

BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Does analytic theology belong in the public university?

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Abstract

An overarching question in William Wood's *Analytic Theology and the Academic Study of Religion* concerns the conditions under which theology belongs in the public university. On this question, many or most academics today are methodological naturalists, and they would not accept explanations that appeal to supernatural entities. Wood devotes a chapter to arguing against that position. Nevertheless, Wood is not a 'sectarian' who argues that Christian theology should only answer to its own, tradition-specific norms, and so it is important to see how close his proposal and methodological naturalism (MN) actually are. In this response, I seek to clarify both MN and Wood's proposal regarding the proper norms for academic inquiry. Key to my argument is a distinction between a MN based on strict or scientific naturalism and a MN based on liberal or expansive naturalism. Analytic theologians and expansive naturalists can agree both that a theology that operates according to proper norms for academic inquiry belongs in the public university and that strict naturalism is not the norm that we want.

Introduction

An overarching question in William Wood's *Analytic Theology and the Academic Study of Religion* (2021) concerns the conditions under which theology belongs in the public university. This is one of those valuable books that moves a conversation forward, and it will become a touchstone for future discussions not only for those in analytic theology, but also for all those interested in this slippery question. Now, on this question, I am – like most in the academy today, I expect – a methodological naturalist, and so I would not accept explanations that appeal to supernatural entities, and Wood devotes a chapter to arguing against that position. He holds that methodological naturalism should be 'appropriately restrained' to leave space for theology (222). Nevertheless, Wood is not a 'sectarian' who argues that Christian theology should only answer to its own, tradition-specific norms, and so it is important to see how close his proposal and methodological naturalism actually are.¹ I therefore want to use this response as an opportunity to clarify competing good answers to this question and to make methodological naturalism more attractive, even to theologians.

Wood's norm: maximal accessibility

Wood holds, as I do, that if the discipline of theology is to belong in the public university, then it has to meet the norms that distinguish academic work. Wood agrees that 'the

academic context is different, and more restrictive': 'Scholars in a university are rightly held to higher standards of reasoning and argument than nonprofessional inquirers' (195). When an academic makes a claim, she 'can expect a level of rational scrutiny that would be excessive in other less formal contexts, and she should assert the claim only if she believes that it can stand up to such scrutiny' (195). What are these 'higher standards'? What should we recognize as the norms for academic scholarship?

The heart of Wood's proposal is that when academics are appropriately challenged, they are obligated to justify their claims with 'reasons and evidence that are maximally accessible to others' (200–202).² This norm of maximal accessibility does not explicitly limit one's evidence to natural entities, so it is a more permissive standard than methodological naturalism. However, that one support one's claims with maximally accessible evidence is a requirement that naturalists also accept. Given this norm, a scholar cannot appeal to reasons that are accessible only to a particular individual or group, and therefore they cannot use as evidence the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit, the infallibility of one's teacher, or the inerrancy of scripture. As Wood says, the claim that God revealed something does not count as evidence in the academy, even if God did in fact reveal it (201, 195 n. 7).

There is a great deal of overlap between evidence that is maximal accessible and evidence based on entities in nature. This overlap becomes even clearer when Wood gives examples of the kinds of claims that fail his norm, because he uses the natural sciences as paradigmatic examples of inquiries that operate with maximally accessible evidence. As he writes,

For example, astrology claims that we can predict human events by looking at the movement of celestial objects. This claim is inconsistent with what we know about the nature of celestial objects and the laws of motion, and we can also empirically show that astrology lacks predictive power. Young Earth creationism is inconsistent with what we know about geology and evolution. Claims about parody deities like the Flying Spaghetti Monster, while often hilarious, are also internally inconsistent. And so on. (204–205; cf. 217)

To the extent that the natural sciences argue using maximally accessible evidence, conflict with the natural sciences is at least a *prima facie* sign that that a claim does not meet academic norms. As Wood says, 'No one can be rationally entitled to commitments that are . . . empirically disproven' (217). A methodological naturalist will agree with all of this, and they will agree with Wood that any theology in the academy should meet this standard.

