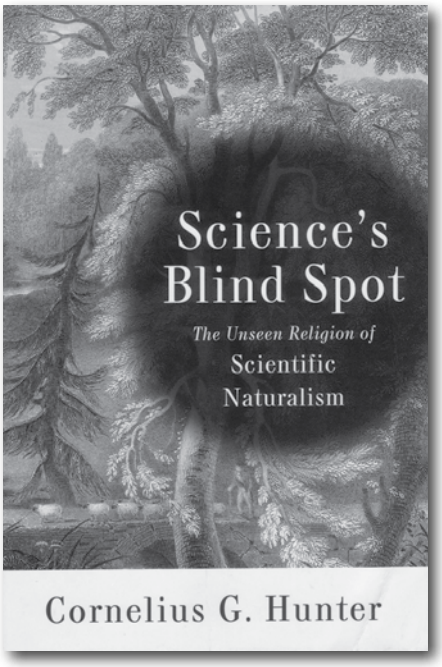
The problem with naturalism, the problem with empiricism



A review of
Science's Blind Spot: The Unseen Religion of Scientific Naturalism
by Cornelius Hunter
Brazos Press, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007

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For all of history, the fundamental issue in the creation-evolution conflict has been philosophical presuppositions, not empirical evidence or 'brute facts'. Creationists have been pointing this out for many years, with varying degrees of effectiveness. To their credit, the modern Intelligent Design movement has recognized this same point, and for almost twenty years now, has explicitly made philosophical argumentation central in the debate over Darwinism. Phillip Johnson played an important role in bringing the philosophy of naturalism out into the open and onto the dissecting table with his best-selling *Darwin on Trial*, the book usually credited with launching the modern ID movement.[1] Distinctions between 'methodological naturalism' and 'metaphysical naturalism' became key points of debate.[2] Biophysicist Cornelius Hunter has added to this understanding by authoring several books focused on the history of Darwinism and design.[3] His latest work, *Science's Blind Spot*, turns the tables completely on naturalism, this time in the realm of history, arguing that Darwinism is religious and ID is empirical. This thesis is not new in the ID literature, but Hunter's way of saying it is.

Bacon vs Descartes

Hunter begins with a trip back in history. He doesn't simply start with Darwin in the 19th century. He goes back almost three hundred years further by profiling two leading philosophers of science in the early days of the scientific revolution: Francis Bacon and René Descartes. The differences and similarities in approach between these two philosophical giants is a microcosm of the rest of the book.

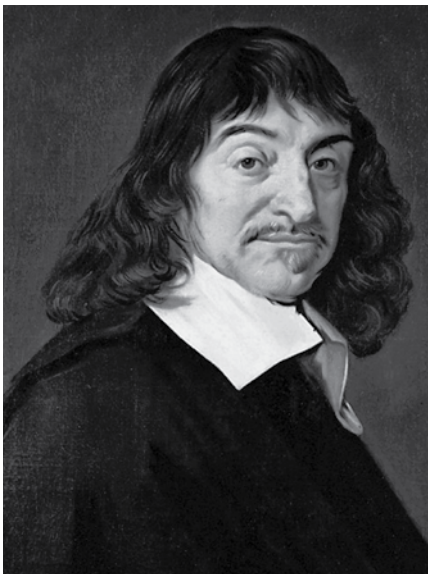
Francis Bacon stood for empiricism. His philosophical opponents were the Aristotelians who force-fit science into their 'preconceived notions of how nature works' (p. 15). In contrast, as Hunter explains, Bacon wanted science to begin with a 'clean slate' (p. 15). General axioms would be 'the end, not the beginning of the scientific process' (p. 15). Science should be empiricism unrestrained, and it should be limited to subjects suitable for empirical research. As a result, religion was not to precondition scientific results, but at the same time, religion would not need to fear science, for the scope of science would be limited to empirical objects.

