

Naturalism vs the Supernatural

A Modern Construct?

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Moreover, the idea of the supernatural, as we understand it, arrived only yesterday; it presupposes, in fact, its opposite.... Now as long as this idea was absent or insufficiently established, there was nothing inconceivable in even the most marvellous events.

Émile Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912)

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1. Religion, Naturalism, and the Supernatural

Religion: 'belief in the supernatural'

RELIGION. n. 1439– Of multiple origins. Partly a borrowing from French. Partly a borrowing from Latin.

Etymons: French *religion*; Latin *religiōn-*, *religiō*.

Belief in or acknowledgement of some supernatural power or powers (esp. a god or gods).

Naturalism: 'denial of the supernatural'

NATURALISM. n. 1750-

The idea or belief that only natural (as opposed to supernatural or spiritual) laws and forces operate in the world.

Naturalism: 'denial of the supernatural'

There is only one world, the natural world, exhibiting patterns of what we call the 'laws of nature', and which is discoverable by the methods of the sciences and empirical investigation.

There is no separate realm of the supernatural, spiritual, or divine; nor is there any cosmic teleology or transcendent purpose inherent in the nature of the universe or in human life

"Fascinating" Brian Cox, *Mail on Sunday* Books of the Year

The
Big Picture
*On the Origins
of Life,
Meaning and
the Universe
Itself*
Sean Carroll

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...the great majority of contemporary philosophers would happily accept naturalism ... that is, they would both reject “supernatural” entities, and allow that science is a possible route (if not necessarily the only one) to important truths about the “human spirit”.

David Papineau, ‘Naturalism’,
Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2015)

Table 3 • Religious Beliefs of Natural and Social Sciences by Discipline

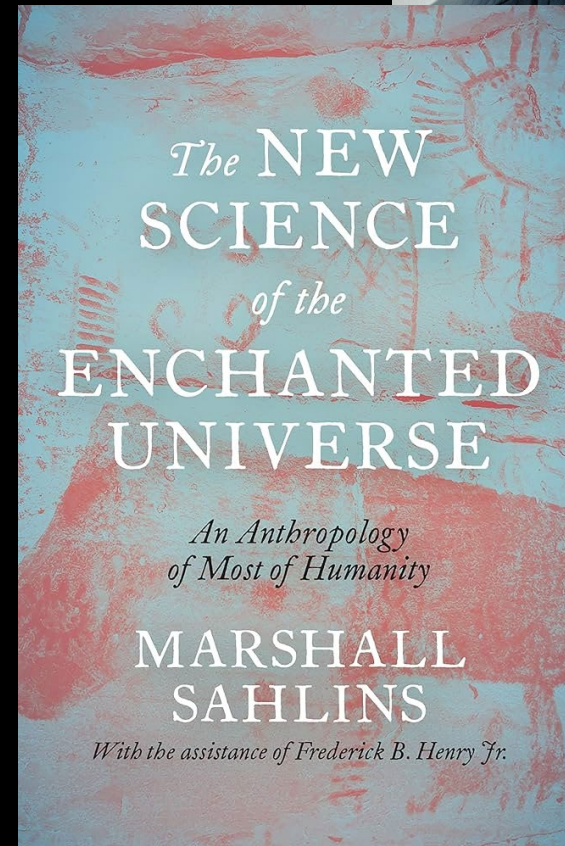
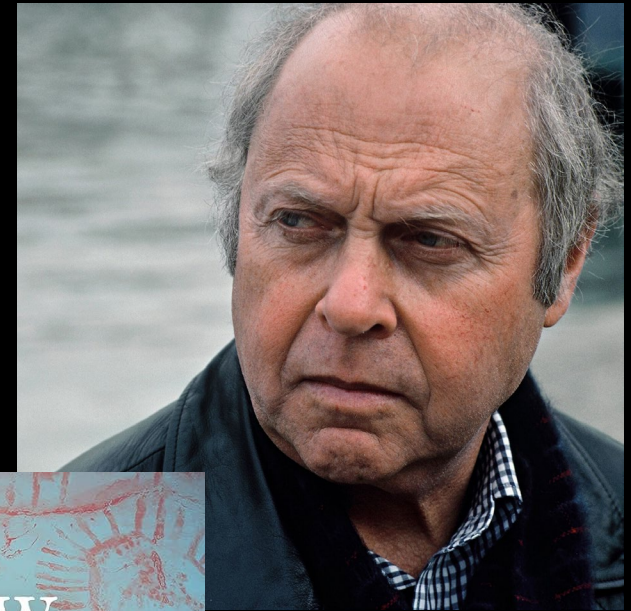
	<i>Natural Sciences</i>				<i>Social Sciences</i>				
	<i>Physics</i>	<i>Chemistry</i>	<i>Biology</i>	<i>Overall</i>	<i>Sociology</i>	<i>Economics</i>	<i>Political Science</i>	<i>Psychology</i>	<i>Overall</i>
Which one of the following comes closest to your views about religion?									
“There is very little truth in any religion.”	33.2	23.2	27.9	28.6	21.9	29.3	14.9	24.5	22.8
“There are basic truths in many religions.”	63.5	74.2	69.4	68.5	76.2	67.4	76.6	74.5	73.5
“There is the most truth in only one religion.”	3.4	2.6	2.6	2.9	1.9	3.3	8.5	1.0	3.7
Which one of the following statements comes closest to expressing what you believe about God?									
“I do not believe in God.”	40.8	26.6	41.0	37.6	34.0	31.7	27.0	33.0	31.2
“I do not know if there is a God and there is no way to find out.”	29.4	28.6	29.9	29.4	30.7	33.3	32.5	27.8	31.0
“I believe in a higher power, but it is not God.”	8.1	9.4	7.7	8.2	11.8	4.9	5.5	7.7	7.2
“I believe in God sometimes.”	2.8	6.3	4.1	4.2	2.8	4.9	5.0	7.7	5.4
“I have some doubts, but I believe in God.”	12.8	18.2	10.0	12.9	11.8	14.8	21.5	12.9	15.5
“I have no doubts about God’s existence.”	6.2	10.9	7.4	7.8	9.0	10.4	8.5	10.8	9.7
Religious service attendance									
More than once a week	.9	2.0	1.1	1.2	.9	1.5	1.8	1.5	1.5
Once a week	2.6	11.4	5.6	5.8	6.7	8.5	8.3	4.9	7.1
2 to 3 times a month	7.8	5.0	4.9	5.9	7.6	4.0	7.8	4.4	5.8
Once a month	3.9	4.5	2.8	3.6	4.0	4.0	4.1	4.9	4.3
6 to 11 times a year	5.2	5.5	4.9	5.1	4.0	3.0	3.7	6.9	4.5
1 to 5 times a year	22.9	22.4	23.5	23.1	27.6	28.6	26.1	24.1	26.5
Not at all in the past year	56.7	49.3	57.2	55.3	49.3	50.3	48.2	53.2	50.3

