

Letters

“Hard” and “Soft” Methodological Naturalism

I very much enjoyed Kathryn Applegate’s article (“A Defense of Methodological Naturalism,” *PSCF* 65, no. 1 [2013]: 37–45) defending methodological naturalism (MN). I share her enthusiasm that MN can help to shed light on the mechanism of God’s handiwork in nature, as opposed to previous intimations that MN is somehow inconsistent with God’s creative agency. I do not think that MN is the methodological extension of metaphysical naturalism. Indeed, if atheism were true, it would undercut both our reason and our ability to do science in the first place!

One issue that I was hoping Applegate would address, but that did not appear in her article, was the contrast between “hard” and “soft” MN. This is a distinction first made by English philosopher Peter S. Williams, and is one that I find very helpful. In short, the difference is this: “hard” MN precludes intelligent causation from science, whereas “soft” MN precludes explicitly supernatural causation from science, while still allowing for explanations to be framed in terms of intelligence. Williams argues that “soft” MN should be permissible in science—and, indeed, *is* permissible in science, given such widely recognized fields of investigation as forensics, archaeology, and SETI. I cannot help but feel that he is on to something.

Although Applegate does not directly address the distinction between “hard” and “soft” MN, she does brush the issue tangentially. She writes, “By practicing methodological naturalism, one does not deny the presence of design or teleology in the created order but simply removes it from the purview of science” (p. 43). Here, Applegate appears to advocate some form of “hard” MN, whereby appeal to intelligence is disallowed a priori. That is certainly her prerogative, although I wonder whether she truly believes that none of the aforementioned disciplines are scientific in nature because they, too, invoke intelligent causes.

To be clear, I remain unconvinced by the recent Intelligent Design movement, particularly as it purports to explain the origin of biological diversity. However, I do find the “hard” version of MN to be problematic, and I think that we limit ourselves needlessly by adhering to it for Applegate’s fear of “demeaning God.”

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Clarifying “Hard” and “Soft” Methodological Naturalism

I am grateful for Jordan Mallon’s question regarding the distinction between “hard” and “soft” methodological naturalism (MN), the former being that which precludes *all* intelligent causation, the latter precluding only supernatural causation. I agree that hard MN is problematic. In my article I wrote that “these fields [archaeology, forensics, SETI] do abide by the traditional definition of methodological naturalism, *which only excludes supernatural explanation, not all intelligent causes*” (p. 40, emphasis added). The version of MN I hoped to defend in my article (“A Defense of Methodological Naturalism,” *PSCF* 65, no. 1 [2013]: 37–45)—what I called “traditional” MN—is indeed “weak” MN.

Mallon questioned whether I meant to exclude *all* intelligent causation when I wrote, “By practicing methodological naturalism, one does not deny the presence of design or teleology in the created order but simply removes it from the purview of science” (p. 43). I am happy to concede that my wording could have been more careful: make that “*supernatural* design or teleology.” My intent was that nonscientific avenues for thinking about design and teleology (e.g., biblical ones) are likely to be more fruitful, in many cases.

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