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NATURALISTIC THEISM ON GENERAL DIVINE ACTION WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE LEVELS OF ANALYSIS MODEL

Abstract. The model of levels of analysis (MLA) is used to describe naturalistic theism and compare statements describing divine action accepted within traditional Christian theism and naturalistic theism. The empirical/non-empirical character of the statements is the main criterion behind the division of the statements within the model. Naturalistic theism is divided into strong and weak, with the former being analyzed in more detail. Strong naturalistic theism is characterized as trying to avoid the conflict with science by only accepting statements describing general divine action in nature. Such statements belong to the metaphysical levels of analysis.

Keywords: divine action, theism, naturalism, levels of analysis, Christianity

1. Introduction. 2. The general characteristics of the levels of analysis model. 3. GDA from the point of view of the MLA. 4. Traditional theism and divine action within the MLA framework. 5. Strong naturalistic theism from the perspective of the MLA. 6. The event of Jesus and Peter walking on water interpreted within the MLA framework. 7. Conclusion.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the main tenets of naturalistic theism is the rejection of the idea of supernatural interventionist action in nature. The notion of an interventionist action can be understood in two ways: 1) as the *God-of-the-gaps* strategy, understood as a reference to God's action in explaining particular facts or events in the empirical realm that have been left unexplained by science; 2) as describing God's actions that violate the natural order. Howard Van Till describes naturalistic theism referring to the latter way when he writes: "In contrast to several forms of supernaturalistic theism, naturalistic theism rejects coercive supernatural intervention as something that would

violate the essential natures of God, the world, and the God-world relationship.”¹ In contrast, Ian G. Barbour uses a combination of both conditions: “The ‘God of the gaps’, invoked to explain scientifically unexplained facts, retreated further as the gaps in human knowledge were closed. God’s special action as a cause producing effects on the same level as natural causes was replaced by law obeying natural causes in each area of scientific advance. (...) past history has taught the danger of bringing God in a stopgap where the scientific explanation is incomplete.”²

This rejection of interventionism and the *God-of-the-gaps* approach is also expressed in the thesis that there is not a single event in the empirical world, the appropriate explanation of which would require a reference to divine supernatural action. Hence, it is assumed that: a) science is capable to explain all the natural events as well as to describe the properties of empirical objects; and b) it is sufficient for the scientific explanations to refer only to natural causes. The concept of the *God of the gaps* is considered harmful to religion as the development within sciences ultimately leads to close the knowledge gaps that were previously explained only by reference to supernatural factors, time and again showing religion to be in the wrong. This does not mean, however, that theistic naturalism rejects any possibility of God’s activity in the created world. To avoid falling into deism, theistic naturalists adopted various notions of *non-interventionist* divine action in the world, most often taking the shape of either the notion of general divine action (GDA) or of special divine action (SDA) in nature.

In this article, the model of levels of analysis (MLA) is used to describe and compare the statements describing the notion of

1 H. Van Till, *Are Bacterial Flagella Intelligently Designed? Reflection on the Rhetoric of the Modern ID Movement*, *Science and Christian Belief* 15(2003)2, 121.

2 I.G. Barbour, *Science and Religion Today*, in: *Science and Religion. New Perspectives on the Dialogue*, ed. I.G. Barbour, Harper & Row, New York – Evanstone – London 1968, 5–6.

divine action found in naturalistic theism (reducing divine action to GDA) and in traditional Christian theism. The MLA allows one to distinguish, in a specific way, between two versions of naturalistic theism, which for the purposes of this article are described as *strong* and *weak*. The specific character of the approach behind the MLA consists in distinguishing between GDA and SDA as well as between the weak and strong NT at the cognitive, rather than ontic, level and to take into account the difference between the empiricalness of the statements describing divine action.³ The strong version limits the type of valid religious statements describing God and divine action in the world to the GDA statements that, being unempirical and metaphysical, belong to the two highest levels distinguished in the model. The weak form of naturalistic theism additionally accepts as valid certain SDA statements that refer to those natural events that are highly complex, indeterminate or unpredictable.⁴ The two types of naturalistic theism both reject the empirical statements describing supernatural interventions, as these are also rejected in the scientific picture of the world.

This article focuses on the notions accepted within naturalistic theism that limit the validity of statements describing divine action to those referring to GDA (belonging only to the metaphysical levels of the model). By phrasing the approach of naturalistic theism and

3 A. Świeżyński also sharply distinguishes between ontological and epistemological approaches to divine action (see A. Świeżyński, *Epistemology of miracle. Scientific inexplicability, religious sense and system approach towards the epistemology of miracle*, Wyd. UKSW, Warszawa 2012; Idem, *Ontology of miracle. Supernaturality, God's action and system approach towards the ontology of miracle*, Wyd. UKSW, Warszawa 2012; Idem, *Filozofia cudu. W poszukiwaniu adekwatnej koncepcji zdarzenia cudownego*, Wyd. UKSW, Warszawa 2012. In contrast to this article, his analysis of the epistemological approach does not take into account a further distinction between statements describing divine action from the point of view of their empiricalness.

4 The notion of SDA as described within the MLA framework is presented elsewhere. See P. Bylica, *Naturalistic theism on special divine action – within the framework of the model of levels of analysis*, *Studia Philosophiae Christianae*, in print.

traditional Christian theism in terms of the model, one is able to compare the two and reveal how substantial a revision of the latter is in fact proposed by the strong version of the former. Traditional Christian theism accepts statements describing God and divine action in the empirical realm formulated at all levels of the model, whereas strong naturalistic theism rejects certain religious statements at the lower, empirical levels as not valid. Hence, the aim of the article is to show the great extent of substantial revisions to traditional Christian theism made within strong naturalistic theism as a result of accepting some philosophical assumptions of contemporary science and, more generally, the authority of science in deciding what phenomena occur in nature.

