Both God and Nature: Providential Naturalism as a Middle Way in Contemporary Divine Action Debates

Josh A. Reeves and Peter N. Jordan

Abstract

Of all the theological problems raised by the emergence of modern of science, the question of how to reconcile naturalistic explanations with God's providential oversight of creation is one of the most difficult. In recent decades various forms of theistic naturalism have been proposed, the goal being in each case to provide a framework for reconciling natural causality with God's action. Those theistic naturalisms avoid one problem implicit in earlier divine action theories – deism – but in doing so they run the risk of re-enchanting the world in ways that make all occurrences in nature the direct product of God's will. In this chapter we describe a historic Christian position – providential naturalism – which locates natural causality inside a providential view of the universe.[1] Those who articulated this view recognized the significant causal independence of nature – a cornerstone of modern science – through a distinction between general and special providence, the former referring to a mode of divine action which empowered created entities to bring about effects in nature but without severing their dependence on God. As their example shows, general providence captures and reflects nature's causal integrity, and does so, we claim, without succumbing to either of two extremes – deism, and attributing everything directly to God's will – that Christians should avoid.

Introduction

Judging from the literature of the period, at least twenty-five comets appeared in Europe during the first part of the seventeenth century. These comets were noted because writers felt compelled to interpret their theological significance. A comet in 1652, for example, predicted Oliver Cromwell's dissolution of the Rump Parliament and the spread of Quakerism; comets of 1664 and 1665 were connected to the Great fire of London and the plague that preceded it.[2] Such attempts at celestial divination were hardly new in Christian Europe. Celestial and terrestrial phenomena of all kinds were seen by natural philosophers, theologians, and clergy as signs and omens of future events guided by God's providence. Luther argued, for example, that "[w]hatever moves in the heaven in an unusual way is certainly a sign of God's wrath," a divine sign meant to warn unbelievers and lawbreakers.[3] By the time that Halley's comet was visible again in 1835, however, intellectual opinion about the interpretation of comets had shifted. No longer proclaimed in sermons and broadsheets as signs of the end of the world, comets were instead examined with an eye to whether they might eventually strike the earth, or for their influence on the climate. This is not to say that comet interpretation was fully

---

[1] Early modern providential naturalism is the subject of Peter N. Jordan, *Naturalism in the Christian Imagination: Providence and Causality in Early Modern England* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming). The term first appears in Peter N. Jordan, "Providence and the Affective Benefits of Natural Causality," *Journal of Religion* (forthcoming).

[2] Sara Schechner, *Comets, Popular Culture, and the Birth of Modern Cosmology* (Princeton University Press, 1997), 75-76.

[3] Quoted in Schechner, *Comets*, 47.

secularized — scholars continued to ask, for example, whether Noah's flood could be explained by comets — but rather it is simply to note that comets ceased to be regarded as theological signs, providentially superintended by God to send specific messages to humanity.[4] By this time, comets and other phenomena were examined through the lens of natural causality, and they no longer portended anything for humanity.

This shift in how phenomena are understood and explained, and in what they are thought to signify, is a useful vantage point from which to examine contemporary discussions of divine action in the science-and-religion literature. Sarah Lane Ritchie has described a recent "theological turn" in thinking about divine action, with many scholars opposing how divine action came to be conceptualized in the modern period.[5] Taking the Divine Action Project — a joint venture between the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences and the Vatican Observatory — as representative, Ritchie views modern divine action theories as possessing three key characteristics.[6] The first is noninterventionism, which assumes that God's action is limited to underdetermined areas of nature. The second is an ontological view of the laws of nature, in which those laws are prescriptive of what happens in nature, rather than being "contingent, nonbinding descriptions of regularities."[7] The third is incompatibilism, in which it is assumed that effects in nature are attributable either to God, or to natural laws, but not both.