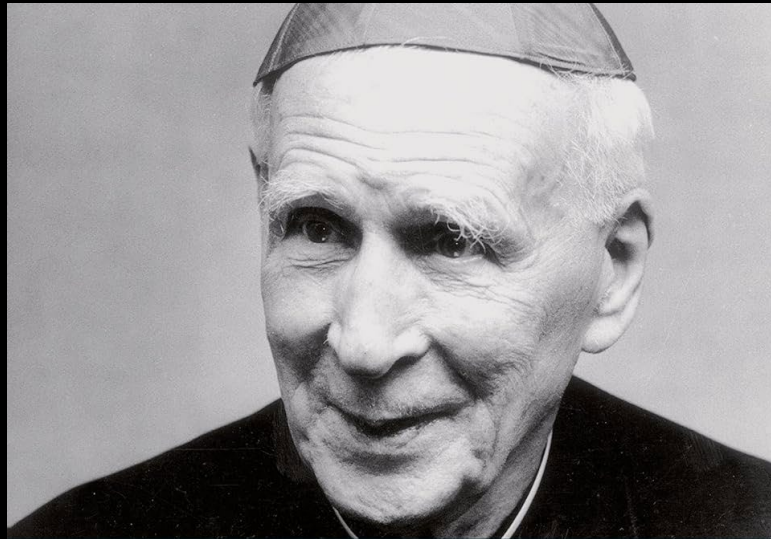
- The Academy operates on the methodological assumption of naturalism.
- Academics are less likely to believe in the supernatural than the general population, and by a significant margin.

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2. The Birth of 'The Supernatural'

For the many 'cultures of immanence ... which is to say most of humanity...the so-called supernatural is not distinguished from what we call the 'natural'...





Surnaturel
Études historiques

Henri de Lubac

Édition préparée et préfacée
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CHARÆ QUALITAT, INTEGRITAS
NUMERUS, FORMA VOLUMINUM
SIMILIS, PRETII RERIGITAS,
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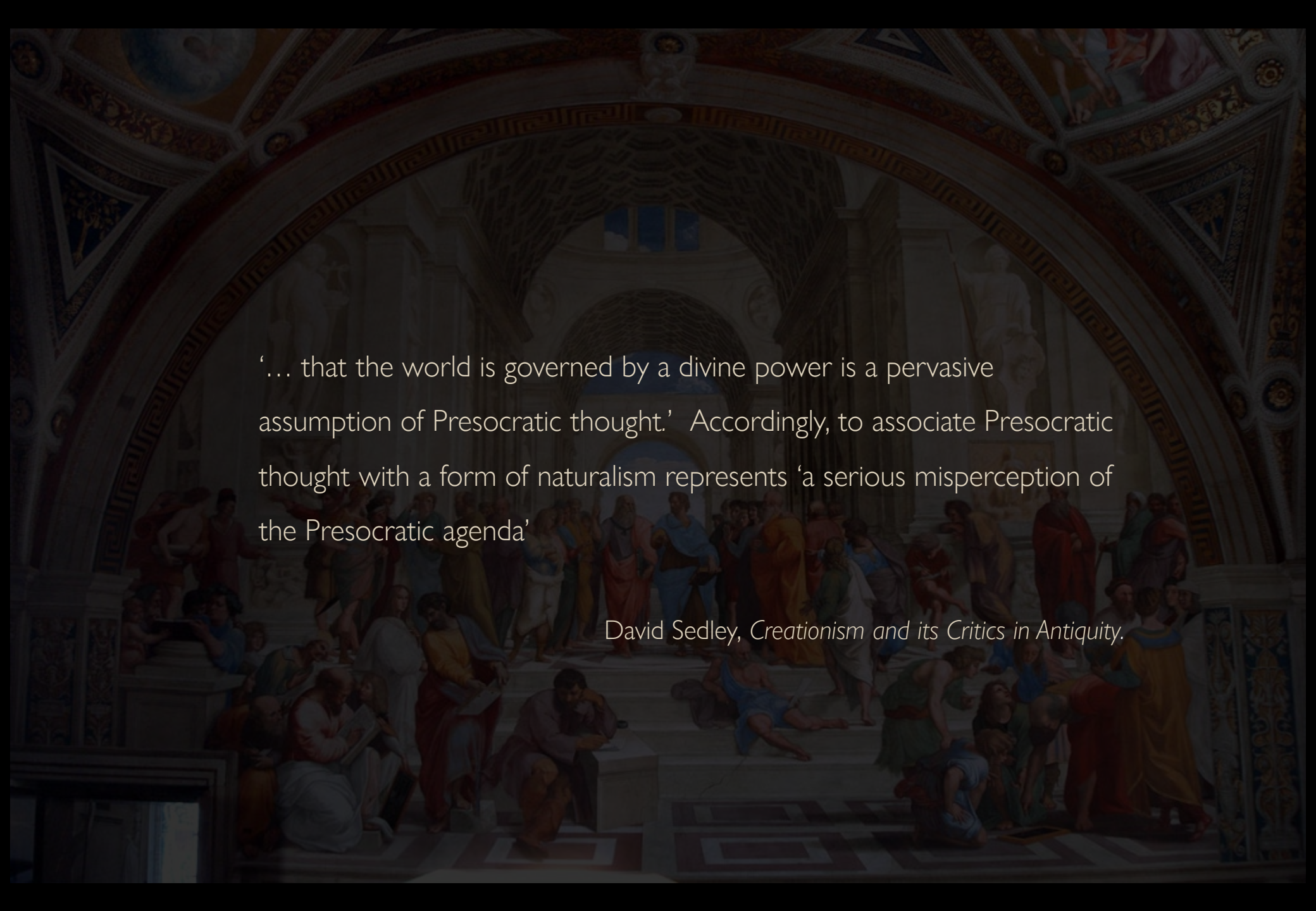
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Thomas Aquinas (1225-74)

