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The Ontological Compatibility of Methodological Naturalism with a Benevolent, Infinite God

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Abstract

This paper works to explore the ontological compatibility of methodological naturalism with the concept of a benevolent, infinite God. Methodological naturalism, which is intended to operate independently of metaphysical claims, offers a neutral stance on the existence of deities; maintaining the empirical integrity of the scientific method. In examining four leading models of divinity, this paper assesses their potential to align with methodological naturalism while preserving divine attributes of infinity and benevolence. The paper then argues that, of the four, panentheism provides the most suitable framework for the integration of such a deity into a methodologically naturalistic framing. The combined model maintains the empirical constraints of methodological naturalism while allowing for a divine presence that embodies ultimate goodness in an infinite nature.

Keywords: Ontology; Divinity; Methodological Naturalism; Classical Theism; Pantheism; Emergentism; Panentheism; Science and Religion

1. Introduction

Methodological naturalism (hereafter, "MN") cannot and should not appeal to divinity; that is its defining clause. As such, MN takes an agnostic stance on the ontology of potential deities. Some of its adherents, like Elliott Sober, note that methodologically naturalistic science "does not in any way detract from the plausibility of supernaturalist theism," making clear deities are possible, in-theory (Sober, 2011). The purpose of this paper, then, is to review four leading ontological models for divinity and discuss their compatibility with MN. This, in and of itself, is a rather unbecoming task—as MN should remain agnostic to any and all ontologies (even atheistic ones) in the supposition that science should not consider God. As such, I intend to fold in a further criterion: that divinity should be both benevolent and infinite.

To be clear, the present paper does not attempt to justify benevolence as a central attribute across all religious traditions. Instead, I am using this specific definition of benevolence as a criterion for its exploration—as, indeed, we are doing philosophy here. I have argued in a past work, focused on the God of the Christian tradition more broadly, that if there were to be a God, that entity should be bound by a single characteristic, in that they should be "Not simply a God who loves, but a God who is love itself" (Ruud, 2021). While it may appear as though I have used the word "love" as a banal remark elsewhere, it is intended to be a binding term—in that all love is God and all God is love, "nothing more…nothing less" (Ruud, 2021). We might say this is the framing of a benevolent deity who exists in some infinite sense. Though rooted in broader traditions, and providing something which may resonate with certain others, the definition of a benevolent, infinite God is a foundational premise for this specific paper, not a universal one; and not one specifically targeted, in this context, at the God of any particular historical or denominational view of the Christian God.

With the potential to allow scientifically-minded individuals not to simply embrace the realities of scientific study, but incorporate them into a reconstructed religious framework, MN can be utilized as a tool to harmonize theism with science (Inglehart, 2020). That said, not enough attention has been given to the type of deity (ontologically speaking) that is attempting to be conjoined to the MN worldview. As many Western religious advocates think of their God as being both infinite in some fashion and benevolently inclined, as mentioned above, most monotheistic frameworks necessarily limit God to one category or another—oft promoting the portrait of a retributive being where God must possess and promote both good and evil. Being that this is a deity some might find repulsive, the task of this paper is to point out the flaws in such ontological models and then lay the groundwork for a more promising alternative where a deity is able to retain both their infinite and benevolent traits and exploring the compatibility of this type of deity while maintaining the integrity of MN.

2. An Overview of Terms

This paper's discussion will be best served by first defining what we mean when speaking to various ontological models of divinity. Benedikt Göcke helpfully outlines four as follows:

1) *Classical Theism* - God and the remainder of existence are distinct from one another.
2) *Pantheism* - God and all of existence are entirely one and the same.
3) *Theistic Emergentism* - God is wholly situated within the scope of existence.
4) *Panentheism* - All of existence is situated within God (2017).

Our leading discussion centers itself on the supposed infinite and benevolent natures of God—as in how does God's infinance and benevolence interact within the above models? It is worth noting here that it is not my attempt to argue for my own theological presumptions about how God is (or indeed, how God is not) in the following discussion. In fact, if there is a God, which, frankly, one cannot fully know at this juncture, that God might be far different than any of the possible God-models articulated here (or by those not listed by Göcke, including forms of polytheism, deism, et cetera). What I intend to point out is how these ontological models of

divinity interact with God if that God must be both infinite and benevolent, and, too, interact within a MN framing.

