

# Or we can be philosophers: a response to Barbara Forrest

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**Abstract** This article is a response to Barbara Forrest's 2011 *Synthese* article, "On the Non-Epistemology of Intelligent Design." Forrest offers an account of my philosophical work that consists almost entirely of personal attacks, excursions into my religious pilgrimage, and misunderstandings and misrepresentations of my work as well as of certain philosophical issues. Not surprisingly, the *Synthese* editors include a disclaimer in the front matter of the special issue in which Forrest's article was published. In my response, I address three topics: (1) My interest in Intelligent Design (ID) and public education and why as a Thomist I have grown more skeptical and explicitly critical of ID over the years, (2) the sorts of philosophical mistakes with which Forrest's article is teeming, and (3) my Christian faith, religious exclusivism, and interfaith dialogue.

**Keywords** Thomas Aquinas · Intelligent design · Barbara Forrest · Methodological naturalism · Religion and science · Evolution · Philosophy of religion · Philosophical naturalism · Public education · Law and religion · Jurisprudence · Francis Beckwith

When I came across Professor Barbara Forrest's "analysis" of my work when it first appeared online in Spring 2009 (Forrest 2011), I was surprised that a philosopher of my modest accomplishments should be the subject of an entire article in such an esteemed journal. My moment of honor, however, was short lived once I began reading it. I soon discovered that Ms. Forrest's interest in me goes far beyond my academic work, but into my entire career and then some, including my friendships, my civic associations, the locations of my speaking engagements, my Church, and the political

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histories of groups and organizations that people with whom I disagree and many of whom I have never met and do not know once belonged.

One is immediately struck by the article's strange style of philosophical reflection, one that seems out of place in this revered periodical. It is, to be sure, a lengthy article (49 pp.), which would make it a philosophically interesting piece if size matters. But on philosophical questions, what matters is the quality of one's argument, the clarity of one's language, the accuracy of one's depictions of the views with which one is interacting, and the charity by which one engages these views. On these criteria, Forrest's assessment of my work is a professional embarrassment. So much so that the editors of this journal—not to be confused with the editors of the “special issue” in which Forrest's article appears—have done something unprecedented: they have included in the front of the issue a disclaimer (Branch and Fetzer 2011, p. 170). They have distanced themselves from her literary misconduct, her article's personal attacks and bizarre tangents into my religious pilgrimage that surround and embed her case against my work. As much as I do not deserve Forrest's attempt at character assassination, I surely do not deserve the generosity of the *Synthese* editors. For in the grand world of academic philosophy, I am a minor figure, who, to be sure, has been blessed to be part of a first-class philosophy department at an outstanding university.

My task of responding is made more difficult by the fact that Forrest's 49-page article is at many points nearly incomprehensible. She cites, quotes from, and misrepresents works of mine published over a 23 year period, from when I was 24 years-old until the age of 47 (I am presently 50); she compares and contrasts works, composed sometimes decades apart, that are dealing with different issues in different disciplines at different levels of abstraction and written for diverse audiences, including professional philosophers, theologians, legal scholars, Christian lay persons, etc.; and she often writes longish paragraphs that include a lot of controversial assertions that she presents as uncontested truths, and quotes from assorted writers whose work she often misunderstands or misrepresents, but with no actual arguments (or at least none that one can immediately recognize).

There really is no easy way to remedy this problem, though it is, happily, not my problem. It is Forrest's. I have no obligation to provide clarity, rigor, and coherence to an article that lacks all three and that I did not author. But what I will do is the only thing I can do: offer in my response a critical assessment of a few examples of Forrest's work and trust that the interested reader will go back and read her article to fully appreciate the severity of her philosophical malfeasance.

Because Forrest is primarily interested in my legal work on Intelligent Design (ID) and public education, I will first explain my interest in the subject and how my ideas on it have developed over the past 15 years. Second, I will then provide a sampling of the sorts of mistakes with which Forrest's article is teeming. And third, I will comment about my Christian faith, religious exclusivism, and interreligious dialogue.

## 1 Intelligent design and public education

Like many Christian academics, I have never thought well of creationism or creation science. In my own intellectual pilgrimage, it was never a live option. In fact, as

someone who did not grow up in either the Bible belt or within the subculture of American Christian Fundamentalism, I never understood why anyone would embrace a position so clearly inconsistent with our knowledge of the universe when one is not required to do so by Scripture, the creeds, or reason. Whether it was just my lack of imagination or my Catholic upbringing, I could not bring myself to entertain creation science.

As a Christian, and as a Catholic, I, of course, believe that God created the universe. And as a philosopher who embraces natural theology, I believe there are good arguments in support of belief in God, the historicity of the miraculous, and other aspects of the Christian worldview that do not depend on special revelation in order to be rationally held. For this reason, I have always had an interest in philosophy of science and how the issues raised in that sub-discipline may help Christians to think more clearly and carefully about the relationship between science, theology, and philosophy of religion. In fact, my 1988 Fordham Ph.D. dissertation (in philosophy) dealt with issues over which these areas overlap (A revised version was published as a book the following year: [Beckwith 1989](#)).

After earning my doctorate, I began to gravitate to issues in moral and legal philosophy, specifically dealing with bioethical questions and the role of religion in the public square. This was soon reflected in both the courses I taught and the articles and books I published. For this reason, I took a sabbatical year from teaching (2000–2001) to pursue an MJS (Master of Juridical Studies) degree at the Washington University School of Law in St. Louis. The fact that the degree program required a dissertation of some size made Washington University's offer of admission extremely attractive to me, for it allowed me to write at the intersection of a number of my philosophical interests in law, religion, science, and politics. Fortunately, a Nevada philanthropist, and an ID critic, financed the bulk of my law school education. The pro-ID Discovery Institute provided a modest fellowship. But neither benefactor had editorial control over my work. This is why, as Forrest points out (pp. 345–346), I am quite candid about the relationship between the Intelligent Design Movement (IDM) and its predecessors in the creationist movement, something that some at Discovery were not pleased with me including.

