



## Dialogue: Response

### *Method or Metaphysics?*

as it were. Theologically, it is hardly appropriate to suggest that God would orchestrate such random acts of novelty when Nature itself could be so endowed to handle this process. In any case, available evidence simply remains underdetermined in principle for theists and atheists alike.<sup>2</sup>

However, paradoxical as it may seem, attitude often counts too. At the level of discovery, exemplified by luminaries like Faraday and Maxwell, scientific knowing can be enriched through a scientist's personal encounter with "relational" knowledge that is capable of engaging the heart in search of deeper meaning.

In summary, attending to the complex deep structure of Naturalism may assist in clarifying a few salient points: The operation of science is inherently neutral vis a vis foundational principles. Yet, the context of science is pregnant with deeper meaning. Searching for deeper meaning is not the proper purview of normal scientific activity. The findings of science, however derived, cannot legitimately attempt to resolve meta-scientific or foundational issues. Nevertheless, scientists, as persons, can encounter a greater depth of meaning through integrated *knowing* that holistically engages the heart as well as the mind. ◇

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> C. A. Coulson, *Science & Christian Belief* (1955).  
<sup>2</sup> Heb 11:1–4 & John 20:29; Book review in *PSCF* 53, no. 2 (2001): 122.

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I have long had a great respect for Walter Thorson's work in the philosophy of science. He it was who first introduced me—in the pages of this journal—to Michael Polanyi, whose philosophy I continue to learn from. I recall with special pleasure the hours Thorson and I spent chatting under the trees in *Sunset Magazine's* gardens near Stanford almost twenty years ago.

I have again found much to impress me in Thorson's two-part article. I am pleased that Thorson rejects both *mechanistic reductionism* and *methodological naturalism*, the reigning presupposition of many Christians who are scientists. His proposal—"naturalism"—is a step forward, as is his adoption of Polanyi's view that there is a "logically distinct aspect or 'level' of creation from the purely physical" (p. 3). In short, granted Thorson's theological foundation, his understanding of science is both insightful and consistent.

Here, however, lies my problem. Has Thorson correctly interpreted Scripture and fashioned a convincing theological framework for this understanding? Thorson rejects *imago Dei* as a foundation because its over-emphasis triggered the Enlightenment notion of the *autonomy of human reason*. I instead would attribute the privileging of human reason to both the misreading of Genesis 1 by Christians and the rejection of God's existence by secular thinkers. When Genesis 1 is read in light of both Genesis 2 and Genesis 3, it need not spawn such an illegitimate child. Of course, human reason is limited; we cannot by our own unaided, unredeemed, untransformed reason argue from creation to the creator. Both human reason and the creation are fallen. The noetic consequences of sin are profound.

Thorson too places limits on human reason, not so much because of the noetic power of sin as because he sees science as an instance of the ability God gave Adam when he named the animals. Adam, of course, did not name God. Nor should we. However, why suppose that in naming the animals, Adam was not seeing the hand of the creator

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James W. Sire, ASA Associate Member, is the author of *The Universe Next Door* and, most recently, *Habits of the Mind* and *Václav Havel: The Intellectual Conscience of International Politics*. He can be contacted by email at: [jsire@prodigy.net](mailto:jsire@prodigy.net)

in his creation and giving them “creaturely” not “natural” names? What would such a “science” produced by an unfallen humanity look like? Any speculation would be wild.

Thorson, following Barth and Ellul, sees all natural theology as flawed. Nevertheless, this does not sufficiently acknowledge God’s immanence. “The heavens declare the glory of God,” says the psalmist. “Even their wordless words are everywhere” (Ps 19:1,4, partial paraphrase). Though much of God is hidden from us, he is not totally *deus absconditus*. Otherwise, the Apostle Paul would not argue that from nature itself one could detect the power and divinity of God. Thorson admits this. Still he says, “We do not know God himself through the knowledge of creation” (p. 7). Fair enough, if Thorson means that we cannot know God personally. However, design science, for example, does not claim we can know God personally through its methods, only that we may be able to see the presence of a design that implies a designer.

