

Natural Theology

Questions of Definition and Scope

*The heavens declare the glory of the Lord.
(Psalm 19: 1)*

Many have experienced a sense of awed wonder at the beauty and majesty of nature, evoked by a stunning verdant landscape, a majestic mountain range, or the cold and clear beauty of the sky at night.¹ But might such an experience be a portal to something still greater? Might this evoke our curiosity, in the deepest sense of that word – a “respectful attentiveness” to the beauty and complexity of the world around us?²

Such an attentiveness allows nature to act as a gateway, a threshold to ways of imagining the world, and our place within it. The journey of exploration that is precipitated by a sense of wonder in the presence of nature leads to “a new way of looking at things,” in which we see things as if they were new and unfamiliar,³ bathed in “a sense of the ‘newness’ or ‘newbornness’ of the entire world.”⁴ Both science and religion can be argued to be a response to a sense of wonder at the world around us and within us.⁵

Yet there is another possible outcome, which intersects and interconnects the domains of science and religion, the sacred and secular, in a manner that is perhaps easier to describe than to define. It is often articulated most clearly by

¹ Hesse, “*Mit dem Erstaunen fängt es an*,” 7–10; Falardeau, “Le sens du merveilleux.” Evans uses the term “cosmic wonder” to refer to a range of such experiences: Evans, *Why Believe?*, 32.

² See Gadamer, *Werke*, vol. 4, 37–42; quote at p. 41: *Curiositas* “ist von *cura*, der Sorge und rühmlichen Sorgfalt, abgeleitet.”

³ H. Miller, *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*, 25.

⁴ Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, 22.

⁵ Haralambous and Nielsen, “Wonder as a Gateway Experience”; Crowther-Heyck, “Wonderful Secrets of Nature”; Dawkins, *An Appetite for Wonder*; Tallis, *In Defence of Wonder*, 1–22. These are not necessary *outcomes*, in that some are led to one, some to both, and some to neither.

those natural scientists who sense that their research is opening up deep questions about meaning, truth, and beauty which lie beyond the capacity of science to answer, and by those theologians who realize that the rich imaginative and conceptual framework of the Christian faith makes it possible to understand the achievements and limits of the scientific enterprise in an informed and enriched manner.⁶ This is traditionally known, however inadequately and provisionally, as “natural theology.”⁷

Natural theology can broadly be understood as a process of reflection on the religious entailments of the natural world, rather than a specific set of doctrines.⁸ In its most general sense, it can be undertaken from a variety of viewpoints, secular and religious, and has no “essential” core, other than an engagement with the question of the relationship of nature (including the human observer) and the divine or transcendent. There are many insights to be quarried and questions to be explored at this rich interface – including the question of whether the natural world is able to signify, intimate, or disclose, no matter how provisionally, a transcendent reality which lies beyond it.

Yet perhaps the most important question to be explored in this work is whether there is a specifically Christian understanding of natural theology, and what form this might take. In 1934 Emil Brunner challenged his theological generation to “find its way back to a right *theologia naturalis*,”⁹ believing that something had been lost, which was in principle capable of being retrieved. Brunner, however, never believed he had solved his own challenge.

Brunner’s challenge remains open and important, especially in the light of new debates about the rationality and integrity of faith, and its relation to other areas of human inquiry, particularly the natural sciences. This volume is an attempt to “find our way back” to such a natural theology, conscious that Christian history is rich in approaches that have been sidelined and suppressed by dominant theological voices and institutions, yet which may be of service to the theological community today, especially by encouraging theologians to “think outside the box of the latest philosophical orthodoxies or commonly held beliefs.”¹⁰

⁶ See, for example, Polkinghorne, “Where Is Natural Theology Today?”; B. H. Smith, *Natural Reflections*, 95–120.

⁷ For a thorough survey of the field and issues, see the essays gathered in Re Manning, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology*.

⁸ J. J. Collins, “Natural Theology and Biblical Tradition,” 3.