In my dissertation and the subsequent book ([Beckwith 2003a](#)) I focused on one narrow question: Could a public school require or permit the teaching of Intelligent Design (ID) without violating the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment? My answer, with a few caveats, was “yes,” and I still think that conclusion is sound. However, I was not convinced (and I am still not convinced) that the ID arguments for the specified and/or irreducible complexity of parts of living organisms ([Behe 1996](#); [Dembski 1998](#)) establish their advocates' case. That is why I was careful in all my publications not to pronounce a verdict on them. As I state in my book: “[Intelligent Design advocates] present criteria that they believe are useful in detecting and falsifying design (Whether such criteria actually work, of course, is another question entirely)” ([Beckwith 2003a](#), p. 93). I also placed more emphasis on the philosophy of science issues. I did this because it seemed to me that these issues are the ones that usually percolate beneath these sorts of debates (and that are rarely the focus of public discussion of ID). These issues include the demarcation problem (*Ibid.*, pp. 23–28, 95–96) and the relationship between science and philosophy (*Ibid.*, pp. 94, 96–106).

In her article, Forrest claims that I am no legal scholar because I did not earn a *Juris Doctor* (the standard professional law degree) and merely earned an academic graduate degree in law (Forrest 2011, pp. 333–334), a degree similar to the one earned by scholars Jules Coleman, Kermit Hall, Carl Cranor, Teresa Godwin Phelps, Elliot Visconsi, and David M. Adams. Before reading Forrest’s strange assessment of my credentials, it never occurred to me to think of myself as a “legal scholar”. That’s what Richard Posner, Richard Epstein, and Michael McConnell are. I just see myself as a pretty average philosopher trying to do some decent work in legal theory, Constitutional Law, and some attendant and overlapping issues in social, political, and moral philosophy. It is indeed true that I have published quite a bit in these areas, most of which have appeared in law and law-related journals, books, and reference works, some of which are invited contributions (see, e.g., Beckwith 1988–1989, 1992a,b,c,d, 1994, 1995a,b, 1996, 1999a,b, 2000, 2001a, 2002, 2003a,b,c,d, 2004–2005, 2005a,c, 2006a,b,c, 2007a,b,c,d,e,g, 2008–2009, 2009c,d,e,f,g, 2009–2010, Beckwith 2010b,e,f, 2011a,b, 2012a,b,c,d; Beckwith and Jones 1997; Beckwith and Laycock 2005; Beckwith and Peppin 2000; Beckwith and Pojman 1998). However, it would be unseemly for me to mount a defense of what label or status should be attributed to me in the academy. I will leave it to my peers and my betters to make that judgment. Nevertheless, given Professor Forrest’s lack of any law degree, she will undoubtedly, by the standard she applies to me, not be among them.

When the IDM first burst on the scene in the mid-1990s, it caught my attention, for it lacked the amateurishness of the creation-science movement while at the same time it had as its main goal the unseating of philosophical naturalism. As a philosopher who had critiqued one sort of naturalist project in his doctoral dissertation and subsequent book (Beckwith 1989), ID intrigued me, especially since its first major conference at Biola University in 1996 included many respected and accomplished philosophers, including Alvin Plantinga, J. P. Moreland, Del Ratzsch, and William Lane Craig (Mere Creation 1996).

Thus, for me, what is known today as the Intelligent Design Movement, seemed in the late 1990s and early 2000s as a loose collection of Christian academics (mostly philosophers) that thought that there was a good case to be made against philosophical naturalism. For this reason, much of what constituted ID at the time was fairly unclear to those of us who traveled in the world of Christian philosophy. This is why I mistakenly included in my 2003 book several scholars as “affiliated with ID” who in fact are not ID advocates, including philosophers Plantinga and Dallas Willard (Beckwith 2003a, p. xiv). But the categories and cast of characters were still in flux at that time. For many of these philosophers often gave papers and lectures at the same meetings and contributed to each other’s books, many of which offered critiques of philosophical naturalism. Thus, it never occurred to me at the time that to engage these thinkers, or to even find some of their work worthy of a fair and non-polemical assessment, somehow made one an “ID advocate”.

This is why in my 2003 book as well as in subsequent publications I define ID as a cluster of arguments (rather than “a theory”) offered by philosophers and scientists who are critical of philosophical naturalism. Included in this definition are not only the arguments of Behe and Dembski, but also cosmic fine tuning arguments (that

are sometimes defended by ID critics!) as well as critiques of naturalism offered by professional philosophers. Hence, I write in my 2003 book:

The main thrust of this new movement, known as Intelligent Design (ID), is that intelligent agency, as an aspect of scientific theory-making, has more explanatory power in accounting for the specified, and sometimes irreducible, complexity of some physical systems, including biological entities, and/or the existence of the universe as a whole, than the blind forces of unguided and everlasting matter. ID proponents also argue that the rejection of intelligent agency by mainstream science is the result of presupposing the philosophical doctrine of methodological naturalism, an epistemological position that ID proponents maintain is a necessary presupposition for the veracity of the evolutionary edifice and entails ontological materialism as a worldview, but is arguably not necessary for the practice of science qua science. Other proponents argue that the exclusive teaching of naturalistic evolution in public schools may violate political liberalism's call to state neutrality. And yet others maintain that certain philosophical arguments—e.g., arguments for substance dualism, the existence of an immaterial first cause, and the existence of non-material entities and moral properties—reveal the weaknesses of both methodological naturalism and ontological materialism. These and other arguments will be discussed in Chapter 3 of this book (Beckwith 2003a, pp. xiii–xiv).