The order of the arguments is as follows. First, an overview of the MLA is presented.⁵ The next step describes the approach to the problem of divine action in the world found within traditional Christian theism from the point of view of the model. Then, the notions of GDA and SDA are analyzed within the MLA framework, leading to an analysis of the strong and weak version of naturalistic theism and focusing on how the notion of GDA is used in strong naturalistic theism to reconcile Christian theism with the scientific picture of the world. Note that it is an overview rather than a detailed presentation of this highly complex issue. Finally, we show that this way of reconciling science and religion leads to a substantial revision of the traditional Christian theism, which is clearly seen when using the MLA framework.

The characterization of traditional Christian theism, naturalistic theism, and the MLA presented in this article are not meant to be detailed descriptions of these theoretical constructs; rather, they

5 For a more in-depth analysis the reader is invited to consult P. Bylica, *Levels of analysis in philosophy, religion, and science*, *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 50(2015)2, 304–328; and P. Bylica, *Zarys modelu poziomów analizy w badaniach relacji nauki i religii*, *Filozoficzne Aspekty Genezy* 9(2012), 221–253.

are useful simplifications. The aim here is to present a version of a complex picture of the debate on the relations between science and religion in such a way as to highlight certain regularities and present a clearer view of the varying attitudes toward the notion of divine action in nature.

2. THE GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE LEVELS OF ANALYSIS MODEL

The empirical/non-empirical character of statements is the main criterion behind their division within the model. Statements are also categorized in terms of their degree of specificity and potential role in scientific endeavors. The model consists of five levels containing five kinds of statements. The structure of the model is represented in the table below. What follows is a summary of each level with some examples of non-religious statements (examples of religious statements found within Christian theism are provided in the section on GDA and in the description of traditional Christian and naturalistic versions of theism).

Level 1 – “the deepest” metaphysics	Metaphysical statements on being as such; most general statements on the ultimate basis of existence.
Level 2 – “shallower” metaphysics	Most general statements describing empirical reality, including statements of axiological character. These include statements on the rationality and cognizability of the empirical world, on its beauty, its meaningfulness or its teleological character, on monistic, dualistic or pluralistic ontology of the world as a whole, on the openness/closeness of nature to supernatural action.
Level 3 – ontology of nature	Ontological statements regarding particular domains of the natural world as adopted (usually tacitly) within given scientific theories, systems of theories or areas of science, as well as in religious ideas on special divine action in nature.

Level 4 – regularity statements	General statements forming scientific laws and theories, including classification statements, or – in the case of religion – statements expressing the general rules governing the actions of the supernatural in the empirical world.
Level 5 – “observational” statements	Particular statements describing occurrences and properties of the natural world, or a state of affairs one observes in the so-called ‘empirical realm’ at a particular time and place.

Tab. 1: A general outline of the MLA

The first two levels are of non-empirical character. The statements found both at the *level of “deepest” metaphysics* and “shallower” *metaphysics* meet the criteria described by logical empiricists for being metaphysical; hence they do not meet empirical criteria of meaning, and play no role in any particular scientific theory. The *level of “the deepest” metaphysics* consists of statements on being as such and on the ultimate source of existence as such, e.g. “Being is, but nothing is not”, “In the being of being the nothing nothings”, “Matter in motion is all that is”, etc.

The use of the superlative *the deepest* for placing statements at the *highest* level in the model might be surprising. However, this can be understood analogously to the use of the term *deep space objects* in astronomy, meaning the objects that are farthest from Earth or, assuming the geocentric view, occupy the highest place above Earth. The statements from “the deepest” metaphysical level are in this sense the farthest from the empirical statements that provide the point of reference. This is a consequence of the empirical point of view assumed in the formulation of the MLA.

The second level includes the most general statements on the most general characteristics of empirical reality, including statements on the rationality, intelligibility, and deterministic or nondeterministic character of the world in general. It also includes statements describing relativistic or anti-relativistic interpretations of reality, statements used in discussions between nominalism and realism,

realism and idealism or antirealism etc. It contains statements on the meaning of reality and realistically-interpreted value statements. Examples of such statements include: “The world in general is rational and intelligible”. “The world in general is beautiful (or formidable, meaningful or pointless, etc).” “This empirical world is only a shadow of an unempirical world of Ideas.” The acceptance of the chosen statements from this level influences the understanding and perception of particular facts as expressing the most general characteristics of the world.

Level 2 statements do play a role in science, but not aimed at influencing the choice between alternative theories considered within science. Their role lies in determining the very framework of science, as is the case of the assumptions of naturalism, located at this level. In this sense, naturalism determines that it is only explanations of naturalistic character that should be considered scientific and that those referring to supernatural factors should be excluded.

The *level of the ontology of nature* is an intermediate step between the levels containing metaphysical statements, on the one hand, and the levels containing empirical statements, on the other. It contains philosophical assumptions on the ontology of particular areas of the natural world as found within particular scientific theories and areas of science, as well as in religious theories of the divine action in nature. Level 3 contains statements expressing opposing positions in discussions between atomism and hylomorphism, determinism and indeterminism, reductionism and antireductionism, finalism and mechanism, mechanism and the concept of action at a distance. Examples of such statements include: “There is no action at a distance between physical objects”, “The process of evolution is undirected and has no purpose”, “Consciousness can be reduced to the behavior of cells in the brain”.