⁹ Brunner, “Natur und Gnade”; in *Ein offenes Wort*, vol. 1, 374–5: “Es ist die Aufgabe unserer theologischen Generation, sich zur rechten *theologia naturalis* zurückzufinden.”

¹⁰ Antognazza, “The Benefit to Philosophy of the Study of Its History,” 165.

The Aim of This Work

In this work, I argue that a Christian natural theology allows us to re-imagine nature. In speaking of such an act of intellectual permissiveness, I do not mean that it encourages a spurious inflation of our understanding of nature, or a descent into intellectual vacuity or irrationality.¹¹ Rather, I mean that we are provided with an informing intellectual and imaginative framework which both *warrants* and *enables* us to visualize the everyday natural world in a new way,¹² as if an intellectual sun had illuminated it so that we could see its colors, textures, and details in a manner that had hitherto eluded us. This book is an invitation to enter into such a theological re-imagining of nature,¹³ alert to both its risks and its rewards.

Such a re-imagining encourages us to develop a principled attentiveness toward the details of the natural world that enables us to see what might otherwise be missed, to appreciate more fully its beauty and wonder, and to grasp its fundamental interconnectedness. Heidegger famously contrasted the openness of the classic Greek notion of “wonder” with the modern temptations to predatory possessiveness and calculating self-interest in what was observed.¹⁴ Yet this impulse can be challenged and resisted, allowing us to recover a deeper level of engagement with the natural world. Elaine Scarry points to the transformative capacity of beauty, which “ignites the desire for truth” which renders us susceptible to new competencies and imaginative possibilities.¹⁵

Something of the approach that I have in mind can be seen from John Ruskin’s reflections on a “monotonous bit of vine-country” north of Lac Leman in Switzerland. In his diary entry for June 3, 1849, Ruskin noted how his attitude toward an unpromising scene of “sticks and stones” and a “steep dusty road” was transformed through an act of aesthetic imagination, driven

¹¹ For an assessment of New Age approaches to the natural order, which are widely regarded as vulnerable to such criticisms, see Spangler and Thompson, *Reimagination of the World*.

¹² Cf. Pieper, *Was heißt Philosophieren?*, 65–82, especially 66–7: “Im Alltäglichen und Gewöhnlichen das wahrhaft Ungewöhnliche und Unalltägliche, das *mirandum*, zu gewahren – das also ist der Anfang des Philosophierens” (emphasis in original).

¹³ For the importance of making explicit such an invitation, see Brock, “The Puzzle of Imaginative Failure.” For further reflections on why re-imagining can meet resistance, see Gendler, “The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance”; Liao, Strohmingler, and Sripada, “Empirically Investigating Imaginative Resistance.”

¹⁴ Kavanagh, “The Limits of Visualization,” 70.

¹⁵ Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, 52. For some concerns about such a comprehensive appeal to beauty, see Leib, “On the Difficulty of Imagining an Aesthetic Politics.”

by a determination to see the scene afresh through an active application of his mind:

I had a hot march among the vines, and between their dead stone walls; once or twice I flagged a little, and began to think it tiresome; then I put my mind into the scene, instead of suffering the body only to make report of it; and looked at it with the possession-taking grasp of the imagination – the true one; it gilded all the dead walls, and I felt a charm in every vine tendril that hung over them. It required an effort to maintain the feeling: it was poetry while it lasted, and I felt that it was only while under it that one could draw, or invent, or give glory to, any part of such a landscape.¹⁶

This act of imaginative reconceptualization goes beyond the purely rational reconfiguration of natural philosophy advocated by writers such as Francis Bacon in the early modern period.¹⁷ The French poet Paul Claudel (1868–1955) wrote critically of the “starved imagination (*imagination à jeun*)” of rationalism, in which a cold rational dissection of things becomes disconnected from a joyful imaginative embrace of reality.¹⁸ Wordsworth made the same point, in emphasizing the aesthetic coherence of nature, grasped by the imagination yet fragmented by reason:¹⁹

Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;
Our meddling intellect
Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things: –
We murder to dissect.