Whether or not ID “worked” was not the point of my book or of virtually any of my subsequent work on ID. My point was to critique the dominant legal view of religion's place in public life. It seemed to me that the burgeoning IDM provided the almost perfect foil by which to assess the conceptual limits of our contemporary church-state jurisprudence. The chief concern of my book was the difficult question of how our legal regime can affirm both religious liberty and disestablishment while not unjustly sequestering points of view from public policy that arise from citizens' religious motivation, especially in cases when those points of view are accompanied by arguments and reasons that are not derived from Scripture. It is a concern that runs through my philosophical and legal works on politics (Beckwith 1999b, 2000, 2010b,f), judicial reasoning (Beckwith 2006b,c), natural rights (2009c), the separation of church and state (Beckwith 2005a), cloning (Beckwith 2002), embryonic stem-cell research (Beckwith 2008–2009), physician-value neutrality (Beckwith and Peppin 2000), bioethics (Beckwith 2007g, 2010d), and abortion rights (Beckwith 1995b, 2001a, 2003d, 2004, 2007a), though on these issues I have argued for certain positions as correct, e.g., the prolife position on abortion (Beckwith 2007a).

While working on my 2003 book (from September 2000 through March 2002), it did seem to me that some arguments offered by those associated with the IDM were more persuasive than others, but it was not relevant to my project for me to announce this in my writings (And besides, on some of the technical scientific questions I was far from competent to issue an informed judgment). Nevertheless, I confess that while I was from the beginning never fully at ease with the Behe-Dembski arguments for specified and irreducible complexity, I was not confident that I had come up with a way to think through their arguments that adequately explained my reluctance to embrace them. So, I took the route of prudence: I neither defended nor critiqued their cases

though I would bring to my readers' attention the critiques of others (see [Beckwith 2003a](#), pp. xxi–xii, xxii–xxiii n. 3, xxxi–xxxii n. 81–86, 117, 135 n. 73–74).

This is why it strikes me as odd that Forrest claims that I am an ID advocate because I present “ID exactly as ID leaders do—their arguments are *his* arguments, restated without hedge or criticism” ([Forrest 2011](#), p. 346). Not only does such a statement ignore my recent writings, explicitly critical of ID, that were available to Forrest many months before her article was to appear in print ([Beckwith 2009c](#), 2009–2010, [Beckwith 2010c](#)), but it also ignores the academic responsibility I had in writing a graduate thesis in law on a matter of fundamental freedoms. In such writing, one is obligated to present the view under analysis with fairness and charity, especially when the nature, and not the veracity, of that view is the only thing relevant to the question one is trying to answer. Nevertheless, as I have already noted, I do in fact refer my readers to criticisms of the IDM including the works of several writers, one of whom is Barbara Forrest (see [Beckwith 2003a](#), pp. xxi–xii, xxii–xxiii n. 3, xxxi–xxxii n. 81–86, 117, 135 n. 73–74).

However, as a philosopher, I found, and continue to find, arguments offered by other non-naturalist thinkers, that are conceptually unconnected to the Behe–Dembski arguments, convincing and worth defending. Here I am thinking of arguments for a first cause of the universe ([Craig 1979](#)), the existence of the soul ([Moreland 2009](#)), an evolutionary case against naturalism ([Plantinga 1993](#), pp. 216–237), and the existence of a moral law for which Darwinism cannot account ([Budziszewski 2009](#), pp. 79–95). But none of these arguments, as I have come to better understand, are technically ID arguments. They are straightforward philosophical arguments that, to be sure, help support a non-naturalist view of the world. And in that sense they share the central aim of ID. But sharing that aim, as well as being offered by ID advocates, does not make them ID arguments. This is why it was a mistake in my earlier work to lump all critiques of naturalism under the umbrella of ID. But, as I already noted, a decade ago it was difficult to know where exactly ID ended and mere critiques of naturalism began.

It was in mid-2005 that I started to understand why I could never defend the Behe–Dembski arguments. So, in my writings I began to play down the significance of these arguments, emphasizing that they merely play a part (though not an essential one) in the broader case against philosophical naturalism. Hence, in a September 2005 online debate with Douglas Laycock, I define ID in this way:

Intelligent design (or ID) is not one theory. It is a short-hand name for a cluster of arguments that offer a variety of cases that attempt to show that intelligent agency rather than unguided matter better accounts for apparently natural phenomena or the universe as a whole. Some of these arguments challenge aspects of neo-Darwinism. Others make a case for a universe designed at its outset, and thus do not challenge any theory of biological evolution.

But even ID advocates who criticize neo-Darwinism are technically not offering an alternative to evolution, if one means by evolution any account of biological change over time that claims that this change results from a species' power to accommodate itself to varying environments by adapting, surviving, and passing on these changes to its descendants. This is not inconsistent with a universe that

has earmarks and evidence of intelligent design that rational minds may detect (Beckwith and Laycock 2005).

While I was contributing to this debate I was struggling to find a way to express a non-naturalist perspective while diminishing the significance of the Behe-Dembski arguments. A few months earlier I had begun exploring several works that would shape my thinking on this matter. This reading continued for several years. Among the authors I consulted were Gilson (2009), Carroll (2000), Carroll (2006), Barr (2006), Feser (2008), George (2002), Machuga (2002), and Tkacz (2007). What these thinkers did for me was to bring to my attention the reason why I had always harbored doubts about the Behe-Dembski arguments but could not find the conceptual language to adequately express those doubts. And it seems that I was not the only one who had experienced such an epiphany. Take, for example, Mark Ryland, a former vice president of the Discovery Institute, and now the director of the Institute for the Study of Nature. He writes in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*: “In some respects, standard reductionistic neo-Darwinism and IDT [intelligent design theory] are mirror images of each other, and suffer from some of the same defects” (Ryland 2009, vol. 1, p. 476). What does Ryland mean by this?

According to Dembski, we discover design in nature after we have eliminated chance and law. And we do so by a conceptual device he calls the explanatory filter. If something in nature exhibits a high level of specified complexity for which chance and law cannot account, Dembski concludes that it is highly probable that the gap is the result of an intelligent agent. Design, therefore, is not immanent in nature. It is something that is imposed on nature by someone or something outside it.

