

## **Only natural causes; God above natural causes**

### **Paul R. Boehlke**

Whenever we think, we make assumptions. Taking things for granted allows us to move on as we deal with life. But when the results of different thoughts cause dissonance, as in humor or with evolution, it is vital to uncover and question the assumptions.

When modern science began in 16th-century Christian Europe, the basic assumptions were shared. Scientists saw their investigations as trying to figure out how God had designed his marvelous works. Today, science and theology have different assumptions. Science is limited to natural causes, and theology is accused of having a “blind faith.”

But Lutherans have never advocated anti-intellectualism. Since the Reformation, comprehensive schools and colleges have been founded. Reason is viewed as a gift of God that makes us human. On the other hand, while believing that, Luther warned against allowing reasoning to overrule clear Scripture. Dr. Siegbert Becker’s finest work, *The Foolishness of God*, covers this subject.

### **THE BEGINNINGS OF MODERN SCIENCE**

Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947), British mathematician and philosopher, actually credited Christianity with providing the very foundation for modern scientific investigation by teaching that God was orderly and had established a lawful nature with dependable causes and effects. Another assumption was that humans could then discover these laws.

During Reformation times Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543), a Catholic, determined that the motion of the planets was better described as being centered around the sun, not the Earth. In 1539 Philipp Melanchthon, “Germany’s Teacher” and Luther’s good friend, arranged that a Wittenberg mathematician, Georg Joachim Rheticus, should study under Copernicus.

Rheticus studied for two years and wrote *Narratio Prima*, a first report of Copernicus’ theory. On his return to the Lutheran university at Wittenberg, Rheticus saw the theory enjoy a favorable reception and urged his mentor to publish. Copernicus was encouraged and sent his *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium* to the Lutherans with permission to publish.

Apparently Luther informally commented on Copernican theory, and a guest recorded it (Table Talk). While the attribution is questionable, our reformer seemingly quipped that scientists like to take a thing and stand it on its head. Some have taken this as being merely negative toward new science, but it is actually very perceptive. Placing the sun in the center of our planetary system was just that type of science. With

different assumptions the facts can be fit to a different theory. If Luther had been truly bothered, he could have stopped the teaching of Copernican theory at Wittenberg, but he did not.

Johann Kepler (1571–1630), who prepared for the Lutheran ministry but accepted an assignment to teach mathematics, followed the Copernican model. In the spirit of the shared assumptions he would burst into praise for the Creator as he speculated about the spacing of the planets around the sun.

A Catholic contemporary, Galileo Galilei (1564–1642) is often used as an example of a fundamental conflict between “objective science” and a “blind church.” Galileo also embraced Copernicus. However, many in the church held to the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic model of an unmoving Earth. This fit well with common perception and a literal interpretation of Joshua 10:12-14 where the sun stood still at Gibeon. So Galileo ran into resistance, but the affair was not so much the church against science as it represented a problem with embedding any science within the church.

Interestingly, and for our benefit, Augustine (354–430) had warned the church against using scientific arguments that would support Scripture lest the science would be disproven and then faith would be damaged. In *The Literal Interpretation of Genesis* he wrote, “It is too disgraceful and ruinous . . . that he [the non-Christian] should hear a Christian speaking so idiotically on [science], and as if in accord with Christian writings, that he might say that he could scarcely keep from laughing when he saw how totally in error [the Christian was].”

In the Galileo affair, the hierarchy of the Catholic Church had failed to heed Augustine’s warning that human understanding is fragile. We trust that nature follows laws but must add in humility that we have limited vision of them. So our science changes.

## **PRESERVATION LOST**

England’s Isaac Newton (1642–1727) steered scientific explanation toward natural causes. Newton saw creation as guided by natural laws with very rare interventions by God. This mechanical view of nature placed God at a distance. Newton’s view encouraged Deism, the problem that Darwin had, where God was active only at the beginning and has left us to deal with the way things are as best we can. But an unconcerned “god at a distance” is not the God we know from the Scriptures.

Science is right to be limited to the study of natural causes. However, if some assume that natural causes are all that exist, they are operating with a different worldview that even many scientists reject. God is not bound by nature; he is above it. He is active in everything.

Might not God cause a scientist to notice something previously missed because it is his will that a discovery should be made? Moreover, if a terrible cancer goes unexpectedly into remission, one can suggest that there must be a natural cause—such

as perhaps the immune system was able to overcome it. We know, however, that God uses natural causes for his purposes. If he wishes, God can also make nature bend to his will.

When someone says that a matter has been explained without God, this does not disprove God's existence or his providence. Consider that science is first limited to the study of natural causes and so will discover or invent natural causes. But there is more to reality than science can study. Science is not the only way to know. That is a very narrow view of life that by assumption rules out God, Scripture, the natural law in us, and what nature truly declares to us.

Assuming first that there are only natural causes led Darwin to look for a natural mechanism to explain the various species. Some prod us to look at evolution now. Here we need to note that many think that Christians do not believe in any changes. However, we have no theological objections to the microevolution that is observed within populations of creatures. For examples, Christians do not question the development of resistant strains of bacteria or that a population of *Daphnia* (water fleas) by natural selection would produce more individuals with defensive spikes if predators are present.

However, to extrapolate natural selection to the beginning of life and to claim that it is the cause of our origin is another matter. Operating with the false assumption of philosophical naturalism can allow one to build a logical "just-so" story that is reasonable but false.

Some objectors dwell on unsolved problems to attack Darwinism. For example, a biochemist, Michael Behe, has said that "irreducible complexity" in the cascading chemical reactions of blood clotting points to a supernatural designer and falsifies Darwin. The reply from opponents, however, is that in time we will see how natural causes could have accomplished this. To this we must again say, "What are you assuming? You are begging the question." More than looking for more gaps in evolutionary conclusions, we need to look at the assumptions that guide this thinking.

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