

Background

The growing harmony between the Bible and science is quite significant in the history of mankind. To appreciate the significance of this harmony, it is helpful to briefly survey the history of a philosophy called naturalism. Naturalism focuses on the importance of the natural world as the source of truth. This is, of course, well aligned with a scientific approach. But the attitude towards God as the supernatural Creator in the scientific approach has changed over time.

Before Naturalism

Before “naturalism” became a formal philosophical stance, most ancient and medieval thinkers assumed that *nature* was real, orderly, and ultimately grounded in a divine source.

- The ancient Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle held that nature had intrinsic order and purposes, but neither rejected divine causation; Aristotle even posited an Unmoved Mover.
- Medieval Christian thinkers (e.g., Thomas Aquinas, Robert Grosseteste, Roger Bacon) believed that the world’s regularities reflect the rationality of its Creator, and therefore studying nature glorifies God. Science and theology were not considered competing explanations.

Thus, pre-modern natural philosophy (as science was originally called) generally operated under the assumption that God creates and sustains the lawful order of nature, but scientific explanations themselves focused on secondary causes (mechanisms in creation), not direct divine intervention.

Early Modern Natural Philosophy (1500s–1700s): Methodological Naturalism

During the Scientific Revolution, scholars increasingly emphasized explaining natural phenomena through natural laws, even while believing that these laws were established by God. This period saw the rise of what historians call **methodological naturalism**:

The rule that scientific explanations should appeal only to observable causes within nature, not to miraculous or theological causes.

Many early scientists were devout theists. A good example of a devout theist was the famous physicist Isaac Newton, who lived from 1642-1727. Newton believed that God created, ordered, and actively sustained the cosmos. Yet in his major work titled *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (or *Principia* for short), he insisted that mathematical laws should describe natural motions. However, Newton did explicitly invoke

the necessity of God when reflecting on the overall design of the universe, even though his physics did not rely on miracles to explain planetary motion. In his 2nd edition of the *Principia*, Newton wrote the following.

“This most beautiful system of the sun, planets, and comets could only proceed from the counsel and dominion of an intelligent and powerful Being.”

Enlightenment to 19th Century: A Growing Skepticism of the Supernatural

By the late 1700s and into the 1800s, thinkers like Pierre-Simon Laplace, David Hume, and Charles Darwin shifted the conversation. An example of this early shift is seen in a conversation between the French emperor Napoleon Bonaparte and the physicist-mathematician Pierre-Simon Laplace. His work *Celestial Mechanics* (1799–1825) showed how Newtonian gravitation could predict planetary motions without additional metaphysical assumptions.

When Napoleon reportedly asked him why his scientific treatise made no mention of God, Laplace replied:

“Je n’avais pas besoin de cette hypothèse-là.”
“I had no need of that hypothesis.”

This remark symbolizes a turning point. Laplace did not deny God’s existence, but he argued that invoking God does not help within scientific explanation, because the laws themselves are sufficient. As time went on, then scientists became increasingly successful at explaining natural phenomena purely through laws and mechanisms.

Along with the success of the sciences, there was a growth in skeptical attitudes towards the supernatural by philosophers like David Hume. Hume argued skepticism towards God because of the problem of evil, a critique of the design argument, and a lack of a direct perception of God, amongst other reasons.

Then with the publication of *On the Origin of Species* (1859), Charles Darwin introduced the natural mechanism of natural selection to account for biological diversity. Many viewed this as eliminating the need for special divine action in biology. Although Darwin’s religious journey is still subject to speculation, by the time of his death in 1882, Darwin seemed to be comfortable with the label of *agnostic*.

Late 19th Century & Beyond: Metaphysical Naturalism Becomes Mainstream

Darwin’s ideas of evolution and other philosophical trends were influential in bringing other philosophers, scientists, and the general public to a belief system that is known as **metaphysical naturalism**.

A philosophical worldview that claims only the natural world, governed by physical laws, exists.

In other words, metaphysical naturalism asserts that there is no God, the stance of an atheist. The philosophy of metaphysical naturalism was popularized by philosophers like the American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey, who was also influential in American education. Various surveys of scientists in the 20th and 21st centuries have found that anywhere from 41% to 93% of professional scientists were either atheists or agnostics, which is often a result of a belief in metaphysical naturalism or something similar.

This history of naturalism helps to explain a great deal about why God and religion are often not taken seriously in today's world that is so dominated by science and technology. In that context, then, this history also provides background for understanding the great significance of this growing harmony between the Bible and science.

The Privilege of Living at this Time in History

Against this background over several centuries of an increasing skepticism of a supernatural God, it becomes significant that we now see harmony between Genesis 1 and science. This harmony is profound because Genesis 1 contains clear scientific truths that only the Creator could have known. The descriptions from Genesis 1 cover events from billions of years ago, long before humanity ever existed. And these descriptions were written in Genesis 1 thousands of years before they were discovered by science.

So, at this time in our history we are quite privileged to understand the growth in harmony between Genesis 1 and science. Indeed, that the descriptions in Genesis 1 are in harmony with what science has now discovered could be one of the most profound truths that has ever been available to humankind. This strongly suggests that the God of the Bible is the Creator of this universe. We are extremely fortunate to be able to finally witness this harmony in this generation.