It will also be of use to define both infinite and benevolence for the remaining discussion. *Infinite* in this paper, is something that by definition, cannot be wholly quantified. While I acknowledge mathematical infinities and theological or philosophical infinities are not perfect mirrors of one another, thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas articulated an infinite deity as being something in which its own qualities are not limited by the nature of being in his *Summa Theologica* 17. So I will often use the language of mathematics to speak of the divine. Also of importance for this paper, *Benevolence* speaks to all that is good in its highest form—love, compassion, grace, mercy, kindness, forgiveness, et cetera—coupled with no hint of evil, oppression, indifference, et cetera. Of course, these natures are, admittedly, human conceptualizations and thereby tainted (at least when compared to a God of supposed infinite and benevolent natures). So, put simply, when talking about benevolence in this paper, I will be using it in a way in which it represents goodness in its highest and most complete forms.

3. The History of MN and its Definition

With the rise of creationism as a "scientific" alternative to the classical method in the 1960s, Paul de Vries of Wheaton College in the United States is said to have derived a new way to think about science and faith—this he deemed "methodological naturalism" (De Vries, 1986). (It is worth noting that scholars such as Perry & Ritchie (2018), perhaps rather correctly, dispute de Vries as MN's founding thinker.) De Vries had been using that particular nomenclature for some time before putting it to print, as the framework was intended to provide an alternative to the duopoly of scientific creationism and evolutionistic scientism (Poe & Mytyk, 2007). His work was, however, more a review of a competing view (that of Nicholas Wolterstorff) than the makings of his own philosophical argument. Beyond de Vries, MN then gained significant traction in the late 1980s as philosopher Michael Ruse used it in the American judicial system to criticize the efforts of many who argued for intelligent design in their attempt to portray creationism and evolution as competitors (Kojonen, 2017). Ruse, much like de Vires before, made clear that the disjointedness of the two camps engaged in the intelligent design-evolutionary theory debate was not the only way for the fields to interact—and, indeed, that they could work in tandem (Papineau, 2001). Others, such as John Polkinghorne, a physicist turned priest, are, too, critical of the intelligent design movement, yet in a slightly different way. Polkinghorne is said to prefer working from the ground up; building a model of divinity from what can be known in the natural realm and not the other way around, as so many in the aforementioned movement endorse (Polkinghorne, 1996). Polkinghorne thinks of the disciplines of science and religion as cousins, working toward the same goals. While these few voices do not represent, in total, the breadth of thought in regard to MN, they paint an accurate portrait of the movement's past.

Looking at MN's varied history then begs the question, where is it now? *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* spells MN out as something which sees science and philosophy "engaged in essentially the same enterprise, pursuing similar ends and using similar methods"

(Papineau, 2001, sec. 2.1). This form of MN is not necessarily tied to religious doctrines (or a certain lack thereof when thinking along atheistic lines) and is, frankly, not the kind of MN which this paper will discuss. Instead, I will look to an opponent of religiously-inclined MN, Andrew Torrance, who defines it as being a "method that assumes that the reality of the universe, as it can be accessed by empirical inquiry, is to be explained solely with recourse to natural phenomena" (2017, p. 691). Meaning that, essentially, MN does and should not make claims about the supernatural (or lack thereof) and that its main purpose is to deter individuals from appealing to the supernatural when working out a scientific explanation—it is this definition from which this paper will draw.

4. Limitations of MN

Like any framework, MN is not without constraints. One of its primary limitations comes in the form of its exclusivity. MN commits to seeking only naturalistic explanations for observed phenomena, leaving no room for metaphysical or supernatural explanations. (Some, like Ruse, debate this, stating that God and MN can indeed coexist; how that is possible, ontologically, is left ambiguous, however [2001, p. 365].) While this commitment is essential for maintaining the empirical integrity of science, it limits the scope of inquiry by precluding exploration of phenomena that may have metaphysical aspects. For instance, questions related to consciousness, ultimate purpose, or the nature of moral values are said to often transcend the boundaries of naturalistic explanation. MN may inadvertently restrict the pursuit of knowledge in these domains, as it is ill-suited to addressing questions that inherently involve non-naturalistic elements. Consequently, the limitations of MN become evident when tackling questions that pertain to the deeper dimensions of human existence.