The two lowest levels, i.e. the *level of regularity statements* and the *level of observational statements* are empirical in the sense that these statements meet the criteria of empirical testability and empirical

criteria of meaning (taking into account the objections made in contemporary philosophy of science to the notion of the empirical testability of scientific statements and to the distinction between observational and theoretical statements). The level of regularity statements contains the general statements found in science and religion that describe regularities observed in the empirical world. Level 4 includes general statements that form scientific laws and theories, or – in the case of religious statements – the rules governing the special actions of the supernatural in the natural world. In the case of religion, it includes statements describing relations between the supernatural and the natural that are assumed in specific rites, aimed at persuading the gods to ensure favorable outcomes: e.g., the abundance of children, cattle, health, wealth etc. It also contains classification statements (in logic, these are traditionally referred to as *subsumption* statements describing entities and processes or events in the empirical world, e.g. Each tree is a plant; Each quark is an elementary particle). Meaning and acceptance of statements from this level is connected with the prior acceptance of statements on the ontology of nature. For example, some scientific notions of the mind are grounded in the belief that can be expressed by the statement mentioned above, i.e. “Consciousness can be reduced to the behavior of cells in the brain”. According to many scientists, the theory of evolution assumes that “The process of evolution is undirected and has no purpose”.

The level of observational statements includes specific statements describing events and properties of the natural world or state of affairs of the so-called ‘empirical realm’ at a given time and place. This level includes statements that at a particular place and time an event X occurred, or that event X had such and such properties. It contains both scientifically important and everyday observational statements, including, for instance, “On 29th July 2014 the Sun in Jerusalem rose at 05:53”, “The tyrannosaurus fossils were found in the layer dated at 65 million years”, “Moon ascension on such and such day equaled X”,

“Ann is having a headache”, etc. Occurrences described by statements found at this level are explained by reference to statements from the level directly above. Dubbing these statements *observational* does not assume the acceptance of the division between observational sentences (protocol-sentences, judgments of perception etc.), expressed in a theoretically-neutral language, and theoretical sentences – as understood within logical empiricism. Instead, such statements should be considered as similar to the basic statements in the Popperian sense⁶ and with no reference to perception statements or theoretically-neutral languages. In this sense, observational statements are both empirical and specific. Their meaning is determined by the language used in the accepted sets of Level 4 statements (viewed as theories), as well as by the assumptions made with respect to the ontology of nature (as expressed by Level 3 statements).⁷

3. GDA FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF THE MLA

Nicholas Saunders provides helpful criteria for distinguishing between GDA and SDA. His approach is similar to the empirical perspective assumed in the construction of the MLA, as his division is related to the scope and physical effect of divine actions. The approach assumed within MLA is a modification of his division into GDA and SDA. According to Saunders: “General Divine Action (GDA): Those actions of God that pertain to the whole of creation universally and simultaneously. These include actions such as the initial creation and the maintenance of scientific regularity and the laws of nature by God. Special Divine Action (SDA): Those actions of God that pertain to a particular time and place in creation as distinct from another. This is a broad category and includes the traditional understanding of ‘miracles’, the notion of particular providence,

6 K.R. Popper, *Logic of Scientific Discovery*, Routledge, London and New York 2000, 12.

7 See P. Bylica, *Levels of analysis in philosophy, religion, and science*, op. cit., 320.

responses to intercessory prayer, God's personal actions, and some forms of religious experience."⁸

Note that an important assumption behind Saunders' division is that "there are causal implications of divine action – genuine physical effects that would not have occurred had God not chosen to act. (...) to be able to speak intelligibly about the existence of SDA it is essential that God's actions actually have causal implications."⁹ This assumption is strongly connected with the possibility of divine action being empirically recognizable, which is crucial for traditional Christian theism as viewed within the MLA framework (see the following section). The empirical character of Saunders' division is expressed in his characterization of SDA as comprising "all actions of God that have local effects independent of any further categorisation as violations of the laws of nature or, on the other extreme, as non-interventionist actions for example."¹⁰

This division is not, however, of purely empirical character. This is evident when one focuses on his analysis of certain problems arising in terms of the relation between GDA and SDA: "Some theologians would wish to assert that as a component of universal general divine action God exerts a 'pressure' upon creation. Such a pressure, they argue, is applied universally on creation with the effect that the world is being steered towards a particular end. While such a universal steering would, on this definition, be clearly a form of GDA there is a significant possibility for a cross-over into SDA should the pressure cause certain local aspects of creation to 'rupture' in a violent manner in analogy with a piece of metal fracturing under a continuously increasing force (...) On the categorisation proposed above this would be a form of divine action that was fundamentally GDA, but that had

8 N. Saunders, *Divine Action and Modern Science*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2002, 21.

9 *Ibid.*

10 *Ibid.*

SDAs associated with it. However, a crucial point is that because the action is fundamentally GDA it does not somehow let us off the need to articulate its relationship to science. Any positive assertions for divine action in this manner are still left with the knotty problem of articulating how local SDA effects of this sort can be reconciled with normal scientific regularity and thus face quite the same difficulties as a simple assertion of SDA.¹¹ This passage indicates that in his division, Saunders tries to accommodate *God's perspective* (when he says that God *does* something) and a *human perspective* (the problem of reconciling local effects of SDA with normal scientific regularity).

In contrast, the MLA only assumes the *human perspective*, as it is a purely empirical one. The empirical character of statements describing God's actions is, from this point of view, the sole criterion for their validity. In fact, most statements describing GDA are non-empirical (hence these are included in the metaphysical levels of the MLA), while some statements describing SDA are indeed empirical.¹² Hence, with regard to statements describing GDA as a pressure from God on all the creation yet causing some local effects "in analogy with a piece of metal fracturing under a continuously increasing force", from the point of view of the model they would only be important if this 'fracturing' could be expressed as an observational statement belonging to Level 5. It is true, as indicated by Saunders, that GDA statements can be used as a kind of explanation for particular events observed at a particular time and place. However, when answering the question "Why the rain is falling at the moment?" one could make use of a GDA statement and say that God keeps the falling rain in existence at this particular moment as God keeps in existence whatever happens in nature. However,

11 *Ibid.*, 21–22.

