

## Dialogue III: Intelligent Design and Naturalism

*What Would Count as Defeating Naturalism? A Reply to Van Till*

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*James D. Madden and Mark R. Discher*

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**W**e are quite honored that Howard Van Till has taken the time to give a detailed response to our paper, and we are likewise pleased to find that he does express some agreement with us on a few salient points. Nevertheless, we are still far from being in complete agreement with Van Till, as any reader of his reply to our paper will surmise. Van Till has three major concerns about our paper. First, he suggests that we have misconstrued the nature of his objection to the ID movement,<sup>1</sup> and in doing so we have failed to cite any texts from his prior work. In conjunction with this, he laments that we have employed “combat metaphors” and other less than flattering language to characterize his intentions. Second, Van Till argues that we operate under an inadequate definition of materialism. Third, Van Till argues in opposition to one of the main theses of our paper that ID is unable to operate as a materialism (“naturalism” in Van Till’s preferred idiom) defeater. We will address each of these concerns in what follows below.

### Van Till’s Three Concerns

#### 1. Our misconstruction of the nature of Van Till’s objection to the ID movement

Let us make three quick points. First, as philosophers we are accustomed to vigorous, critical exchanges. We thus meant no offense in our use of a “combat metaphor,” and we apologize if any offense was taken. Second, regarding our failure to quote Van Till’s earlier writings, all that can be said is that our paper is itself a response to an earlier exchange between Van Till and Discher in the

pages of this journal.<sup>2</sup> As such we assumed that the reader would be familiar with the prior positions staked out in this debate, and therefore there was no need to clutter our paper with quotations. Third, we do not believe that we have mischaracterized or misrepresented Van Till’s position in any way. We assume that if we had, Van Till would have disabused us of our false claims. Since he does not, we are confident that we have represented his views carefully and faithfully.

#### 2. Our use of an inadequate definition of materialism

Van Till objects to our use of the term “materialism.” We define “materialism” in our article as

*the view that efficient and material causes along with precise laws of nature are by themselves sufficient to explain and predict all phenomena in the natural world; it is the view that we do not need to include anything in our explanation of how things in nature operate and why they are arranged in any particular way that is not empirically observable and mathematically calculable.<sup>3</sup>*

Against our use of the term Van Till has three complaints, which we will treat in order. First, he claims that our understanding of materialism rules out instances of “authentic contingency” which are “inherently unpredictable.” He claims that our account of materialism “excludes all authentically contingent events from natural phenomena.” On this, we make two quick points. First, in footnote four of our paper

we emphasize that we do not wish to exclude authentically contingent (indeterminate) phenomena at the quantum level. Thus, we did not construe materialism to exclude all forms of contingency in nature. Second, the purported macro-level example of contingency that Van Till adduces as problematic for our definition of materialism, the wind velocity in his yard at 9:00 a.m. next Tuesday, can in fact be accounted for by our use of the term. The reason that Van Till assumes that it cannot is because he fails to make a distinction between that, on the one hand, which we as predictors must effectively take to be contingent on account of our imperfect knowledge and that, on the other hand, which is genuinely contingent. We take the wind velocity in Van Till's yard at 9:00 a.m. next Tuesday to be contingent in the former sense, because we do not have at any time before 9:00 a.m. next Tuesday complete knowledge of all the relevant material conditions and laws of nature that will determine the wind velocity then and there. But if we did have such knowledge, à la Laplace, then it would in principle be possible for us to make the prediction in question, and this in perfect accord with our definition of materialism. Therefore, our definition of materialism would deny that such an event is authentically contingent. Furthermore, we are confident that this understanding of "materialism" is in uniformity with what materialists have typically meant historically in their use of the term. Contrary to being, as Van Till puts it, "radically unrealistic," our use of the term "materialism" is coherent and conventionally accepted.