This means that for Dembski as well as other ID advocates, nature’s order, including its laws and principles, need not require a mind behind it except for in the few instances where the explanatory filter allows one to detect design. But whatever design we detect, it can always be overturned by future discoveries, and thus conceding yet another slice of nature to naturalism.<sup>1</sup>

So, ironically, as Ryland notes, ID advocates, like Dembski and Behe, and defenders of naturalism, like Richard Dawkins and Jerry Coyne, wind up agreeing that without “gaps” in nature one is not justified in believing that there is design in nature. The IDer thinks he can fill the gaps with intelligent agents; the atheist sees no reason to abandon fruitful theories because of a few anomalies for which he thinks he can someday account. Ironically, Dembski accepts this narrative, but is confident that the naturalists will not be able to “explain” everything:

The “gaps” in the god-of-the-gaps objection are meant to denote gaps of ignorance about underlying physical mechanisms. But there is no reason to think

<sup>1</sup> In this sense, Forrest is correct that ID and miracle-claims have something in common (Forrest 2011, p. 354). But they differ in one fundamental way: the ID-advocate maintains that a designer changes nature and those changes remain as substantive characteristics of species in which the change occurred, whereas the miracle-believer argues that a miracle is a singular event within a significant religious context that seems impervious to a naturalistic explanation and thus is attributable to divine agency. For this reason, the Thomist believer in miracles ought not to embrace ID, since ID confuses God as First Cause with God as an active participant in salvation history.

that all gaps give way to ordinary physical explanations once we know enough about the underlying physical mechanisms. The mechanisms simply do not exist. Some gaps might constitute ontic discontinuities in the chain of physical causes and thus remain forever beyond the capacity of physical mechanisms (Dembski 2001, pp. 334–335).

This, however, is not the only option for Christian theists. Followers of St. Thomas Aquinas (Thomists) and many other Christian thinkers do not accept this philosophy of nature (There are some exceptions, however; see Gage 2010). For the Thomist, design is immanent in the universe, and thus even an evolutionary account of the development of life requires a universe teeming with final causes. What is a final cause? It is a thing's purpose or end. So, for example, even if one can provide an evolutionary account of the development of the human lungs without any recourse to an intervening intelligence, there remains the fact that the lungs develop for a particular purpose, the exchange of oxygen for the sake of the organism's survival. This fact, of course, does not contravene the discoveries of modern biology. And neither does it mean that final causes should be inserted into scientific theories. All it means is that the deliverances of the sciences—even if they need no intelligent intervention to be complete—can never be nature's whole story. For the Thomist, and for many other Christians, law and chance do not eliminate design. "Design" does not replace efficient and material causes in nature when the latter two appear impotent as explanations (i.e., Dembski's "gaps"). Rather, efficient and material causes *require* final causes. For example, my belief that the lungs' purpose is to exchange oxygen is not falsified simply because I can provide an exhaustive scientific account of the natural processes of the evolution and development of the lungs. This is because final causality is not a substitute for a scientific account of nature. For the natural processes—even if they are complete and exhaustive—seem to work for an end, and that end is its final cause. This is why, in his famous Five Ways (or arguments) to show God's existence, St. Thomas includes as a fifth way an argument from the universe's design as a *whole*, appealing to those scientific laws that make motion possible (Aquinas 1920, I, q. 2, art. 3). For this reason, I write in a recent article: "[Although] I have maintained and continue to maintain that ID may be taught in public schools without violating the Establishment Clause... [,] I sincerely hope that no public school teaches it. For I think that ID advances an inadequate philosophy of nature that suggests a philosophical theology that is inconsistent with classical Christian theism" (Beckwith 2009–2010, p. 65 n. 106).

Given Forrest's understanding of the natural sciences, she seems to accept the same philosophy of nature that ID advocates like Dembski need to embrace so that they may have warrant to insert a designer into nature's gaps. The only difference is that Forrest is confident that the gaps will eventually be filled by material and efficient causes, while the ID advocates are confident that they won't. Ironically, in terms of philosophy of nature, Forrest is closer to the Intelligent Design Movement than I am. Thus, for Forrest to call me an ID supporter is worse than guilt by association; it is guilt by free association.



## 2 Forrest's mistakes

Her mistakes are so plentiful and egregious that it is almost impossible to know where to begin, and when to end. But, as I noted in my introductory comments, I simply cannot cover all of these mistakes. Readers can check out her article for themselves. However, I do want to single out a few so that readers get a sense of what I mean.

### 2.1 Religion and science

Forrest writes: “[Beckwith] contends that religion is ‘real knowledge’ that should be accorded epistemological parity with scientific knowledge, a view undergirding his argument for ID’s legality in public school science classes” (Forrest 2011, p. 334). She repeats this canard in numerous places in a variety of ways. It is, however, false. What in fact I argue for in my work is that some answers to contested questions, that are offered by their advocates as the deliverances of science or “public reason,” are often philosophical answers masquerading as scientific or neutral ones. I also argue that the so-called “religious” answers are often conclusions to philosophical arguments that happen to cohere well with certain theological traditions, but are nevertheless real arguments that can be assessed on their merits. Consequently, one cannot *a priori* discard the possibility that a position on a contested question that is often associated with a theological tradition may be at least a reasonable position to hold. I have repeatedly argued for this view in so many venues for over a decade that I am not sure how Forrest could have missed it (see, e.g., Beckwith 2000, 2001a, 2003d, 2004, 2008–2009, 2009b).

To provide an example of the sort of work I have been doing, let us consider an issue over which many citizens strongly disagree: the permissibility and federal funding of embryonic stem-cell research.<sup>2</sup>

Stem cells are found in all animals, including human beings. In adults, stem cells serve the function of repairing damaged tissue (National Institutes of Health 2011). For example, “hematopoietic stem cells” are “a type of cell found in the blood”. Their purpose is to repair the tissue of a damaged part of the organ of which they are a part, for adult stem cells are differentiated. However, stem cells found in the early embryo (or totipotent cells)—before its cells differentiate into the cells of particular organs—“retain the special ability to develop into nearly any cell type”. The embryo’s germ cells, “which originate from the primordial reproductive cells of the developing fetus,” possess similar properties (National Bioethics Advisory Commission 1999, p. i).

