

## Methodological Naturalism: Neutral Principle or Self-Refuting Philosophy?

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Robert J. Marks:

Greetings and welcome to Mind Matters News. I'm your anti-methodological naturalist host, Robert J. Marks. Mind Matters News drops a fresh new podcast every Thursday, but on the last Thursday of the month, we air a binge cast where interviews from past are merged into a single episode. We shy away from chatting with talking heads and focus on talking to those with deep expertise who actually do know what they're talking about.

We are currently airing interviews with authors of chapters in the Bradley Center's new book, *Minding the Brain*. The book is edited by Angus Menuge, Brian Krouse, and yours truly. Info about the book is available at [mindingthebrain.org](http://mindingthebrain.org). That's [mindingthebrain.org](http://mindingthebrain.org). Hosting the interview with me today is my fellow co-editor of *Minding the Brain*, Dr. Angus Menuge. Angus is chair of the philosophy department at Concordia University. He holds a PhD in philosophy from the University of Wisconsin. He is author of the book *Agent Under Fire*. He is editor of lots of books including *Legitimizing Human Rights* and the book *Religious Liberty and the Law*. With Jonathan Loose and J.P Moreland, Dr. Menuge co-edited the *Blackwell Companion to Substance Dualism*, and with Barry W. Bussey, he edited the book, *The Inheritance of Human Dignity*, and he is past president of the Evangelical Philosophical Society. Angus, thanks for hosting the show with me today.

Angus Menuge:

Yeah, thanks for having me, Bob. Appreciate it.

Robert J. Marks:

Okay, great. Our guest today is Robert Larmer. Dr. Larmer received his PhD in philosophy from the University of Ottawa. He is chair of the philosophy department at the University of New Brunswick. He's authored many books, the most recent of which is the *Legitimacy of Miracle and Dialogues on Miracle*. The *Legitimacy of Miracle and Dialogues on Miracle*. Dr. Larmer has served on the executive boards of the Canadian Philosophical Association and the Evangelical Philosophical Society. And has twice served as president of the Canadian Society for Christian Philosophers. For the book *Minding the Brain*, Dr. Larmer has contributed the chapter *Methodological Naturalism in the Mind* and this is what we're here to talk about today. Robert, welcome.

Robert Larmer:

Thank you.

Robert J. Marks:

Okay, great. I'll start out by asking you to define the topic of your chapter, *Methodological Naturalism*. These are big words. I counted them. There's 10 syllables there in two words. That's a lot of syllables per words. For those of us not privy to philosophers lingo, could you give us just a quick definition of *methodological naturalism*?

Robert Larmer:

Yes, methodological naturalism, sometimes known in its early days as methodological atheism says that, "As a matter of method in pursuing knowledge, we should act as if metaphysical naturalism is true. This amounts to insisting that for any event or phenomenon we investigate, we must always posit a physical cause and never appeal to a non-physical cause as an explanation." In other words, even if we don't agree that metaphysical naturalism is true, we should act as if it is.

Robert J. Marks:

Okay. Thank you. Angus, I'll turn over the questioning to you right now.

Angus Menuge:

All right. Robert, that's very helpful. You've clarified the nature of methodological naturalism. Perhaps we could look at why it is that proponents of that principle say that it is a neutral principle, that it doesn't itself have any metaphysical commitments. In other words, why do they think that that's true?

Robert Larmer:

They want to say that it's metaphysical neutral in the sense that even if you act as if metaphysical naturalism is true, you don't have to actually believe it's true. And the idea is that this will allow people doing science and people investigating the physical world, that they can all get along and agree on a common method even if they don't agree on their metaphysics.

Angus Menuge:

Right. Now, interestingly though, you argue in common with some other philosophers that in fact, methodological naturalism isn't really neutral. And how exactly in your view does methodological naturalism bias the search for truth?

Robert Larmer:

Yes, I think two ways. The first way it biases the search for truth is it makes it impossible to ever recognize non-physical causes, even if they exist and are active. If for example, God actually directly created the first living cell, methodological naturalism would never permit you to posit that as the actual cause. The second thing I think it does is people who are methodological naturalists, it seems that they're going to have to conceive God as always working indirectly instrumentally through natural causes rather than ever acting directly in the world. So if you're a thoroughgoing methodological naturalist, I don't think you could ever identify an event as a miracle, even if it was one.

Angus Menuge:

All right. That's very interesting. And of course, the focus of this chapter is the mind. And here you say that methodological naturalism implies the causal closure of the physical, which means that mental states like beliefs and desires apparently either simply don't exist, or if they do exist, they are epiphenomenal. That is that they don't actually do anything. They have no causal influence on our actions. So can you help us understand these key concepts here? What's meant by the causal closure of the physical exactly? And why does it rule out mental causes?

Robert Larmer:

Yes. Those who believe in the causal closure of the physical insist that there are never any causes that affect the physical that are outside as it were the physical. So any idea that God, or an angel, or an

immaterial mind might do something in the world is ruled out a priori. So to claim that the physical realm is causally closed is to claim that for any physical event that has a cause, that cause will be itself physical.