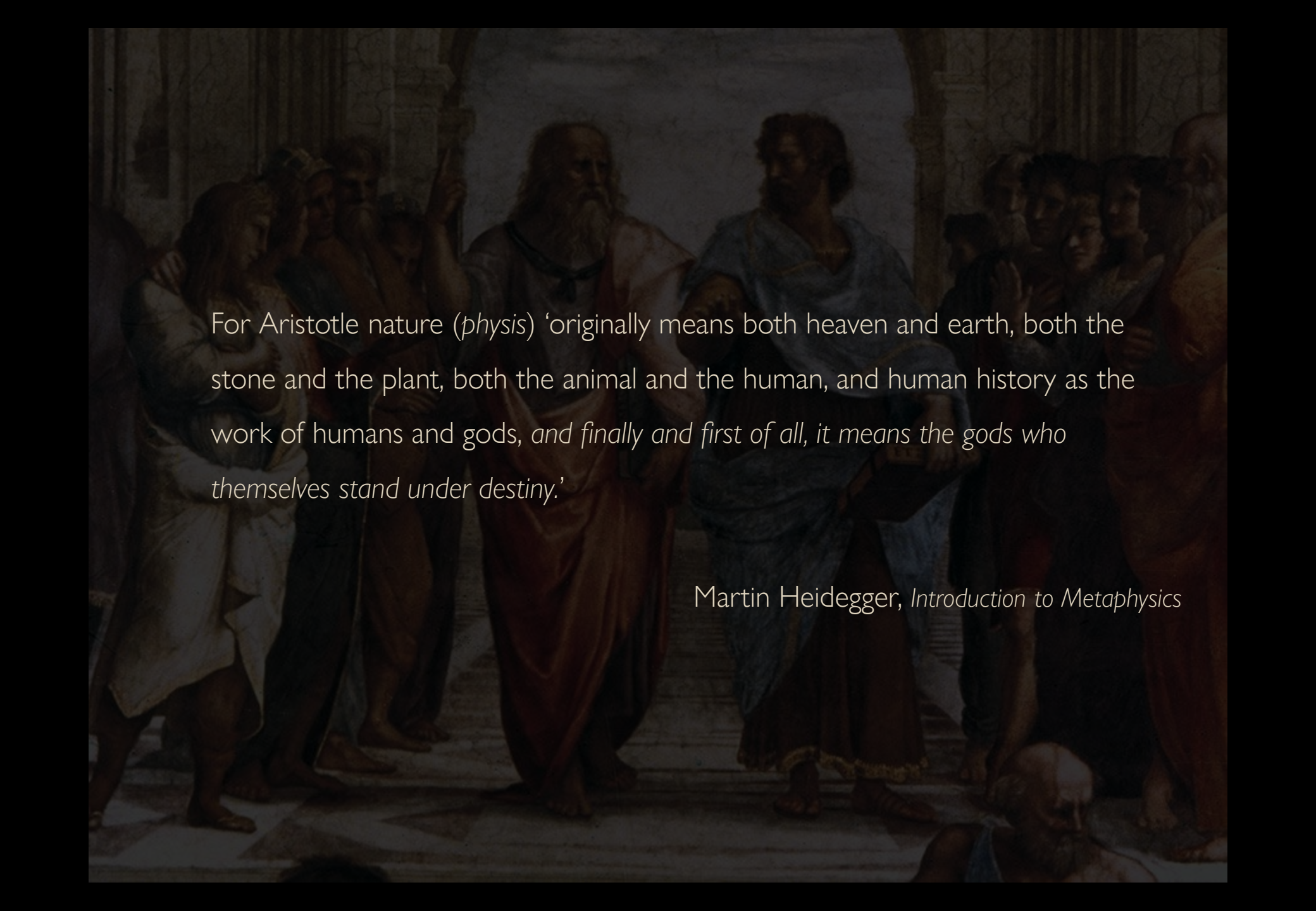




‘... that the world is governed by a divine power is a pervasive assumption of Presocratic thought.’ Accordingly, to associate Presocratic thought with a form of naturalism represents ‘a serious misperception of the Presocratic agenda’

David Sedley, *Creationism and its Critics in Antiquity*.





For Aristotle nature (*physis*) 'originally means both heaven and earth, both the stone and the plant, both the animal and the human, and human history as the work of humans and gods, and finally and first of all, it means the gods who themselves stand under destiny.'

Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*

For the Stoics, 'Nature is virtually synonymous with the set of words we moderns tend to think of as more explicitly theological: *God/gods/divinity/divine*'.

C. Kavin Rowe, *One True Life: The Stoics and Early Christians as Rival Traditions*, p. 29.







Christianity has emptied Valhalla, felled the sacred groves,
uprooted the shameful superstitions of the people....

Hegel, *The Positivity of the Christian Religion*

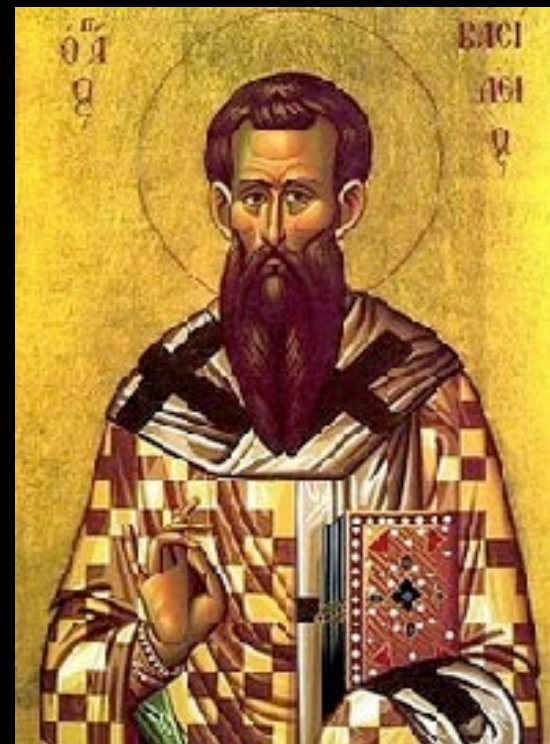


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Hegel, *The Positivity of the Christian Religion*

‘Therefore the motion of the stars is not voluntary, but of necessity, because they obey the laws appointed for them [by God].’

