

Consciousness and Agency: A Critique of Methodological Naturalism

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Announcer:

Greetings and welcome to Mind Matters News. This week we're continuing our discussion with Angus Menuge and Robert Larmer about methodological naturalism. Dr. Larmer contributed a chapter on the subject to the book *Minding the Brain*, of which Dr. Menuge was a co-editor. This is the second part of this series, so I encourage you to listen to the first part if you've not already done so. Enjoy.

Angus Menuge:

All right, very good. That's a helpful explanation of main concepts, but still we want to understand why it is that methodological naturalism has been so popular. The main part of your chapter takes a look at the common justifications that are out there in the literature. Some of them seem quite weak and some of them perhaps are more serious, so maybe let's take a look at these. First of all, you have those people like Barbara Forrest who will say that, "Oh, well, if it's a non-natural cause it's unknowable by scientific inquiry. Oh, and by the way, if we did have evidence of some non-natural cause, well that would just show that it was a natural cause after all." In other words, having evidence and being natural just seemed to go together on her view. Well, you disagree though. What's wrong with that sort of argument in your view?

Robert Larmer:

I think her article, which is pretty well-known, I think that in its attempt to justify methodological naturalism, I think it commits at least two logical fallacies. First, it assumes the very thing it needs to show, namely that a non-natural cause cannot be known by scientific inquiry. That's an argument that has to be made that she never makes. The second point, second fallacy, is it empties the term physical of all content by insisting that if God the creator of the physical universe exists, we would have to claim that God is physical and again, she provides no argument for such a claim and such a claim would seem to be at odds with Big Bang cosmology, which says that if there was a cause of the universe, it had to be nonphysical since it's only at the beginning of the universe that anything physical begins to exist.

Angus Menuge:

Yeah, right. That's a great example because of course there couldn't be a physical cause of everything that is physical. Well, but now in the other caps, there are some who think that in principle, methodological naturalism is a necessary condition for science and so they reject nonphysical causes in principle because they claim that methodological naturalism is what's called a demarcation criteria, and that is it's a line between science and non-science that we just have to accept. Why do you think that's mistaken?

Robert Larmer:

Well, I think philosophers of science have been pretty clear that attempts to get a nice clear demarcation criterion haven't been successful, so there's been many attempts to provide clear and strict dividing lines between science and non-science, but these typically fail. In my view, methodological naturalism seems the latest attempt with people simply insisting that science requires the assumption that the physical realm is causally closed.

Now, I think the problem with that assumption is that if we take science to be a search for the causes of phenomena or the search for truth, then methodological naturalism puts science in a straight jacket where it's incapable of ever recognizing nonphysical causes even if they exist. This means that arguably in some cases, scientific explanation will amount to insisting on a naturalistic explanation no matter how inadequate that explanation may be. Science then becomes not primarily a search for truth, but a search for the least implausible, naturalistic explanation that we can give.

Angus Menuge:

Right. That's very good. It's like a race. How significant is it that you win? It all depends on which runners are allowed, right? You might have an inference to the best explanation, but if only the weak explanations are allowed in principle, the best explanation turns out to be the best of a bad lot and not the best explanation of all. Yeah, that's a great point.

The other thing that I always hear is that scientists and philosophers will say, "Well look, if you do allow nonphysical causes, because they are free acts of agency, you never know when they're coming and you would end up with a universe so chaotic and unpredictable that science would be impossible." What's really wrong with that argument? At first sight it might seem quite plausible. What's your response?

Robert Larmer:

Paul Draper, who's an atheist, has some nice work on this, but I think the primary fault with that argument is either God exists or God doesn't. We have found ourselves able to investigate the universe, so whether or not the physical universe is in fact chaotic is not determined by the method one adopts. The universe either is chaotic or not chaotic, your method is not going to make the universe be different. We already know that the physical universe is not chaotic, so if in fact God does exist, we already know He does not simply, to use Robert Pennock's kind of polemical phrase, "Simply zap anything into or out of existence in any situation." I think the error underlying that kind of attempted justification of methodological naturalism is just the assumption that God will act in an entirely arbitrary, non-rational way. We already have good evidence that if God does exist, He's not acting in that way.

Angus Menuge:

Right, very good, because after all, the laws of nature themselves are rational, so we've got evidence that if there is a being behind the universe, it would be a rational one.

What about those, though, who think that allowing nonphysical causes as a science stopper because we can just say, "Well, somebody made this choice and that's all there is to it"? One thinks back to Aristotelians who thought it's sufficient to explain why a body returns to the earth, well, that it had the goal of finding its natural resting place. Then along comes Francis Bacon to complain, "Well, that deters you from finding out exactly what the laws of motion are that govern the behavior of that body." That might happen, I guess, but you argue at least that there's no reason to think that inferring a nonphysical cause has to be a science stopper. Why is that?

Robert Larmer:

Yeah, I'll mention several points, but just before I do that, probably you're aware, Angus, of Edward Feser's recent book in philosophy of science, which he titles Aristotle's Revenge.

Angus Menuge:

Yeah.

Robert Larmer:

But I'll leave that aside, though it's an excellent book, but I think several points need to be made concerning this science stopper objections. First, all explanation must ultimately stop somewhere on pain of infinite regress. We have scientists talking about the four basic forces, they'd like maybe to whittle it down to one, but even if you whittle it down to one, then if you explain everything in terms of one fundamental force, you've stopped your explanation somewhere. Theoretically all explanations stop somewhere.

Second, if an explanation in terms of an immaterial cause is given, it can be challenged just like any other explanation. If I look at something and say, "Look, I think that the cause of that was a supernatural agent," I can be challenged. If somebody puts forward a naturalistic explanation that works well, then Occam's razor, as William Dembski has pointed out, will do the job of selecting the naturalistic explanation on the basis of it being more simple. Giving an explanation in terms of God's agency doesn't mean that it can't be challenged.