According to Ritchie, many scholars have become dissatisfied with this modern outlook, and have begun to articulate new — or rediscover old — alternatives. Ritchie gathers those alternatives under the banner of "theistic naturalism." Uniting these theistic naturalisms is the worry that a world governed by the laws of nature is a world that is distant from God — that is to say, a world that is implicitly deistic. Such concerns are of course nothing new; Aubrey Moore articulated a similar concern over a century ago when he asserted that "a theory of occasional intervention implies as its correlative a theory of ordinary absence."[8] Contemporary theistic naturalists nevertheless are responding to the specific form of deism presented by the modern outlook. They refuse the dichotomy between interventionism and noninterventionism because it presumes an "autonomous and self-sufficient" natural world.[9] They also tend to be compatibilists, as they do not regard natural processes "as *ever* occurring apart from relationship with God."[10] And finally, they tend to see the laws of nature as instances of continuous divine activity, and not as ontological descriptions of nature around which God must work. In these ways, theistic naturalisms instead affirm "both a robust theological account of nature, and the explanatory power of the natural sciences."[11]

---

[4] Ibid., 216.
[5] Sarah Lane Ritchie, "Dancing Around the Causal Joint: Challenging the Theological Turn in Divine Action Theories," *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 52 (2017), 361-79; Sarah Lane Ritchie, *Divine Action and the Human Mind* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).
[6] Ritchie, "Dancing Around the Causal Joint," 363-6.
[7] Ibid., 364.
[8] Aubrey L. Moore, *Science and the Faith: Essays on Apologetic Subjects with an Introduction* (K. Paul, Trench, Trübner & Company, 1893), 184.
[9] Ritchie, "Dancing Around the Causal Joint," 367.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid.

From a Christian perspective, the turn to theistic naturalism helpfully resists the ontological naturalism so often insisted upon — erroneously, as Peter Harrison has recently argued — by those who argue for it based on the success of the sciences.[12] Yet we are concerned that in their desire to avoid a deistic view of the God-world relationship, the theistic naturalisms proposed thus far may unintentionally conceive of God's involvement in the created order in ways that imply that God wills everything that happens, meaning that everything which happens has a corresponding reason for it. In other words, we worry that contemporary theistic naturalisms lean toward a doctrine of meticulous providence.[13] Doing so would return us to a view of phenomena as signs of God's pleasure, displeasure, or otherwise.

In this chapter we argue that Christians need to properly recognize the causal integrity of nature that it seems to possess, without at the same time adopting either deism or meticulous providence. To avoid deism they must figure out how to locate natural causes inside a providential view of the world in a way that doesn't force a choice between divine and creaturely action – in other words, they must adopt some form of compatibilism between God and nature. One way that past theologians have done so is through the concept of general providence. General providence gives explanatory purchase to natural causes, while always understanding those causes as ontologically dependent on God. To appeal to general providence, and hence to invoke natural causes to explain phenomena in nature, avoids both ontological naturalism and deism, because everything created always depends at every moment on God, and God is therefore always involved in some way in whatever happens in nature.

Within such a compatibilist perspective, Christians need to conceptualize God's involvement so that nature's regularity depends on God without everything that occurs being directly willed by God, and therefore as having a reason for occurring. Many Christians throughout history have subscribed to meticulous providence and hence have looked for the reasons behind what happens. Yet we believe it is possible to employ an explanatory framework we call providential naturalism in which general providence features prominently, and which recognizes nature's regularity and the explanatory power of natural causes, yet which also helps to resist the notion that everything that happens is willed by God. Such a view of providence – one that presumes that God undergirds nature's regularity, but does not will everything that occurs – helpfully steers clear of the notion that comets and other phenomena in nature communicate divine messages to humanity. Providential naturalism recognizes God's ongoing involvement in nature, and thereby avoids Moore's concern about God's "ordinary absence," while also pushing against claims that God wills everything that occurs in nature.

The Regularity of Nature in Christian Thought

We agree with Ritchie and others in the field of science and religion that it is incumbent upon theologians to take the natural sciences seriously. One way they should do so is by taking seriously scientists' presumption that the natural world is highly regular. By this we mean that objects in the

[12] Peter Harrison, "Naturalism and the Success of Science," *Religious Studies* 56 (2020), 274-91.