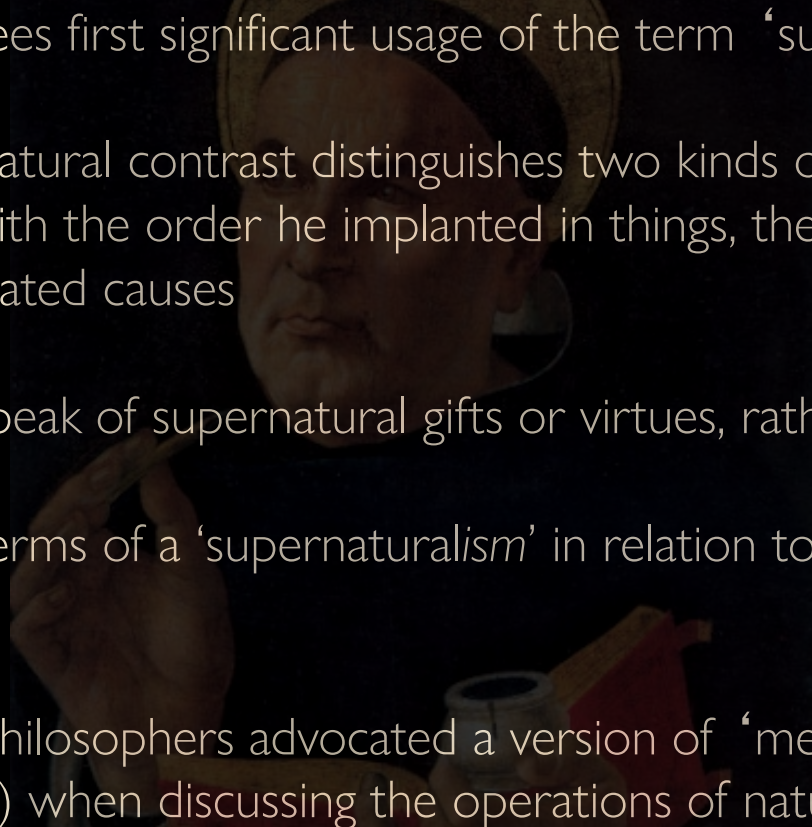
Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*



'Isn't the daily course of nature itself a miracle, something to be wondered at? Everything is full of marvels and miracles, but they are so common that we regard them as cheap and of no account.'

Augustine, *Sermons* 247



- 
- The 13th century sees first significant usage of the term ‘supernatural’ (*supernaturalis*).
 - The natural-supernatural contrast distinguishes two kinds of divine activity: one in which God works with the order he implanted in things, the other when he works independently of created causes
 - Aquinas tends to speak of supernatural gifts or virtues, rather than supernatural events.
 - No-one talked in terms of a ‘supernaturalism’ in relation to explanations of natural phenomena.
 - Several scholastic philosophers advocated a version of ‘methodological naturalism’ (*de naturalibus naturaliter*) when discussing the operations of nature.

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Theology: 'Pure Nature'



Thomas Cajetan (1480-1547)

Francisco Suarez (1548-1617)

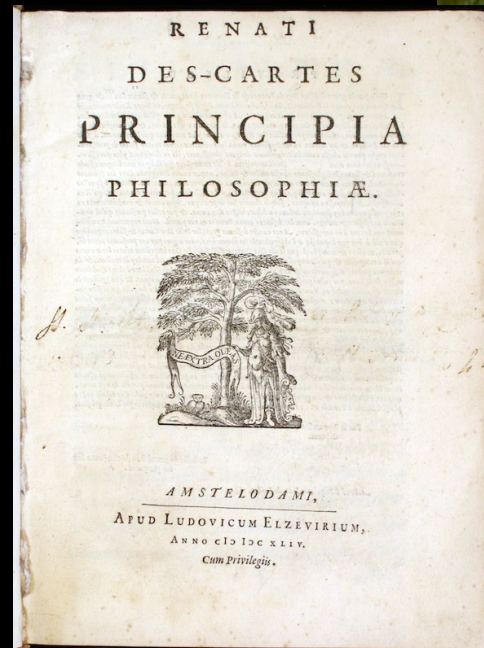
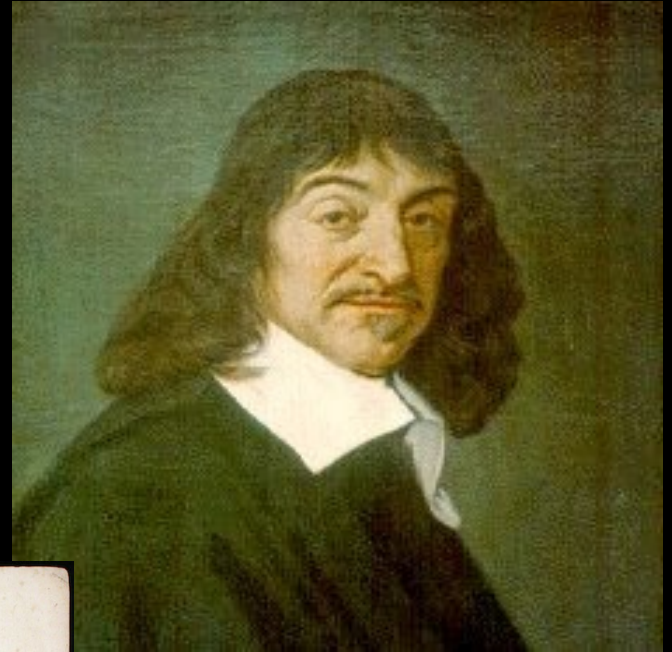


Natural Science: 'Laws of Nature'

'God imparted various motions to the parts of matter when he first created them, and he now preserves all this matter in the same way, and by the same process by which he originally created it..'

We should consider God to be the efficient cause of all things

Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy* § 61
CSM I, 240, 202



For there is no other nature, that is, there are no other natural laws, except the efficacious volitions of the almighty.'

Nicolas Malebranche, *Dialogues on Metaphysics and Religion*, 59f.



Nicolas Malebranche 1638-1715



‘... laws of motion ... did not necessarily spring from the nature of matter, but depended on the will of the divine author of things.’

Robert Boyle, *The Christian Virtuoso*, in *Works* 5:521.

‘all the powers of mechanism are dependent on the Deity’, for ‘gravity, the great basis of all mechanism, is not itself mechanical, but the immediate *fiat* and finger of God, and the execution of divine law.’

Richard Bentley, 1691-2 Boyle Lectures IV.

‘the efficient Cause of all Things is God’

Isaac Barrow, *Usefulness of Mathematical Learning*

... the *Course of Nature*, cannot possibly be any thing else, but the *Arbitrary Will and pleasure of God* exerting itself and acting upon Matter continually.

