

NATURAL PROVIDENCE: REPLY TO DEMBSKI

Michael J. Murray

In *No Free Lunch* William Dembski presents a reply to the argument against intelligent design theory (IDT) I offered in “Natural Providence (or Design Trouble).” In this essay I reply to Dembski and describe a brief proposal for a model of providence that might be more congenial to the advocate of IDT.

In “Natural Providence (or Design Trouble)” I presented arguments defending the claim that the alternatives to methodological naturalism which have been defended by friends of Intelligent Design Theory (IDT) should be rejected.¹ In making this argument, I commended a Leibnizian conception of providence according to which the states of the natural world, excluding those caused directly by free creatures, come about by means of God’s creation of the initial state of the universe and the subsequent unfolding of the succeeding states via nomically regular processes. As a result, when we seek to explain states of affairs in the natural world, we should do so by appeal to the existence of natural entities and their powers. William Dembski has published a reply to this argument. I argue here that the reply is not convincing.

The argument I present in “Natural Providence” had two stages. First, I argued that since most states of affairs (at least those not caused by free human agents) come to be via nomically regular means, and since there is no way for the scientist to distinguish empirically between those states generated by nomically regular means and those caused by direct divine intervention, properly scientific explanations will be naturalistic.

Second, I argued that since there are some suggestive, if not compelling, reasons for thinking that God would create the world in Leibnizian fashion, scientists who are theists should favor naturalistic explanations in science. This pair of arguments should at least make the scientist who is also a theist wary, to say the least, of proposals to jettison methodological naturalism in science.

I argued for the claim of the first stage by focusing on a case in which one player in a poker game repeatedly draws four aces, thereby winning every hand. It would be clear to anyone who was shown the outcomes of each round that the apparently fortunate player had cheated. That is, it would be clear that intelligent agency has been involved in securing the outcomes. However, there would be no way of knowing whether the result had come about as a result of some intervention by the cheater, or rather by allowing the cheater to have access to the cards before the game so that he could stack the deck. The empirical evidence simply will not allow this discrimination. Of course, the same will be true when we are talking about the natural world, where the intelligent agent is not a card player, but the creator. As a result, there is no reason to favor explanations of apparently designed states of affairs in nature by appeal to divine intervention. When we combine this result with the fact that the universe seems almost unexceptionally nomically regular, and that there are good reasons for God to create and govern the world via nomically regular means, the theist has good reason to retain methodological naturalism as a constraint in scientific theorizing.

Dembski offers two replies. First, he claims that even though intervention and deck-staking might be empirically equivalent, we should only favor deck-stacking explanations when we can trace the information content necessary to produce the

apparently designed state back to the beginning. He considers, for example, the Cambrian explosion, a 5 to 10 million year span of natural history when most of the basic metazoan body plans emerged. This rapid increase in biological complexity seems to have emerged out of quite simple precursor conditions. If we measure such complexity in terms of information content we might say, as Dembski does, that “the information needed to build the animals of the Cambrian period was suddenly expressed at that time and with no evident informational precursors.”² We might *assume* that the necessary complexity was somehow programmed into precursor states in a way that is opaque to us, but “there is no evidence for it and there is no reason . . . to think that all naturally occurring information must be traceable back in this way.”³

The conclusion of this line of reasoning seems to be this: unless we have reason to think that precursor states contain the information content necessary to produce the apparently designed state, we should assume that the information content is imparted when it first becomes manifest. Perhaps that’s true. And there are *prima facie* reasons to think that the information content necessary to produce such complex states *is* present prior to its manifestation, namely the reasons I offered: first, that this is the only way to generate such complexity through the pattern of providence we see across times and places, that is, through nomically regular natural processes, and second, that there are good reasons for thinking that God would favor a world which unfolds by nomically regular means. Until we deal with those arguments, Dembski’s conclusion will have no traction against my argument.

In his second reply, Dembski argues that even though intervention and deck-stacking are empirically equivalent, there are other values in theory choice that might tip

the balance towards intervention. As he notes, the hypothesis that the world was created 5 minutes ago with all of the apparent signs of age which it has, is empirically equivalent to the reigning cosmological hypothesis that the world is 14 billion years old. Yet this does not lead us to throw up our hands when it comes to deciding between the two.

Fair enough. But Dembski does nothing to tell us which other theoretical values we should bring to bear. As a result, we might fairly say that consistency, simplicity, and scope, to name three oft-cited theoretical values, would tend to favor deck-stacking explanations over intervention explanations. After all such naturalistic explanations are in fact the correct explanations in nearly every case. In addition, as I have noted, the theist has additional reasons for thinking that a Leibnizian conception of natural providence is to be preferred.

In order to mount a response to the argument I offered, Dembski and other friends of IDT will need to say something about those additional reasons. I think there is more to be said, and not all of it is favorable to the view I have defended. Since I was defending the Leibnizian position in “Natural Providence” I was not inclined to highlight the considerations unfavorable to my view. But I think that they are worth considering. As a result, I herewith offer the friends of IDT some suggestions which might provide a better angle of attack.