[13] Oliver Crisp cites David Fergusson's description as a helpful definition of meticulous providence: "Everything that happens is willed by God and serves some end – nothing lies outside the scope of divine volition and intentionality." Oliver D. Crisp, "Meticulous Providence," in Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders (eds.), *Divine Action and Providence* (Zondervan Academic, 2019), 21-39, 21; David Fergusson, *The Providence of God: A Polyphonic Approach* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 1.

world seem to behave in ways that can usually be explained through appeal to natural causes, and the cause-and-effect relations between objects – ones often described in terms of laws of nature – usually are consistent and do not change unexpectedly over time. This temporal consistency of nature undergirds the tremendous predictive power of the natural sciences, one that enables us to accurately foretell the future paths of comets or the energy that will be produced by a nuclear power plant. Although many Christians throughout history have resisted the idea that nature is completely and unbreakably regular, those who want to take the natural sciences seriously today need to figure out how best to incorporate this regularity of nature into their theological picture of the world. Doing so means investigating the relationship between that regularity (and hence explanation through natural causes), God's action, and God's will.

Reflection on the relations between these has a long history, one that began well before the Christian era. The Presocratic philosophers are often viewed as having initiated a critical shift away from mythological or supernatural explanations (such as those of Homer and Hesiod) toward naturalistic forms of explanation. Yet in recent years, historians have increasingly questioned that narration of ancient philosophy, and have begun instead to realize that many ancient philosophers were not pure naturalists who assumed a completely regular world in which divinity was utterly absent. Daryn Lehoux has suggested that Epicureans may be the only figures who genuinely qualify as such.[14] Otherwise, many ancient thinkers appear to have regarded the natural world as being in constant relationship to divinity. David Sedley, for example, has shown that many were creationists who saw divine agency at work in nature.[15] Peter Harrison has similarly observed that for later figures like Aristotle, God "looks more like a source of the regularity (and hence intelligibility) of nature's operations than an unhelpfully disruptive influence that will make scientific explanation impossible."[16] Lehoux has thus concluded that "the gods never really go away" from ancient science, which is another way of saying that among ancient thinkers there was not (as is often assumed) a clear shift from the mythological/supernatural to the natural.[17] Rather, they intermingled the natural and supernatural in complex and interesting ways, and often invoked divinity (or divinities) to "account for nature's regularity, complexity, and beauty."[18]

Many Christians historically have similarly seen God as intimately involved in nature, and their scriptures seem to give few reasons to see nature as an orderly realm filled with regularities explicable through natural causes. In the Old Testament, for example, there is no Hebrew word that corresponds to nature as an independent realm, and occurrences in the world are typically attributed to God's immediate action and will. Proverbs 16:33 is exemplary here – "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord" – in its suggestion that God determines even seemingly chance outcomes. Both the animal kingdom and inanimate objects like snow are similarly seen as the product of God's direct action in Psalm 148: "Praise the Lord from the earth, you sea monsters and all depths; Fire and hail, snow and mist, storm winds that fulfill His word. You mountains and all you hills, you fruit trees

[14] Daryn Lehoux, "'All Things are Full of Gods': Naturalism in the Classical World," in Peter Harrison and Jon H. Roberts (eds.), *Science Without God? Rethinking the History of Scientific Naturalism* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 19-36, 36.
[15] David Sedley, *Creationism and its Critics in Antiquity* (University of California Press, 2007).
[16] Harrison, "Naturalism," 278.
[17] Lehoux, "'All Things are Full of Gods,'" 20.
[18] Ibid., 36.