Natural theology invites us to see things with new eyes, to develop a heightened perceptual acuity in the expectation that we will see aspects of nature that we had hitherto missed, or heal our theoretical blindness which prevents us from seeing what is really there on account of our metaphysical prejudices and precommitments. These points will be developed and amplified as our analysis proceeds.

¹⁶ Ruskin, *Complete Works*, vol. 5, xix. See the extended discussion of this theme in Finley, *Nature's Covenant*, 136–53. For Ruskin's views on the “innocence” of the eye, see Wettlaufer, *In the Mind's Eye*, 197–239, especially 231–6. A similar urge to go beneath the outward appearance of landscapes is found in the works of the influential American conservationist Aldo Leopold (1887–1948): see Callicott, “The Land Aesthetic.”

¹⁷ Dear, *Revolutionizing the Sciences*, 56. Such a “reimagination” of nature must not be confused with some of the more esoteric approaches to nature which emerged around this time: Coudert, *Religion, Magic, and Science in Early Modern Europe and America*, 153–72.

¹⁸ Claudel, “Introduction à un poème sur Dante,” 429. Cf. Borella, *The Sense of the Supernatural*, 31–43.

¹⁹ Wordsworth, “The Tables Turned” (1898), lines 25–8. For comment, see Midgley, *Science and Poetry*, 47–58.

Yet any attempt to explore and advocate a natural theology raises a fundamental question of definition. How is natural theology to be understood? And who has the right to make such a normative decision? Any discussion about whether natural theology is helpful or destructive, proper or improper, wise or foolish, authentically Christian or inherently pagan, is critically dependent on how the notion is defined, and the ideational framework within which it is located. Orthodox theologians, for example, have been critical of western tendencies to impose an unnecessary and improper separation between natural and supernatural revelation. Orthodoxy holds that “natural revelation is understood fully in the light of supernatural revelation,” and rejects any scholastic or modernist tendency to ignore divine influence on human theological reflection on the world, seeing humanity as “the only active agent” in this process of reflection.²⁰

During the twentieth century, particularly within Reformed Protestantism, discussion of “natural theology” has become entangled with polemical concerns which have disrupted and confounded any serious attempt to offer an objective account of its theological legitimacy and potential.²¹ This is perhaps to be expected; George MacDonald is a classic example of a Calvinist writer who struggled to reconcile his theology and his love of the imagination.²² During the twentieth century, the Reformed tradition temporarily seems to have submitted to Karl Barth’s withering criticism of natural theology, with some even falling into what Eberhard Jüngel termed a “sterile Barth-scholasticism” which refused to countenance any misjudgment on Barth’s part, or consider alternatives to it;²³ happily, a more attentive reading of the Reformed tradition has demonstrated that alternative approaches to, and understandings of, natural theology lie to hand, with a distinguished history of use.²⁴ Yet these shadows of past controversies about natural theology are now fading and receding, making possible a reconsideration and re-evaluation of its place in theology in general, in the broader cultural dialogue about the beauty of nature and its representations, and in the more specific dialogue between science and religion.

Ludwig Wittgenstein once quipped that certain expressions need “to be withdrawn from language and sent for cleaning” before they can be “put

²⁰ Stăniloae, *The Experience of God*, 1–36. See further Lemeni, “The Rationality of the World and Human Reason.”

²¹ Kapper, “‘Natürliche Theologie’ als innerprotestantisches und ökumenisches Problem”; Kock, *Natürliche Theologie*, 1–16; 391–5; Jüngel, “Das Dilemma der natürlichen Theologie und die Wahrheit ihres Problems.”

²² Dearborn, *Baptized Imagination*, 9–14; 67–94. For reflections on the deficiencies of syllogistic theologies, see Guite, “Through Literature.”

²³ Jüngel, “Unterbrechung des Weltlebens,” 135.