As I have said, the two reasons I cited for favoring the Leibnizian picture, and thus methodological naturalism in science, are that it seems to cohere with the order of things we find in nature, and that there are reasons for thinking that God would orchestrate the affairs of the natural world in such a way. Let’s leave aside the first reason since it is really more of a tie breaking reason when we have empirically

equivalent explanations. What does the second reason amount to? As I cast the exchange between Newton and Leibniz on the issue of providence over nature, Leibniz makes heavy weather over the fact that the Newtonian God appears to be a designer of less than adequate competence. What sort of God would actualize a creation which would require periodic intervention to keep things from collapsing into disorder and chaos? Leibniz's answer: only one with less than perfect knowledge, power, or goodness.

There is something very attractive about this position. When I bought my first car, the manufacturer recommended a tune up every twenty thousand miles or so. Cars rolling off the assembly line today hardly need anything like a tune up. With many of these cars, the sort of routine service that would be required every twenty thousand miles need only be done every fifty or one hundred thousand miles. Better engineers with greater understanding and better raw materials are now producing better cars. And I think we suppose that were General Motors to take on a few omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good engineers, cars would be utterly maintenance free (less than wholly good engineers might be able to design such cars, but undoubtedly their greed would get the better of them). The same intuition underlies the Leibnizian picture. If God knows how to bring about all of the states of affairs he wishes to bring about in the course of natural history by deck-staking, what would motivate the creation of a universe that was in need of periodic tune ups?

Dembski addresses this issue in passing in the same book when he responds to Howard Van Till. Like Leibniz, Van Till argues that the interventionist picture requires appeal to a God who cannot, or at least refuses, to provide creation with all that it needs

to accomplish its ends. Dembski contends that this may be a fair criticism of the interventionist picture if we conceive of the relation between God and world on analogy with that between clockmaker and clock. But why focus on this analogy? Perhaps we should instead think of it on the analogy of musician and instrument. In that case, deconstructing seems rather perverse. Why would we form the expectation that a perfect pianist would create a player piano, rather than one which required the activity of the musician to perform its function?⁴ I suspect that many readers will find that the musician analogy unappealing, motioning, as it does, in the direction of something like process theism.

Still, Dembski's point here bears further scrutiny. We can imagine someone arguing with Van Till, or Leibniz, or me, in the following way:

While mechanistic philosophers of the seventeenth century might have been inclined towards the analogy of clockmaking, there is surely something perverse about such a picture. For the Christian at least, creation is in large part a love story. God's overflowing love and goodness leads him to create a world into which he intends to continue to pour forth his love and goodness. The creation is a child, a bride, a lover, not a mechanical curiosity to be displayed on the mantle of the divine living room. If creation is created for relationship, the perversity of the Leibnizian picture becomes especially apparent. Imagine that we are introduced to someone with whom we want to develop a deep and fulfilling relationship of love. God then pulls us aside and offers us the following choice. Since God knows everything that will happen in the life of this person he can offer you two options. First, you can enter this relationship

and live with your beloved, laboring with them and sharing in their joys, passions, and sorrows. Second, God can tell you up front everything that will ever happen to them, and then you can assist God in designing an automaton which will look and act like you, and which will live with your beloved and interact with them in just the way you would if you were actually present. You can then leave your beloved behind and go off to watch the drama unfold by webcam at the beach in Bermuda. Which would you choose? Why of course it is the first! Why? Because what we desire in love is not simply the well-being of the beloved, or the opportunity to help the beloved achieve fulfillment, but the experience of *actively loving* the beloved as well. That is why a loving God would surely find a Leibnizian conception of providence repugnant.

The words of this imaginary critic are powerful. One might reply that they are only powerful insofar as they concern God's relationship with persons, not the natural world itself. But the Christian will have a hard time accepting this restriction, especially in light of the Biblical emphasis on God's passion for redeeming all of creation. Redemption of persons surely has a special place in providence, but not an exclusive one.

I do not intend to try to resolve the question of which analogy is most apt. However, it seems to me that friends of IDT would do well to focus more on these questions. If the slim evidence we have only provides us with reasons for a deck-stacking picture of natural providence, then methodological naturalism should be favored. If the evidence tips in another direction, perhaps it should not. Friends of IDT owe us the contrary evidence.⁵

*University of Notre Dame/
Franklin and Marshall College*

NOTES

¹ *Faith and Philosophy*, Volume 20, no.2 (July 2003), pp. 307-327.

² William Dembski, *No Free Lunch*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, p.345.

³ *Ibid.*, p.346.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.328.

⁵ Special thanks are due to the Note Dame Center for Philosophy of Religion and the American Philosophical Society both of which provided support for the leave during which this essay was written.