Another limitation of MN is its tendency to omit alternative, non-naturalistic perspectives—or simply adopt them as natural. Critics argue that MN can be perceived as dogmatic, biased against supernatural or metaphysical explanations, and, as a result, it might inadvertently limit our understanding of reality (Larmer, 2019, p. 7). Science's commitment to MN might lead to the neglect of valuable insights offered by alternative worldviews, such as those posited by philosophical perspectives or theological doctrines. Consequently, a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of reality might be hindered.

Naturally, MN's strict commitment to naturalism can also pose challenges in engaging with philosophy and theology. It may appear as a conflicting ideology, particularly in discussions related to the nature of reality and ultimate questions. Philosophical and theological perspectives often encompass metaphysical elements that lie outside the purview of MN (Larmer, 2019, p. 9). Thus, the tension between MN and these philosophical and theological worldviews can limit fruitful interdisciplinary dialogue. In part, the above limitations are why I am writing this paper, to show that there is room for possible matches in which ontological models for divinity stand to hold a God who is both infinite and wholly benevolent within the framework laid out by MN. We will now spend a short while on each of the four models, described briefly in the section above, in an attempt to find one that fits with MN.

5. Classical Theism

We will first look to classical theism, where, ontologically, God and all else that exists are completely separate from one another. Here, there is no overlap between God and "the universe." Proverbially, if what is known to exist is a bowl of fruit, encompassing a mango, several apples, tangerines, an orange, and perhaps a small bunch of bananas, God is not the fruit, or the bowl in which it sits, God is, in this analogy, the knife sitting on the countertop beside the fruit bowl. There is a distinction between the fruit and the knife; they are completely separate from one another—serving different roles, shaped differently, and made of different materials. Many, if not most, classical theists go beyond an ontologically separate deity and travel into the realm of "perfection," where Thomas Williams in his introduction to the model says, "The unqualifiedly perfect being is atemporal and immaterial—free from all limitations of time and place. It acts but is not acted upon, and so it is said to be impossible. It is perfect in knowledge, perfect in power, and perfect in goodness" (Williams, 2013, p. 95). Many monotheistic religions, such as Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, all, by and large, subscribe to this type of entity (Williams, 2013, p. 96).

In classical theism, however, God cannot be truly infinite, at least within the parameters of what has been created—as God is distinct from and outside of what God has caused to exist. There are two spatial localities in this model, and while God may infinitely inhabit one (i.e. heaven), God is not allowed to incarnate the other (the created universe). While God may not be truly infinite given this particular model, God can remain benevolent as, since God is not a part of the created cosmos, whatever evils do exist in that space, are entirely separate from God's deity—war, suffering, oppression are all separated from God as God is separated from creation. That said, classical theists often point to their God as having perfect (i.e. infinite) freedom (Mawson, 2016, p. 143). Which, if that were true, would actually take away any possibility of infinite benevolence, since a wholly free God could then choose to create a wholly benevolent world—which, at least in human conceptualization, does not exist.

All said, does this version of divinity have the potential to exist in a MN framework? Well, that depends on one's own metaphysical presuppositions. If such a God existed, yet chose to refrain from interacting with the reality of which humanity is a part, that God would not be in conflict with MN since it would be unobservable by science (and, thereby, unable to be verified scientifically). The religious person who possesses a particular faith in such a God, however, could, too, view their own theism as valid so long as they refrained from concocting naturalistic theories which involved the deity (i.e. where one's God impacted the universe which we inhabit, by helping someone find their missing keys or purse, for instance). This isn't to say problems don't arise, however, as the classical God's aseity—complete ontological separateness from the rest of reality—creates issues with doctrines such as *imago Dei* and others, since the classical God cannot be dependent on anything other than Godself; and in creating and/or interacting with things apart from God, God, necessarily, loses such self-sufficiency (Webster, 2007, p. 148). So, classical theism does not wholly work on this front, yet its lack of fit is not so much dependent on the parameters of MN so much as its internal incongruencies when thinking about the external parameters of benevolence and infinance.

