

# DISCERNING THE LIMITS OF RELIGIOUS NATURALISM

by *William A. Rottschaef*er

*Abstract.* In response to my “How to Make Naturalism Safe for Supernaturalism: An Evaluation of Willem Drees’s Supernaturalistic Naturalism” (Rottschaefer 2001), Willem Drees maintains that I have misunderstood his purpose and views and have failed to make the case against his view that naturalism is intrinsically limited. In this response, I comment on these concerns.

*Keywords:* Willem B. Drees; empirical theology; limit questions; naturalism; supernaturalism; underdetermination.

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In response to my “How to Make Naturalism Safe for Supernaturalism: An Evaluation of Willem Drees’s Supernaturalistic Naturalism” (Rottschaefer 2001), Willem Drees maintains that I have misunderstood his purpose and views. In addition, he argues that I have failed to make the case against his view that naturalism is intrinsically limited. Finally, he maintains that I have provided little help in understanding and appreciating the empirical theology that both of us espouse.

In this response, I shall comment on the first two of these concerns. My goal is to promote the kind of positive dialogue concerning the relationships between philosophical naturalism and theology, broadly conceived, that I understand Drees to seek.

## PURPOSES AND VIEWS

First, I address Drees’s concern that I have misunderstood both his purpose and his views. Drees asserts that his naturalism is not designed for the purpose of saving supernaturalism by making the former safe for it. His, he contends, is a *discovered* naturalism that has consequences for theology,

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not one *constructed* to render a dangerous naturalism compatible with theology. But I have not contended that Drees fabricates a naturalism in order to make it safe for supernaturalism. Indeed, I maintain that Drees's intentions, whatever they be, are irrelevant to the question about the relationships between naturalism and supernaturalism.<sup>1</sup> Drees's account of the role of naturalism in theology is an attractive position precisely because he maintains that naturalism is intrinsically limited and, thereby, not inherently antithetical to all forms of theology. As such, his views contrast sharply with generally held positions on the relationship between naturalism and theology. Theologians, scholars in religious studies, and philosophers of religion often find naturalism to be antithetical to supernaturalistic theology. Drees's naturalism merits careful study, because, if it proves to be an accurate characterization of naturalism, it has the consequence of making naturalism compatible with at least several forms of supernaturalistic theology. The introductory paragraphs of my essay make these points.

But Drees also objects to my characterization of his view as *supernaturalistic* naturalism. Although he does indicate that I attempt to be careful in my use of the term *supernatural*, he finds it to have Christian connotations that he rejects. There is no doubt that the term does have such connotations. But—no play on words intended—it seems to be a *natural* for the contrast between ontologies that Drees has in mind. Nevertheless, despite his remonstrance about my failure to understand his view, Drees concedes that my use of the term does capture his position (Drees 2001, 459). Drees speaks of a transcendent realm in terms of “source,” “ground” and “mystery.” Moreover, he contends that his naturalism leaves open various theological options such as process theology and the postulation of an atemporal source of reality. Indeed, he argues explicitly that his naturalism leaves open the question whether there is a transcendent source of existence.<sup>2</sup> This, in my view, is sufficient to contrast it with a naturalistic ontology that does not allow for transcendence of any sort. So, if Drees prefers to use different terms to designate the ontology of the transcendent, that is fine with me. I conclude that Drees's naturalism is open to transcendence so described. It is a transcendent naturalism.

But, even if we are talking about the same thing, Drees contends that I have not understood what it is he is claiming about naturalism and its implications for views about a transcendent realm. He criticizes me for not discerning the difference between supporting a position and being open to it. Thus, he finds that I have incorrectly maintained that he holds that naturalism *supports* contentions about a transcendent realm. Drees maintains that he merely holds naturalism to be *open* to contentions about a transcendent realm.<sup>3</sup> He claims that his naturalism is merely compatible with certain sorts of views about the transcendent, not that it provides any epistemic justification for them.