12 See P. Bylica, *Naturalistic theism on special divine action – within the framework of the model of levels of analysis*, *op. cit.* for a detailed analysis of SDA from the point of view of naturalistic theism.

keeping in existence is a metaphysical concept belonging to the level of “the deepest” metaphysics (Level 1), which can be applied to any *observable* process or fact in the world (the GDA account describes God’s action as universal and simultaneous). When we ask why it is raining instead of, say, snowing, the explanation contains the same GDA statement describing God as keeping every process in existence or God’s permission for the created entities to act “according to their natures”. According to this approach, the same statement from the level of the “deepest” metaphysics can be applied to any observational data. What is most important is that such GDA statements are consistent with any two mutually exclusive observational statements. Hence, from the point of view of the empirical criteria of meaning, GDA statements would be considered as belonging to metaphysical levels, since they have no empirical content, and are of no cognitive value according to logical empiricists.¹³

4. TRADITIONAL THEISM AND DIVINE ACTION WITHIN THE MLA FRAMEWORK

In the perspective of the MLA, traditional Christian theism contains statements on God and supernatural actions in the world belonging to each of the levels of analysis distinguished above. These include metaphysical statements, statements describing the ontology of nature, as well as statements from the empirical levels of analysis, as shown in the table below.

Level 1 – “the deepest” metaphysics	Statements describing God as a necessary being, the Creator, the ontological basis of the existence of the world, who constantly and simultaneously sustains the world (including nature) in its existence.
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¹³ See P. Bylica, *Levels of analysis in philosophy, religion, and science*, op. cit., 308–309.

Level 2 – “shallower” metaphysics	Statements describing the world as rationally, axiologically and morally ordered, having its roots in God. Statements describing the world, life, humankind as effects of God’s intentional and general action. Statements describing nature as open to external interventions.
Level 3 – ontology of nature	Statements describing particular (physical, biological, psychological, sociological, etc.) domains of the empirical realm as open to special divine action. Statements describing certain types of events or properties of objects and processes as effects of a special action of God or other non-natural beings. Such action can be either hidden or open (i.e. it can be recognized as such).
Level 4 – regularity statements	Statements describing rules and regularities of special divine action in the natural world: the role of prayer, the so-called holy pictures or sacred places, the etiology of demonic possessions etc.
Level 5 – “observational” statements	Statements describing particular events interpreted as supernatural interventions. Such statements describe events and properties of the natural world observed in the so-called ‘empirical realm’ at a particular time and place.

Tab. 2: General characteristics of traditional Christian theism as viewed within the MLA framework

Level 1 contains statements describing God’s sovereignty, transcendence or purposefulness. Statements describing God as the ontological basis of the world, His sustaining the world in existence, or God as the Primary Cause are also found here. Level 1 statements also include other statements on God, which are more characteristic of the Christian doctrine. In Reaburne S. Heimbeck’s terminology, these were described as G2-statements (*vs.* G1-statements). Heimbeck differentiated between those God-statements (G-statements), “which have some empirical entailments and incompatibles and those which have none”.¹⁴ G2-statements, which as metaphysical

14 R.S. Heimbeck, *Theology and Meaning. A Critique of Metatheological Scepticism*, George Allen and Unwin London 1969, 171.

and non-empirical would be included in Level 1, which describe God himself also include the following: “The Lord is one”, “God is one yet three, a trinity in unity and unity in trinity”, “God the Holy Spirit proceeded from God the Father and From God the Son together, not from God the Father alone”, “God loves all human beings”.¹⁵

According to Heimbeck, “Each of these G2-statements (as well as their entire class) has for its entailments and incompatibles only other G-statements. And though empirical facts may enter into their checking procedures at some point, the primary and ultimate data for G2-statements (their direct evidence) will be expressed by other G-statements.”¹⁶ This idea can serve as a good (though not complete) analogy aiding appropriate understanding of the role of the metaphysical levels statements. There, meaning and justification of metaphysical statements are not determined by empirical data but through a mutual relation between statements (being their direct evidence) from different metaphysical levels of analysis.

In the case of the “shallower” metaphysics, the acceptance of certain metaphysical statements from this level influences the interpretation of certain observed facts as expressing beauty, cruelty, rationality, etc. of the world in general (or as facts behind which these features are hidden). This kind of assumptions found in traditional Christian theism express the conviction that the world is orderly and essentially good, that it is an expression of and incorporates God’s love or His immanent presence.

Heimbeck’s G1-statements are categorized in the MLA as empirical statements found in the lowest level of analysis. In his own words: “G1-statements differ in both respects, having some empirical entailments and incompatibles and having only empirical evidence as their primary and ultimate data. The prime example of a G1-statement (...) is the statement made by ‘God raised Jesus of Nazareth from the

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 172.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

dead near Jerusalem at t2'. This G1-statement entails (*prima facie*) the statements made by 'Jesus of Nazareth was dead near Jerusalem at t1' (when t1 is a time just prior to t2) and 'Jesus of Nazareth was alive and in the vicinity of Jerusalem at t3' (where t3 is a time just subsequent to t2) (...). The statement expressed by 'Jesus of Nazareth was not dead near Jerusalem at t1' and 'Jesus of Nazareth was not alive in the vicinity of Jerusalem at t3' are (*prima facie*) incompatibles of the statement made by 'God raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead near Jerusalem at t2'".¹⁷ The use of time and place indicators, as well as a reference to an empirically observable event and person in the statement describing the resurrection of Jesus means that, in accordance with the criteria for observational statements, it should be categorized as a Level 5 statement. Hence, the criteria for Level 5 statements and Haimbeck's G1-statements are equivalent. However, his condition that G1-statements treat the empirical evidence as the primary data source has to be understood in the context of critical empiricism (informed by philosophy of science with respect to the role of theory and philosophical assumptions in determining the meaning of observational statements).