6. Pantheism

For this paper's second model we will look to pantheism, where God and all else that exists are completely conjoined as one. In this model, God is identical to "the universe." To continue with the above analogy, if what is known to exist is a bowl of fruit, God is not simply a mango or a tangerine, God is, instead, both the mango and the tangerine, as well as each and every banana, orange, and apple in the bowl. God is each piece of fruit in its entirety; and while there may appear to be clear distinctions between the various fruits, they are all wholly God. This is a deity who is ontologically synonymous with the remainder of reality and, as such, impossible to distinguish from it (Leslie, 2007, p. 4).

Here, God exists as everything (both in what we might call heaven and the remaining universe). There is no dualistic distinction between these two localities as God is situated as the uniting infinite—*God is all*. "God's thought did not make the world," writes Jennifer Michael Hecht of perhaps the preeminent expander of pantheism, Baruch Spinoza's view, "God *is* his thought, and the God-thought *is* the world" (Hecht, 2003). But, while the infinite and grounding nature of the divine is blatantly present in pantheism, there exists a problem with God's benevolence. For, if God exists as all that is, God would necessarily inhibit both the good and the bad in any given scenario—war, suffering, and oppression are all God equally so with peace, happiness, and equity. So, as with traditional theism, pantheism does not hold up to both ends of the litmus test.

Since MN is committed to explaining the world in the terms of natural causes, properties, and activities, and the pantheistic God is entirely situated as existence's causes, properties, and activities, it follows that such a God would be entirely compatible with MN. Pantheism, like classical theism, has its own problems, however—chiefly, that if everything is God nothing is really "God," at least in the sense that such a God is of higher morality, power, or ethic. (Responses to similar objections are plentiful, with Spinoza (1632-1677 CE) standing out as a thinker whose method for diffraction came by simply doing away with the need for a wholly pure being (Nadler, 2020, sec. 2.1) Ontologically, of course, this has no real effect as MN can, itself, make no claim regarding the viability of a given deity so long as the rules of the natural world are not broken—which, since the natural world is the deity, they are not. Subsequently, as the pantheistic God can be observed by science (though perhaps not verified as properly divine), even with its flaws, it could be seen as a better fit regarding this paper's aim to retain infinite benevolence than the aforementioned classical theism.

7. Theistic Emergentism

Next comes theistic emergentism, where God is situated (and was, at one point, formed) wholly within all else that exists. In this model, God is a proper part of "the universe." Returning to the fruit bowl, here God is a banana and a banana only. The mango, tangerines, apples, and orange all exist in the fruit bowl with the God-banana, but God is not those other fruits or the bowl in which it sits, neither is God the entire bunch of bananas from which it came, but one banana alone. There is a distinction between the piece of God-fruit and the rest of existence; so that while they exist among each other, they are still completely separate from one another (Bennett-Hunter, 2015,

p. 331). Here, God was grown from the preexistent universe. (It is of note that scholars such as Philip Clayton reject the idea of emergent theism as an ontological option for the divine wholly based on the fact that "a God who would be doing things within the cosmos subsequent to the big bang would be encroaching on the territory for which the sciences are responsible" [2006, p. 185].)

Of course, this could mean that, as with traditional theism, since God is separated from the rest of existence, although this time exists within it, God could certainly retain God's benevolent nature. Now, that may prove improbable—as no thing the human has experienced has proved to be entirely good (house cats, while soft and cuddly, have painful claws; autos, though they indeed are handy in an effort to get from home to work, get into accidents; and so on)—it is not thoroughly impossible that there would be an entirely benevolent God situated within the cosmos. The emergent God would exist within the scientific confines of reality as it is known, though perhaps such a God remains properly undiscovered by the scientific community—not because the deity exists as ontologically undiscoverable, such as with the God of classical theism, or as ontologically indistinguishable, such as the God of pantheism, but because the "semidivine" simply exists within the physical confines of the same universe that limits the knowledge and scope of the human species (Franklin, 2019, pp. 2-3).

With this in mind, the emergentist's framework does not, strictly speaking, conflict with MN—though, it might simply be labeled plausible (and, based on its inability to yet be tested scientifically, nothing more). Emergentism varies from pantheism, however, as it defends the idea that while God is a part of the created cosmos, God is in fact, not at all infinite—and is instead determined as being a properly finite segment of reality.