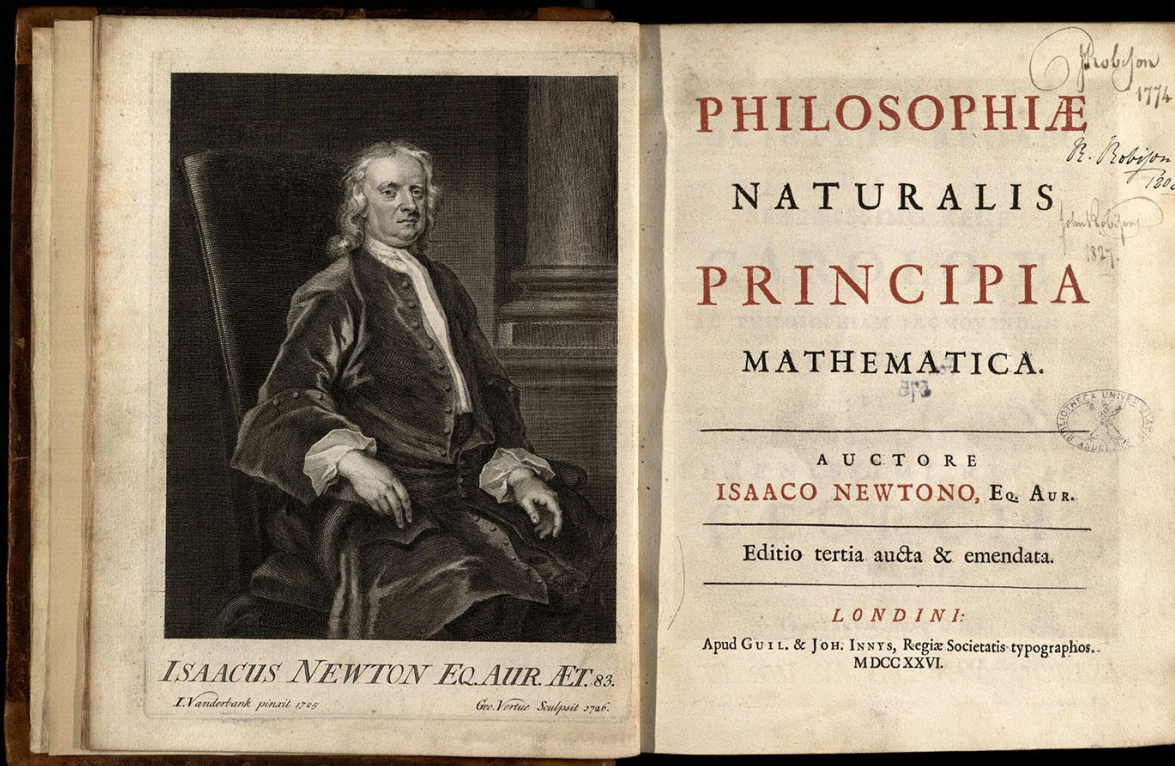
...absolutely speaking, in *This strict and Philosophical Sense*; either nothing is miraculous, namely, if we have respect to the Power of God; or, if we regard our own Power and Understanding, then almost *every thing*, as well what we call natural, as what we call supernatural, *is in this Sense* really miraculous; and 'tis only *usualness* or *Unusualness* that makes the distinction.



Samuel Clarke
(1675-1729)

'Without all doubt this world...could arise from nothing but the perfectly free will of God...These (laws of nature) therefore we must not seek from uncertain conjectures, but learn them from observations and experiments.'

Principia, Preface to the 2nd edn.



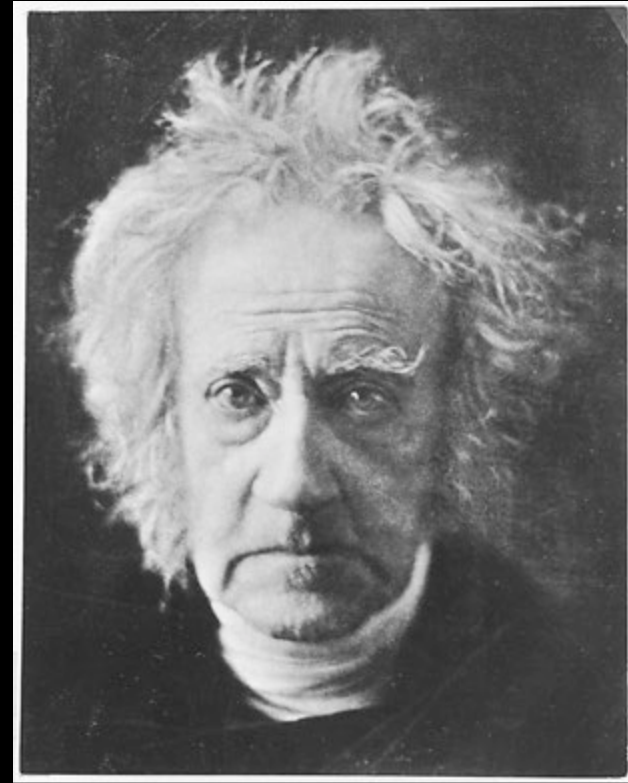
'This most beautiful system of the sun, planets, and comets could only proceed from the counsel and dominion of an intelligent and powerful Being....

And thus much concerning God, to discourse of whom from the appearances of things does certainly belong to Natural Philosophy.'

Newton, 'General Scholium', *Principia*

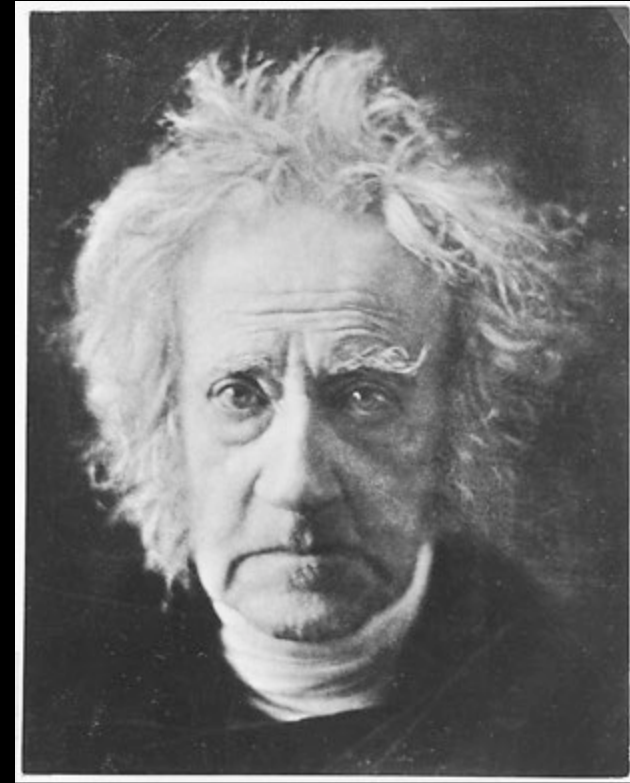
The uniformity of laws of nature arise out of the constant exercise of his [God's] direct power in maintaining the system of nature, or the ultimate emanation of every energy which material agents exert from his immediate will, acting in conformity with his own laws.