Some of the most important Level 5 statements in the traditional Christian system of beliefs include those describing the resurrection of Christ. Traditional theism contains a large number of Level 5 statements describing effects of special supernatural action,¹⁸ which are statements having empirical entailments and thus incompatible with the way Haimbeck uses them. Such statements describe particular events interpreted as supernatural interventions or miracles.¹⁹

17 Ibid.

18 See K. Jodkowski, *NOMA, cudy i filtr eksplanacyjny*, Roczniki Filozoficzne 53(2005)2, 91; Idem, *Epistemiczne układy odniesienia i „warunek Jodkowskiego”*, in: *Filozoficzne i naukowo-przyrodnicze elementy obrazu świata 7*, eds. A. Latawiec, G. Bugajak, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Kardynała Stefana Wyszyńskiego, Warszawa 2008, 115.

19 On the empirical character of miracles, see A. Świeżyński, *Epistemology of miracle*, op. cit., 12; Idem, *Filozofia cudu*, op. cit., 14. The empirical character of miracles was stressed

These include the so-called mighty acts of God in the history of Israel, the miracles performed by Jesus and his disciples or by saints, extraordinary healings (taken as crucial evidence of miracles in beatification and canonization processes by the Roman Catholic Church), accounts of demonic possession etc., All these statements are important parts of the Christian tradition and are characteristic elements of Christian theism.

The MLA framework takes into account two more kinds of statements not included in Heimbeck's categorization. Level 3, called the *ontology of nature*, contains philosophical statements describing particular domains of nature in terms of determinism, indeterminism, complexity, chaotic processes, body and soul etc. Such statements can also form the philosophical background or interpretation of a given scientific theory or particular area of science, and describe the inner workings of nature. From the point of view of traditional Christian theism, certain (physical, biological, psychological, historical etc.) events or features of objects and processes found in the empirical realm can be adequately understood when explained as the effects of a special action of God or other supernatural being. Therefore, God acts in various empirical areas, each with its own specific ontology.

Level 5 includes statements describing events, the explanation of which – from the point of view of traditional Christian theism – assumes Level 2 statement that nature is not a closed causal system, and that recognizable special supernatural action can occur in different areas of nature. It should be noted that the Level 5 and Level 2 statements mentioned above are an important part of traditional Christian theism. Hence, if one claims that supernatural interventions cannot be invoked in explanations of empirical events, as such explanations would count as the discredited God-of-the-gaps strategy, he or she is also forced to view an important part of traditional Christianity as discredited.

by Thomas Aquinas. See M. Rusecki, *Traktat o cudzie*, Komitet Nauk Teologicznych PAN, Wyd. KUL, Lublin 2006, 97.

In traditional Christian theism one can also identify Level 4 statements describing rules and regularities of special divine actions in the natural world (also performed by evil beings), which can take the form of interventions resulting in events described by Level 5 empirical statements.²⁰ Such religious regularity statements cannot be claimed to be identical to scientific laws and theories, and many of them refer to *personal* effects. (Statements about existential experiences of an individual expressing his or her attitude toward the world and God are not considered as belonging to Level 5, but rather to the metaphysical Level 2. The latter contains general statements, the acceptance of which is identical with having a particular existential experience, a specific way of understanding the sense of the world and existence, and with expressing specific value judgments). However, Christian theism does include assumptions that can be described as religious regularity statements. They refer to a constant or a semi-constant relation between the supernatural realm and particular events occurring in the empirical, natural world (beyond the existential dimension of human life). They are statements on the role of prayer and the so-called holy pictures or sacred places, the intercession of the saints on behalf of men to secure the grace of God (e.g. the healing grace), the etiology of demonic possession etc. In the Gospels one finds many examples where it is either tacitly assumed or explicitly stated that obtaining particular graces is an effect of having a prior appropriate relation with God. Hence, these regularity statements (Level 4) are empirical, as they have empirical entailments and incompatible consequences. In particular, the empirical entailments consist of Level 5 statements describing the occurrences of empirically verifiable events that are the outcomes of special supernatural actions.

20 A more detailed analysis can be found in P. Bylica, *Levels of analysis in philosophy, religion, and science*, op. cit., 315–320.

Importantly, Level 4 statements forming a part of traditional Christian theism can be accepted only after prior acceptance of statements from the level of metaphysical statements (Level 2) affirming that nature is not a closed system of causes and effects and that supernatural factors can act in different areas of nature, or that nature alone is unable to produce in its normal course certain observable specific occurrences. These occurrences are expressed, within traditional Christian theism, in the form of observational statements belonging to Level 5. In this way, traditional theism accepts statements describing God and divine action that can be found on all levels of the model.