Now turn to Wood's central thesis that analytic theology meets this norm. Wood argues that it is uncontroversial that the methods of analytic philosophy are appropriate for the academy and, therefore, when theologians use those methods, they are not violating any academic norms. He is right that the methods of analytic philosophy meet the criterion of maximal accessibility. What may be controversial from the naturalist's perspective, however, is that analytic theologians use these methods to study supernatural entities and events such as the Trinity or the resurrection. The members of religious communities who hold beliefs in the supernatural may have come to those beliefs precisely by accepting the inerrancy of scripture, the infallibility of their teacher, or the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit. Religious practitioners typically use doxastic methods that do *not* meet the norms for the university. Nevertheless, Wood argues that one cannot exclude the study of supernatural entities unless one can provide good reasons to think that those entities do not exist (as, recall, he thinks one can with young earth creationism and the Flying Spaghetti Monster). Wood judges that the claim that Christ rose from the dead has

not been shown to be empirically false, internally inconsistent, or inconsistent with other known truths, including those of the natural sciences (205 n. 16), and so it is a legitimate object of academic inquiry. Wood holds the reasonable view that until a claim is discredited, scholars are entitled to treat it as rationally viable and therefore can include it in academic investigations (204–205). One might rephrase his point this way: belief in supernatural entities may arise through methods that are private, but when the methods of their study are public, those studies are not inappropriate for the academy. Despite its focus on the supernatural, analytic theology therefore belongs in the academy.

Methodological naturalists should agree with all of this. To study claims about the supernatural using analytic philosophical methods does not violate academic norms, and analytic theology so understood is a legitimate academic field. Wood is right that there is nothing inappropriate about investigating beliefs that people hold for reasons other than maximally accessible evidence. In fact, there is nothing inappropriate about investigating beliefs for which people can offer *no* evidence. The scholar can trace out what those claims imply, see whether they are coherent, and discover whether they are supported by or contradicted by other things we know. One of Wood's main arguments is that analytic theology can be practised in the mode of the conditional, ascertaining, in effect, that *if* someone accepts assumptions X, Y, and Z, then conclusion C follows (48–49, 209–210, 279).³ I agree: in this conditional mode, an academic might study claims about the resurrection just as one might study claims about abstract entities like human rights, about fictional entities like Sherlock Holmes, or about theoretical entities like those in string theory. The study of claims like these would be appropriate for the academy whether or not the scholars themselves consider the claims true. These studies would be appropriate even if the scholars came to hold these beliefs precisely by accepting the inerrancy of scripture, the infallibility of their teacher, or the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit. Scholars in the academy can pursue the philosophical study of the resurrection (or Sherlock Holmes, human rights, or string theory). Whether these topics *deserve* academic attention is a separate question. Wood is right that the question about which claims should be studied is not going to be settled a priori, but as long as the scholar's methods are appropriate, this question can be left to what scholars and students want to look into. The bottom line, then, is that analytic theology so understood is not inappropriate for the secular university, even from a naturalist perspective.

Schilbrack's norm: expansive naturalism

Now let's consider methodological naturalism (hereafter, 'MN') as an academic norm. MN is a rule that prohibits an inquiry from making appeals to supernatural entities. As a rule adopted 'methodologically', it does not deny that supernatural entities exist, but for the purposes of the inquiry, it does not use them as explanations. I have previously argued that MN should be adopted not only by the sciences, but by the academy as a whole (Schilbrack, 2018). If every academic discipline adopted MN, it would govern inquiry even in philosophy and religious studies departments, which is to say, even philosophers and religious studies scholars would eschew appeals to the supernatural. If this rule were adopted, then a commitment to naturalism could be what distinguishes the academic studies of religion practised in public universities from the religious studies of religion practised in confessional institutions.

Wood does not reject MN in particular cases, but he argues against the proposal that the academy should require all scholars to adopt it. He therefore has no objection when an individual historian, cognitive scientist, or other scholar explains phenomena using this-worldly causes, even when studying religious phenomena. For Wood, inquiries that seek to show that someone's religious commitment can be explained by social factors

like politics or gender or by physical factors like an agency-detecting module of the brain or temporal lobe epilepsy are completely appropriate. Wood also has no objection to a scholar – or even an entire department – that adopts MN as their rule so that they restrict themselves to naturalist explanations and will not consider the supernatural. He objects only to the claim that that every member of the academy must work this way. He calls the MN rule for the academy as a whole ‘restrictive methodological naturalism’ (or ‘RMN’).⁴ It is precisely this academy-wide version for which I argue.