8. Panentheism

We will conclude this survey of ontological models by looking to panentheism, where God and all else that exists are completely intertwined with one another. Here, "the universe" is a proper part of God. Turning one final time to our bowl of fruit, now the mango, apples, tangerines, orange, and bunch of bananas are all a part of God, yet, God this time transcends those fruits and is, too, a part of the bowl in which they sit, and even the knife used to slice them into edible pieces. Were the knife to be used and an apple split in half, one would notice its seeds and fleshy core, these seeds and the core are not themselves God (petering on emergentism) though they are a part of the apple, but, just like everything else, *a part* of God. To borrow the words of Göcke, the bowl of fruit is "essentially divine but . . . not exhaustive of the divine being" (2017, p. 1).

John W. Cooper speaks of panentheism as being something the likes of Schleiermacher, Bergson, Ruether and McFague would articulate as God being "the Life Force, the dynamic Spirit that generates life, intelligent order, and oneness in the universe" (Cooper, 2013, p. 19). God here links all that is, God is *a part* of everything—that is God is in all of existence, but not *entirely* so—this semantic distinction is what separates panentheism from pantheism. And it is here where God's infiniance in this model may come into question, as God is in everything and, thereby, everything is a part of God, yet God is not everything nor is everything God. As confusing and counterintuitive as this may sound, it also demonstrates that God is in fact not all of everything

which may then appear as though God is also not infinite. Now, based on one's conceptualization of an infinite being, this may or may not be true—if one's idea of infinity must include *everything*, say every possible digit of every number in existence, God would not be infinite in the panentheistic model. That said, one's idea of infinity may come from a vastly different place—say, not in every number, but in certain parts of every number. For example, looking at a number line, you will notice whole numbers include both odd and even digits as their decimals. Here we could say that every even decimal of every whole number is God, and every odd decimal of every whole number is not God. God is still a part of every whole number (and exists within each whole number an infinite amount of times), but God is not that number (or the infinite line of whole numbers) *in its entirety*. If one's conceptualization of God comes from the former mode, God would not be properly infinite. Yet, if one's portrait comes from the latter mode, God retains God's infinite nature—where God can be infinite as a part of the entire whole and yet not the whole entirely.

This then brings us to God's benevolent nature. How might divine goodness fit within the aforementioned mode by which God's infinite nature is expressed? Within an infinite universe which houses both good and bad there can still exist an infinite God who is wholly good—just as within an infinite amount of whole numbers, there are, too, an infinite number of odd decimals as there are even within the whole numbers. Proverbially, an infinite God (our even decimals) co-exists with, but is not a part of, the evils of the world (the odd decimals). While this is by no means a perfect analogy, it does demonstrate how a benevolent entity might retain its infinite nature amidst the apparent chaos of the cosmos.

9. Infinite and Benevolent Interactions with the Models

When it comes to considerations about the infinite, there are two cases to think through: either "the universe" is finite or it is infinite. If "the universe" is finite, then, on the models of pantheism and emergentism, God is finite. If "the universe" is infinite, then, on the models of pantheism and panentheism, God is infinite. The classical God, which is in no way a part of "the universe" must, in all cases, be finite. While the emergent God could be infinite within an infinite universe, but would necessarily be finite within a finite one.

When it comes to considerations about value, there are two cases to consider here, as well: either "the universe" is "good" or it is "not good." This, of course, relies heavily on the assessments about the universe's breadth above. For, if "the universe" is "good," then, on pantheism and emergentism, God is also necessarily "good." If "the universe" is "not good," then, on pantheism, God is "not good." For panentheism, God could be "good" inside "the universe" and "not good" outside of it (or vice versa). And, necessarily, for the classical God, such a deity could be either "good" or "not good" since it exists outside of "the universe."

10. MN's Interaction with the Models

After reviewing the above models, we come to a rather awkward fork in the road, for while panentheism may indeed retain God's infinance and benevolence, all of the aforementioned ontological models might indeed work within the scientific framework of MN; yet since MN is keen to make no metaphysical claims or assumptions, and as it is itself a wholly scientific enterprise, it would behoove me to allow MN to remain MN and not fit it to my metaphysical presuppositions or lack thereof into its mold. Ontological models of divinity, which themselves are found to be separate from what can be presently known through the practice of good science, are a part of a completely different truth-seeking mechanism. This is not to say that MN and theology, say, cannot work in tandem, but it is the very nature of MN to refrain from picketing itself alongside any version of theistic or atheistic thought—and perhaps it is healthiest in that position.