5. STRONG NATURALISTIC THEISM FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE MLA

From the point of view of the MLA, strong naturalistic theism can be defined as a position that rejects empirical statements (Levels 4–5) describing divine action in nature, as well as any statements on SDA referring to noninterventionist divine action that uses as causal joints the aspects of the ontology of nature (Level 3) assumed in different areas of science. This noninterventionist version of SDA is accepted within *weak naturalistic theism*. Its proponents postulate divine action at the level of indeterministic quantum processes – *bottom-up causality*, nonlinear dynamic processes (based on both *bottom-up causality* and *top-down causality*) or the influence of God only on the higher levels of organization by *top-down (downward) causality*.²¹ This additional qualification relates to the ‘strength’ of the naturalistic component, i.e. to the similarities with a description of the world based on the purely naturalistic assumptions of contemporary science. In other words, strong naturalistic theism is a position that only accepts those

²¹ The remainder of the paper deals with the strong version of naturalistic theism. Weak naturalistic theism is a subject to an in-depth analysis in P. Bylica, *Naturalistic theism on special divine action – within the framework of the model of levels of analysis*, op. cit.

metaphysical statements on God and God's action in nature that are restricted to GDA. Even if a proponent of strong naturalistic theism accepts certain statements describing God's action that in their literal meaning describe SDA, including some miraculous observable occurrences in the empirical realm, such statements are nevertheless interpreted as only belonging to the non-empirical levels of analysis. For example, the description of the creation of man would not be treated literally as a description of an event occurring at a given point in space and time, but rather as a collection of statements that can be interpreted as confirming that men depend on God for their existence. The biblical description of the escape of the Israelites through the Red Sea as expressing the redemptive power of God, and not as referring to an actual event. A similar metaphorization process would apply to all descriptions of miraculous events contained in the Bible and forming part of the Christian tradition.

This restriction in the set of accepted statements on divine action to the metaphysical levels is an effect of the prior acceptance of the authority of science and scientific naturalistic ontology in describing and explaining what happens in the empirical (natural) world. Also, the rejection of interventionism and the so-called *God-of-the-gaps* strategy is a consequence of this position. If all natural phenomena and all specific properties or events found in nature are adequately described and explained by the use of scientific (naturalistic) methodology, then metaphysical problems and statements are the only problems and statements that can be rightfully asserted to be within the purview of religion.

This kind of division of epistemological authority is expressed in an analysis of the gaps in the picture of the world as presented by Michał Heller, who is a representative of strong naturalistic theism: "The essential point is to distinguish between spurious gaps and genuine ones. Spurious gaps are temporary holes in our knowledge usually referring to an incomplete scientific theory or hypothesis and

to restricted domain of phenomena. (...) I think that all gaps are spurious except for the following two or three:

First is the *ontological gap*. Its meaning is encapsulated in question: Why is there something rather than nothing? The problem at stake is sheer existence. Even if we had a unique theory of everything (...), the question would remain who or what «has breathed the fire into the equations» to change what is a merely a formally consistent theory into one modeling the real universe.

Second is the *epistemological gap*: Why is the world comprehensible? (...) It is truly a gap. Science presupposes the intelligibility of the world, but does not explain it. Philosophy of science can at most demonstrate the non-trivial character of this question, but remains helpless if one further asks «Why?»

From the theological perspective both gaps, the ontological gap and the epistemological one, coincide: everything that exists is rational, and only the rational is open to existence. The source of existence is the same as the source of rationality.

I strongly suspect that there is the third genuine gap; I would call it the *axiological gap* – it is connected with the meaning and value of everything that exists. If the Universe is somehow permeated with meaning and value, they are invisible for scientific method, and in this sense they constitute the real gap as far as science and its philosophy is concerned. Here again, by adopting the theological perspective, I would guess, that the axiological gap does not differ from the remaining two: the sources of existence, rationality and value are the same.²²

22 M. Heller, *Chaos, Probability, and the Comprehensibility of the World*, in: *Chaos and Complexity. Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*, eds. R.J. Russell, N.C. Murphy, A.R. Peacocke, Vatican Observatory Publications, Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, Vatican City State – Berkeley 1995, 120–121. See also P. Bylica, *Mark Harris as a Naturalistic Theist: The Perspective of the Model of Levels of Analysis*, *Filozoficzne Aspekty Genezy* 12(2015), 15–16.

Gaps called *spurious* are those for which one can expect that sooner or later a scientific explanation will be found. Science is competent to give explanations for every phenomenon found in nature. Since science is based on methodological naturalism, accepted by naturalistic theism as an appropriate methodological assumption behind the science, all particular phenomena are adequately explained by naturalistic scientific theories and hypotheses. Trying to use God as an explanation for every particular phenomenon or occurrence observed in nature is from this perspective a *God of the gaps* fallacy.

The rest of the gaps described by Heller are the *real* ones, gaps that science due to its own limitations is unable to explain. From the point of view of the MLA, these gaps and the statements used in attempting to fill them are metaphysical. Using Heller's terminology, the statements describing the ontological gap belong to Level 1, while the statements describing the epistemological gap as well the statements describing the axiological gap belong to Level 2. Here, one finds the only gaps that can be filled by means of theological explanations: "Why is the world mathematical?" and perhaps it should be regarded as special instance of a more general question: 'Why is the world comprehensible?' (...) In theology one could (...) offer a theological interpretation of this result. For instance, one could say that the comprehensibility of the world and its existence are but two aspects of the creation. (...) The rationality of the Creator is reflected in the created world."²³

This form of theistic naturalism combines the concept of creation with the notion of providence in the idea of a *continuing creation*, a kind of GDA belonging to the metaphysical levels of analysis. This idea assumes that the process of creation has not been finished yet.

23 M. Heller, *On theological interpretations of physical creation theories*, in: *Quantum Cosmology and Laws of Nature. Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*, eds. R.J. Russell, N.C. Murphy, C.J. Isham, Vatican Observatory Publications, Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, Vatican City State – Berkeley 1999, 102–103.