I find this response interesting for the following reasons. First, in other

papers Drees has argued that his version of naturalism *definitively rules out* some theological positions (see Drees 1998). Even in his response to my essay, he notes that he is in agreement with me in rejecting transcendent intervention in the natural world (Drees 2001, 464). Thus, Drees's account of naturalism does not merely show that naturalism is open to views about the transcendent. Indeed, depending on his understanding of interventionism, Drees's naturalism could be understood to undercut all theistic religious traditions. This is hardly a neutral naturalism. On the other hand, Drees's naturalism, as we have seen, does not rule out all appeals to the transcendent. It is open to, in the sense of being logically compatible with, the postulation of a transcendent realm. Thus, the kind of naturalism that Drees claims to have discovered does not merely show itself to be logically compatible with assertions about the transcendent. It is, in fact, incompatible with some such assertions and not others.

It is precisely these two characteristics of his naturalism that, if they accurately capture the phenomenon of naturalism, change the current state of the question in the discussions between naturalism and theology. Naturalism has often been understood to imply that *all* claims asserting the existence of a transcendent realm are epistemically unjustified. But Drees's intrinsically limited naturalism has different sorts of consequences for (some) claims about the transcendent. First, if Drees is correct, his naturalism eliminates some of the support that naturalism is thought to provide for an attranscendent metaphysics by showing naturalism to be logically compatible with some claims about the transcendent rather than antithetical to all such claims. Second, in doing so, it removes apparent falsifiers of claims about some forms of transcendence. In these two ways, it provides a positive change in the epistemic status of some claims about the transcendent. Consequently, in the current dialectical situation, Drees's naturalism, if correct, accomplishes significantly more than establishing the openness of naturalism to theology.

Thus, I conclude that I have accurately represented Drees's claims about the consequences of his naturalism for theological claims about the transcendent. In the end, Drees seems to concede this, claiming, "I do acknowledge that we disagree on limit questions and hence on the feasibility of a naturalistic understanding of reality as a whole, which has consequences for the theology I consider justified" (Drees 2001, 459).

#### THE INTRINSIC LIMITS OF NATURALISM

Drees locates the sources for his position about the limitations of naturalism in "argument and reflection, rooted in knowledge of the world" (Drees 2001, 460).<sup>4</sup> In doing so, he claims that he does not go beyond the confines of methodological and epistemological naturalism. He also concedes that ontology and method are connected (p. 460). These remarks lead me

to believe that, contrary to his previously published work, Drees now accepts epistemic and methodological naturalism. But, of course, the reader may be wondering how Drees can make this sort of concession and still maintain his original position about the limits of naturalism. Indeed, in my original essay I argued that, despite his announced rejection of methodological and epistemic naturalism, his claims about limited naturalism depend on implicit commitments to the former sorts of naturalism. But it is these very commitments, I argued, that render his claims about the intrinsic limitations of naturalism suspect. Nevertheless, Drees seems to neither discern the import of his concession nor recognize that he now needs to show that commitments to methodological and epistemic naturalism require a reexamination of his claims to have discovered that naturalism is limited.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, in his response he continues to argue for one of the defining characteristics of his limited naturalism, namely, underdetermination. He persists with his claim about the underdetermination of theological claims by low-level naturalistic metaphysical claims by appealing to the same sorts of considerations that he has in earlier works. He does this while conceding my contention that underdetermination is temporally indexed, thus unwittingly, it appears, undermining his own position. Let me address in turn the several ways in which he attempts to support his position.

