

# Piotr Bylica

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## Second Thoughts on Naturalistic Theism and Model of Levels of Analysis: A Response to Mark Harris

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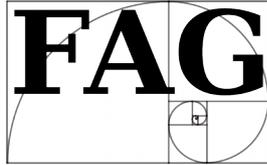
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Piotr Bylica

## Second Thoughts on Naturalistic Theism and Model of Levels of Analysis: A Response to Mark Harris

I wish to thank Dr. Harris for his remarks on my article. His polemics show that we have encountered an interesting situation that is quite common in philosophic debates, when one author concludes that he or she has been misunderstood by the other. Harris goes as far as to claim that he does not recognise himself in the image of the naturalistic theist that I have presented in my article. I shall attempt to show that Dr. Harris misinterprets the aim of my article as promoting model of levels of analysis (MLA) and is mistaken in thinking that his actual study of biblical scholarship has been presented superficially. I shall show that, on the contrary, his study of biblical scholarship is treated in a very serious manner as it is the element identifying him as a representative of naturalistic theism (NT), with MLA being only used to facilitate a clear presentation of key features of NT that can be overlooked when MLA is considered in too superficial manner.

Contrary to what Dr. Harris writes, it is not the case that my article assumes that science and theology can only be in competition with each other.<sup>1</sup> What I actually claim is that naturalism and traditional theism (where the statements on empirically recognisable special supernatural action in the world are accep-

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<sup>1</sup> See Mark HARRIS, "Response to «Mark Harris as a Naturalistic Theist» by Piotr Bylica", *Filozoficzne Aspekty Genezy* 2016, vol. 13, p. 271 [267-273].

ted) are incompatible. MLA, by considering statements from the point of view of their empirical consequences, allows one to show that despite the metaphysical differences with regard to divine action in the world proposed by various proponents of NT, there is a common denominator to all such approaches: all aim to describe this action as empirically non-recognisable. However, empirical recognisability of divine action in the world is an important element of the traditional theism.

Dr. Harris writes that it should be considered to the credit of the thinkers I have identified as naturalistic theists (Barbour, Peacocke, Polkinghorne, Murphy, Heller, etc.) that they contributed to “opening up the dialogue between natural sciences and Christian faith”.<sup>2</sup> In reality, however, this “dialogue” boils down to the situation where one party, i.e. the religious one, accepts naturalistic assumptions of science and revises those statements of Christian theism that are incompatible with such assumptions. Hence, it would be more accurate to say that in the case of the above-mentioned what we see is just a kind of *openness* to science together with its naturalistic assumptions. A dialogue is a situation where both parties are ready to listen to each other, where openness is mutual. Yet in the case of contemporary natural sciences, one would be hard pressed to find such an openness to the philosophical assumptions of traditional theism, such as supernaturalism, interventionism or in fact any other key claims that would result in modifying science in any way. Naturalistic theists themselves go as far as to say that expecting this sort of openness on the side of science is not justifiable. Therefore, the term “dialogue” does not do a good job of describing the relation we encounter there.

The above remark is closely related to a major objection that Dr. Harris makes. Namely, he doubts that the mentioned thinkers “can be considered as forming a single school of thought in any sense other than that they are Christian theologians and philosophers exploring the relationship between science and religion” and hence he disagrees with my claim that “this group is united by a particular metaphysical commitment to what the paper calls «naturalistic theism» (NT)” and that he is representative of this position.<sup>3</sup> He also doubts that “NT ac-

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<sup>2</sup> HARRIS, “Response...”, p. 267.

<sup>3</sup> See HARRIS, “Response...”, p. 268.

curately contains the spread of metaphysical thought in this school” and that it represents his own position.