John Herschel, *Preliminary Discourse on the Study of Natural Philosophy*,
(1830) 137



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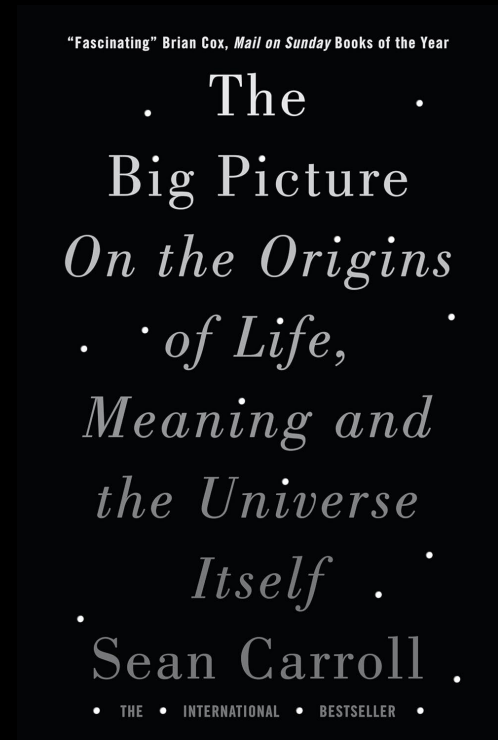
The contemplation of the material universe exhibits God to us as the author of the laws of material nature.

William Whewell, *Astronomy and General Physics* (1833), 251.

Naturalism: 'denial of the existence of supernatural entities.'

There is only one world, the natural world, exhibiting patterns of what we call the 'laws of nature', and which is discoverable by the methods of the sciences and empirical investigation.

There is no separate realm of the supernatural, spiritual, or divine; nor is there any cosmic teleology or transcendent purpose inherent in the nature of the universe or in human life



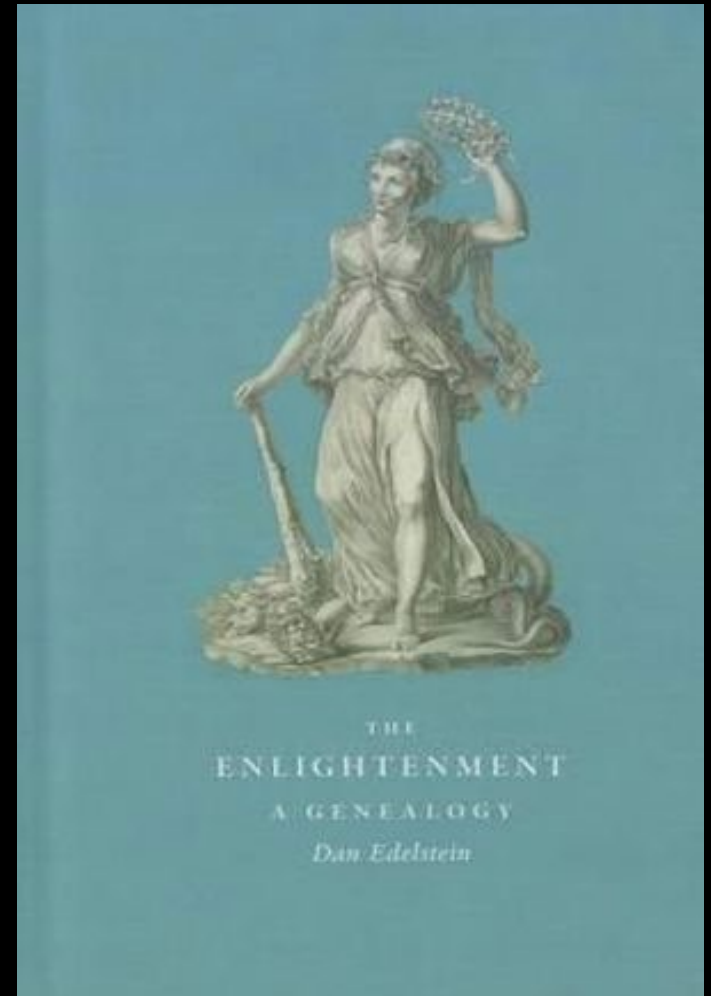
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The narrative of a 'new science' progressively dismantling all remnants of superstition and Scholasticism in its way was central to the self-perception of the *philosophes*.

The idea of 'the Enlightenment' is thus the story we tell ourselves about our values, our government, and our religions....

It was and remains a 'master narrative' of modernity, even a myth.



Dan Edelstein, *The Enlightenment*
(2010)

'...the triumph of Christianity had been the signal for the complete decadence of philosophy and the sciences'

Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Spirit (1795)