Few doubt the potential of human stem cell research and the possibilities it offers for finding cures for numerous diseases such as Parkinson’s and Alzheimer’s. But the real issue that animates opponents of this research, and raises deep ethical questions, is how these cells are obtained and from what entity they are derived. These stem cells can be derived from four sources:

- \* human fetal tissue following elective abortion [Embryonic germ cells or EG cells],

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<sup>2</sup> The following discussion on embryonic stem-cell research is adapted from portions of Beckwith (2008–2009).

- \* human embryos that are created by *in vitro* fertilization (IVF) and that are no longer needed by couples being treated for infertility [Embryonic stem cells or ES cells],
- \* human embryos that are created by IVF with gametes donated for the sole purpose of providing research material (ES cells), and
- \* potentially, human (or hybrid) embryos generated asexually by somatic cell nuclear transfer or similar cloning techniques in which the nucleus of an adult human cell is introduced into an enucleated human or animal ovum (ES cells) (National Bioethics Advisory Commission 1999, pp. i–ii).

Since the publication of this 1999 report, research on adult stem cells has shown much more promise in the research for which embryonic stem cells were procured. Thus, we can now add a fifth source of stem cells for research. However, with the exception of the first and fifth sources (which do not result in the death of an embryo), the acquisition of stem cells can only be accomplished at the cost of killing a human embryo. This is why many citizens who otherwise support stem-cell research oppose both *embryonic* stem-cell research as well as the federal funding of it. For, according to these citizens, embryos are full-fledged members of the human community and thus the government at least ought not to underwrite their demise for the sake of another's good. Moreover, these citizens' belief about the nature of embryos is shaped significantly by theological traditions that are the result of an understanding of Scripture in symbiotic relationship with a particular philosophical anthropology (John Paul II 1995).

For this reason, supporters of embryonic stem cell research and its government funding have drawn attention to the theological roots of the bioethical views of these citizens and have concluded that their policy proposals are in violation of the First Amendment's establishment clause. Take, for example, the comments of Cornell law professor, S. F. Colb, whose understanding of science and religion seems nearly identical to Forrest's:

Religious freedom is an essential right in this country. Religion and religious organizations have often provided compassion and support to those in need. Observant members of religious groups have a fundamental constitutional right to practice their respective religions—a right enumerated explicitly in the First Amendment... But as strongly as our Constitution protects religion, it forbids our government from becoming a religious one...

...[T]he idea that full-fledged human life begins at conception—is a religious notion, and it is one to which some, but not all, religions subscribe.

The idea of “ensoulment” is, of course, a purely religious concept. The notion that life begins at conception is counterintuitive if understood in secular terms. In a secular world, because an embryo lacks the capacity to think, to experience joy, and to suffer pain or distress, it accordingly lacks legal entitlements that could possibly trump or even equal the interest in saving lives and curing disease through research. A secular perspective, then, would unequivocally approve of stem cell research...

Only a religious view would equate a clump of undifferentiated cells the size of a pinprick with a fully formed human being—deeming both equivalent “life”. Proceeding on the basis of this equation... wrongfully imposes a religious

perspective on all citizens, regardless of their religious belief or lack thereof (Colb 2001).

Colb seems to commit two mistakes: (1) She privileges, without adequate justification, what she calls the secular perspective; and (2) she mistakenly presents the so-called secular and religious perspectives as two different subjects rather than two different answers about the same subject.

Concerning the first, Colb claims that the secular perspective requires the law to protect only those human beings with interests that arise when they possess certain mental and physical capacities, “to think, to experience joy, and to suffer pain or distress” (Colb 2001). Although this is a widely-held point of view defended by some of the finest minds in philosophy (Boonin 2002; Tooley 1983), it is not clear why we should embrace it as *the* secular perspective. After all, Aristotle (1986), whose views many Christians, including Thomas Aquinas (1999), have found congenial to their theological projects, offered “secular” theories of ensoulment and philosophical anthropology that do not rely on special revelation and religious dogma, but rather on empirical observation and philosophical reflection. The contemporary supporters of Aquinas’ Aristotelianism (Beckwith 2007a, 2011a; Feser 2008; George and Tollefsen 2008; Haldane and Lee 2003; Kaczor 2010; Lee 2010; Oderberg 2007) offer arguments of a similar sort, and yet they are inconsistent with what Colb calls *the* secular perspective.

Thus, the contemporary religious or non-religious Aristotelian (or Thomist) can raise the question: why should one accept Colb’s secular understanding of human beings and their interests as the only legitimate deliverance of reason? After all, for the Thomist, there is a sense in which embryos do have these interest-making capacities from the moment they come into being. From its genesis, the embryo possesses essential properties that its being and its constituent parts are intrinsically ordered to work in concert to bring to maturation (see George and Tollefsen 2008; Kaczor 2010). For this reason, Colb is simply mistaken when she describes the embryo as “a clump of undifferentiated cells” (Colb 2001). Even when the embryo’s cells are undifferentiated (i.e., the cells are totipotent and thus have the capacity to develop into any organ), the early embryo, as several scholars have pointed out, functions as a substantial unity whose parts work in concert with one another for the growth, development, and continued existence of the whole (George and Tollefsen 2008; Lee 2010; Ashley and Moraczewski 1994; Fisher 1991; McLaren 1982).

With these clarifications, Colb may now want to make the counter-argument that excluding the early embryo from legal protection is still justified, but not because it lacks certain ultimate capacities for the actualization of certain powers, actions and experiences, for the typical embryo surely does not lack those ultimate capacities. Rather, she may want to argue that it is the present and immediate exercisability of those capacities that distinguishes protectable persons from early embryos, since the latter do indeed lack that power. This is clearly a more defensible position than Colb’s initial argument. Yet, like her first argument, this revised one has its sophisticated detractors as well (see George and Tollefsen 2008; Kaczor 2010; Lee 2004, 2010).

Nevertheless, no matter which argumentative strategy she procures for her case, it is clear from the above analysis she can no longer present the embryonic stem cell

debate as if it were a dispute between two different subjects—religious and secular understandings of embryonic stem-cell research—rather than what it really is about, two different answers to the same question: What should be our public policy on embryonic stem cell research? Instead of confronting the arguments for the position she labels “religious,” Colb seems to believe that if a position on a policy question can be labeled religious, it is no longer a position that may legitimately have a bearing on the public’s deliberation on the issue. But that’s putting the cart before the horse. For unless Colb first shows that no argument in principle can provide warrant for a view of embryonic personhood connected to a theological tradition, justice requires that we treat so-called religious and secular understandings of embryonic personhood as different answers to the same question.