While all four models discussed do indeed provide a possible match (at least when speaking strictly ontologically) for a deity, of any kind, to be paired with MN—primarily because of MN's entirely agnostic ontological stance—all models, too, find themselves with problems outside of this paper's scope which, in turn, have the potential to render them rather less than ideal once a deity's infinite and benevolent natures are layered in. However, were we to pick a model with the most promise, it would not seem a stretch to contend that panentheism best fits the bill. This because panentheism is the only model mentioned which is itself ontologically ambiguous—while classical theism and theistic emergentism house God, in God's entirety, either within or without the rest of "the universe," and where pantheism concludes God is the entirety of said "universe," panentheism provides space for ontological uncertainty, making it the most suitable model for reconciling an infinite, benevolent God with MN. This persuasion, in my estimation, is what makes panentheism a choice partner when looking to the aforementioned parameters of this paper.

There is yet another benefit of panentheism which ties into the idea of an infinite, benevolent God. It is that this model of deity allows for the personal God most classical theists adhere to, amidst the evils presented, to be retained. Scholars such as John Bishop and Ken Perszyk recognize the link a panentheistic deity can make in how the existence of evil can be consistent with a personal "omniGod," as they call it (2016, p. 108). This is of course necessary for the retention of a benevolent deity—a value articulated by the philosopher Thomas Talbott when he says that "Anything less than a perfectly loving God . . . would be far worse than no God at all" (2014, p. 7). For how could God be good yet sit apart, at a distance, from afar, looking at the not-so-good things happening to God's creation? This conceptualization aids in the retention of God's suffering as *a part* of God's creation. In Christendom, for example, the assumption that Jesus was God incarnate furthers this line of reason; where a part of God, who was indeed divine, suffered alongside the rest of God's divinity (humanity). Other New Testament metaphors, such as the body of Christ and all things being made new in Christ, point to the plausibility of this ontological model within that particular tradition (e.g. Colossians 1:15-17; 1 Corinthians 12:27).

With this lens in mind, and assuming for a moment that God is both infinite and benevolent, it would follow that God must necessarily be a part of everything which embodies benevolence. Meaning that panentheism, then, provides the best model that allows infinite benevolence to have

care for finite entities, since those finite entities are, themselves, a part of the infinite benevolence—without also necessarily housing anything less-than-benevolent. This is similarly articulated by Bishop and Perszyk when speaking to panentheism as a model of divinity, "that God is the supremely good end of the Universe and that this is what ultimately explains the existence of all that is" (2016, p. 106). Where God is the "ultimate," the "grounding," the infinite sum of all that is and all that will be—and it is because of this that God would necessarily show unique interest and have intimate care for every individual (as modern Christendom oft projects). For since God is, in this model, quite literally, *everything* which is good and nothing that is bad, God must *necessarily* care for every finite thing, even though God is, in Godself, infinite.

Finally, panentheism finds itself in a unique place when compared to the ontology of the three aforementioned models. For, as MN is careful to make no real distinction regarding ontological divinity or lack thereof, panentheism is itself careful to do the same (even though, comedically, it is an ontological model). The *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* defines it as "the belief that the Being of God includes and penetrates the whole universe, so that every part of it exists in [God]" (Cross & Livingstone, 2005, pp. 1221-1222). This, like pantheism, is difficult to refute scientifically, as such divine embodiment, even if just partially so, is still lacking in the classical ontological qualities necessary to make such observation (Brierley, 2004, p. 11). This unique difference, however—panentheism's rather ambiguous ontological stance juxtaposed to pantheism's universal persuasion—perhaps makes it a better partner for MN in that MN itself takes an ambiguous (or, agnostic) metaphysical stance.

11. Potential Objections

This conjoining of MN and panentheism with an infinite deity of highest-order goodness should not go unchallenged. Here, I lay out what I see as being three primary holes in this proposed marriage.

