

Mark Harris

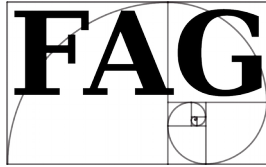
Response to “Mark Harris as a Naturalistic Theist” by Piotr Bylica

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Response to “Mark Harris as a Naturalistic Theist” by Piotr Bylica

I am most grateful for Dr Bylica’s studied attention to my published theological thought, but my overall impression is that the mirror that he holds up to me shows a face which I barely recognise. Dr Bylica has invited me to write a response to his paper¹ (hereafter simply referred to as “the paper”), and so I will outline my major points of disagreement, while nevertheless adding here that I have benefited greatly from thinking through his observations.

To summarise what I will say: I believe that Dr Bylica’s paper attempts to force my thought into a theological mould of its own making — the better to promote his “levels of analysis” model — while the paper engages only superficially with the central focus of my work, namely close study of biblical scholarship in the light of the natural sciences, and the interpretation of ancient theological texts.

I am flattered that Dr Bylica should consider me to represent a group of scholars which includes such luminaries in the science-and-religion field as Ian Barbour, Arthur Peacocke, John Polkinghorne, Nancey Murphy, Michał Heller, etc.² The members of this group have achieved a tremendous amount in opening up the dialogue between the natural sciences and Christian faith, and they

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¹ See PIOTR BYLICA, “Mark Harris as a Naturalistic Theist: The Perspective of the Model of Levels of Analysis”, *Filozoficzne Aspekty Genezy* 2015, vol. 12, pp. 7-36.

² See BYLICA, “Mark Harris as a Naturalistic Theist...”, p. 8.

have influenced the theological world out of all significance to their relatively small numbers. I am not sure, though, that these people 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. Hence, I cannot support one of the central claims of the paper that this group is united by a particular metaphysical commitment to what the paper calls “naturalistic theism” (NT), and that I am a representative of this position. Indeed, such is the significance of this claim for the paper that it forms its main title: “Mark Harris as a Naturalistic Theist”. But it is not clear to me that NT accurately contains the spread of metaphysical thought in this school, nor that it represents my own position. In fact, as I said above, I suggest that NT (using me as an example) functions in the paper largely as a vehicle to promote its own “levels of analysis” scheme.

Why do I say that NT does not represent my own position? Well, while I admit that I have a strong commitment to methodological naturalism in the natural sciences — and a brief perusal of my scientific output would demonstrate this (although the paper makes no mention of it) — I maintain that my theological position falls squarely within Christian theism as it has been traditionally construed, at least in my own confession (Anglicanism). Here, like other churches which self-consciously maintain the Catholic and Apostolic Faith, this means an adherence to Holy Scripture, to the Catholic Creeds, to the historic episcopate, and to the theological and ecclesiological interpretations thereof, as they have been explored by the Church’s great theologians and doctors such as Ss. Irenaeus, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas. Hence, I do not feel any need to qualify my own position with an adjective such as “naturalistic”. Since many of the early modern scientists — who developed what we now call “methodological naturalism” — were also faithful adherents to exactly the same rich and historic theism as me, the paper has not convinced me that my science has caused me to depart from this theism, nor to modify it, although in my work I have taken seriously my own church’s injunction to “proclaim it afresh in every generation”.³ I think it is important to make this clear, because although the paper makes a great deal of contrast between NT and what it calls “traditional Christian the-

³ A prominent phrase in the Church of England’s Declaration of Assent, made by all newly-ordained deacons, priests, and bishops.

ism”, the paper never defines the latter; rather, the paper seems to assume that it is so obvious that it barely needs explaining. And this is a regrettable rhetorical practice of Dr Bylica, because it has the effect of painting his own theological position (that which he refers to as “traditional Christian theism”) as normative, while NT (which he considers to be my position) comes across implicitly as an aberrant departure. As with those who claim that their own position is orthodox so that their opponents automatically appear heterodox, this strategy alone would be sufficient grounds for me to decline to play along with the paper’s game. However, there is more.

