

HOWARD VAN TILL'S SUPER-NATURALISM

Gilbert Fulmer

I.

The Christian physicist and astronomer Howard Van Till has argued for an Augustinian interpretation of nature.¹ He explicitly and vigorously rejects the special creation model in which God is said to create species individually as claimed by Christians who style themselves “scientific creationists.” As a practicing scientist himself, Van Till believes that those coreligionists of his have adopted a losing position: for not only is it demonstrably false scientifically, but it denigrates, rather than glorifies, the Creator himself.

Special creation would mean that God did not create the world adequately in the first place and had to intervene later to correct his earlier mistakes. For that reason, Van Till charges special creationists with disparaging God and his power rather than extolling them. To believe God has to improve on his original creation is to believe it was imperfect and, therefore, that God's power is itself less than infinite. And so this model is less pious, less reverent than one in which the universe is originally created to achieve God's full purpose.

Rather than endorsing the special creation model, Van Till believes that the natural world was created with all the capabilities it needs to do what it does. He agrees with non-theistic evolutionists like Daniel Dennett that

[w]e have substantial empirical warrant for presuming that matter and material systems do possess the resident capabilities for self-organization and transformation of the sort envisioned by evolutionary theorizing in sciences such as cosmology and biology. (*NPSG*, p. 126-7; emphasis original)

Modestly, Van Till concedes that he cannot conclusively prove this hypothesis, but he considers it a warranted belief (*NPSG* 126-7).

Van Till calls this model the “Fully Formed Formational Economy Hypothesis” (FFFEH), meaning that nature is fully functional (i.e., capable of functioning autonomously) with regard to everything that happens within it (*NPSG* 126-7). That is, the universe was initially created with all the powers and capabilities required for it to produce every entity that exists and every phenomenon that occurs. Only such a conception of creation, Van Till believes, can do full justice to God's infinite power, wisdom, and goodness.

II

I heartily agree with Van Till's rejection of "scientific creationism," for both his reasons and others. Like Van Till, I recognize that it fails utterly to harmonize with the observed facts of the world, scientific and other. And I believe that no attempt to account for the universe in ultimately animistic terms can succeed for logical reasons. Furthermore, I applaud Van Till's intellectual honesty in attempting to resolve his Christian commitments with his scientific knowledge. But, however honest and ingenious his position may be, I believe it fails to achieve its purpose of reconciling science and Christianity.

To repeat, Van Till claims that the natural order contains all the necessary laws and powers to produce everything that exists and happens within it. Therefore, he holds that no appeal to divine intervention is required to explain natural phenomena—any such appeal would imply, as we saw, the inadequacy of God's original creative work. In other words, whatever happens in the world can be explained naturalistically.

To see what this proposal means, and what radical implications it has for theism, it will be useful to introduce a common distinction between "methodological" and "metaphysical" naturalism. Van Till himself rejects this terminology, saying the phrase "methodological naturalism" retains the "stench" of the concept of naturalism itself. But for our purposes, we can use the distinction as defined, for example, by Michael Ruse in his recent book, *Can a Darwinian Be a Christian?*

The metaphysical naturalist is the person who is an atheist, who does deny that there is anything beyond blind law working on inert matter. The methodological naturalist, who may well be an ardent Darwinian, is one who states that for the purposes of doing science nothing but law will be entertained, but who recognizes that there might be more, in fact or meaning.³

"Methodological" naturalism is no more than the necessary working commitment of any scientist (or, for that matter, any ordinary person almost all the time). It is simply the determination to look for naturalistic explanations of experience since that is a scientist's job and is the most practical approach for anyone faced with something not yet understood. In medicine, engineering, space exploration, plumbing, cooking, and car repair, we would take this for granted. But the methodological practice of seeking a naturalistic explanation does not require any conviction that a naturalistic explanation actually exists. A methodological naturalist can

perfectly well accept the possibility that there is no naturalistic explanation at all perhaps because the only explanation is supernatural or because there simply is no explanation at all. Therefore, methodological naturalism makes no assertions about the world, only about the naturalist's intentions.