After all, Colb offers an answer to the question of philosophical anthropology that religious traditions have also offered an answer. She makes her case by suggesting that because the early embryo lacks certain capacities (or in our revised version of her argument, certain present and immediately exercisable capacities), the early embryo does not have interests. But by doing this, Colb is offering an account of the human being, a philosophical anthropology if you will, in order to exclude early embryos from the realm of moral subjects that the law is required to protect. Not surprisingly, those who oppose Colb’s position, mostly religious citizens, present arguments and counter-arguments in order to first show that the early embryo is a moral subject and then from there show that killing that entity in the way that Colb suggests is unjustified and thus ought to receive the protection of our laws. She responds to their position by calling it “religious,” even though its advocates offer real arguments with real conclusions and real reasons (Beckwith 2007a, 2011a; Feser 2008; George and Tollefsen 2008; Kaczor 2010; Lee 2010). Of course, these arguments and the beliefs they support are, for many of their advocates, religious, in the sense that these arguments and beliefs are integral to the development and understanding of their church’s theology. But these beliefs are also offered as the deliverances of rational argument, and not merely as commands of divine revelation. Consequently, the arguments of these believers should be assessed on their own merits as *arguments*.

My work on this subject in bioethics—embryonic stem cell research—is not unlike how I address several other issues on which a citizen’s theologically informed beliefs touch on questions of public policy about which other citizens hold differing viewpoints. But what I am not advocating is that “religion... should be accorded epistemological parity with scientific knowledge,” as Forrest claims. (Forrest, 2011, p. 334). Rather, what I am suggesting is that labeling a citizen’s argument or belief “scientific” or “religious,” prior to critically assessing the argument or belief, tells us nothing about the rationality of the argument or belief embraced by that citizen. In sum, I am arguing that such a “triumph by adjective” approach to disputed questions seems contrary to the proper ends of philosophical inquiry. That is the essence of my project, and Forrest egregiously misrepresents it.

## 2.2 Methodological naturalism and philosophical naturalism

Forrest writes that “Beckwith wrongly asserts...that MN [methodological naturalism] logically entails PN [philosophical naturalism], which he also calls ‘ontological

materialism.’ [OM]” (Forrest 2011, p. 346). This is false. I do not claim this, and neither of the two quotations of mine she procures as evidence says it either. Here is the first quote:

Ontological materialism...is the view that the natural universe...and all the entities in it can be accounted for by ...material processes without ...any designer, creator, or non-material entity.... Thus, *if* science is the paradigm of knowledge (as is widely held in our culture), and it *necessarily presupposes* methodological naturalism, *then* ontological materialism is the only worldview for which one can have “*knowledge*” (Beckwith 2003c, p. 457 as found in Forrest 2011, p. 346; emphasis added).

My claim is conditional (as the italicized words indicate). It is a claim about the methodological constraints on a particular practice and how that limits what one may legitimately claim one knows within the confines of that practice. It is about epistemology not ontology. After all, PN can still be metaphysically false even if we can in principle only *know* the deliverances of science. Thus, I am not claiming that MN entails PN.

The second quote is embedded in this passage from Forrest’s article:

[Beckwith] contends that ID proponents “find objectionable ...the methodological naturalism that evolution presupposes and the ontological materialism it entails” (Beckwith 2003c, pp. 492–493). But if MN logically entailed PN, science would be intrinsically atheistic (to the surprise of religiously devout scientists)...A proper understanding of entailment, which, as a philosopher, Beckwith should have, shows this to be wrong. The relationship between MN and PN is neither logically nor epistemically necessary (Forrest 2011, p. 446).

Her citation is not anchored in the text from which she extracted it. Here are my comments in their original context (with the portions quoted by Forrest in italics):

But that is not what many citizens find objectionable about evolution, and it is not what is actually defended by proponents of evolutionary theory. What these citizens *find objectionable*, and what is actually affirmed in the literature, is *the methodological naturalism that evolution presupposes and the ontological materialism it entails*.

A few observations. First, I am not writing about ID proponents (as Forrest claims), but rather, about ordinary citizens and why such citizens would want to be politically active on this matter. Second, I *am not referring* to what *I* believe, but rather “what is actually affirmed in the literature” penned by some proponents of evolution (So, by leaving out the phrases “these citizens” and “what is actually affirmed in the literature” Forrest significantly changes my meaning and thus seriously misrepresents what I am trying to communicate). Those proponents often easily move from MN in the hard sciences to issuing grandiose and unwarranted metaphysical claims about the unreality of everything from God, souls, human dignity, and intrinsic purpose, just as if MN entails PN (see Pinker 2008; Beckwith 2010d). In fact, Forrest seems to do precisely that in a 2000 article: “What science shows us about ourselves has seriously undermined—or at least forced changes in—the belief that human existence is

either naturally or divinely endowed with predefined meaning” (Forrest 2000, p. 863). And third, the “it” in the last sentence is referring to evolution, not methodological naturalism.

This last point is key, for in my article I define “evolution” as “naturalistic evolution,” and thus what I mean by it is something more than Darwinian or neo-Darwinian evolution (which I concede need not entail PN, for one may include theistic evolution as a form of “creationism” even though it is not inconsistent with Darwinian or neo-Darwinian evolution (Beckwith 2003c, p. 461)). I am defining evolution as the naturalist’s creation narrative of how all things, organic and inorganic, came to be and developed over time. Here’s how I put it in the article from which Forrest took my comments:

What I mean by evolution is *naturalistic* evolution, the view that the entire natural universe, including its living organisms in all their complexities and differences and apparent designs, can be accounted for by strictly material processes (such as natural selection) without resorting to any designer, Creator, or non-material entity or agent as an explanation. That is, an exhaustive materialist description of the natural universe and an accounting of the entities in it, including living organisms, is in principle possible. Therefore, to say that evolution is true-as understood by its leading proponents-is to say that naturalism (or materialism) as a worldview is true, for the former *entails* the latter, for the latter is a necessary condition of the former (Beckwith 2003c, p. 466).