How exactly does the paper understand the distinction between NT and “traditional Christian theism”? In fact, it turns out that the distinctions are rather subtle: they seem to concern no important point of Christian doctrine that I can see, while they *do* concern important distinctions in the paper’s “levels of analysis” scheme, which attempts to distinguish between differing metaphysical and epistemological claims in the natural sciences, philosophy, and theology. The nub of the matter seems to be contained in the different ways that the paper presents the relationship between the supernatural and the natural in NT compared with what the paper calls “traditional Christian theism”. In particular, according to the paper, in NT “the traditional ideas of supernaturalism, dualism and interventionism are denied”,⁴ while in “traditional Christian theism” they are maintained. The paper then uses a lengthy quotation of Peacocke to illustrate these denials, and concludes that “the proposed model is a useful tool in terms of presentation of the main assumptions behind naturalistic theism”.⁵ But there is little clarity here, because the paper has not explained exactly what it is that Peacocke is supposed to be denying. This is especially mystifying when we see that Peacocke explicitly affirms forms of dualism and supernaturalism in the quotation. I can only guess that what the paper has in mind as the “traditional ideas” which Peacocke denies here are the existence of angels, and the heavily-dualistic Cartesian view of the soul/mind, since both ideas appear later in the paper,⁶ but the paper does not say. In any case, there is a very important question

⁴ BYLICA, “Mark Harris as a Naturalistic Theist...”, p. 14.

⁵ BYLICA, “Mark Harris as a Naturalistic Theist...”, p. 15.

⁶ See, respectively: BYLICA, “Mark Harris as a Naturalistic Theist...”, pp. 34, 22-24.

as to whether this quotation from Peacocke is truly representative of the rest of us which the paper places in the NT school. For myself, I would say not (again). While I have immense respect for Peacocke's ground-breaking work, his explicit commitment to pantheism is too much of a departure from the "traditional Christian theism" that I own. In fact, such was Peacocke's commitment to pantheism that I very much doubt that he himself would have been content with being branded a representative of NT, as the paper would have it.

My own feeling is that the paper's NT is probably a mid-way point between my own "traditional Christian theism", and Peacocke's pantheism. However, it is important to the paper that it demonstrates that I deny (A) supernaturalism, (B) body/soul dualism, and (C) divine interventions. Regarding (A), I am not aware that I have denied the existence of angels in print; indeed, this would go against my personal beliefs in them as important functionaries described in the scriptural traditions that we have inherited. Regarding (B), I have indeed commented at length on the heavily-dualistic Cartesian account of the human soul, and I have argued that not only it is difficult to maintain this account in light of current work in the science-theology field, but Christian tradition itself has varied greatly on this question in the past.⁷ Hence, I cannot agree with the paper that belief in a strongly-dualistic soul is characteristic of "traditional Christian theism". In any case, the paper mentions my view on the soul largely in order to combine it with what it claims I believe about supernaturalism and interventionism, as though (A), (B), and (C) were really all the same thing.⁸ Notwithstanding the fact that I think that the paper seriously misrepresents me on a number of counts here, I regard these various theological issues as very different from each other. But the paper's "levels of analysis" scheme collapses them all into one simple categorisation, so that the paper can demonstrate that in all of these things (and also in my comments on creation⁹) I consistently drive a wedge between the metaphysical levels (1 and 2) on the one hand, and the empirical levels (4 and 5) on the other. The paper wants to make the point that I (along

⁷ And I have a detailed article on this (see Mark HARRIS, "When Jesus Lost His Soul: Fourth-Century Christology and Modern Neuroscience", *Scottish Journal of Theology* 2017, vol. 70, no. 1, pp. 74-92).

⁸ See BYLICA, "Mark Harris as a Naturalistic Theist...", pp. 24-25.