The most important aspect of my RMN proposal is that it is based on a distinction between two kinds of naturalism (Schilbrack, 2018).⁵ On the one hand, there is a ‘strict’ or ‘scientific’ naturalism according to which the natural sciences (or perhaps, in the end, physics alone) can provide a complete account of everything that exists. On the other hand, there is an ‘expansive’ or ‘liberal’ naturalism according to which nature includes ‘a world beyond physics’ (Kauffman, 2019). On this latter view, mental properties like intentions, normative properties like flourishing, and modal properties like possibility are all part of the natural world. (Several now summarize the advantages of expansive naturalism by using the alliterative device introduced by Huw Price (1997) that liberal naturalism seeks to provide a non-supernatural place for the ‘four Ms’, namely: morality, modality, meaning, and the mental.) According to this more expansive view, we do not need supernatural entities to account for the difference between inanimate chemicals and living organisms, nor for the development by those organisms of nervous systems, self-consciousness, or culture. The arrival in the universe of life, or consciousness, or religious beliefs and practices does not require a source outside the natural world.

One can use this distinction between strict and expansive forms of naturalism to develop strict and expansive forms of methodological naturalism. A strict MN would only permit a scholar to explain events using the entities recognized in scientific naturalism. This is a stark worldview. At the level of subatomic particles, atoms, and molecules, nothing is morally right or wrong. There are no minds, intentions, or goals. There are not even functions (Kauffman (2019), ch. 2). If the academy as a whole were to accept a RMN based on scientific naturalism, then none of the traditional normative questions of theology would be permitted. In fact, all inquiries about morality, justice, beauty, and purpose would be excluded. The very idea of an ‘academic theology’ would be an oxymoron. I think that it is this strict version of MN, rather than the expansive version, that theologians have typically taken as their opponent. By contrast, a RMN based on expansive naturalism could recognize and welcome theology and other normative inquiries. Naturalism and religious philosophies are typically seen as enemies, and the discussion of possible cooperation between expansive naturalism and theism is largely non-existent.⁶ This is a shame. Expansive naturalists tend to be moral, mathematical, and logical realists. They tend to hold that good and bad are objective features of the natural world rather than mental projections on the otherwise meaningless physical world. Although the debate about mental causation has advocates on both sides, expansive naturalism is open to the idea that reasons can be causes. Expansive naturalism goes beyond the entities recognized in physics, chemistry, and biology to include not only everyday natural realities like persons, values, and nations, but also extraordinary natural realities that are sublime (McMahon, 2022) or ineffable (Wildman, 2018). Even a multiverse of innumerable universes would still not leave behind what counts as nature (Rubenstein, 2014). I would argue that expansive naturalism includes the discipline of metaphysics not only in the John Dewey style of empirical study of the generic traits of the world but also in a more robust investigation of logically necessary existential claims. Those who endorse an expansive RMN can also study claims about supernatural entities – claims about a realm of eternal forms, or about the soul, or about God – precisely in the conditional way that Wood described. Granted, an expansive RMN would exclude explanations

in terms of causes that are not rooted in the natural world. It would not accept, for example, an explanation of the emergence of life due to the arrival of an 'élan vital', nor an explanation of mind by 'ensoulment', nor an explanation of culture explained by 'Geist'. An expansive methodological naturalist would not use supernatural entities as explanations. But, as we saw above, neither does Wood.

Tensions and alliances

Let's assess where things stand. I judge that, as a norm for the academy, either maximal accessibility or an expansive methodological naturalism would accept analytic theology as a legitimate academic discipline. Nevertheless, MN, even when expansive, would be a more restrictive norm. An expansive methodological naturalism recognizes as fundamental realities not just the fermions and bosons of reductive physicalism, but composite atoms, molecules, cells, persons, ecosystems, and social groups.⁷ An expansive naturalism produces a value-laden or 'reenchanted' view of the natural world (Meijer and De Vriese, 2021). This is a rich ontological picture. What an expansive methodological naturalism does not recognize, however, would be alleged causes that are not rooted in the physical world. It therefore resists claims about the causal power of ideas not held by any particular minds, social groups independent of their members, or persons without bodies. To work within a naturalist framework, even when expansive, will therefore create tensions with traditional Christian commitments.⁸