Addressing the above critique, let me point out that the terms naturalistic theism or theistic naturalism have been present in the subject literature for a number of years now.<sup>4</sup> What is more, these do not simply describe the analysis of the relations between science and religion. If this were the case, then the thinker such as Clive S. Lewis, Alvin Plantinga or Philip E. Johnson could be considered naturalistic theists, since they also make claims in terms of the relation between science and religion. Johnson himself clearly distinguishes such theists as a group accepting the naturalistic assumptions of science: “The power of scientific naturalism in the academic world is so intimidating [...] that hardly anyone is willing to challenge it. Theologians (or theistic scientists) survive in academia not by challenging naturalism with a rival interpretation of reality but by trying to find a place for theology within the picture of reality defined by scientific naturalists. They write book with titles like **Religion in an Age of Science** (Ian Barbour), **Theology for a Scientific Age** (Arthur Peacocke) and **Theology in the Age of Scientific Reasoning** (Nancey Murphy). I call this genre «theistic naturalism», because to accommodate successfully the theists must accept not just the particular conclusions that scientists have reached but also the naturalistic methodology that generated those conclusions”.<sup>5</sup>

The representatives of NT themselves also use such labels to describe their standpoint, defined by accepting methodological naturalism and their openness to the scientific interpretation of the world: “The processes revealed by the sci-

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<sup>4</sup> See David R. GRIFFIN, **Religion and Scientific Naturalism: Overcoming the Conflicts**, State University of New York Press, New York 2000, p. xvi, 15, 17, 40, 89, 247, 258, 290-293, 307; Howard VAN TILL, “Are Bacterial Flagella Intelligently Designed?: Reflection on the Rhetoric of the Modern ID Movement”, *Science and Christian Belief* 2003, vol. 15, no. 2, p. 121 [117-140]; Christopher C. KNIGHT, “Divine Action: A Neo-Byzantine Model”, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 2005, vol. 58, p. 184-188, 191, 194, 195 [181-199]; Christopher C. KNIGHT, “Theistic Naturalism and Special Divine Providence”, *Zygon* 2009, vol. 44, no. 3, pp. 533-542. See also Piotr BYLICA, **Współczesny teizm naturalistyczny z punktu widzenia modelu poziomów analizy. Problem działania sfery nadnaturalnej w przyrodzie**, *Biblioteka Filozoficznych Aspektów Genezy*, vol. 7, Instytut Filozofii Uniwersytetu Zielonogórskiego, Zielona Góra 2016, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Phillip E. JOHNSON, **Reason in the Balance: The Case Against Naturalism in Science, Law & Education**, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove 1995, p. 97.

ences are in themselves God acting as Creator, and God is not to be found as some kind of additional influence or factor added on to the processes of the world God is creating. This perspective can properly be called «theistic naturalism».<sup>6</sup> According to Howard Van Till, „In contrast to several forms of supernaturalistic theism, naturalistic theism rejects coercive supernatural intervention as something that would violate the essential natures of God, the world, and the God-world relationship”.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, naturalistic theism as a name for a specific approach has been in use for a while now and it cannot be claimed that every thinker involved in analysing the relations between science and religion is a naturalistic theist. One can also point to a “particular metaphysical commitment” of the representatives of this group, consisting in rejecting interventionism and dualism (both integral parts of Christian theism), with the former being the more important element. The above quotes were chosen precisely to show the rejection of interventionism as a common feature of all approaches within NT.

My article contains a passage from Peacocke describing the rejection of traditional dualism. Since it plays an important role here, let us quote it again in full here: “The only dualism now theologically defensible appears to be the distinction between the Being of God and that of everything else (the «world» = all-that-is, all-that-is-created). Talk of the «supernatural» as a level of being in the world, other than God, therefore becomes superfluous and misleading, and a genuine naturalism is thus entirely compatible with theism — for God is the only super-natural entity or being”.<sup>8</sup> Dr. Harris indicates that I have not mentioned which type of dualism is rejected by Peacocke but he is right in assuming, on the basis of the above and the article as a whole, that I meant the rejection of the existence of supernatural beings other than God and the dualism of soul and body. I agree with Dr. Harris that Peacocke’s point of view is not common among the representatives of the NT, as identified by me; however, apart from Polkinghorne, a representative of the weakest version of NT, I have been

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<sup>6</sup> Arthur R. PEACOCKE, *Paths from Science Toward God: The End of All Our Exploring*, OneWorld, Oxford 2001, p. 138. See also PEACOCKE, *Paths from Science...*, p. xvii, 51, 135, 146, 159, 161, 163, 165.