"Metaphysical" naturalism, by contrast, *does* make a claim about the world. It claims that, in fact, any correct explanation for any thing, event, or phenomenon that exists must be naturalistic. It claims there *are* no *supernatural* explanations required for anything whatever; indeed, in the version I myself prefer, metaphysical naturalism claims that no *supernaturalistic* explanation is even logically possible. Thus scientists, and the rest of us, can be methodological naturalists by simply following the reasonable procedure of looking for, and usually expecting to find, naturalistic explanations. But to adopt metaphysical naturalism is to make a claim that is not and could not be supported by scientific evidence—a philosophical claim that could be supported, if at all, only by philosophical argument.

Now we can see why Van Till's position is so radical for a theist to take. He asserts that nature is endowed with all necessary capabilities to produce all the entities and phenomena that occur and, therefore, that naturalistic explanations *actually exist* for *everything* (whether they have yet been discovered or not). In making this claim, Van Till goes beyond the methodological naturalism that is the practical necessity of scientific inquiry. Indeed, his position is hard to distinguish at this point from full-scale metaphysical naturalism however distasteful this conclusion would certainly be to him.

III

Since Van Till holds that a naturalistic explanation actually exists for every event and phenomenon that occurs in the natural world, he cannot require divine intervention to explain any of them. And therefore *he cannot in consistency use any such phenomena as arguments for the existence of God*. This conclusion follows directly from his position, and he seems to accept it in principle. But its consequences may reach farther than he recognizes, for it means that he cannot endorse *any a posteriori* argument whatever for the existence of God.

Van Till recognizes that the traditional teleological argument for God is unacceptable. That argument claims that the adaptation of form to function in the structures of living plants and animals could only be explained

by divine intervention in the natural order. In the hallowed examples of William Paley, the teeth of the wolf and the cow were specifically designed by God to serve their respective needs. Of course, Van Till, as a competent contemporary scientist, knows that adaptations like these are fully explained by evolution—a naturalistic explanation requiring no specific divine intervention. This is the whole point of his rejection of the doctrines of the special creationists.

He might be less well pleased, however, to recognize the implications of his position for other arguments employed by theists. For example, theists often appeal to religious experience in support of their beliefs. They sometimes claim that they need no external proofs because they have directly experienced the divine. But their experiences are and always must be phenomena in the world. Thus they must be subject to Van Till's claims about the FFFE: the full economy of nature must be capable of producing the sense of the divine reported by these theists. Therefore, such experiences cannot constitute evidence of divine intervention in the world or of divine existence.

By the same token, Christians commonly cite appeals to miracles as evidence of God's activity. Van Till might be willing to reject the crasser notions of unsophisticated religionists, such as beliefs that images of Jesus appear on vegetables, but the same reasoning applies to miracle beliefs more important to Christian thought including the resurrection itself. For the biblical reports of the bodily resurrection of Jesus are events within nature about events, which, *ex hypothesi*, are within nature. And so Van Till's position commits him to holding that there is a naturalistic explanation for them.

There is no lack of candidate naturalistic explanations for why the contemporary followers of Jesus might have believed he rose from the dead; they were deeply involved emotionally with his life and teaching, they were distraught at the notion that he might have died in vain, they were immersed in a culture that believed in the miraculous, they were subject to all the same frailties of memory and perception as are we all. Such facts contribute to possible naturalistic explanations for why the disciples at the time of Jesus' death might well have believed he was miraculously resurrected even if he was not. Moreover, as is well known, the accounts as preserved in the Bible were committed to writing long after the events occurred and were based on oral accounts from the Christian community. Since Van Till believes all observed events and phenomena can be explained naturalistically, he must accept that some such explanation, whatever it may be, can account for the

disciples' belief in the resurrection. And so it is not open to him to cite that belief as evidence of the existence of God, or, indeed, even in a supernatural resurrection of the body of Jesus.

Or, to consider a different possibility, perhaps the resurrection *did* really occur—that is, perhaps Jesus of Nazareth did suffer biological death and then resumed biological life. If so, Van Till is committed to the position that the phenomenon was a natural one—that some naturalistic explanation, perhaps in terms of laws still unknown to us, accounts for the event.