Given how my ideas about ID have developed over the past decade, I would tackle the MN/PN issue much differently today, and have actually done so in later publications (Beckwith 2009–2010, 2010a,c). Nevertheless, Forrest’s presentation of my earlier work seriously misrepresents it.

It should be noted, however, that some philosophical naturalists do in fact offer an argument from methodological naturalism for the belief that philosophical naturalism is true.<sup>3</sup> Writes D. Stoljar:

The second argument for physicalism [or PN] is (what I will call) *The Argument from Methodological Naturalism*. The first premise of this argument is that it is rational to be guided in one’s metaphysical commitments by the methods of natural science. Lying behind this premise are the arguments of Quine and others that metaphysics should not be approached in a way that is distinct from the sciences but should rather be thought of as continuous with it. The second premise of the argument is that, as a matter of fact, the metaphysical picture of the world that one is led to by the methods of natural science is physicalism. The conclusion is that it is rational to believe physicalism, or, more briefly that physicalism is true.

The Argument from Methodological Naturalism has received somewhat less attention in the literature than the Argument from Causal Closure. But it seems just as persuasive—in fact, rather more so (Stoljar 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Special thanks to Jay Bruce for bringing this to my attention.

Ironically, Forrest is criticizing me for suggesting an argument for PN that a leading philosophical naturalist himself makes. And he makes it roughly along the lines that I propose the argument is in fact made.

### 2.3 Normative claims as beliefs

Although it takes up only a sliver of her piece, Forrest's discussion about the nature of beliefs and normative claims is instructive. For it is representative of the level of rigor and clarity that she seems to bring to every technical philosophical question she addresses in her article.

In a book chapter (Beckwith 2006a), I criticize the 2002 California public school science framework (State Board of Education 2004):

It is difficult to take seriously such educational pronouncements from a document whose authors cannot even present their views without relying on self-refutation as their ground of principle: "Nothing in science or in any other field of knowledge shall be taught dogmatically. A dogma is a system of beliefs that is not subject to scientific test and refutation. Compelling belief is inconsistent with the goal of education; the goal is to encourage understanding". So, the California Board of Education, a government body, employs the coercive power of the state to compel its educators to adhere to a belief—"nothing in science or in any other field of knowledge shall be taught dogmatically"—that is itself not subject to scientific test and refutation and is thus affirmed dogmatically, in order to instruct its teachers to teach only "science" and not engage in compelling others to hold beliefs that are dogmatic and not subject to scientific test and refutation. Consequently, if school districts are to obey their state board's framework and incorporate it into their science curricula, each district must, ironically, *reject* the board's definition of what counts as science and/or knowledge, since it is a claim that is either self-refuting (i.e., it is a claim *of* science that is inconsistent with itself) or it is a philosophical claim (i.e., it is a claim *about* science and thus cannot be part of the science curriculum because it is not a claim *of* science), a "belief based, at least in part, on faith and" is "not subject to scientific test and refutation" (Beckwith 2006a, p. 109, quoting California Board of Education 2004, p. 5).

Forrest responds:

Beckwith fails to make a basic distinction between types of statements. His charge that "nothing in science or in any other field of knowledge shall be taught dogmatically" is an untestable statement of belief is nonsensical because this statement has no propositional content. A statement of belief must have propositional content of which it makes sense to ask whether that content is true or false. The statement Beckwith calls a state-mandated belief is only an instruction, a rule of pedagogical procedure. As such, one cannot even sensibly consider its truth or falsity; instead, one must ask whether it advances the public school's

mission in a way that facilitates the proper teaching of science and abides by the Constitution (Forrest 2011, p. 352).

First, Forrest misses my point. I am not arguing that the instruction may not be good, proper or justified. Rather, I am arguing that according to the board's own definition of dogma, the instruction seems to be a dogma, and thus on its own grounds cannot be taught in science classes. This is a practical consequence of pretending there is no demarcation problem while ignoring the role that philosophy plays (or ought to play) in the assessment of that problem. Second, although in the heyday of logical positivism non-cognitivists claimed with great confidence that normative assertions are not beliefs, nobody today, except perhaps Forrest, believes that it is a settled question. In fact, moral realism—the view that normative moral claims can be true or false (Sayre-McCord 2009)—is the dominant view among professional philosophers (PhilPapers Surveys 2009). Consider, for instance, this syllogism:

1. If Barbara seeks virtue, then she ought to love her neighbor as herself
2. Barbara seeks virtue
3. Therefore, she ought to love her neighbor as herself.

The conditional premise's consequent and the argument's conclusion are both normative claims, and they seem to be beliefs. If they were not beliefs, they could not be denied or affirmed. But it seems they can be. We fully understand this retort: "I think you are mistaken that she ought to love her neighbor as herself" or "It is not the case that she ought to love her neighbor as herself". This position could be wrong. It may be that Forrest is correct that the concept of "a normative belief" is "nonsensical," akin to a married bachelor or a square circle. But it is a case she has not made, and thus her confidence in the truth of her view is unwarranted.

And finally, even if normative claims are not beliefs, they surely can be performatively self-refuting. "One ought not to make ought statements" is one such example.

This is the way that Forrest consistently articulates contested philosophical questions throughout her article. Whether it is on the relationship between science and religion, the rationality of belief in God, the possibility and actuality of miracles, the demarcation of science and non-science, or religious epistemology, Forrest seems unaware that every philosophical question she pronounces as dead is very much alive. And every side on these questions is often championed by some of the most accomplished men and women in our profession.

### 3 The scandal of being a Christian

Forrest spends several pages discussing both my Christian faith as well as my published works critical of other religious traditions such as The Baha'i World Faith and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormonism or LDS) (Forrest 2011, pp. 370–373). As with her mistakes I catalogued in part 2, I simply cannot respond to every unsupported, uncharitable, and unreasonable assertion she makes about my theological beliefs. So, I will briefly address some of her claims about religious exclusivism as well as my writings on other faiths.