Van Till's second worry regarding our use of "materialism" concerns the possibility that it might be construed to include teleology, given that we claim that a materialist is committed to the view that efficient and material causes provide the explanation of *why* events occur in nature. Van Till suggests that we need to qualify our use of "why" in a way so that it does not slip into "such metaphysical and religious matters as the 'why questions' of purpose or ultimate end." We answer Van Till's request for qualification as follows: "Why," when used in our definition of materialism, is to be taken only in the straightforward sense we find in "The reason why the puddle dried up is that the sun is shining today," where what we mean is that the material properties of the water in the puddle reacted to the increased air temperature brought about by the shining of the sun, and it was this that caused the water in the puddle to change state. We hope that with this qualification we are able to avoid in our use of "why" any hint of "metaphysical or religious" teleology.

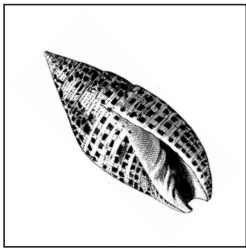
Third, Van Till then notes that our use of "materialism," which could be easily conflated with "naturalism," might mislead people into thinking that all critics of ID, many of whom are materialists in our sense, are atheists, since the latter term connotes atheism, whereas the former term (in our usage) does not. Van Till rightly points out that many critics of ID are, in fact, theists. On this, perhaps

Van Till is right. Perhaps it would have been better for us to use "naturalism" in place of "materialism." This is just a matter of coming to terms. In actual fact, we intentionally used "materialism" instead of "naturalism" in order to avoid this problem. But perhaps we were ill-advised to do so. Nonetheless, what is important here is that our intention was to define the position in such a way so as to encompass a Christian who has a materialist conception of the natural world, i.e., a non-interventionist conception of the natural world, such as Van Till has with his robust formational economy principle. It is this sort of view that we wanted to include among those positions that would be defeated by a successful ID project. In any case, we do believe that nothing we wrote either explicitly states or strictly implies that all critics of ID are atheists. We certainly do not believe that to be the case. Furthermore, we certainly do not want anyone to infer mistakenly that to be the case.

### 3. Our error to suggest that the primary aim of ID should be to defeat naturalism

Van Till claims that ID is wholly incapable of defeating naturalism. The reason Van Till thinks this to be the case is that we can never be certain that we have complete knowledge of the natural world—for example, knowledge regarding the natural causes of a given biotic structure such as the bacterial flagellum. Because such perfect and complete knowledge is never available to us, Van Till claims that we are never warranted in saying anything more in attributing the existence of any such structures to non-natural, interventionist causes than that it is logically possible that the actualization of the structure required non-natural action. As Van Till puts it, all that it is permissible for an IDer ever to claim is that "in the absence of a detailed and causally specific scientific account of the particular sequence of natural processes and events that can fully explain the formation history of biotic system X, it is logically permissible to posit that the actualization of X required at least one instance of non-natural action." Because ID is in this way "unable to establish a conclusive scientific case that any non-naturalistic explanation is even necessary," Van Till warns that the arguments for ID should be excluded from public school science classrooms.

We agree, of course, with Van Till's central point—that we can never be absolutely certain that a naturalistic cause might eventually be found to explain some phenomenon that we might be tempted to ascribe to interventionist design. We are not inclined to disagree with Van Till that ID interventionism could never be established conclusively by any empirical evidence. Because in both philosophy and the natural sciences such decisive proof is very rarely forthcoming, we take this point of Van Till's to be so obvious as to be almost trivial. The mistake we believe Van Till makes in his argument against interventionist ID is that he sets the epistemic bar for it too high.