First, Drees likens his view about the limitations of naturalism to Gödel's thesis about the limitations of arithmetic. Gödel has shown that arithmetic is limited because it must remain incomplete to be consistent. By analogy, Drees argues that naturalism is limited because of the existence of unanswerable limit questions. Drees, of course, does not contend that he has established his view in the definitive way that Gödel has, since he is dealing with constraints on empirical rather than mathematical knowledge. The problem with Drees's claim is that the analogy fails. Suppose that one could establish that an empirically based low-level metaphysics is incomplete in the way the arithmetic is incomplete. That is, suppose that for a system of empirically based, low-level metaphysical claims to be consistent it must be incomplete. Some of its claims cannot be elements of a consistent deductive system. It does not follow from this assumption that there are any unanswerable questions in such a low-level metaphysics. What follows is merely that some answers will not be deductive consequences of other parts of the system. Though such a system is deductively incomplete, it may still answer all relevant questions. The source of answers to some questions will not be either postulates of the system or valid deductive consequences of those postulates. If so, there are no limit questions in that system, that is, no relevant questions that are unanswerable.

Second, Drees argues that the constraints on naturalism that give rise to limit questions are of the sort that a Kantian perspective suggests. Human knowers come to their cognitive pursuits with certain categories that limit

the kinds of questions they can answer. This response may seem particularly surprising, because a few paragraphs earlier in his response Drees has claimed that the nature of the questions themselves, not the structure of our cognitive capacities, is the major source of limit questions (2001, 461). The former sort of defense of the existence of limit questions renders the latter sort otiose.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, and more importantly, Drees's appeal to Kant is a problematic one. As is well known, Kant argued, using his transcendental methodology, that knowledge of Euclidean geometry and Newtonian physics is synthetic a priori. As such, the claims of physics and geometry are necessarily true. This necessity derives not from things in themselves but from the categories and forms constitutive of the human mind. According to Kant, we humans are prevented by the categories of our mind from understanding space, time, and physical objects as they are in themselves. We know them only as they appear to us. Similarly, Drees appeals to a Kantian conception of the mind and its capacities to argue that there are questions about transcendent reality that are beyond the capacity of the human mind to answer. However, it now seems clear that Kant was wrong about Euclidean geometry and Newtonian physics. We make use of non-Euclidean and non-Newtonian concepts; in so doing, we pose and answer questions that Kant's nonempirical transcendental method had barred us from. If we possess inbuilt cognitive structures, they are best understood as evolutionarily based. But such inbuilt structures do not seem to place any intrinsic limit on the kinds of questions that we can pursue and answer. If there are limitations, they are, as I have argued in my essay, contingent, not necessary. Indeed, Drees seems to have conceded this point by accepting my notion of temporally indexed underdetermination.

Nevertheless, since Drees does not elaborate on his reference to Kant, it is not clear that he has these Kantian limitations in mind. Perhaps he is referring to the Kantian view that the ideas of reason, that is, of soul, world, and God, are necessarily devoid of empirical content. This would fit the fact that it is certain sorts of theological metaphysical questions that Drees finds unanswerable. I shall not explore this possibility, as it will lead us too far afield. However, I note that both Drees's generally realistic epistemology and his position that naturalism definitively rules out certain supernaturalistic positions seem to be at odds with this sort of Kantian approach. Nor is the methodological and epistemic naturalism that he now seems to accept compatible with the transcendental method, by means of which Kant attempted to establish limits on human knowledge of both nature and transcendent realities.<sup>7</sup>

Next Drees rehearses his pessimistic induction argument that we humans have failed to answer certain sorts of questions in the past, so we will do so in the future. But he cannot consistently hold the conclusion of his

pessimistic induction and concede, as he does in his response, that all underdetermination is temporally indexed, as I have defined it. So let me briefly review my discussion of underdetermination in an attempt to understand Drees's continued adherence to his pessimistic induction.

In my essay I distinguish three sorts of underdetermination: (1) necessary, (2) de facto but permanent, and (3) de facto but temporary; the latter I call temporally indexed. I argue that past failures to answer limit questions—for instance, why there is something rather than nothing—do not alone allow us to conclude that such questions are necessarily unanswerable, or even that they are contingently but permanently unanswerable. To establish either necessary or de facto but permanent limits, the fact of past failure must be supplemented by claims about the nature of the questions themselves or the limitations of the cognitive agents entertaining these questions. But Drees has done no more in his response to my essay than to suggest these factors as possible sources of limitations. Moreover, as I have already argued, these suggestions are not persuasive. In addition, if in fact Drees does concede that underdetermination is temporally indexed in the way that I have characterized it in my essay, he has conceded my major critique of his view about the existence of limit questions. The only limit questions that naturalism need concede are those that have not been answered for some period of time and that currently remain unanswered. But this sort of limitation on our capacities for answering theological metaphysical questions says nothing about the permanent unanswerability of these questions.