Now, methodological naturalists insist that even if the physical realm is not causally closed, we must act as if it is. So what this means for the methodological naturalist is they must hold that mental events never cause anything to happen. Now, I was trying to think of an analogy here and perhaps a helpful analogy would be to think of a reflection in a mirror. The reflection is caused by the person standing before the mirror, but exerts no causal influence on the person. Likewise, if we treat the physical realm as causally closed, then mental events are caused by physical events, say brain states, but like a reflection exert no influence on brain states. So nothing that we do is actually caused by our mental states.

Angus Menuge:

All right. Yeah, that's a very nice analogy. And at a common sense level, what does that do for our understanding of ourselves as rational agents? If that's true, what impact does that have for the way we understand ourselves?

Robert Larmer:

I think it has a hugely disastrous result for our self-understanding as rational agents, because if act the physical realm is causally closed, then we have to assume that any beliefs or purposes I have will be entirely dependent on my brain states, but will have no influence on what subsequently takes place. So just as my reflection cannot influence the state of my body, so my mental states cannot affect the state of my brain.

What this means is that I never do anything because of a belief I hold or a purpose I have. The explanation, for example, of a parent putting a baby in a child's seat when driving will not be that the parent has a desire to keep the child safe and a belief that the car seat will help do this. So put bluntly, adopting methodological naturalism requires accepting that none of our actions have anything to do with our mental states.

Angus Menuge:

Right. And you point out that this seems to come very close, if not all the way to self-refutation, because it would apply to human acts of reasoning. In the book, for example, you give the example of a very simple piece of reasoning. A is greater than B, B is greater than C, so A is greater than C. If we apply this idea of causal closure to what's going on, when somebody thinks through that argument, what happens?

Robert Larmer:

Well, I think what it means is that no one, including scientists, ever hold their beliefs because the beliefs are rationally justified. So to just riff on your example a little, rather than As and Bs, suppose I'm told that porcupines are bigger than mice. A little later I'm told that mice are bigger than ants. Shortly after this, I find myself believing that porcupines are bigger than ants.

Now, normally we would think that I come to this last belief because of holding the first two beliefs and seeing some kind of rational relation between these first two beliefs that led me to my third belief. But if we treat the physical realm as causally closed and mental beliefs as dependent on brain states, we have to abandon this view since causal closure requires that mental states are entirely dependent on brain states and they never exert any causal influence on brain states, or, and this is important, other mental

states. So I never believe that two plus two equals four because I thought about two and then thought about adding another two and then thought about four. Mental states just as one reflection can't affect another person's reflection. So one mental state can't affect another mental state.

Angus Menuge:

Right. So this of course will affect agency in general, but I guess even our understanding of the rationality of science, because it seems that advocates of methodological naturalism try to justify their position by saying that, "Well, it's the rational approach," but if what you are saying is correct, it would seem that methodological naturalism undermines the very idea of scientific rationality. What would you say to that?

Robert Larmer:

I would agree entirely. If methodological naturalism means as it does, treating the physical realm is causally closed, then that commits the methodological naturalist to saying that, "We never ever hold a belief because of the reasons for that belief."

Robert J. Marks:

Yeah. If I could chime in here, it seems that you're saying that methodological naturalism has confined itself to a silo and everything that they observe must fit within this silo. I think the people that are not methodological naturalists, that believe that things exist outside of the silo are much more open-minded. And then Angus mentioned the idea of self-refuting. It seems to me, as I understand it, now, I'm coming at this as a mathematician engineer, but methodological naturalism cannot be used to prove or even provide evidence for methodological naturalism. It's kind of a philosophy that's sitting out there as a singularity without any support from its own claims. Do you think that that's true?

Robert Larmer:

I think so. Analogy I heard years ago was that, suppose you come and on the sand on a beach, you find some pattern that says, "Buy Microsoft." Now, if you were totally convinced that that was only produced by wind and waves and had no link to rational reasoning, would it be smart to buy Microsoft? So the methodological naturalist says, "We must confine our explanations to non-rational physical causes." Well, if we do that, then there's no reason to think that we can trust our thinking processes.

Robert J. Marks:

Actually, that's kind of funny. No matter where I go, I cannot escape advertising. I even went to a gas station the other day and I was pumping gas, and then the gas pumps started to try to sell me stuff. They put a little video and some audio out there, and I said, "My gosh, I can't escape advertising." So if I go on the beach and I see, "Buy Microsoft," I think now more than ever, I would think, "Well, maybe Microsoft figured out a way to put that there." But your point's well taken. It could not have occurred by natural processes.

Announcer:

That's all for this week. We'll be back with Angus Menuge and Robert Larmer next time on Mind Matters News. But until then, be of good cheer.

This has been Mind Matters News with your host Robert J. Marks. Explore More at [mindmatters.ai](http://mindmatters.ai). That's [mindmatters.ai](http://mindmatters.ai). Mind Matters News is directed and edited by Austin Egbert. The opinions

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