and all you cedars; You wild beasts and all tame animals, you creeping things and you winged fowl." The New Testament contains more than a dozen references to the Greek word *phusis*, but there the term is used as a contrast to that which is abnormal or perverse (such as when Paul in Romans refers to acts that are "against nature").[19] Paul at times refers to what nature teaches (such as in 1 Corinthians 11:14), but this refers to what can be known about God's law, rather than to an order of nature that operates autonomously. Given this inheritance, it is little surprise that many Christians throughout history have claimed that God wills everything that occurs in nature, and that God is constantly active in it. Alfred Freddoso captures this outlook well: "Central to the western theistic understanding of divine providence is the conviction that God is the sovereign Lord of nature… He is always and everywhere active in it by His power. The operations of nature, be they minute or catastrophic, commonplace or unprecedented, are the work of His hands, and without His constant causal influence none of them would or could occur."[20]

Arguably the majority tradition in Christian theology has thus tended to see nature as immediately reflecting the divine will. One way God's sovereignty over nature has been emphasized is by attributing nature's orderliness directly to God, and by viewing regularities in nature as the product of God's regular action. As John Calvin argued, any regularity in the universe is attributable to God's consistency in dealing with nature, rather than to the regular operation of causal powers embedded within it. The "carnal mind," Calvin wrote, "imagines that all things are sufficiently sustained by the energy divinely infused into them at first. But faith must penetrate deeper … [and] infer that he is also a Governor and Preserver, and that, not by producing a kind of general motion in the machine of the globe as well as in each of its parts, but by a special providence sustaining, cherishing, superintending, all the things which he has made, to the very minutest, even to a sparrow."[21] Even inanimate objects for Calvin only possess their power to exert force "in so far as directed by the immediate hand of God."[22] Calvin is here articulating a position tending toward occasionalism, in which causes and effects in nature are merely the occasion for God to act, and God is the only genuine cause in the universe.[23] If Calvin is any indication, Christians have often been reluctant to grant nature a significant degree of causal independence, to recognize its regularity, and to see natural causes as genuinely explanatory.

Despite the persistent pressure from the scriptures to emphasize divine sovereignty and to recognize God's direct providential involvement in and control of nature, at different points a conception of nature as possessing delegated but genuine order and regularity of its own has nevertheless emerged in the Christian tradition. Historians have referred to the "rediscovery of nature" in the twelfth century, when theologians incorporated Greek natural and moral philosophy into a Christian perspective. Aristotle had argued that regularities in nature reflect the essential nature of individual things, whether living or inanimate. Theologians like Thomas Aquinas who made extensive use of Aristotle could thus

---

[19] Joseph Henry Thayer, Carl Ludwig Wilibald Grimm, and Christian Gottlob Wilke, *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Coded with the Numbering System from Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Hendrickson, 1996).
[20] Alfred J. Freddoso, "Medieval Aristotelianism and the Case Against Secondary Causation in Nature," in Thomas V. Morris (ed.), *Divine and Human Action: Essays in the Metaphysics of Theism* (Cornell University Press, 1988), 74-118, 74.
[21] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 1.16.1, 114.
[22] Ibid. 1.16.2, 115.
[23] Peter Harrison, "The Development of the Concept of Laws of Nature," in Fraser Watts (eds.), *Creation: Law and Probability* (Routledge, 2008), 13-36.

refer to the "order that God has implanted in nature."[24] Within this framework, "the natural" referred to the regular operation of created causes undergirded by a form of divine action that facilitated but did not compete with or replace those causes. This natural order was at times interrupted by the "supernatural," when God acted above or beyond created causes.[25]

Early modern theologians affirmed this understanding of nature by distinguishing between two modes of God's providential oversight of the created order. In the first, known as *general* or *ordinary* providence, the world is sufficiently regular in its operation that natural causes can explain whatever occurs in the world. During those periods of time when the world is governed by general providence, God's creative and sustaining action brings created entities into existence and energises them with the power they needed to influence other created entities; to use language typical at the time, God creates, preserves, and concurs with created entities. Like their medieval forebears, early modern thinkers also believed that God at times miraculously alters the regular course of natural causes through special acts, ones that surpass what the created order can accomplish during general providence. This second mode of divine government is known as *special* or *extraordinary* providence. For much of the time, however, the world operates in the mode of general providence.