According to the justification given by Barbour, the idea of *continuing creation* better corresponds to the contemporary scientific picture of the world. It was in the Middle Ages, when the creation was understood as completed that the analogy of God as the creator of a fully developed world seemed appropriate. According to Barbour: "Today the world as known to science is dynamic and incomplete. Ours is an unfinished universe which is still in the process of appearing. Surely the coming-to-be of life from matter can represent divine creativity as suitably as any postulated primeval production of matter 'out of nothing'. Creation occurs through time."²⁴ Barbour's *theology of nature* is an *expressis verbis* declaration of the acceptance of the contemporary scientific perspective, which leads to the reinterpretation of the traditional doctrine of creation: "Advocates of this approach [i.e. theology of nature – PB] hold that some traditional doctrines – especially doctrines of God and human nature – need to be reformulated in the light of current science. (...) [Genesis' – PB] message is not really about events in the past but about fundamental relation of God to the world and to us in every moment. In an evolutionary world we must give attention to continuing creation rather than to events in the distant past."²⁵

The idea of God's action in the world understood as a continuous creation (entailing an immanent presence of God in the laws of nature and sustaining every natural process in its existence) is not in fact in conflict with any scientific account of the events occurring in the natural world. This is because this idea has no empirical content, just like any other statement from Levels 1–2. There is no empirical evidence that could be used for its confirmation or refutation. Hence,

24 I.G. Barbour, *Issues in science and Religion*, Harper & Row, New York – Hagerstone – San Francisco – London 1971, 385. See also P. Bylica, *Zarys modelu poziomów analizy w badaniach relacji nauki i religii*, op. cit., 230.

25 I.G. Barbour, *Nature, Human Nature, and God*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 2002, 3–4.

such statements about God's action in nature belong to GDA and the metaphysical levels of analysis.

Arthur R. Peacocke promoted metaphysical statements describing God's general action in nature as consisting of God's presence in everything that happens and influencing nothing that happens: "(...) the contemporary Christian theist in urging the immanent creative activity of God in the cosmos must recognize that it is by the 'laws' and through the regularities of nature that God must be presumed to be working. This recognition is linked with the important understanding that matter is of such a kind, and the 'laws' which it obeys are of such a kind, that creativity, in the sense of the emergence of new forms of matter, is a permanent potentiality whose actualization depends on circumstances. This potentiality is not injected into the cosmos from 'outside', either by God (...) or other supernatural agency. If God is in the world-process of matter at all, he is in it all through, in all potentialities, whether actualized or not, and he continues to hold it in being by his will with these potentialities and not otherwise."²⁶

This way of *accommodating* scientific and religious views of the world by reference to God's action in nature as merely sustaining the natural processes in existence and His immanent presence in the laws of nature was used by Józef Życiński when he interpreted the process of evolution, including the emergence of humans, in a non-interventionist way. According to Życiński (whose ideas – just like a number of other theistic naturalists – were influenced by Whiteheadian process theology), God's activity in the creation of humans should be understood as God's immanent continuous presence in the laws of nature and in the process of evolution: "The Divine Logos is immanently present in the entire process of the creative development of the universe. The process of creation persists in every period and

26 A.R. Peacocke, *Science and the Christian Experiment*, Oxford University Press, London 1971, 129–130.

our »persistence in being«is its manifestation.”²⁷ Hence, this position accepts statements describing God’s action in nature that are nothing more than GDA statements and belong to the metaphysical levels of analysis.

It seems that the only gap in the history of the world that naturalistic theists accept is the incarnation of Christ. Peacocke believed in the veracity of the accounts of the incarnation of Christ, yet at the same time he denied the empirical character of the accounts of divine action found in the Old Testament: “The next basic and specifically Christian affirmation is rooted in history. It claims that, in a particular time and place in history, the God who had all along been immanent implicitly in the whole temporal creative process then expressed himself personally in and through a particular man, Jesus of Nazareth, who humanly speaking, was completely open to him.”²⁸ Writing about “God who had all along been immanent implicitly in the whole temporal creative process”, Peacocke denied the literal interpretation of Old Testament descriptions of not only the first chapters of Genesis, but also of all the mighty acts of God that were treated by the Jews as explicit evidence of their special relation with Yahweh. The meaning of these descriptions must be different from their *prima facie* content describing what happened at a particular time and place (Level 5).

Accepting the metaphysical statements (Levels 1–2) describing the immanent, hidden, and constant presence of God in nature and the fact that God is keeping every natural process in existence seems to be treated by strong naturalistic theists as a way of avoiding the accusation of deism. Such an accusation can indeed be raised as the naturalistic picture of the world accepted by naturalistic theists rejects

27 J. Życiński, *God and Evolution: Fundamental Questions of Christian Evolutionism*, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington, D.C. 2006, 67. See also P. Bylica, *Zarys modelu poziomów analizy w badaniach relacji nauki i religii*, op. cit., 234.

28 A.R. Peacocke, *Science and the Christian Experiment*, op.cit., 157.

empirical statements describing God's involvement in what happens in nature (Level 4–5).

The use of statements describing the *emotional* life of God as connected with the processes in nature (classified by Heimbeck as G2-statements) is yet another way of dodging the problem of deism. The prime example of such an approach is Peacocke's description of God's joy and suffering in the evolutionary creation of the diversity of life forms: "The branching bush of terrestrial biological evolution appears to be primarily opportunist in the direction it follows and, in so doing, it has produced the enormous variety of biological life on this planet. We can only conclude that, if there is a Creator, then that Creator intended this rich diversity (...). We can only make sense of this, using our limited resources of personal language, if we say that God may be said to have something akin to joy and delight in creation."²⁹ "Creator God must be conceived of now not only, as in pre-Darwinian days, as giving existence to everything and of sustaining all in existence, but as deeply involved in the evolutionary processes of creation. These processes are to be seen as the very action of God as Creator. But if that is so, then the ubiquity of pain, predation, suffering and death as the means of creation through biological evolution entails, for any concept of God to be morally acceptable and coherent, that we have to propose tentatively that God suffers in, with and under the creative processes of the world."³⁰ Such statements on the inner life of God are non-empirical and metaphysical statements that are in conflict with no scientific descriptions of nature.