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“*Imago Dei* ... should not be misunderstood as some metaphysical essence or ‘stand-alone’ quality of human beings ... ,” Thorson writes (p. 8). Then he adds “in and by themselves.” Exactly! Not *in and by themselves*. Nothing in this world is *in and by itself*. That is just the point. The *imago Dei* does not stand on its own; human reason is not autonomous. When the *imago Dei* works correctly, it reflects as image to reality the nature and character of God; when it works incorrectly, it betrays its brokenness prompted by the Fall. By thinking of the *imago Dei* as solely relational, do we not limit the essence of human “being” to the utterly natural? Does it not then become so divorced from God’s Being that even a relational *imago Dei* is scarcely possible? The Son of God became a man. Was not his *imago Dei* more than relational? I raise all these as questions. I am not sure of the answers. Nevertheless, I am unwilling to write-off the possibility that we should look to both Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 for a scriptural foundation for our understanding of science. Nor am I willing to agree that “a metaphysical doctrine of nature is not needed to justify science and the ‘naturalism’ proper to it” (p. 7). Likewise I cannot agree with Austin Farrer that “the ‘metaphysical joint’ where divine agency intersects the created world is

fundamentally inscrutable” (p. 9). I would rather say that this joint has never been much examined.

It still seems appropriate to me to examine nature for marks of intentionality, marks of design, that point to the nature and character of God as both creator and designer. Since we know from revelation that God is such a designer, why must we bracket out this knowledge? Should we not expect to detect in creation the marks of God’s mind as well as his hand? Natural theology is not all of theology; but it is an important part. It is, in my view, not to be the sole purview of theologians but of scientists as well, especially those who work with biblical presuppositions and put themselves under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. A brief but eloquent comment by John Henry Newman is relevant here:

[Even though God as Creator is infinitely separate from his creation,] yet He has so implicated Himself with it and taken it into His very bosom by His presence in it, His providence over it, His impressions upon it, and His influences through it, that we cannot truly or fully contemplate it without contemplating Him.<sup>1</sup>

Sadly, Newman’s own plan for university education contains what can only be seen as a nineteenth-century version of *methodological naturalism*, as Mark A. Kalthoff has so well pointed out in “A Different Voice from the Eve of *The Origin*: Reconsidering John Henry Newman on Christianity, Science, and Intelligent Design.”<sup>2</sup> However, the implications for science of the foundation that Newman outlines have yet to be built on.

Look at it this way. God is the I AM, the ultimately unified Being, the creative source of all other than himself. If God is unified, then so is his creation, and, therefore, his revelation in Scripture must necessarily relate in some deep way to his revelation in creation. What would happen if Christian scholars from all disciplines were to work consistently from such a perspective? I think the whole Christian academic world would be transformed. We might, of course, end up not with just a Christian philosophy (we already have more than the outlines of this), psychology, sociology, and literary criticism, but with a Christian physics, chemistry, and even mathematics. This prospect often frightens Christian academics, especially untenured ones. “Who will publish my papers?” I have been asked. “How can I advance in my field? I would be a laughing stock.” Perhaps. But the community of Christian scholars might themselves be laughing all the way into the kingdom.

In summary, though Thorson’s “naturalism” is a healthy step away from *methodological naturalism*, it still relies (incorrectly, in my judgment) on *method* rather than *metaphysics* as a proper foundation for a Christian understanding of science. ◇

## Notes

- 1 John Henry Newman, *Idea of a University*, ed. Frank M. Turner (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 37.
- 2 Mark A. Kalthoff, “A Different Voice from the Eve of *The Origin*: Reconsidering John Henry Newman on Christianity, Science, and Intelligent Design,” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 53, no. 1 (March 2001), 14–23.