René Descartes stood for rationalism. Descartes, like Bacon, rebelled against stifling Aristotelianism and was an eager advocate for an empirical approach to nature. But Descartes' empiricism turned out very different from Bacon's empiricism. Bacon would collect voluminous data before venturing any hypothesis; Descartes would assert hypotheses before collecting data. Descartes and his followers emphasized the creation of hypotheses to explain phenomena, which must themselves be in terms of natural processes (naturalistic). The important difference between Descartes and Bacon was that in the Cartesian system, hypotheses came *first*. Several hypotheses could then be compared against nature to see which one might be the more probable explanation. But this still meant that the hypotheses were going to be read back into nature, rather than looking to nature to develop hypotheses. At its worst, Descartes effectively replaced the axioms of Aristotle with axioms of his own.

Theological naturalism

Descartes did recognize that his hypotheses might not be true, but he hoped that they might be useful.[4] What he did not seem to realize was the extent to which his presuppositions might be unconsciously limiting the types of hypotheses that would be proposed, so that scientists never would arrive at the real truth. And this is exactly what happened, Hunter suggests, for in the years to come, many scientists and philosophers absolutized Descartes' most fundamental axiom—that only natural explanations can be legitimate hypotheses. This proposition became entrenched, not by scientific progress, but by rationalistic reasoning—specifically, *theological* rationalistic reasoning.

The path to theological naturalism was charted over the course of several centuries. First came the 'greater God' argument. Hunter starts with Thomas Burnet, who wrote in 1685 that it was theologically preferable for God to create a cosmic 'clock' that runs on



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René Descartes was an opponent of blind adherence to ancient Greek axioms in science. But often, Descartes merely replaced the axioms of Aristotle with axioms of his own. Descartes appears as a symbol of philosophical dogmatism in *Science's Blind Spot*.

its own, rather than have a universe requiring any divine interventions. Hume's (thoroughly discredited[5]) argument against miracles a century later only strengthened the force of Burnet's logic. This argument—that divine efficiency equals a 'greater God'—was frequently repeated over the years, and remains today a basic tenet of theistic evolution.[6]

Second, deists tended to emphasize nature as the superior (if not the only) revelation of God in the world. So, as the young Immanuel Kant argued, natural laws must obey God 'in and of themselves', mechanistically. The alternative, Kant thought, would be the absurd situation of natural laws disobeying God unless coerced. This, in turn, would downgrade the efficacy of natural revelation. However, the *biblical* view of natural laws is that they are *descriptions* of God upholding His creation in an orderly way, rather than prescriptions.

Third, many theological writers suggested that nature must be mechanistic in order to save God from the problem of evil in the world. Hume argued that if God was directly involved in the world, then He would be responsible for evil. So, to save God, naturalism must be true.

Hunter emphasizes that the common thread for each of these lines of thought is that ostensibly scientific naturalism was adopted for theological reasons. Hunter recognizes that the shift to naturalism as the basic philosophy of science was not entirely bereft of empirical discourse. But even when the arguments are framed in terms of science, Hunter finds theological axioms as the driving force.

For instance, Bernoulli and Kant interpreted the empirical, observed order in the solar system as evidence of naturalism. How did they arrive at this conclusion? By injecting the theological premise that if God had directly acted, He would have acted without restraints on His creativity. So the fact that planets move on the ecliptic was considered evidence that God did *not* put them there (p. 57). If God had no restraints on His creativity, then it was assumed he would have placed planets going in every direction. In another example, Burnet observed the 'lack of a pattern in the moon's craters and earth's coastlines and concluded that [an] unguided mechanism was responsible' (p. 58). Again, a theological premise was necessary for the conclusion: Burnet assumed God would make things in an orderly manner. Ironically, the conclusion that God did not act was proven to different people from the exact opposite situation.