*The mistake we believe Van Till makes in his argument against interventionist ID is that he sets the epistemic bar for it too high. ... If and when the empirical evidence warrants it, fair-minded science requires that the interventionist designer hypothesis be accepted as a plausible theory of explanation ...*

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The best we can hope, when hypothesizing about the causes of empirically observable phenomena and when direct observation of the phenomena in question is not possible is to make an inference to the best explanation regarding its cause, given all that we do confidently know. If, given all that we do presently know both scientifically and philosophically, the best explanation of some phenomenon seems to require positing the intervention of an intelligent designer, then we ought to accept that hypothesis. To rule that hypothesis out in the teeth of pretty compelling evidence for it would be to exclude a plausible hypothesis on a priori grounds. But ruling it out on a priori grounds is not at all tantamount to ruling it out on scientific or empirical grounds.<sup>4</sup> It would be to rule it out on the basis of a philosophical commitment, a faith, if you will, in naturalism.

As God is a jealous God, so naturalism is a jealous explanatory tool; it will not tolerate any other mode of explanation. But if it can be shown that, in our current state of knowledge, there are phenomena that are not explained by any known, scientifically accessible cause, then there is reason to doubt, in the sense of suspending judgment, the truth of naturalism. That for us would constitute a naturalism defeater (and if this does not constitute a naturalism defeater for Van Till, we wonder what in the world ever would qualify for him as one). Of course, the purported defeat of naturalism would not be conclusive; it is itself always subject to being defeated by a scientific discovery that vindicates naturalistic explanation in the relevant area. But unless and until such a discovery is made, the current hegemony that naturalism holds in the science classrooms would be called into question by a successful ID project.

Van Till's basic strategy here is to make any potential interventionist ID claim a "God of gaps" type of argument; whenever the IDer adduces an interventionist designer in an explanatory role, he is always doing so with less than absolutely perfect knowledge of the natural world. Consequently, he can never be absolutely certain that the phenomenon in question is to be explained by an interventionist designer, because he always has gaps in his knowledge of the natural world, and the intelligent designer might

just be illicitly filling one of these gaps. But notice that this argument is Janus-faced and can be turned against Van Till himself. For Van Till refuses ever to posit an interventionist designer, because he takes it as a matter of faith/philosophical commitment that naturalism will eventually fill whatever gaps there are. So Van Till has a "naturalism of the gaps" argument always underway. In this respect, even if Van Till's argument were correct, there is parity between Van Till's position and that of the interventionist IDer. Logically they are on an equal footing.

In conclusion, if and when the empirical evidence warrants it, fair-minded science requires that the interventionist designer hypothesis be accepted as a plausible theory of explanation, perhaps one that competes with and deserves to be evaluated in light of the competing hypothesis of naturalism. We agree that ID cannot defeat naturalism in the sense of providing a once and for all refutation, but we also believe that ID could defeat naturalism in the sense of providing space for non-naturalist theories within the context of scientifically respectable debate regarding certain biological issues. What would tell the tale in such a debate would be which of these theories can be best identified with a coherent and intellectually satisfying world view. Of course, and we are sure Van Till will agree, this is a moot point until ID can prove itself on scientific grounds. ♦

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>What is really at issue in this discussion is an interventionist understanding of intelligent design. We recognize that there are non-interventionist intelligent design views, such as those belonging to the family of anthropic arguments. Van Till himself is a non-interventionist IDer.

<sup>2</sup>Mark Discher, "Van Till and Intelligent Design," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 54, no. 4 (2002): 220-31; Howard J. Van Till, "Is the Creation a 'Right Stuff' Universe?" *PSCF* 54, no. 4 (2002): 232-9; and Mark Discher, "Is Howard Van Till's Response to 'Van Till and Intelligent Design' a 'Right Stuff' Response?" *PSCF* 54, no. 4 (2004): 240-1.

<sup>3</sup>James Madden and Mark Discher, "What Intelligent Design Does and Does not Imply," *PSCF*, 56, no. 4 (2004): 287.

<sup>4</sup>That Van Till is wont to rule ID out on a priori grounds was precisely the subject of Discher's critique of his assessment of ID. See Discher, "Van Till and Intelligent Design," *PSCF* 54, no. 4 (2002): 220-31.