These two modes of providence can be seen in the writings of William Pemble (1591/2-1623), theologian and tutor at Magdalene College, Oxford. Pemble wrote that "Providence is divided into Ordinary, when God governeth the world, and things of the world, according to the Order and Lawes which himselfe set in the Creation: and Extraordinary, when hee worketh either against, or beside that order so appointed; as in working miracles."[26] The main difference in these two types of providence has to do with God's action in relation to the order of nature. According to the prominent Puritan theologian and preacher William Ames, God has "appointed from the beginning" an "order in things," an order which "requires, that some certain things goe before, and … some certain thing follow after."[27] Ames refers to this primal order as the "Law of nature," one that arises "from the force and efficacy of that never to bee revoked Word of God given in the beginning."[28] Under general providence, God upholds this regular order of nature. Under special or extraordinary providence, by contrast, God

[24] Harrison, "Development," 14. For a contemporary discussion of Aquinas see Michael J. Dodds, *Unlocking Divine Action: Contemporary Science and Thomas Aquinas* (Catholic University of America Press, 2012).
[25] Peter Harrison, "Introduction," in Peter Harrison and Jon H. Roberts (eds.), *Science Without God? Rethinking the History of Scientific Naturalism* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 1-18, 8. Michael Shank has claimed that naturalistic approaches to explanation became "widespread and endemic" in the learned culture of late medieval Christian, Jewish, and Muslim. Faculties of arts in the new medieval universities became the institutional home of methodologically naturalistic forms of explanation. The separation of subject areas at the time – reflected structurally in the separation of arts faculties from faculties of theology – led natural philosophers to focus on chains of proximate causes that presumed an "ordinary course of nature," and to treat the natural in naturalistic fashion. Michael H. Shank, "Naturalist Tendencies in Medieval Science," in Peter Harrison and Jon H. Roberts (eds.), *Science Without God? Rethinking the History of Scientific Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 37-57. Thanks to the primary/secondary causation framework, the naturalistic explanation characteristic of the medieval era nevertheless assumed an "indispensable divine involvement." Harrison, "Naturalism," 279.
[26] William Pemble, *A Treatise on the Providence of God* (London, 1635), 279.
[27] William Ames, *The Marrow of Sacred Divinity* (London, 1642), 46.
[28] Ames, *Marrow*, 46.

"provideth for things beyond the usuall, and appointed order."[29] Such miracles represent "operations[s] above the order appointed."[30]

As Pemble and Ames indicate, early modern thinkers deployed what we are calling a providential naturalism framework in which the concept of general providence captures nature's regularity and causal integrity. During this mode of providence, God undergirds nature, yet natural causes can explain what happens. Although many early modern figures interpreted providential naturalism within a meticulous providence outlook by asserting that everything that happens (whether because of natural causes or supernatural ones) is willed by God, others at the time implied through their criticisms that it need not be understood in that way. Several early modern providential naturalists criticized their contemporaries who insisted upon a meticulous providence understanding of occurrences in nature and wanted to read events in nature as signs from God. They did so by (for example) arguing that those who read nature as filled with messages from God were superstitious, or suffered from melancholy, or were dangerous "enthusiasts." They also suggested that they were ignorant of the true, natural, causes behind much of what happened in nature. By claiming that most phenomena can be explained through natural causes, they hoped others would cease viewing so many phenomena as divine signs, and would thereby avoid the impieties often thought to result from such fanciful thinking.[31]

Since the early modern period, the scope of general providence (for those who adhere to it) has expanded as more and more phenomena have come to be explained through natural causality. Eventually, those who subscribed to a laws-of-nature conception of nature's order insisted that nature's laws were completely uniform in their operation. As Matthew Stanley has shown, that view was widespread among scientists of Christian persuasion in the nineteenth century, although David Hume had identified its precursors as early as the middle of the eighteenth:

> Many theists, even the most zealous and refined, have denied a particular providence, and have asserted, that the Sovereign mind or first principle of all things, having fixed general laws, by which nature is governed, gives free and uninterrupted course to these laws, and disturbs not, at every turn, the settled order of events by particular volitions. From the beautiful connexion, say they, and rigid observance of established rules, we draw the chief argument for theism.[32]

As Hume here notes, nature came to be viewed at least in some theological circles as the product of a master craftsman whose wisdom is reflected in its design, rather than in God's immediate providential control over each outcome.[33] Such moves highlighted the regularity of nature, and further increased the explanatory scope of natural causality. Yet they also opened the way to viewing the laws responsible for that regularity simply *as* nature, ones that have no need for God.[34] It is with this view of

---

[29] Ibid., 47.