If an academic theologian were to adopt methodological naturalism, it would have the benefit of putting their work in line with the understanding of inquiry that operates in the rest of the university. It is not only the natural sciences that have adopted naturalism as their methodological norm. There are no academic historians, for instance, who explain that a battle was won because God aided one side. Or because of prayer. Or because of karma. Similarly, academics studying, say, immigration, elections, and economic downturns do not explain them with curses, miracles, or angered spirits. The rejection of supernatural causes is a norm assumed throughout the disciplines of history, anthropology, geography, sociology, and political science. Moreover, it is not only the natural and social sciences that have adopted MN. Even when scholars in the humanities do not seek causal explanations, and they use methods not found in the sciences, they do not appeal to the supernatural as they study how these human products are created or interpreted. Like the sciences, the humanities (save, sometimes, philosophy and theology) never leave the realm of the natural. As a consequence, a theologian who adopts MN would be endorsing a rule that is already followed by the rest of the university. A theologian who does not adopt it reinforces the assumption that theology is an exception to the norms under which the rest of the university is working.

One argument that Wood gives for resisting RMN is that the academy as a whole does *not* in fact subscribe to methodological naturalism. He gives three examples: mathematicians who are Platonists about mathematical objects, arguing that perfect circles, sets, and numbers exist in some Platonic realm of forms; mind-body dualists in philosophy; and non-naturalists in ethics (226). He argues that if the academy as a whole were to adopt RMN, it would exclude these examples of 'presumptively legitimate work [being done] in other fields' (227). Wood is right that professional mathematicians tend to be realists: for most of them, the truths of mathematics do not depend on human beings thinking them – or even human beings existing. Nevertheless, these counter-examples do not provide a reason not to accept RMN. In the first place, appeals to the 'Platonic realm of forms' are made by philosophers of mathematics. Mathematicians rarely care. This example is therefore not evidence that 'the wider university' (226) outside philosophy rejects RMN. The same is true of the two other examples. Though Wood is right that what counts

as ‘nature’ is still a live issue and we do not want to close conversations prematurely, the majority (and perhaps the vast majority) of academic philosophers today are naturalists. In the second place, however, and more importantly, truths about mathematics, minds, and ethics are precisely the kinds of reality that would be included in an expansive naturalism.⁹ All three are truths that might find no ‘place’ in reductive physicalism, but they would be included in the liberal or expansive ‘stratified’ ontology described above. My hope is that as richer, value-laden versions of naturalism are developed, they come to inform the question of the norms that the university should adopt.

An expansive methodological naturalism still looks to me like a good rule for the public university as a whole.¹⁰ Nevertheless, this ‘inclusivist’ norm is similar enough to Wood’s proposal to see that naturalist philosophers and academic theologians have a common enemy – namely, a neoliberal university increasingly committed to the view that the only value of higher education is vocational and that since the normative work done in philosophy and theology bakes no bread, the public university can eliminate both of them. The value of Wood’s three counter-examples, for me, is that they draw our attention back to the traditional liberal arts topics of human existence, ethics, and metaphysics. I think that philosophers who are naturalists should advocate for the place of theology in the public university and they should recognize that they share with theologians an inquiry into what is good, real, just, and beautiful. Naturalist philosophers and academic theologians can be allies in articulating why these questions belong in the public university.

To make the case that analytic theology can be housed in public universities, Wood argues that the academic study of religion should accept irreducible methodological pluralism (236–237). He is definitely right that religious studies requires this. But ‘irreducible methodological pluralism’, by itself, is too broad a slogan to identify what we should be fighting for. Sectarian theologians who reject Wood’s criterion of maximal accessibility also insist on methodological pluralism (e.g. MacDonald, 2017). Since the academic study of religion is an interdisciplinary field, secularists who want to exclude theology altogether would agree to it as well. A more useful slogan would be that normative inquiry belongs in the public university. I will close on a short argument about how we might make this case.