The modern rationalists

Up to this point, Hunter has provided a very valuable historical refutation to the notion that naturalism was itself a scientific discovery. It was, instead, a rationalist construct, based usually on (pseudo-)theological grounds, imposed on science. It is not hard to anticipate where Hunter is going with this. Sure enough, Darwin followed the same procedure as so many who had gone before. Naturalistic explanations were sought, and very often the evidence for the naturalistic explanation was that God would *not* have done it that way. 'Darwin could not actually explain how the wing or leg of a bat could have arisen, but he knew how they *could not* have arisen' (p. 72).

From this history Hunter brings us to the present controversy over naturalism. He starts with astronomy, briefly reviewing problems and anomalies in the currently popular 'Nebular Hypothesis' for the origin of the solar system. Then he proceeds to a more detailed examination of naturalism in biology, manifested in Darwinism. Hunter's focus is demonstrating that Darwinism has a host of empirical problems. And yet, because Darwinism is rationalistic, it refuses to acknowledge any of them.

For instance, homology has been touted as a key evidence for evolution, from Darwin to the present. Yet in light of modern genetics, the argument is collapsing, for many homologous structures do not share the same genetic pathways in development. Hence, they could not have been derived from a common ancestor (pp. 81–82). Convergent evolution is a similar anomaly from the opposite direction. Where evolutionists are confident that particular animals did not share a common ancestry for most of their development, it remains puzzling why so many biological features are recurrent (pp. 84–86).

Hunter notes that the position of the modern Darwinists is just like so many other proponents of rationalistic theories of the past. The theory is as much a fact as the observations, 'so problems are interpreted as unanswered questions,' without ever questioning the rationalistic 'universal criteria' (p. 136). The Darwinist rationalists focus on the many observations that fit neatly within the theory, but ignore the anomalies. But, in Hunter's words,

> 'science cannot be replaced by statistics. Indeed, often it seems that the exceptions, the anomalies, are what stimulate interesting and important scientific discovery. … The rare failure is more interesting than the common success. Rather than use statistics to rationalize unexplained observations, science needs to focus in on such observations' (p. 96).

Modern empiricists

So, what might a science look like that does *not* take rationalism for granted? In his final chapter, Hunter suggests that it would be a 'moderate empiricism,' in the tradition of Francis Bacon. It would be suspicious of *a priori* assumptions, cautious in putting forward theories until sufficient empirical data (experiments and observations) are collected, and never overly devoted to a particular theory (pp. 137–140). Hunter emphasizes that this is a more uncertain path to take: 'The empirical approach is much less certain about the form … [and] truthfulness of the result. Problems are complicated, and humanity is not always up to solving them completely' (p. 137). The advantage is that because moderate empiricism is severed from preconceived notions, it can discover more about the real world. 'The empirical approach is not as tidy as the rational approach. But it also does not constrain itself to preconceived notions. It is more amenable to new and unexpected results' (p. 137). 'It makes no sense to constrain the methodology of an investigation into the unknown' (p. 139).

Intelligent Design represents moderate empiricism today, Hunter says. It rules out nothing *a priori*, and is dedicated to considering all the evidence. The Darwinists are bothered by this, Hunter says, because they cannot understand an approach which is so radically different from their own, an approach without a firm rationalistic structure. But this is precisely ID's strength. 'Unfortunately', Hunter writes, 'there is a common misunderstanding that intelligent design is opposed to all naturalistic explanations. Nothing could be further from the truth. Intelligent design is opposed, however, to simple-minded, dogmatic blinders when we are dealing with complex problems' (p. 147).

Hunter's book is a valuable corrective to the all-too-common belief that Darwinism, with its concomitant naturalism, is a scientific discovery. Hunter's historical survey of rationalistic theories puts Darwinism in proper perspective. More interesting, perhaps, is Hunter's endorsement of Bacon and 'moderate empiricism'. How a Christian might understand this position is worth considering at some length.

Presuppositions and axioms: are Christians rationalists?