[30] Ibid., 47.

[31] See Jordan, *Naturalism in the Christian Imagination*, for more on this.

[32] David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, 1757, N 6.2, Bea 52-3. Matthew Stanley, *Huxley's Church and Maxwell's Demon: From Theistic Science to Naturalistic Science* (University of Chicago Press, 2014).

[33] Margaret J. Osler, "From Immanent Natures to Nature as Artifice: The Reinterpretation of Final Causes in Seventeenth-Century Natural Philosophy," *The Monist* 79 (1996), 388-407.

[34] "[T]his approach was equally susceptible to a purely naturalistic reading, on the condition that the incessant and regular operations of God were reconceptualized simply as 'nature'." Peter Harrison, "Laws of God or Laws of Nature? Natural Order in the Early Modern Period," in Peter Harrison and Jon H. Roberts (eds.), *Science Without God? Rethinking the History of Scientific Naturalism* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 58-76, 76.

natural laws (i.e., as features of nature itself) that the modern divine action theories described above have often worked, and to which Ritchie's theistic naturalists have responded.

Providential Naturalism: Between Deism and Meticulous Providence

As this historical sketch suggests, Christian theologians have often worried that a strong concept of nature's orderliness and regularity effectively makes God superfluous to nature. This concern can be seen in a recent book surveying how ten major theologians from the past two centuries have dealt with modern science.[35] The main theological concern outlined in the book is not evolution (as one might expect), but rather pictures of the world as a mechanism operating according to laws. Such laws seem to remove God from nature and lead to other major theological problems. As one scholar summarizes the problem, "Modernity's conception of the God-world relationship as a mechanism affected both the doctrine of creation and theological anthropology and misconstrued what it means to live in God's creation and exist in relationship with each other."[36]

One possible way of dealing with this worry would be to adopt an occasionalist understanding of nature, an approach that Freddoso has called a "remarkably devout theory of divine causation."[37] That approach was popular among selected figures during the scientific revolution, and seems to be behind Newton's denial that the force of gravity is intrinsic to matter (a view which might seem to make God unnecessary). Newton instead insisted that the laws of nature reflect God's direct external control over completely inert and passive matter.[38] Another possible response is that recently proposed theologians like Jurgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg, who – like some of the theistic naturalists Ritchie discusses – have reasserted the Holy Spirit as the animating principle of the universe. Our concern with such proposals, however, is that in their effort to distance themselves from deism, their affirmations of divine involvement may lend credence to the idea that God wills everything that occurs in nature — that is, they may inadvertently lead to a doctrine of meticulous providence.

Inspired by the providential naturalists of the early modern period, we suggest that any doctrine of providence that takes modern science seriously must take account of the regularity of nature. We contend that a mode of providence akin to general providence helps to do that.[39] This mode of

[35] Geoffrey H. Fulkerson and Joel Thomas Chopp, *Science and the Doctrine of Creation: The Approaches of Ten Modern Theologians* (InterVarsity Press, 2021).
[36] William B. Whitney, *Problem and Promise in Colin E. Gunton's Doctrine of Creation* (Brill, 2013), 74. Whitney is summarizing the themes in Gunton's work, especially Colin E. Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many* (Cambridge University Press, 1993).
[37] Freddoso, "Medieval Aristotelianism," 77.
[38] Harrison, "Development."
[39] Lydia Jaeger has recently invoked a comparable general/special providence distinction: "In 'general' providence, God works through and in natural means; thus, the outcomes of his actions are identical to what we expect from the scientific description (as long as our theories get it at least reasonably right). With miracles [i.e., special providence], the scientific predictions are superseded by a greater power. As long as one keeps firmly to creation as the starting point of thought, God's action and scientific description can be jointly upheld in both cases. In the first, the divine primary cause sustains the natural means so that the laws of nature are observed. Thus the result conforms to (correct) scientific models. In the second case, an event contrary to scientific theory occurs. There is thus no need to strive for a scientific rendering of such