<sup>7</sup> VAN TILL, “Are Bacterial Flagella Intelligently Designed...”, p. 121.

<sup>8</sup> PEACOCKE, *Paths from Science...*, p. 51.

unable to find statements positing the existence and potential influence of such factors in the world. Peacocke explicitly states that the claims about the actions of supernatural demonic factors belong to mythology, which cannot be accepted today as it is inconsistent with contemporary scientific naturalism.<sup>9</sup> The dualism of soul and body is commonly rejected by such thinkers, whose views differ widely in terms of the presented alternatives. More importantly, all proposed solutions aim to be consistent with the ontology of contemporary naturalistic science, making them non-dualistic in the traditional sense.

In his critique, Harris falls into the trap of mistakenly referring to the traditional dualistic understanding of soul as *Cartesian* (which is quite commonplace not only among naturalistic theists), whereas it would be much more appropriate to refer to it as *Augustinian*. In that case, however, it would not have been obvious at all that it could be easily removed from the Christian belief system. He also writes that the “heavily-dualistic Cartesian account of the human soul [...] is difficult to maintain [...] in light of current work in the science-theology field”.<sup>10</sup> However, if by “current work in the science-theology field” he means the standpoint of NT, then he is merely stating that Cartesian dualism is rejected in naturalistic theism. Even if, as Harris puts it, “Christian tradition itself has varied greatly on this question in the past”,<sup>11</sup> it would be very difficult to agree that their goal was to subordinate the Christian doctrine to the naturalistic approach to reality, as is the case of NT. In any case, naturalistic theists — if they can be said to be striving to be consistent with the scientific description of the world, which is indeed their stated goal — are forced to reject traditional dualism and interventionism. This is because scientific naturalism, a position Christian theism is to be reconciled with, is a monist and decidedly non-interventionist standpoint.

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<sup>9</sup> “What scientists rightly object to, it seems to me, is that acceptance of the occult, demonological, «supernaturalist» mythology would imply not just a lack of understanding of a particular phenomenon, the mental-brain processes, but also the falsity of the entire scientific understanding of the world so painstakingly built up and so intellectually comprehensive and inspiring in its scope and depth” (Arthur R. PEACOCKE, *Creation and the World of Science: The Bampton Lectures*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1979, p. 123).

<sup>10</sup> HARRIS, “Response...”, p. 270.

<sup>11</sup> HARRIS, “Response...”, p. 270.

By using MLA, despite the differences in opinions among the representatives of the group as mentioned by Dr. Harris, one is able to identify a fundamental feature, common to all their approaches. MLA describes these approaches from the point of view of the epistemic status of the statements used, which enables one to show that no statements on God's action, or on action of other supernatural factors in the world, are empirical in character (i.e. do not belong to the lowest levels of analysis as described in the model). To make things more concrete, let us take on Dr. Harris' conviction about the existence of angels and their role as messengers, which is to indicate the compatibility of his approach with traditional theism. What is important from the MLA's point of view is that when claiming the above, Dr. Harris is saying that certain actions of angels, as described in the Bible, really took place in the past and were empirically recognisable, making the naturalistic explanations of certain events on Earth, namely those that are described in the Bible as involving actions of angelic supernatural beings, false. If that is the case, then it could be said that his approach goes beyond the core belief system of a naturalistic theist. This would also imply that he accepts that scientific, naturalistic explanations are not applicable to the entirety of empirical events that are describable by L-5 empirical statements (as defined within the MLA). Does he, in fact, explicitly accept such a thesis or is this acceptance implicit in the statements or assumptions behind his research on the relations between science and religion? We shall provide a detailed analysis of this problem in what follows a bit later on.