'Moderate empiricism' is a philosophically and theologically 'loaded' issue. A Christian should not embrace Hunter's position carelessly. It follows, to some extent, Bacon's naïve idea that religion should not precondition results, and that science could not speak to religion. This is a position that has been thoroughly discredited by history: either a theologically-informed science will operate, or an anti-theological science develops.[7] This in itself should be a warning signal.

In considering Hunter's 'moderate empiricism', some hard questions need to be faced. Is it possible to put aside all preconceptions? If so, does that mean that, for the sake of science, the Christian must treat God and Scripture as only one possibility among many, giving up his conviction in the reality of God and veracity of Scripture when dealing with scientific issues? If the answer is yes, is this morally acceptable? In short, the Christian is committed to belief in the existence of a Creator God and the veracity of his revelation in Scripture. But this appears to place the Christian on the side of rationalism, prejudging the issues before empirical investigation. To become empirical seems to require the Christian to exchange his principles for uncertainty.

In response, we will take for granted the position of orthodox Christianity that the Christian *does* have a duty to acknowledge God in every sphere of life, and should not partition his thought life between the 'sacred' and the 'secular'. But this does not turn us into 'rationalists'.

In evaluating 'moderate empiricism', we should recognize that it is *impossible* to actually abandon all presuppositions in favour of completely open possibility—impossible to do that and still live with the results, that is. For instance, suppose one gave up the presupposition of regularity in the universe. There would then be no reason to suppose that the experiment you did yesterday would turn out the same today, or that the sun would rise again. All prediction would be destroyed. The fact of the matter is that a host of presuppositions is required to even carry on a rational conversation: presuppositions about the nature of logic, about the existence of other minds, and about the regularity of nature, to name a few. Hunter could never advocate an abandonment of all presuppositions.

So how do we distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate constructs 'imposed' on science? This subject needs to be handled carefully, for both empiricist and rationalist positions are problematic. In walking a fine line between extremes, a very helpful distinction could be made between rationalistic 'axioms', and 'presuppositions' necessary for all reasoning, including science itself.

An 'axiom' is the term Hunter uses for the rationalistic propositions or premises assumed *a priori* to be true and then used as the filter for determining the truthfulness of other investigations. But in contrast, we can call the Christian's pre-theoretical commitment to the existence of a Triune Creator God and to Scripture a 'presupposition'.

The crucial difference is that presuppositions are always non-optional. All reasoning either presupposes the existence or non-existence of God, and on this all-important point there can be no neutral ground. Every act of reasoning is therefore taking sides based upon either recognition or non-recognition of God. There is no option to 'do away' with presuppositions. Christian presuppositions, then, cannot be eliminated in response to the empiricist's call for neutrality, for on these fundamental issues, there is no neutrality.

It should also be added that the Christian's choice of presuppositions are not fideistic or arbitrary. They are supported by a powerful argument that

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Francis Bacon, the champion of empiricism, emerges as the hero of the Intelligent Design book, *Science's Blind Spot*.

upon Christian presuppositions alone is reasoning possible; a presupposition of the God of Scripture is necessary for any meaning at all. Without the existence of the God of Scripture, there would be no reason to suppose that logic actually works, that the laws we observe in the universe are consistent, and that our minds correspond to reality. This means that every act of scientific inquiry rests on suppositions that are religious, and the functionality of science is only explicable from a biblical Christian worldview.

We thus have good reason to hold to the authority of Scripture even when doing our science—indeed, *especially* when doing science. As philosopher Alvin Plantinga pointed out, if we know Scripture to be true, then it only makes sense to apply this knowledge to every sphere, creating a Christian worldview-conscious science.[8] This is very different from the rationalist imposition of naturalism on science, for in our case, we argue that our presuppositions are necessarily true if science itself is true. If we indeed have a presupposition that must necessarily be as true as the science itself, it would be foolish to maintain an 'I don't know' agnosticism on the issue.