The Christian apologetic literature abounds with arguments as to why no such naturalistic explanations can be correct. And it is perfectly possible that all of the *specific* naturalistic explanations so far propounded may indeed be incorrect. But the point here is that Van Till is committed to saying that *some* naturalistic explanation *must* be correct! For the Bible and the events it reports are phenomena within experience, and Van Till holds that all experienced phenomena have naturalistic explanations. Consistency forbids him to appeal to divine intervention, even in so crucial a case as this.

Of course, the points about the evidence in the Bible for the resurrection apply to Christian Scripture and to scriptures generally. The contents of the Christian Bible, or any other putatively sacred text, are phenomena in the natural world. As such, by Van Till's own commitments, they must be susceptible to naturalistic explanation. No divine inspiration may be inferred or required for any such writing, and, therefore, no such writing can be claimed to be revealed by divinity. Religion has been studied by historians, psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, and so on, and all these and others have given their various accounts as to why and how religions and their writings have come into being. As before, any or all such explanations offered to date may be incorrect, but Van Till cannot hold that *all possible* naturalistic explanations of scriptures held sacred by his own religion or any other are false. On the contrary, his position requires that he hold that *some* such naturalistic explanation be true.

In addition, Van Till endorses what is often called the "Anthropic Principle Design Argument" (APDA) which holds that the universe is "fine tuned" to produce life, even human life. Supporters of this argument adduce countless natural laws and constants which, they insist, must be almost precisely as they are for the existence of life, and, they maintain, this precise adaptation is so wildly improbable that it cannot be a coincidence. A couple of other philosophers who have defended this argument include William Lane Craig, who says,

. . . it is unimaginably more probable that the universe should be life-prohibiting rather than life-permitting, and the best explanation for the cosmos as it is may well be intelligent design.⁵

Again, Robert M. Augros and George N. Stanciu claim,

The properties of matter . . . on the smallest scale and on the scale of the whole universe appear uniquely suited to life. . . . Life is not accidental Though man is not at the physical center of the universe, he appears to be at the center of its purpose. . . . Hence, the New Story [of science] again leads to a mind that directs the whole universe, all the laws of nature and all the properties of matter, to a goal. To that mind we give the name God.⁶

Such philosophers conclude that this observed “fine-tuning” must be the result of divine planning, thus propounding a modern-day teleological argument. But the same considerations already mentioned apply as well against the APDA: whatever precisely adapted laws and constants are required to give rise to life in the universe, they and their adaptation must, if Van Till’s own FFFEH is consistently posited, have a naturalistic explanation. Though it may seem to the best of contemporary scientific knowledge that there is no naturalistic explanation for the “fine-tuned” natural laws and constants, according to the FFFEH hypothesis some such explanation must exist. It would contradict Van Till’s central hypothesis to claim that a divine explanation is required—for that would mean that nature is not fully capable of producing natural phenomena.

And it is obvious that similar reasoning applies to any *a posteriori* argument for God’s existence whatever form it takes. For by definition *a posteriori* arguments appeal to observed facts, and Van Till’s position is that all facts observed in the natural world can be explained naturalistically. Consequently, he can take no observed facts as evidencing God’s activity or existence.

IV

The choices remaining to Van Till seem limited. Nothing I have argued here would prevent him from appealing to an *a priori* argument for the existence of God such as the ontological argument. But I see no evidence that he wishes to, nor does it seem compatible with his empirical temperament as a practicing scientist. And absent such an appeal, it seems Van Till can give no reason of any sort for believing in his own Fully Formed Functional Economy. It does not follow that Van Till’s position is self-contradictory; it does not prove itself false. But it suffers from perhaps the next most serious fault: its own terms make it impossible to have any reason for believing it to be true. Van Till regards his position as supporting

a supernatural account of the universe. But under scrutiny it seems instead to support an account more naturalistic than even that of most naturalists; indeed, it might be called *super-naturalistic*.

NOTES

¹Howard Van Till, “No Place for a Small God,” in *How Large Is God?* ed. John Marks Templeton (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 1997). Further references to this article will be given parenthetically as NPSG.

²Martin Ruse, *Can a Darwinian Be a Christian?* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001) 268.

³William Lane Craig, in *William Lane Craig and Quentin Smith, Theism, Atheism, and Big Bang Cosmology* (Oxford: OUP, 1995) 268.

⁴Robert M. Augros and George N. Stanciu, *The New Story of Science*, (New York: Bantam, 1984) 69-70.