For now, let us get back to MLA. The accepted epistemic approach, which is emphatically non-ontological, results in interpreting the key term, namely "supernatural intervention", as referring to empirically-recognisable action, independently of the mode in which the action has been realised. However, Dr. Harris accepts the more common ontological approach, and this is perhaps one of the sources of misunderstanding.<sup>12</sup> On top of that, it seems that some conceptual confusion has taken place, as in Harris' approach any theory accepting divine interventions (independently of the way in which these are understood) is considered deistic. This is undoubtedly the case, even if it is described as "a subtle form of deism [...] where God only steps in occasionally into a closed natural

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<sup>12</sup> See HARRIS, "Response...", p. 272.

order”.<sup>13</sup> Dr. Harris claims that such a deistic understanding of intervention is not consistent with the traditional Christian theism. Admittedly, it is hard to argue that the authors of the Bible or “Church’s great theologians and doctors such as Ss. Irenaeus, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas” (the legacy of whom Dr. Harris refers to),<sup>14</sup> claimed that nature is a closed system. As representatives of traditional theism, they certainly did not accept such-conceived interventionism. When it comes to occasionality, the question suggests itself as to the frequency threshold for God’s action, below which the moniker no longer applies. The constant sustaining of the world in existence certainly does not count as occasional. However, such action is not related to any specific empirical consequences. The task of showing that the mentioned authorities did not accept special or empirically-recognisable actions of God in the world can be very difficult to accomplish, however it cannot be ruled out that it can be done with the help of an appropriate hermeneutic method. Moreover, even if one considers all the descriptions of miracles made by God or the actions of lower supernatural beings presented in the Bible or in the lives of the saints (which are accepted by the Roman and Anglican Churches as examples of excessively occasional actions), which means these descriptions cannot be taken at face value, there is still the problem of incarnation. If the incarnation is to be considered as the only such action when God “enters” the world in an empirically-recognisable manner, then will this action not be best described as “occasional”?

Dr. Harris in his response wrote that what he deals with is a “close study of biblical scholarship in the light of the natural sciences”<sup>15</sup> and admitted to having a “strong commitment to methodological naturalism in the natural sciences”.<sup>16</sup> This combination seems to suggest that his approach falls within the “naturalistic theist” label as defined by Johnson. (We note that the fact that Dr. Harris, as he himself mentions, for a while worked in pure sciences before turning to theological studies, is yet another feature common to representatives of this group). The use of the principle of methodological naturalism — both in terms of doing

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<sup>13</sup> HARRIS, “Response...”, p. 272.

<sup>14</sup> See HARRIS, “Response...”, p. 268.

<sup>15</sup> HARRIS, “Response...”, p. 267.

<sup>16</sup> HARRIS, “Response...”, p. 268.

science and theology, respectively — can be considered a litmus test for being a naturalistic theist. Harris writes that I am mistaken in interpreting his publications as “affirmations of a sceptical and pluralist agenda where truth is relative, and divine action does not occur”,<sup>17</sup> when in fact he aims at “explorations of the special hermeneutical difficulties underlying textual accounts of special divine action”.<sup>18</sup> The following question suggests itself at this point: Does the method used in the analysis of biblical texts utilised in these “explorations of the special hermeneutical difficulties” allow one to identify those biblical passages (taken both from the Old and New Testaments) that could be viewed as descriptions of events taking place in an empirical sphere at a particular point in time and place? If so, then does the list of such passages include any description of empirically-recognisable special action of God, commonly referred to as a miracle? In other words, is the accepted methodology designed to aid in the understanding of the text, allowing one to single out the descriptions of miracles, which according to the analysed text did take place, from the use of metaphors or symbolic or allegoric statements? If that is the case, then will Dr. Harris interpret such passages as indicating that the naturalistic scientific vision of the world is false? Will he acknowledge that there are limits to methodological naturalism? I have been unable to find in Dr. Harris’ publications anything that would indicate that he did in fact identify such passages or that he was able to claim the existence of biblical passages indicating the limits of naturalistic explanations of empirical events (Level 5 statements in the MLA). I would guess that perhaps it is these passages that could reasonably be described as giving “special hermeneutical difficulties” as referred to by Harris? In that case, these difficulties would be related to the incompatibility of these passages with the scientific, naturalistic, picture of the world produced by science based on the principle of methodological naturalism. It can no doubt be accepted that the authors of biblical texts rejected the naturalistic principle stating that all empirical events have to be explained with natural causes. Hence, they would have been rather perplexed at any “hermeneutical difficulties” related to reconciling what they had had written with the knowledge of nature. The research indicating such difficulties could have been interpreted by them as evidence for doubting whether the divine ac-