providence reflects God's permission of created entities to act freely according to the powers they possess or the laws to which they are subject. It precludes conceiving of nature as completely autonomous from God, yet its acknowledgement that natural causes can explain much that happens helps to dissuade from the idea that everything that happens does so because it is immediately willed by God. Within a providential naturalism framework, general providence thus gives considerable scope to natural causes to explain phenomena in the created order. It assumes a natural order which possesses a considerable degree of integrity and regularity, and which is therefore amenable to scientific investigation, but which is also always undergirded in some manner by divine action. Rather than natural causality serving as an alternative to providence, it is one means by which God providentially governs the created order.

Providential naturalists can work with a range of philosophies of nature and conception of the God/world relationship. One could, for example, hold an "enchanted" mechanist view of the universe where God is ever-present to a world that operates by universal natural laws. Alternatively, one might affirm a doctrine of general providence in which natural objects have "inherent natures" (as in Aristotelian natural philosophy) and God works according to something like a primary/secondary causality framework. Numerous historians have argued that the modern notion of laws of nature emerged only in the early modern period and represented only one way of conceptualizing the orderliness of nature. A much more common way of doing so in the medieval period was through Aristotle's concept of natures, the regular behavior of which could also be described as "lawful." Regardless of how these are conceptualized, the key point is that through something like a concept of general providence, one can respect the regularity of nature and maintain a non-deistic view of creation while resisting the claim that God wills everything that occurs in nature and that everything therefore has a specific reason for its occurrence.

General providence differs from deism through its insistence that God's ongoing creation, preservation, and concurrence creation make the "natural" mode of operation of nature simultaneously the product of a form of divine action that does not compete with or, or replace, natural causes. In this, providential naturalism affirms the Christian categories of creation, conservation, concurrence, and even (to some extent) governance, while enabling natural causality to have genuine explanatory power. Without that conservation and concurrence, every creature, asserts William Ames, would "reduce … into nothing."[40] While providential naturalists historically have recognized that creation has a considerable degree of regularity to it, that regularity has always been understood as able to be interrupted at any time. In contrast to deism, providential naturalism leaves open the possibility of God's miraculous acts in creation, ones that bring about effects beyond what created entities can produce during their regular operation. The operation of natural causality, that is, can be interrupted by acts of special providence.

---

an event. The very fact that it does not comply with a scientific description provides evidence for its special status as a miracle." Lydia Jaeger, "Against Physicalism-Plus-God: How Creation Accounts for Divine Action in Nature's World," *Faith and Philosophy* 29 (2012), 295-312, 307.

[40] Ames, *Marrow*, 48.

Based on this understanding of providential naturalism, we part company with those in the science and religion community who might claim that general providence would constrain how God acts in the world. It is inelegant, they claim, or perhaps even unintelligible, for God to set up an order of nature and then violate the general order of nature with miracles. As Taede Smedes puts it, "to argue that God works against the laws of nature, or suspends them temporarily, would make the concept of God inconsistent."[41] By contrast, it is the regularity of nature that provides the background against which human choices are possible, and against which special divine interventions are visible.