1) Now, it could easily be argued that, if God is fully infinite, that would also mean that God could not be benevolent—for as to an infinite entity, something finite would be perceived as not existing. (Just as a finite entity cannot fully comprehend an infinite entity, it would follow that an infinite entity (because of its ever-growing expanse of infinity) would not be able to truly comprehend a finite entity [see Smith, 2016, pp. 95-121].) Which, if that were the case, would result in an infinite entity losing its ability to truly care for (show benevolence towards) the finite. That said, I have already asserted that, of the four models Göcke articulates, panentheism is the only way to have an infinite God care for any finite thing. I have said this because while to an infinite entity, finite things do not exist nor compute, in panentheism, all that is finite makes up the infinite. This would necessitate constant care of the infinite for the finite since the finite is itself a part of the infinite. This would then mean that an infinite, benevolent God must *necessarily* have care for all that is. This, as it follows, grounds Göcke's second criterion in that a God must be worthy of worship.

2) Another objection might be found in how I have defined infinity. Some may want to define God's infinance as being an infinite maximality—essentially asserting that God is infinitely good

in that God is the most good (no other good goes beyond God's), or that God is more good than any other thing. Of course, in classical theism, this is often how God is perceived as being; allowing for God to possess both good and evil so long as God retains more good than any other thing. But is an infinite maximality truly infinite? I would argue not, for while on a day in which I am well hydrated, I may be made up of something like 60 percent water, I am not all water. Even though I may be made of more water than the rest of the materials which make me the human that I am, I am not water infinitely so (even within the parameters of my being). It follows that just because God is perceived as being mostly good, certainly more good than any other entity, that does not make God good in an infinite fashion.

3) Keeping that in mind, an interesting contradiction to MN's current framing can be found in the work of Loren Haarsma of Calvin University in the United States. Haarsma attempts to use his theism as a foundation for scientific frameworks, such as MN (Haarsma, 2003). He says that "Methodological Naturalism … is a tool for conducting limited investigations and for discovering limited truths" (2003, p. 55). He frames MN in its current form as "misleading" as it teaches that "God is absent from ordinary natural events" (2003, p. 57). Of course, the problem with Haarsma's desire to use his ontologically religious belief as a foundation on which to build MN is that, in doing so, he has neglected MN's primary clause—that it will utilize no assumption, credence, or belief unable to be justified by science. In reversing the order of operations, as it were, Haarsma has not successfully, as intended, paired MN with theism and instead created a framework entirely independent of it. Even if the ontological outline he attempts to construct were true, his claims regarding it would presently be falsified because their "truth" is not yet endorsed by the scientific method. One could easily argue that using MN, while still remaining theistic, is rather counterintuitive. But, as this paper has intended to demonstrate, it could prove to be of value to various religious adherents, given a proper ontological model (Perry & Ritchie, 2018). It should not go unsaid, however, that MN is, indeed, in conflict with many religious frameworks—primarily because MN often takes a neutral stance on ontology; while models of divinity, in contrast, regularly take rather distinct stances on the matter.

12. Concluding Thoughts

This paper has sought to establish a connection between the idea of an infinite and benevolent deity with the ideological parameters of MN, a method that looks to empirical inquiry alone in an attempt to describe "the universe." As I have worked to show, because of the posture MN takes toward divinity, it cannot itself speak to the reality of deity and must remain agnostic. After reviewing a slate of leading candidates, panentheism was presented as the most viable ontological framework for harmonizing the concept of an inherently good and infinite God with the principles of MN. As such, it is, at present, best equipped to harmonize with the demands of scientific methodology than any of its competitors.

Again, my intention has not been for this paper to argue for MN to make claims about faith, but rather to serve as a neutral framing that allows individuals to hold a faith commitment without contradicting the scientific process. And, based on the parameters of inference and benevolence, it

seems panentheism can best be conjoined with MN in such a way. Here, more practically, I have aimed to provide a reconstructed religious framework where scientifically-minded people can seamlessly incorporate scientific study into their beliefs, were those beliefs to be limited to an infinitely benevolent deity—showing that, at least in theory, a possible match can indeed exist. Though agnostic in its final posture, the proposal here of conjoining MN with panentheism provides an answer to the unbecoming task of reconciling yet another dimension of apparent discrepancy between science and religion.

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