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<sup>17</sup> HARRIS, “Response...”, p. 271.

<sup>18</sup> HARRIS, “Response...”, p. 271.

tion does occur. And if the methodology accepted by Dr. Harris and many other contemporary theologians does not allow one to, or even is not supposed to, identify such passages at all, then knowing that the biblical authors could have plausibly claimed that contemporary researchers are not interested in getting to know the truth but instead take on some pluralist agenda or adopt some similar standpoint where truth is relative.<sup>19</sup>

Harris explicitly stated that his commitment to methodological naturalism is related to science but he did not state whether it also applies to theology. My article, as well as the above considerations, aims at inferring what is his position in that respect. This is a more general problem regarding whether — from the point of view of Christian theism — it is possible to separate the two types of activity, e.g. when performing the scientific analysis of the world always seek naturalistic explanations, and when switching to theology start allowing supernatural, interventionist explanations. Can this separation take place when one views “[...] science and theology as compatible, complementary and mutually reinforcing descriptions, united in the service of one truth?”<sup>20</sup> If one agrees that the object area of science and theology overlap in the empirical world, then such a separation is a plausible approach. However, one must also admit that there are empirical problems (e.g. divine inspiration in prophets, apparitions of Jesus and Holy Mary, demonic possessions, miraculous healings, etc.) that are outside the scope of scientific explanations. Someone admitting that in terms of empirical research there is such a limitation for science cannot be considered a naturalistic theist. Can, however, Dr. Harris’ close study of biblical scholarship in the light of the natural sciences, or the dialogue between science and religion as described within NT, be said to respect such limitations or to try to identify or define them

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<sup>19</sup> Evidently, many hermeneutical problems in biblical scholarship are related to other factors apart from the relation to contemporary scientific picture of the world. These include the problems with translation, incompatibilities among various versions of the same text, inconsistencies between various fragments present in the Bible, familiarity with different cultural backgrounds present at the time of writing the analysed texts, knowledge of geography of regions important from the point of view of biblical texts, etc. Dr. Harris’ publications do take these subtleties into account. Such hermeneutic studies are no doubt valuable. It should be emphasised, however, that my analysis of Dr. Harris’ publications focused on only one theme: the relation between the scientific naturalism and the traditional theism.

<sup>20</sup> HARRIS, “Response...”, p. 271.

in the empirical arena? I have been unable to find either in Dr. Harris' work or in the work of other naturalistic theists any consistent statement that would allow me to answer the above question in the affirmative.



*Piotr Bylica*

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**Second Thoughts on Naturalistic Theism and Model of Levels of Analysis:  
A Response to Mark Harris**

**Summary**

I shall show that Dr. Harris' study of biblical scholarship is treated in a very serious manner in my paper, as it is the element identifying him as a representative of naturalistic theism (NT). NT is a position that has been recognized in the literature on science and religion for several years. Dr. Harris' commitment to the rule of methodological naturalism in the natural sciences, as well as his lack of evidence for the limits of using it in his hermeneutical analysis of divine action, makes his academic papers represent the main assumptions of NT. Model of levels of analysis (MLA) helps to show the empirical character of accounts of divine action as an important part of the traditional theistic interpretation of this action, and scepticism towards such an interpretation as a main characteristic of all advocates of NT.

**Keywords:** naturalism, theism, naturalistic theism, miracles, biblical interpretation, levels of analysis.