29 Idem, *Paths from Science towards God. The End of all Our Exploring*, Oneworld, Oxford 2001, 85.

30 Ibid., 86.

6. THE EVENT OF JESUS AND PETER WALKING ON WATER INTERPRETED WITHIN THE MLA FRAMEWORK

What follows is a simple comparison in the form of a table presenting the reduction of the theistic doctrine of divine action to the metaphysical statements describing GDA as the essence of strong naturalistic theism. A statement describing an empirical event (the fact of Jesus and Peter walking on water) is analyzed using the MLA, taking into account the ways in which this event is interpreted in traditional Christians theism and strong naturalistic theism. This example is just one of many empirical statements of the same kind accepted by traditional Christian theism. The empirical levels contain fragments from the Gospel interpreted literally as statements describing a particular event (Level 5) caused by a supernatural factor, and a regularity statement describing the relation between the action of supernatural factors and particular events in the empirical realm (Level 4). Next, the level of the ontology of nature contains statements accepted in traditional Christian theism describing the openness of nature to the action of supernatural factors (Level 3). The metaphysical levels (Levels 1–2) contain metaphysical statements describing GDA, a general account of the world, or the axiological and existential dimensions of religious experience.

The approach of traditional Christian theism towards the event of Jesus and Peter walking on water as viewed within the MLA framework can be presented as follows:

Level 1 – “the deepest” metaphysics	God constantly and simultaneously sustains the world (including nature) in its existence.
Level 2 – “shallower” metaphysics	The world is rationally ordered and there is an axiological and a moral order rooted in God and connected with the realm of personal existence.

Level 3 – ontology of nature	God and other non-natural beings perform special interventions in the form of physical effects in an empirically recognizable way.
Level 4 – regularity statements	“Have faith in God. (...) whoever (...) does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says. Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them” (Mark 11:22–24)
Level 5 – “observational” statements	“And when Peter had come down out of the boat, he walked on the water to go to Jesus. But when he saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink he cried out, saying, »Lord, save me!«And immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and caught him, and said to him, »O you of little faith, why did you doubt?«” (Matthew 14:29–31)

Tab. 3: The event of Jesus and Peter walking on water accepted by traditional Christian theism and interpreted within the MLA framework

In contrast, the treatment of the same event from the point of view of naturalistic theism within the MLA can be presented in the following manner:

Level 1 – “the deepest” metaphysics	God constantly and simultaneously sustains the world (including nature) in its existence.
Level 2 – “shallower” metaphysics	The world is rationally ordered and there is an axiological and a moral order rooted in God and connected with the realm of personal existence.
Level 3 – ontology of nature	
Level 4 – regularity statements	
Level 5 – “observational” statements	

Tab. 4: The event of Jesus and Peter walking on water accepted by naturalistic theism and interpreted within the MLA framework

The limitations imposed within strong naturalistic theism on the metaphysical statements describing general divine action leads to important consequences in terms of the reception of the biblical account of the event of Peter and Jesus walking on water. Striving for consistency with scientific naturalism, the strong version of naturalistic theism accepts that God does not intervene in the natural order and that his role is limited to sustaining the world in existence and to being a source of natural and moral order (Levels 1–2). Hence, naturalistic theism rejects statements from the level of the ontology of nature (Level–3) describing special supernatural interventions in terms of physical effects empirically recognizable as divine action, and only accepts those regularity statements (L–4) and descriptions of empirical facts (L–5) that are accepted by scientific naturalism. This entails that it cannot accept the event under consideration as comprising statements describing actual events in the empirical world. Hence, the description of Jesus and Peter walking on water cannot be considered a collection of empirical statements. For this reason, the lowest three rows of the table are empty.

7. CONCLUSION

The use of the MLA in analyzing the statements of traditional Christian theism describing the relation between the supernatural and the empirical world allowed us to show that traditional theism endorses statements on God's action belonging to all of the levels of analysis. The empirical statements describing such action are especially important. The MLA allows one to clearly see that the acceptance of naturalistic L2 assumptions, logically leads to the rejection of religious empirical L4–L5 statements describing supernatural actions in nature. Such statements are accepted in traditional Christian theism precisely because it rejects the assumptions of metaphysical naturalism.

Naturalistic theism tries to reconcile Christian theism with naturalistic assumption and the stipulations of contemporary science.

Strong NT assumes that the only way to properly describe the God–world relationship is to express it with metaphysical statements that, in the context of the MLA, belong to the first two levels of analysis. Weak NT also accepts statements on special divine action in the world and statements on God’s action that refer to an indeterministic ontology of nature as described by L3 statements. The two types of naturalistic theism both reject empirical statements describing supernatural interventions, as these are also rejected in the scientific picture of the world.

Traditional Christian theism accepts statements describing divine action in the empirical realm found at all levels of the model, whereas strong naturalistic theism rejects as invalid certain religious statements found at the lower, empirical levels. From the point of view of strong naturalistic theism, a significant number of statements describing empirically recognizable divine action cannot be understood as empirical statements, contrary to their traditional interpretation. A comparative analysis of the tables describing the event of Jesus and Peter walking on water, as viewed within the MLA framework, enables one to recognize that the way of reconciling science and religion proposed by strong naturalistic theism leads to a substantial revision of traditional Christian theism.

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