Marquis de Condorcet

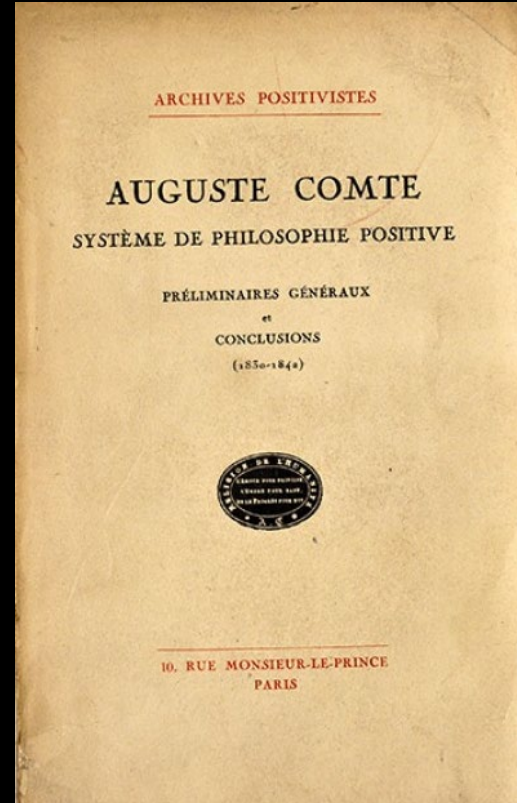
Scientific



Metaphysical

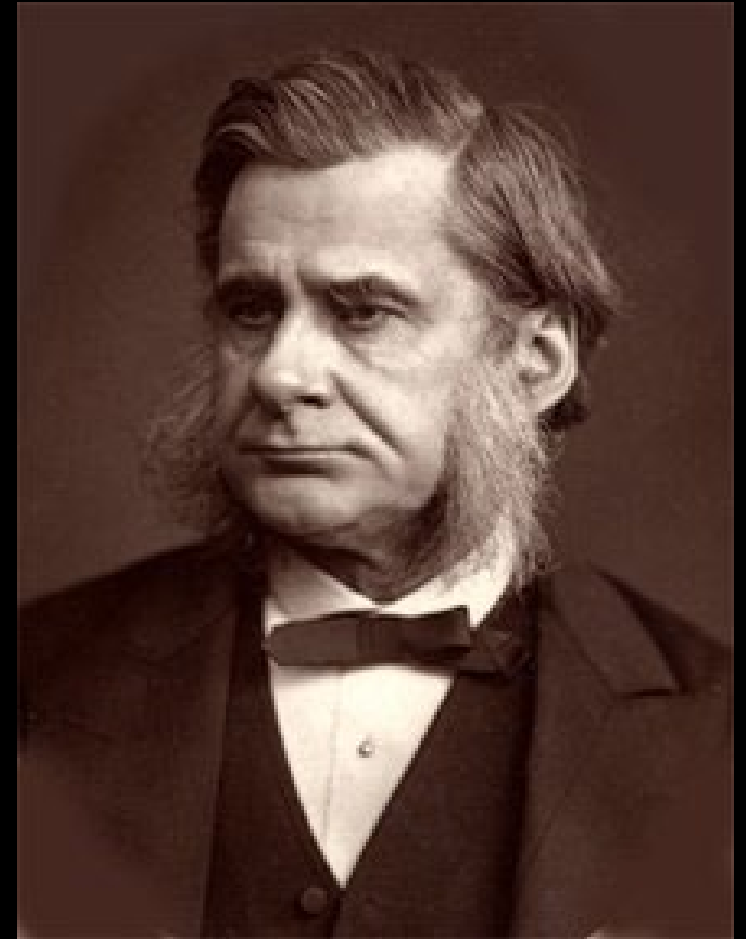


Theological



'Naturalism and Supernaturalism have consciously or unconsciously, competed and struggled with one another; and the varying fortunes of the contest are written in the records of the course of civilization.'

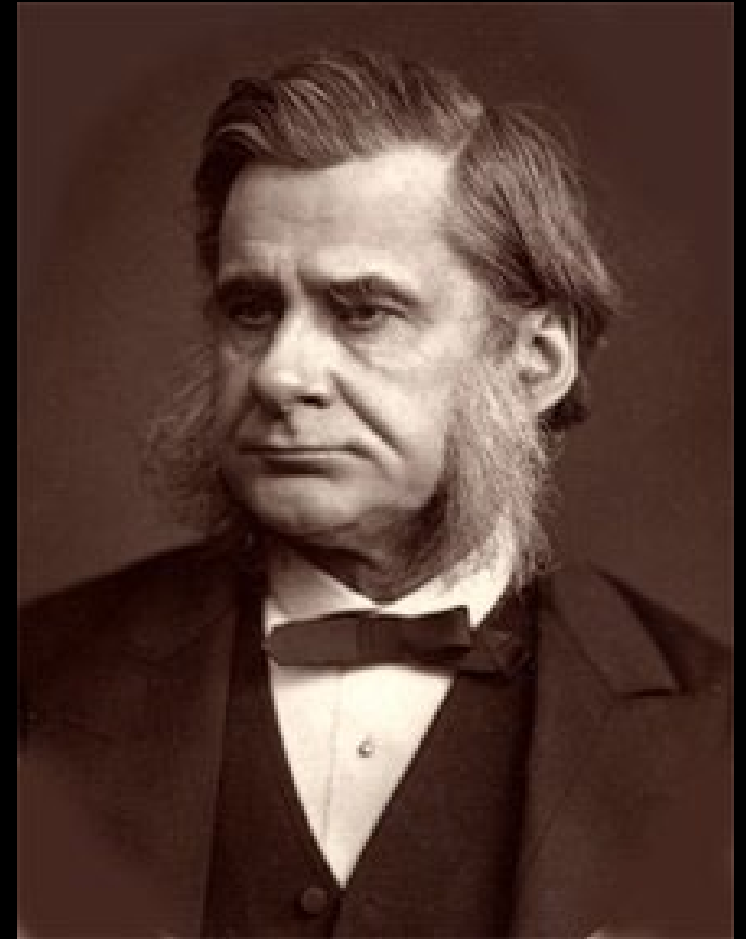
Extinguished theologians lie about the cradle of every science as the strangled snakes beside that of Hercules; and history records that whenever science and orthodoxy have been fairly opposed, the latter has been forced to retire from the lists, bleeding and crushed if not annihilated; scotched, if not slain.'



T. H. Huxley (1825-95)

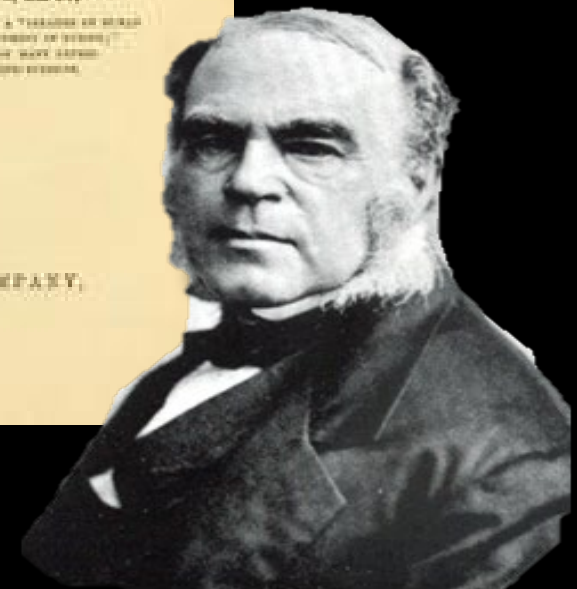
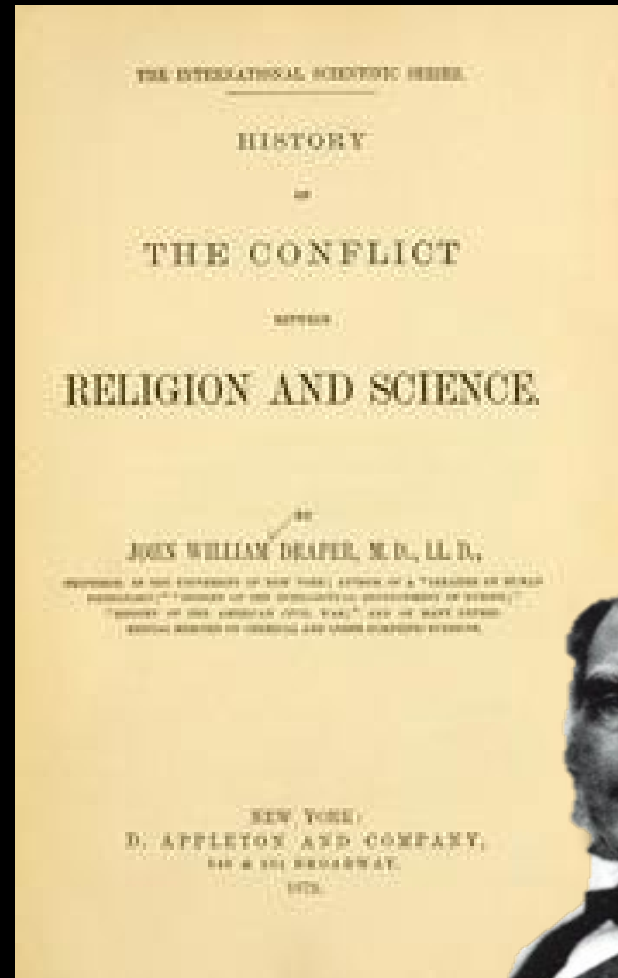
The extant forms of Supernaturalism have deep roots in human nature, and will undoubtedly die hard; but, in these latter days, they have to cope with an enemy whose full strength is only just beginning to be put out, and whose forces, gathering strength year by year, are hemming them round on every side. This enemy is Science....