⁹ See BYLICA, "Mark Harris as a Naturalistic Theist...", pp. 18-19.

with others who, the paper claims, are committed to his NT), sharply separate the domains of science and theology, so that theology only has competence to pronounce on the metaphysical, while the natural sciences reign supreme in the empirical domain, without any interference from theology or divine action crossing the boundaries between levels. This allows the paper to make what is probably its main criticism (insofar as it is repeated most frequently) that I take science more seriously than I do theology.

But in my defence, it does not appear to have occurred to Dr Bylica that I might see science and theology as compatible, complementary and mutually-reinforcing descriptions, united in the service of one truth (rather as many of the early modern scientists would have seen things). The paper seems to assume that science and theology can only be in competition with each other, as in the conflict hypothesis which has been widely rejected as naïve and simplistic by practitioners in the science-and-religion world. My own suspicion is that Dr Bylica's "levels of analysis" scheme forces him towards a conflict hypothesis because of the bluntness of its either/or categorisation, a bluntness which I find unsuited to the subtle reality questions here.

The irony is that, in order to force me into its scheme, the paper ends up painting me as an arch-deist, something which I have gone to considerable pains to avoid in my publications. And so we come to (C), divine interventions, and here I find the paper making the argument that my cautions against interventionism are not cautions against deistic thinking (which is what I thought my writings made clear), but instead a rejection of divine action itself. In other words, the paper makes me say quite the opposite of what I thought I was saying. Likewise, the paper takes my discussions of miracle stories not as they were intended (namely as explorations of the special hermeneutical difficulties underlying textual accounts of special divine action), but as affirmations of a sceptical and pluralist agenda where truth is relative, and divine action does not occur. Again, I find that the paper makes me say quite the opposite of what I thought I was saying. As the author I must bear responsibility for whatever lack of clarity in my writing has led to this astonishing turnaround, but I feel that the paper also makes some astonishing misinterpretations of my position. For instance, by tak-

ing several of my statements out of context,¹⁰ the paper argues that I am apparently a postmodern sceptic towards the supernatural and miraculous. What I find most surprising, though, is the series of conclusions which the paper draws from its assertion that divine interventions should be “empirically recognizable”, and that this issue constitutes “classical Christian theism”.¹¹ There is the paper’s regrettable rhetorical device here, of course, but also (what is to my mind) a glaring error. The paper conflates two key issues which I keep quite separate in my work, one concerning interventionism as a subtle form of deism (i.e. where God only steps in occasionally into a closed natural order, a position which I reject as being untrue to the “traditional Christian theism” that was handed on to me), and the other concerning the hermeneutical question of how we might recognise and interpret a divine action “empirically”. These are totally distinct issues in my writing, which I am careful to keep apart. Hence, by conflating them, the paper has misrepresented a major strand of my thought, and I can only assume that it does so in order that it might fit me more conveniently into its “levels of analysis” scheme.

In a response such as this, there are diminishing returns to be obtained by challenging every small point. Hence, I simply want to draw to a close by saying that, if I am indeed to be seen as a “naturalistic theist”, then it is not the kind of naturalistic theist which Dr Bylica describes. I would rather be seen simply as a theist, and one who recoils with astonishment at being described erroneously as a postmodern sceptic concerning all blanket supernatural and miraculous claims. But my last word should be a re-emphasis of my earlier gratitude to Dr Bylica. He has spurred me on to think carefully about the nuances in my own form of theism by giving me much to react against.



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¹⁰ See, for example, BYLICA, “Mark Harris as a Naturalistic Theist...”, pp. 28-29, 33.

¹¹ See BYLICA, “Mark Harris as a Naturalistic Theist...”, pp. 27-28.

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Response to “Mark Harris as a Naturalistic Theist” by Piotr Bylica

Summary

In this paper, I respond to a recent published analysis of my work by Dr Piotr Bylica, which characterises me as a “naturalistic theist”. I suggest that Bylica’s analysis takes this approach in order to fit my thought into his own “levels of analysis” scheme, but that it does not accurately represent my own theistic beliefs. I further argue that this process has resulted in the loss of important nuances in my work on areas such as miracles, dualism, and biblical interpretation.

Keywords: naturalism, theism, miracles, biblical interpretation.