In addition, the reader should note that, while conceding a role for methodology as well as ontology in his characterization of naturalism, Drees distinguishes between empirical support and coherence. He seems to consider the feature of coherence to be distinct from empirical support and to associate only the latter with issues of underdetermination. However, as I indicate in my first essay, discussions of underdetermination, while distinguishing between empirical support and coherence as different modes of epistemic justification, retain appeals to coherence as ways to eliminate underdetermination. I use appeals to coherence when I distinguish in my essay between *empirical* and *evidential* underdetermination. Empirical underdetermination does not imply evidential underdetermination. Thus, I argued that, though it could be the case that two competing theories may both account equally well for the current *empirical* evidence, nevertheless, these competing theories are not necessarily underdetermined by the *evidence*. For one of them may better cohere with other accepted theories. The classical case is, as I mentioned in my essay, the empirical underdetermination of Ptolemean and Copernican astronomy in the early sixteenth century. Because of its coherence with Aristotelian physics, Ptolemean astronomy was epistemically preferable to Copernican theory. The theories were empirically but not evidentially underdetermined. The same con-

sideration applies to the evaluation of theological accounts, to use Drees's term. Drees seems to have missed the distinction between empirical and evidential underdetermination and its import for his argument for the existence of limit questions.

That brings me to Drees's discussion of the limit question, Why is there something rather than nothing? Drees accepts Grünbaum's claim that the practice of science shows that scientists accept certain states as ones that require no explanation. Thus, although the Aristotelians required an explanation of all motion, constant and accelerated, Newtonians took straight-line constant motion to require no explanation. Drees argues that this practice shows that unsupported assumptions always lie at the heart of the scientific enterprise. Each new successful research program has its set of assumptions. He concludes that such unsupported assumptions are examples of unsupported answers to limit questions. As such, they demonstrate the existence of limit questions.

This argument is problematic. First, grant for the sake of argument that these assumptions are unsupported answers to limit questions. Because the assumptions change, we do not necessarily have a set of perduring unanswered limit questions. Second, the assumptions are far from being unsupported. There are good empirical reasons for preferring Newtonian to Aristotelian assumptions about what needs to be explained about the motion of bodies. Third, there are reasons to believe that the changes in assumptions are progressive. The adoption of the new assumptions helps in better answering key questions. And the fact that they do answer key questions better by providing, for instance, superior explanatory power and understanding, is a reason for thinking that they are providing better answers to limit questions. We find a similar situation in the history of theological accounts of reality, to use Drees's terminology. Drees himself seems to claim that naturalism shows transcendent theology to be preferable to both polytheism and interventionistic monotheism.

Drees also contends that the atheistic answer that I suggest for the limit question about existence, namely, that the basic particles of matter are self-existent, is incompatible with current physics. He claims that the basic particles of contemporary physics are themselves created and that they thus exist contingently. This response, of course, does not show that the limit question about existence is unanswerable. If correct, it merely shows that the existence question is not answered by claiming that the currently accepted set of basic particles is self-existent. What Drees needs to make his case is that every such claim that the basic entities of the physical world as established by the sciences are self-existent has, is, and will be incompatible with the extant physics. But Drees has made no such argument.