Essays upon some Controverted Questions (1892)



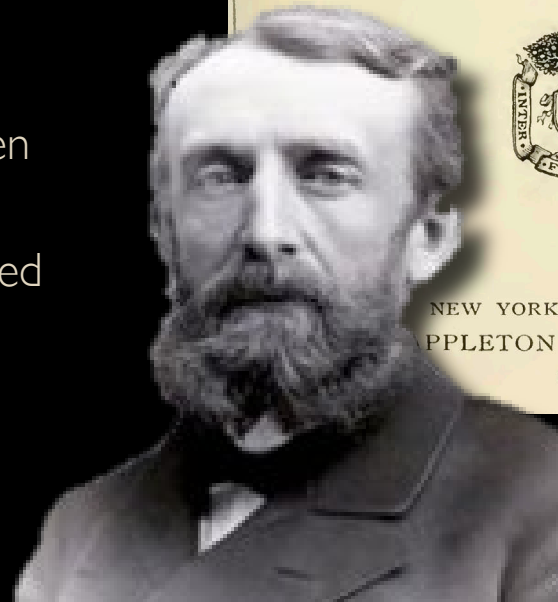
T. H. Huxley (1825-95)

The history of Science ... is a narrative of the conflict of two contending powers.



‘More and more I saw [the struggle between Science and Dogmatic Theology] as the conflict between two epochs in the evolution of human thought—the theological and the scientific.’

‘The establishment of Christianity, beginning a new evolution of theology, arrested the normal development of the physical sciences for over fifteen hundred years.... For twelve centuries, then, the physical sciences were thus discouraged or perverted by the dominant orthodoxy.’

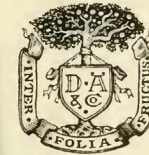


A HISTORY OF
THE WARFARE OF SCIENCE
WITH THEOLOGY
IN CHRISTENDOM

BY
ANDREW DICKSON WHITE

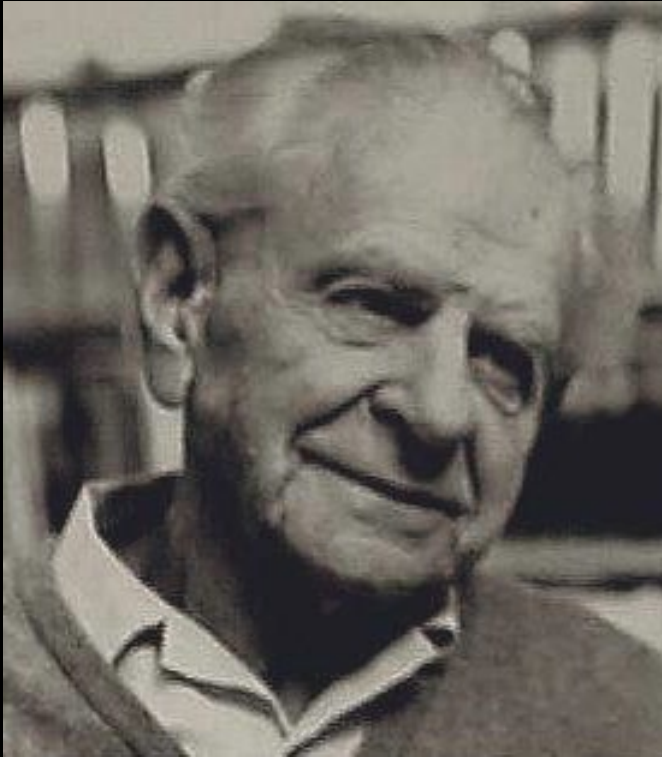
LL.D. (YALE AND ST. ANDREWS), L.H.D. (COLUMBIA), PH.D. (JENA), D.C.L. (OXON.),
LATE PRESIDENT AND PROFESSOR OF HISTORY AT CORNELL UNIVERSITY; VICE-
PRESIDENT OF THE AMERICAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY; HONORARY MEMBER
OF THE ROYAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES AT BERLIN; AND AN OFFICER
OF THE LEGION OF HONOR OF THE FRENCH REPUBLIC

IN TWO VOLUMES
VOL. I



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... the scientific tradition was inaugurated by Thales of Miletus and his immediate successors, and that it died in the West when it was suppressed by a victorious and intolerant Christianity. While science was missed and mourned during the Middle Ages, it was eventually revived during the Renaissance and found fulfilment in Newton.

Karl Popper, *The Myth of the Framework*

To Conclude:

- The idea of the supernatural is foundational to our present understandings of both religion and naturalism
- However, a sharp natural-supernatural divide arises only in the West, and only over the course of the past two centuries.
- The pioneers of modern science, committed to a new conception of laws of nature, supernaturalised the operations of nature.
- In the nineteenth century, the supernaturalised world of the Newtonian scientists was simply redescribed in naturalistic terms, although the logic of the original theological content was retained.
- These redescrptions were facilitated by new narratives of progress – unique to the West – along with the fabrication of dubious ‘histories’ of science, which purported to demonstrate that scientific progress resulted from the abandonment of theological understandings of the world.
- Ironically, laws of nature came to be thought of as inimical to theistic interpretations of nature.
- Scientific Naturalism seems to rely upon a covert theology.

Peter Harrison

SOME
NEW
WORLD



MYTHS OF
SUPERNATURAL
BELIEF IN A
SECULAR AGE