Third, there's no reason to think that scientists are likely to become lazy just by becoming open to recognizing nonphysical causes. Historically, that hasn't been the case. Robert Boyle, the great father of chemistry, took seriously miracles, but that didn't mean that he didn't make great advances in chemistry.

Angus Menuge:

Yeah, that's a good example. The same thing with the discovery that DNA is like a language. It doesn't at all stop people from investigating how that language works. On the contrary, that seems to be the main area of research, but oddly it seems to point to design. Yeah.

Robert Larmer:

A fourth and final point I'd make here is that in practice, some explanations can be so compelling that there exists no reason to challenge them. Just as no one is likely to challenge the explanation that the pumping of the heart helps explain the circulation of the blood, so I would suggest that it makes no sense to challenge the explanation that when I type up a manuscript that the manuscript is due to my mental state of desiring to provide answers to whatever question I'm investigating.

Angus Menuge:

Right. Very good. Many philosophers have kind of admitted this now that the in principle objections, people like Elliot Sober and some of the best philosophers of science don't want to say that in principle you have to use methodological naturalism. Rather they give this kind of weaker argument that, well, it's inductively justified because it's been so successful in scientific practice. Of course since that's a weaker claim, it's a little bit harder to refute. But you argue interestingly that methodological naturalism isn't really necessary. Why is that? What's the alternative?

Robert Larmer:

Yeah, it's interesting. Martin Boudry, who is a very determined critic of intelligent design, he makes precisely point. He says, if you're going to argue for methodological naturalism, don't do it in the way that it's been typically done, rather try to justify it on an inductive basis.

But I would argue that any presumed work that methodological naturalism does in helping scientific investigation can just as well be done by employing other rational principles. For example, Occam's razor, the principle of not multiplying entities needlessly, that's going to allow us to choose a physical

explanation over a nonphysical explanation if in fact the physical explanation does just a good a job as the nonphysical explanation. For example, I don't need methodological naturalism in order to come to the conclusion that ocean tides don't need a nonphysical explanation for their occurrence. What I find interesting is it seems that methodological naturalism is only invoked when you want to attack a certain position and you want to label it as unscientific. Of course, in our society, labeling something as unscientific is to say, "Well, it doesn't have as much right to be taken seriously." As Larry Laudan mentions, things like methodological naturalism, they tend to be employed as weapons of war. I think that you don't need methodological naturalism, you've got all sorts of well-established explanatory criteria for scientific investigation, for scientific explanation.

Angus Menuge:

Oh, very good. You also point out that something that is very important here is this fundamental distinction between different kinds of science, nomological science that's looking for regularities and historical science, which is looking at singularities, things that happened once. What's the distinction exactly between those two kinds of science and why is it relevant to methodological naturalism?

Robert Larmer:

Yes. Nomological science deals with explaining regularities found within the physical realm. For example, ocean tides or cycles of seasonal change. Explanation in terms of laws works very well in explaining such regularities. On the other hand, historical science has to do with explaining non-regular events in nature. For example, we don't regularly experience life coming from non-life and in areas of historical science, explanation works best when we employ abduction, namely that we work in inferring the best explanation by considering different hypothesis.

Angus Menuge:

All right, and so your point is that even if methodological naturalism has a good track record in a nomological science for finding laws, it can be very reasonably and seriously challenged in historical science. Why is that and what would be examples where it would be wildly implausible not to consider a nonphysical cause?

Robert Larmer:

Yeah, see, the fact that explanations in terms of physical causes has a good track record in explaining regularities within science should not and does not automatically justify thinking it's going to have a good record in explaining non-regular events. If you want an analogy, the fact that it's easy to catch pigeons doesn't mean that it's going to be easy to catch foxes. The inductive success we've had in nomological science in terms of natural causes, doesn't automatically transfer over to explaining historical events such as the origin of the first cell or major non-regular events such as the Cambrian explosion.

Angus Menuge:

In particular, you want to say that this failure of methodological naturalism is especially clear in the case of consciousness, the emergence of consciousness, and also agency. Why is that and what's at stake here?

Robert Larmer:

Well, what's telling is that even materialistic philosophers admit what they call the hard problem of consciousness and the difficulty if not impossibility, of explaining it in physical terms. Thomas Nagel, who is himself an atheist and he's very honest, he says, "I don't want God to exist," but he sees the problem. He writes, here's a quote from him, "Conscious subjects and their mental lives are inescapable components of reality, not describable by the physical sciences." There you have a hard-nosed atheist, and he's not alone in saying, "We have a problem in trying to talk about consciousness as a physical phenomenon." Just for example, and you would be very familiar with this as a very fine philosopher of mind yourself, but for example, physical objects can't be true or false. Chairs aren't true or false, but mental states such as beliefs can be true or false.

Angus Menuge:

Right, very good. There's all kinds of properties, subjectivity, intentionality, that don't seem to be physical properties or to be predicted by them. Circling back to what we had discussed before, why in this area in particular does the price of methodological naturalism seem just too high for anybody to pay?

Robert Larmer:

Well, as we've already said, what's at stake is whether we are able to engage in rational investigation of reality. When you ask a scientist why he or she believes something, they're going to talk about evidence interpreted according to methods of logics. Given that non-rational physical causes have no interest in obeying the rules of logic or the rules of inference, insisting on a purely physical account of consciousness undermines any kind of rationality, even to try and justify that position.

Angus Menuge:

Right, so even if we do have reasons, they have got nothing to do with the conclusions that we draw, and that seems to be a dreadful place to end up.

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.

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