As a Christian, I believe that Christianity is true. And as a Catholic, I believe that Catholicism is the most authentic form of Christianity. But as I have written in my 2009 memoir on my personal journey from Evangelicalism to Catholicism (Beckwith 2009a), this does not diminish how other Christian traditions have shaped, and continue to shape, my spiritual and intellectual development (Ibid., p. 129).

Nevertheless, Forrest argues, that there is something epistemically suspect in believing that one's worldview is correct and other worldviews mistaken (Forrest 2011, p. 371). She chides me, a believing Christian, for believing that Christianity is true, and points out that I have in my published writings offered critical analyses of other religious traditions that I believe are mistaken. I am not sure what to make of this. After all, Forrest is a believing atheist, committed to philosophical naturalism and what it entails about the good, the true, and the beautiful (Forrest 2000). She maintains that her point of view is correct and other points of view are mistaken, including the point of view that theological claims may in fact consist of beliefs that the believer has adequate warrant to believe (Forrest 2011, p. 371). So, she, like the Christian, believes that she is correct about her beliefs. And she, like the Christian, believes that other points of view are mistaken. But then she is in precisely the same position as me: she thinks she is right and others wrong. Thus, on her own grounds, her critique of my work ought to be rejected as epistemically suspect, and I need not worry about it. But she should not worry either. For, as the immortal Frank Sinatra once put it, "That's life".

When Forrest submitted her article to *Synthese* in March 2009, the memoir of my personal pilgrimage had been in print for almost five months (Beckwith 2009a). In that book I talk candidly about my writings on other faiths, including the two mentioned by Forrest, Baha'ism and Mormonism (Forrest 2011, p. 371). I confess in my memoir that over the years I have gained a more mature understanding of how best to engage in interreligious conversations. Thus, it is a real shame that Forrest did not consult that book. For if she had, she would have read these words:

I wound up publishing a revised version of [my M.A.] thesis as a book with Bethany House Publishers, *Baha'i* (1985). Looking back I confess I was far too young (24 years old) to publish a book that offered a critical assessment of a world religion. I had not read as deeply or carefully as I should have—nor did I possess the charitable spirit a Christian ought to have when writing a polemical tome about another faith... (Beckwith 2009a, p. 51).

This interest in Mormon theology never waned. After earning my PhD at Fordham University in 1989, I published two books and several academic articles on LDS beliefs (Beckwith and Parrish 1991; Beckwith 2001b, 2005b; Beckwith et al. 2002) What was especially gratifying about my second book on Mormonism was that it was taken seriously by LDS scholars, two of which wrote book jacket endorsements: Brigham Young University Professor Daniel Peterson and LDS philosopher Blake Ostler. I say all this because one of the lessons that I learned from the examples set by both my parents and [my friend] Dan Green is that when you disagree with another person you must not forget that that individual is still entitled to both your respect as well as your Christian charity. This is why I have always tried my best to offer my criticisms of LDS thought

in measured tones rather than with inflammatory rhetoric, which, sadly, is not atypical in some quarters of Christianity (Beckwith 2009a, p. 44).

In 1998 I made the mistake of contributing a chapter to a book called *The Counterfeit Gospel of Mormonism*.... Although I stand by the content of my chapter, which dealt with the nature of God in Mormonism and classical Christian theism, the book's title and cover (which featured models posing as a very white looking LDS family), as well as the way the publisher marketed the work, were an embarrassment to me. For they were inconsistent with the way I had chosen to conduct myself as a Christian academic. Thankfully, the book is now out of print. And given its publisher's penchant to distribute hysterically bad anti-Catholic tomes, I doubt that my now-Catholic contribution would be welcomed if a reprint or revised edition were in the offing (Beckwith 2009a, pp. 132–133, n. 9).

If Forrest had conducted her inquiry while equipped with the principle of charity, she would have encountered a real person, and not the one-dimensional caricature of me that she constructs in her article, and that I do not recognize. She avoids, for example, my 2007 essay in which I chide traditional Christians who could not support the presidential candidacy of Mitt Romney because he is a Mormon (Beckwith 2007f). This resulted in LDS scholar inviting me to participate in a conference at Princeton University on Mormonism and American Politics (2007). The paper I presented there will appear in a *festschrift* published in honor of Mormon philosopher, David Lamont Paulsen (Beckwith 2011b). I was invited by one of David's students to contribute to this volume. Although David and I had a dust-up in 1991 over a paper of mine that had been rejected from a Society of Christian Philosophers' meeting at Brigham Young University (which Forrest bizarrely mentions in her paper (Forrest 2011, p. 371)), we have long since reconciled, as my contribution to his *festschrift* clearly shows. My relationship with David, extending over two decades, is the consequence of our faiths, though in sharp theological disagreement on several points, both supporting and nourishing a shared understanding of the other person as an intrinsically valuable child of God and thus an appropriate subject of mutual charity.

Although this is just one story, it is illustrative of the sort of internal struggles that I have gone through during my life as a Christian philosopher. I suspect that many others also strive to balance an uncompromising devotion to Christ while at the same time respectfully extending the hand of friendship to those who do not share their beliefs. I seem to be better at it now than I was 25 years ago, though I am not even close to being fully conformed to the image of the One I serve. And for that reason, I am still a work in progress.

#### 4 Conclusion

At the end of the day, my assessment of Forrest's article is not really about Intelligent Design or even Francis Beckwith. It is about how we, as philosophers, ought to conduct our disagreements in public, especially when they touch on those questions that arise from what John Rawls calls our "comprehensive doctrines". (Rawls 1993) We have a choice. We can take our cue from Forrest, and a few of her compatriots

higher up on the philosophical food chain, and continue to escalate and amplify our inflammatory rhetoric, falsely depicting our adversaries as sinister subversives looking to usher in a totalitarian regime committed to either theocracy or atheocracy. Or we can be philosophers.

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