived categories. This does not mean that it is ever possible to approach an object without prior conceptions and prejudices in mind. It means only that a properly scientific approach would consist in the attempt to conform one's conceptions and judgements to the object itself, rather than imposing upon the object categories and notions that are not proper to it. In a word, 'proper scientificity' means remaining open to the possibility that the object may prove one wrong.

If one accepts this notion of 'proper scientificity', then it becomes clear that the anti-supernaturalist aspect of naturalism as a philosophical position must be subordinated to its commitment to the scientific description of the world, or else naturalism becomes an ideology founded in bias. The argument can be stated in the form of a dilemma. Suppose that the naturalist defines the 'natural' in terms of whatever is admitted by a well-established science. This entails the compatibility in principle of scientific naturalism and classical theism, since nothing excludes the possibility that a future well-established science will posit the existence of that absolute and fundamental reality which the classical theistic tradition refers to as 'God'. But suppose instead that the naturalist defines the 'natural' as excluding any conception of God whatsoever. In this case, either science

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can no longer be the source for the definition of the 'natural', since it may possibly posit the classical theistic conception of God in the future, or else the naturalist must be willing in principle to reject science out of a prior commitment to the non-existence of God. Either case illustrates how granting priority to the anti-supernatural dimension of naturalism turns it into a biased ideology. It would be an anti-theism even more fundamentally and more importantly than it would be scientific, which is to say that it would not be properly scientific.

Concluding remarks

Thus goes the argument for the thesis of the present article. A properly scientific naturalism can be compatible with classical theism. This is because a properly scientific naturalism would submit itself to the demands imposed upon scientific research by the objects which it purports to study, and it is possible in principle that a well-established science of the future will be obligated to posit the existence of an absolute and fundamental reality upon which everything else depends for its existence at every passing moment, such as the classical theistic tradition refers to by 'God'.

If a future well-established science were to make such a positing, it would be tantamount to the scientific discovery of the truth of classical theism. And this would follow even if this future science did not refer to this absolute and fundamental reality as 'God'. One can discover something antecedently known to someone else without referring to it by the same name. It especially would make no difference if these future scientists did not find themselves scientifically obligated to conceive of this absolute and fundamental reality as personal or as omniscient or anything of the sort (although nothing excludes *a priori* the possibility that they might). One must recall that the various connotations and associations that the word 'God' bears in the mind of any individual person as a result of the contingent and

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accidental circumstances of her life need not be essential to the classical theistic conception of 'God' itself. Classical theism is one thing, and the appropriation and development of classical theism in some religious or spiritual tradition such as Christianity or Islam or Hinduism is another. These traditions may all be false while classical theism is nevertheless true. Going further, it is also possible that these future scientists would find themselves unmotivated to speak in such terms about God simply from the point of view of their scientific investigations. But it does not follow that there could be no other circumstances of life from within which the decision to speak of this absolute and fundamental reality in more recognizably religious terms would appear motivated and reasonable. For example, a naturalist who experienced a sudden sense of gratitude for her own existence and for the existence of the world and of everything within it that she enjoys might be suddenly capable of seeing the 'logic' behind the affirmation that God, as that upon which everything else depends for its existence, is 'good' and 'loving'. But unless some particular naturalist simply refused to understand the world in any other way than is scientifically demanded, nothing would exclude this naturalist from adopting more recognizably religious language with reference to this absolute and fundamental reality, even while granting that such sub-scientific language cannot attain to the status of 'knowledge'. And there is always the possibility that a yet future science will in fact necessitate the adoption of a more recognizably 'religious' conception of that absolute and fundamental reality upon which everything else depends for its existence at any moment.

It is therefore clear that nothing about a properly scientific naturalism logically excludes the possible truth of classical theism. A properly scientific attitude requires an in-principle openness to the possibility that the very things that science seeks to describe and to know might themselves demand that they be understood to depend upon some absolute and fundamental reality for their existence in every passing

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moment. This in turn might motivate a naturalist to be more open towards other forms of inquiry than are presently understood as 'strictly scientific'. If proper scientificity means proceeding from the object rather than from preconceptions and pre-judgements, then it would seem 'improperly scientific' to close oneself off to other forms of inquiry than are practised by present-day scientists. Who can know whether it is not precisely this departure from present tradition that will allow a newer and more complete well-established science to come into being? On the other hand, naturalism can only be defined to the exclusion of classical theism at the cost of its becoming an anti-theistic bias and ideology, that is, at the cost of its proper scientificity.

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