Moreover, if one uses appeals to coherence—something that Drees in his response advocates—then, as I argued in my essay, empirical underdetermination does not imply evidential determination. We can concede

that the existence question is empirically underdetermined in the sense that all the empirical evidence is currently compatible with the truth of (some) competing hypotheses that appeal to transcendence and with other hypotheses that appeal only to natural phenomena. But, as I argued in my essay, we need not concede that the existence question is *evidentially* underdetermined. Coherence with a full-fledged methodological, epistemic, and ontological naturalism gives epistemic weight to a scientific naturalistic answer to the existence question over the competing appeals to the transcendent. Thus, in my essay, I have suggested that the successes of the methodologies of the sciences and their coherence with the methods of ordinary knowledge acquisition should lead us to give epistemic preference to a full-fledged scientifically based naturalistic approach to theology.

Finally, Drees claims that I have misunderstood his views on morality. Contrary to my claim, he maintains that his account of morality is not part of his argument for underdetermination and, thus, for a limited naturalism. He acknowledges that naturalistic ethical considerations, drawn from evolutionary theory, play a role in his account of moral motivation. However, it is the “deep-down” consideration about the moral goodness or moral ambiguity of the universe that remains open. I do not find this critique persuasive. I explicitly acknowledge the role that Drees’s naturalism has in accounting for morality: “Indeed, Drees seems to accept both a biological and social/cultural evolutionary account of religious wisdom” (Rottschaefer 2001, 439). In his response, Drees seems to assume a non-cognitivist account of the foundations of morality (Drees 2001, 464). My criticism of Drees’s naturalism is precisely that it unjustifiably *separates* questions about morality and the ultimate goodness of the universe, placing questions about the latter, whether he acknowledges it or not, within the category of limit questions. In so doing, Drees claims to discover a limit on both naturalistic and supernaturalistic accounts of the ultimate foundations of morality. I have argued that Drees has not satisfactorily supported this contention. I find no response to this argument in Drees’s rejoinder.

#### CONCLUSION

Drees finds my critique of his views and the brief exposition of my own positive position to be of little help in understanding and developing an empirical theology, an enterprise that he believes we both share. I want to be the first to admit that I did little in my original essay to make a positive case for empirical theology. Nevertheless, since I believed that a careful examination of Drees’s version of naturalism was essential to making further progress in elaborating such a theology, my aim was primarily to accomplish the former. I remain convinced that Drees’s naturalism is flawed and cannot serve as an adequate basis for the empirical theology that he



wants to develop. Nevertheless, I continue to maintain that his understanding of naturalism and its relationship to theology provides an importantly different view from the currently primarily negative view of it that obtains among theologians and antinaturalistic philosophers of religion. So, although flawed, I believe Drees's account of naturalism and its relationships to theology makes an important contribution to the elaboration of a truly adequate empirical theology, an aim, I take it, that we have in common.

#### NOTES

1. Why should Drees or anyone be distressed about intending to find a way to reconcile naturalism and supernaturalism? This seems to me to be a perfectly legitimate enterprise.
2. In other of his works, as I note in my essay, Drees speaks of a transcendent source not only of existence but also of the kinds of things there are and of value and possibility.
3. Drees goes on to imply that I have argued that he holds his preferred views about the transcendent to be the only reasonable options. I have not made this claim or argued for it either explicitly or implicitly.
4. Drees goes on to note that "his subsequently articulated views" are shaped by personal preferences themselves the results of personal history and cultural circumstances. It is difficult to know what views Drees is referring to. But his comment seems to put much of theological discourse, including his theological accounts, outside the realm of epistemic evaluation.
5. I argue in my original essay that Drees's ontological naturalism requires both epistemic and methodological naturalism. In addition, I argue that these features undermine his claim about the limitations of naturalism. Thus, I find it odd that Drees does not think it necessary to address this part of my paper.
6. It is not clear to me that questions have any sort of status independent of the cognitive agents that pursue answers to them. What would it mean for a question, if it were a genuine question (not the sort of super-ultimate questions, for instance, that I referred to in my essay) to be intrinsically unanswerable? I find it difficult to conceive of such questions.
7. Of course, full-fledged Kantianism is not without its problems!

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