One sometimes hears the proposal that theology belongs in the academy because religious traditions develop reasoned justifications, philosophies, or doctrines, and scholars of religion must do justice to this intellectual aspect of religion, no less than to, say, the ritual and the institutional aspects. The proposal is that scholars can bring theology into the academy as an object of description – though they would not also evaluate whether the theology is persuasive or not, since the academic goal is understanding, not proselytizing. This argument for including theology makes a step in the right direction, but I think that a description-only approach underestimates what the task of understanding involves.¹¹

Understanding is not simply translating another’s words into one’s own – replacing, for instance, ‘il pleut’ with ‘it is raining’. To the extent that someone understands what another is saying, one grasps when it would and would not make sense to say what they are saying, what the other is and is not implying, and what would make their claim true or false. Understanding already includes and in fact depends upon evaluative norms. The same is true when one understands another’s theological claims. For personal or professional reasons, a scholar may not explicitly take a position on whether a theological claim is reasonable, but the scholar’s understanding is made possible by their own view of what is reasonable. Normative assumptions are already operating even when a descriptive scholar is merely coming to an understanding of what a theology says. In other words, the theologian being described is not the only one with assumptions

about what is real, true, good, and so on; the scholar also has them. The crucial question is whether the academy includes those who critically reflect on normative assumptions.

Many scholars of religion in the academy seek to understand theological claims while ‘bracketing’ their own evaluations. But other academics in these post-positivist days are willing to remove those brackets and say, for example, that a given theology is oppressive, ideological, or neurotic. Here, the scholar’s normative assumptions are closer to the surface. However, insofar as a scholar judges that a given theology is oppressive because it says one thing rather than another, the scholar’s normative assumptions point towards an implied alternative. For personal or professional reasons, scholars who evaluate a theology may not develop their own normatively informed alternative to the ideas that they study. The crucial question is whether the academy includes those who not only critically reflect on normative assumptions but also develop post-colonial, anti-racist, non-sexist, or other alternatives to the ideas we study.

The banner that we want is that the public university should also include scholars engaged in inquiries that are normative and constructive. I think that this is a goal on which expansive naturalists and analytic theologians can agree.

Notes

1. The label of ‘sectarians’ comes from a useful typology of three positions proposed by MacDonald (2017). MacDonald contrasts this position with ‘secularists’ who seek to exclude theology from the university on the grounds that theology lacks shareable reasoning or evidence, and with ‘inclusivists’ who argue that theology should be included in the university when it meets the secular norms of the academy. Wood and I are both inclusivists. For a similar three-part typology with statements from representatives of each type, see Cady and Brown (2002).
2. Wood’s requirement that academics provide reasons and evidence that are ‘maximally accessible’ resembles Thomas Lewis’s (2015) requirement that they provide reasons and evidence that are ‘public’. As Lewis puts it, ‘The moves that exclude one from the discipline are appeals to an authority that is claimed not to require justification, appeals to an authority conceived as unquestionable, and appeals to private forms of justification for which, in principle, no argument can be given’ (Lewis (2015), 146). Wood agrees with all these strictures (197). However, I judge that ‘maximally accessible’ is an improvement on ‘public’, given that some forms of justification cannot be understood without difficult training or equipment.
3. As Wood (2021, 209, 280–281) notes, Martin Kavka (2015) also argues that theology belongs in the academy since theological arguments can be (and often are) offered in this conditional way.
4. Since Wood holds that academic inquiry *should* be restricted and since the MN adopted by an individual scholar work would also be restrictive, to use the label ‘restrictive MN’ for the university-wide version seems tendentious. Nevertheless, Wood is right to mark the difference between a rule adopted by an individual scholar, department, or field and a rule adopted by the academy as a whole, so I will use his label in this response.
5. The first work I know that explicitly proposed this distinction is Strawson (1985), but the dissatisfaction with scientific naturalism and the desire to give a naturalistic but non-eliminative account of minds and values unites the most influential analytic, pragmatist, and phenomenological philosophers of the twentieth century. The label ‘liberal naturalism’ comes from the important edited collections by De Caro and Macarthur (2008, 2010, 2022).
6. However, see Ellis (2014, 2021, 2022).
7. I like emergentism as an account of the novel properties of each of these ‘layers’ of the natural world, but I will not open that kettle of fish in this article.
8. For an insightful discussion of these tensions, see Leidenhag (2021).
9. As Paseau (2016) notes, Platonism in philosophy of mathematics today usually is a naturalist position rather than an alternative to it.
10. This article is arguing about academia in general, but I recognize that universities are institutions with particular histories and so there may be cases in which a university has its in-house reasons to vary from an otherwise general norm (for instance, by including a seminary within the university). I owe this point to conversations with Wesley Wildman.
11. I develop this argument more fully in Schilbrack (2022).

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