As the earlier Freddoso quote indicates, Christians have often found it difficult to affirm the genuine freedom of nature. Since nature is not an agent with free will, the line of reasoning seems to go, natural phenomena must reflect the will of God, and everything in nature must be exactly how God wishes it to be. The problem with this view is that it leads one to look for the reasons why things occur, and to therefore look for meaning(s) in what happens in nature. Historically, such explanations have typically centered on divine judgment. Christians throughout history have looked at natural phenomenon as what Alexandra Walsham calls a "sensitive gauge of human misconduct and moral disorder."[42] All manner of unusual events have been seen as signs of God's judgement, or of the state of a person's (or nation's) soul, and God's sovereign government of the created order has been understood as God's "constant providential intervention in temporal affairs."[43] For the providential naturalist, however, general providence gives room for natural causes to operate. In most times and places, explanations that appeal to natural causes will therefore be sufficient. Giving general providence considerable latitude resists viewing large numbers of phenomena in the created order as miracles. It also lends weight to the idea that what happens in nature doesn't need an additional layer of explanation or reasoning beyond natural causality to explain it. As some early modern figures were beginning to appreciate, an insistence on natural causality during general providence can help to resist undisciplined claims that phenomena in nature communicate divine messages.

Providential naturalism's insistence on natural causality as explanatorily powerful can help to discourage looking for the reasons for everything that happens, and so avoids exacerbating the problem of natural evil. The alternative to recognizing that natural causality is responsible for hurricanes, earthquakes, tornadoes, and viruses is that they become directly attributable to God's will. In our view, general providence means that events in nature do not directly reflect God's will, but instead are permitted to occur and can do so thanks to the causal integrity that nature possesses and that God gives to it. Most events in nature, then, are not acts of special providence but instead reflect a different (and less direct) manner of God's action in the world.

---

[41] Taede Smedes, "Beyond Barbour or Back to Basics? The Future of Science-and-Religion and the Quest for Unity," *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 43 (2008), 235-58, 243.
[42] Alexandra Walsham, "Sermons in the Sky: Apparitions in Early Modern Europe," *History Today* April 2001, 56-63, 59.
[43] Walsham, "Sermons," 59.

This view accords well with David Fergusson's argument that the "sovereignty of God should be constructed in promissory terms, rather than in a total control that is everywhere and always exercised … The fit between divine volition and the order of nature and history has been too tightly calibrated for many centuries."[44] We think providential naturalism as a Christian view of nature is promising because of its calibration of providence and natural causality. In a world of suffering and increasing climate events resulting from human choices, it is theologically unwise to attribute all events in nature to God's will, and to see everything that happens as bearing a divine message for humanity. This is not to deny God's ongoing involvement in nature, or to suggest that humans are alone in the universe or that nature must be disenchanted. But it does mean taking considerable care in articulating how God is involved. It also means that finding the meaning(s) in occurrences in nature will need considerable theological discernment, for it cannot simply be assumed that merely because something happened it therefore *has* a meaning.

Conclusion

This chapter has addressed a key issue raised by the theological turn in divine action: In stressing God's involvement in nature in order to distance themselves from deism, do proponents of that turn give insufficient explanatory power to natural causality, and lead us back to a doctrine of meticulous providence in which every event is communicatively meaningful? In response, we have been asking: Is it possible to develop an understanding of nature that makes space for its regularity without giving into deism or ontological naturalism, on the one hand, or meticulous providence on the other?

We believe that it possible for Christians today to deploy a version of providential naturalism, and thus of general providence, in which natural causality features prominently, in which miracles are also possible, and which does not entail a meticulous providential view of God as willing everything that occurs in the world. Something like providential naturalism will enable Christians to safeguard the ontological priority of God upon which theistic naturalists insist, without collapsing the ontological distinction between God and the world in ways that might make the world divine (as in pantheism), that might make God the only true causal agent (as in occasionalism), or that might make God immediately responsible for absolutely everything that transpires in nature (as in theories of meticulous providence). It also gives Christians a view of nature that is not inherently deistic (such as motivated the theological turn in the first place). Providential naturalism recognizes God's involvement in nature — thereby avoiding Moore's concern about God's "ordinary absence" — and at the same time safeguards against claims that God wills everything that takes place in nature.

Acknowledgement

This publication was made possible in part through the support of a grant (#61651) from the John Templeton Foundation. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the John Templeton Foundation.

[44] Fergusson, *Providence of God*, 300.