Science to the glory of God?

A presuppositional analysis can prevent Christians from making an unwise choice between rationalism and empiricism. But a new question can be raised at this point. What is the actual position of ID on this issue? Hunter's comments about ID are not particularly analytical, and often could be read just as easily as either describing ID as it as, or prescribing what ID ought to be. Either way, the book's last sentences are thought provoking: 'Intelligent design is not about proving religion. It is about analyzing the workings of nature without religious constraint' (p. 147).

Many Christians have welcomed the ID movement as the latest and greatest weapon against unbelief. It has been generally understood that ID maintains wide appeal by disclaiming any adherence to a particular belief. Yet here, Hunter has expressly disclaimed not just adherence to particular sectarian beliefs. He has placed the abandonment of all restraints on inquiry at the heart of ID. Christians should consider this well, for Christians at this point face a crossroads in our relationship to ID.

On the one hand, we can opt to support ID's ideal of a completely free inquiry, with God/Intelligence as one option among many, equally respectable, options. On the other hand, Christians can work to develop a presuppositionally biblical approach to science, an approach that conducts scientific inquiry on the foundations of a biblical epistemology. For the Christian, I think that the choice is clear: we are charged to do all things to the glory of God. With this being the case, we can appreciate the work that ID has done to dethrone naturalism, but as Christians, we should not do our science with the goal *merely* of making 'the supernatural' or 'intelligence' (and maybe 'God') an 'option'.

Good history, not enough philosophy

Creationists should, and generally do, appreciate ID for the good it has done, even if we wish it did not stop where it has. That position applies very well to *Science's Blind Spot*. This book is a very helpful contribution to the literature on naturalism, and does a fine job placing the naturalist dogma in historical perspective as dogma. It is an easy and enjoyable read, even if its large-scale structure could have used a bit of tightening up to avoid some internal repetition. Its fault lies in its overly generalized treatment of axioms, failing to distinguish, appreciate and adequately deal with the more foundational issue of presuppositions. Like the rest of ID, *Science's Blind Spot* is a very useful resource, but is, at the same time, a resource that should be used with caution.

References

1. Johnson, P., *Darwin on Trial*, 2nd ed., Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, ch. 12, 1993.
2. See, for example, Johnson, P., *Reason in the Balance*, Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 1995.
3. Hunter, C.G., *Darwin's God*, Brazos Press, Grand Rapids, MI 2001; Hunter, C.G., *Darwin's Proof*, Brazos Press, Grand Rapids, MI, 2003. See reviews: Ury, T.H., 'Surely God would never have chosen to create this way,' *Journal of Creation* **17**(2):34–40, MI 2003, <creationontheweb.com/images/pdfs/tj/j17_2/j17_2_34-40.pdf>; and Nelson, C., Evolution's theological underpinnings, *Journal of Creation* **21**(2):40–43, 2007 (respectively).
4. A description similar to how a scientific model is often defined: a helpful way to think about a scientific problem, which may not necessarily be true.
5. Earman, J., *Hume's Abject Failure: The Argument Against Miracles*, Oxford University Press, USA, 2000. Incidentally, Earman is Professor of the History and Philosophy of Science at the University of Pittsburgh, and not a Christian.
6. It has been embodied, for instance, in the notion of the 'god of the gaps'. See discussion in Weinberger, L., Whose god? The theological response to the god-of-the-gaps, *Journal of Creation* **22**(1):120–127, 2008.
7. See Garroutte, E.M., The positivist attack; in: Smith, C. (Ed.), *The Secular Revolution*, University of California Press, Berkeley, pp. 197–213, 2003. See also a discussion of theological issues in Kulikovsky, A.S., Scripture and general revelation, *Journal of Creation* **19**(2):23–28, 2005; <creationontheweb.com/content/view/4763/>.
8. Plantinga, A., Methodological naturalism? *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* **49**(3):148–149, 1997.