²⁴ See, for example, A. E. McGrath, *Emil Brunner*, 228–9.

back into general circulation.”²⁵ It is hard not to appreciate the wisdom of his remark for our topic. So can the term “natural theology” be cleaned up, and put back into circulation? Or do we need to confront and come to terms with its ineluctable multiplicity of meanings?²⁶ Or might we hope to find some richer understanding of the notion, which helps us understand why it is understood in so many ways, and lend coherence to its plurality?

In this study, we shall offer a careful assessment of how natural theology might be understood and applied, what criticisms and challenges it might face, and what benefits it might bring. The best point at which to start this discussion is clearly to explore how the notion of *theologia naturalis* might be conceived, deploying a genealogical approach which seeks to identify how the idea has been understood, rather than allow others to define the concept in a manner that suits their vested interests.

A Brief Genealogy of Natural Theology

Concepts have histories, and for this reason, they have genealogies which have to be traced in order to deepen our understanding of those concepts and the rationalities which formed them.²⁷ It is not acceptable to offer a contemporary definition of natural theology which has gained acceptance within some particular community of discourse, as if that settled the matter, or become locked into a “metahistorical deployment of ideal significations” capable of delivering clear and crisp answers.²⁸ Studying the genealogies of core concepts – such as “rationality” – is one of the most effective (although not unproblematic) means of subverting the vested interests of intellectual power groups, and allowing the retrieval of suppressed or marginalized notions which remain nonetheless live intellectual options for contemporary theological discussion.²⁹

The genealogy of natural theology, like so many other critical terms in the history of human thought, is “gray,” not black and white. The history of use

²⁵ Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 44.

²⁶ Hutchinson, “The Uses of Natural Theology.”

²⁷ Oliver, “Analytic Theology,” 466–7. Note his conclusion that “history is determinative of concepts, or at least indicative of the meaning of concepts.” For a similar emphasis on studying the history of philosophy, see the well-argued studies of Antognazza, “The Benefit to Philosophy of the Study of Its History”; Garber, “What’s Philosophical about the History of Philosophy?”

²⁸ See Foucault, “Nietzsche, la généalogie, l’histoire,” passim: “La généalogie est grise . . . [elle s’oppose] au déploiement métahistorique des significations idéales” (145). The genealogical method adopted by Foucault eschews developmental or progressive accounts of history in favor of an emphasis on historical contingency. For further comment, see Lightbody, *Philosophical Genealogy*, 133–89.

²⁹ Owen, “Criticism and Captivity”; Dean, *Critical and Effective Histories*, 7–23; Lightbody, *Philosophical Genealogy*, 7–56.

of the notion indicates that it has had, and still has, multiple associations and meanings, with the cultural context influencing which of a range of possible interpretations or implementations achieves dominance in that location. The clarification of the meaning of this notion in any given context must be determined by active engagement with that community of discourse in the empirical, not by ahistorical or purely theoretical argument.

Debate about what we now know as “natural theology” – although this term does not seem to have been generally used at the time – can be traced back to classic Greek philosophers, where it was often framed in terms of a rational or scientific quest for an *archē* – a first principle. The assumption of the rationality of both the empirical world and belief in gods was commonplace, although the pre-Socratic tradition showed little interest in developing arguments in support of the existence of the gods – for example, through an appeal to nature.³⁰ “Natural theology, taken as a scientific search for an ultimate *archē*, is virtually identical with the activity of a search for wisdom as the Greek philosophers understood it.”³¹ For the Ionian philosophers, a natural theology interpreted the world as an ordered whole – that is, as a *kosmos* – and therefore was, at least to some degree, transparent to the human intellect.³² Pythagoras is often credited with being “the first to call the containing of all things the *kosmos*, because of the order which governs it.”³³ The Greek term *kosmos* thus developed overtones of order and intelligibility. The universe is something that we can *understand*, however partially and imperfectly.

The Latin term *theologia naturalis* – which could arguably be translated as either “a natural theology” or “a theology of nature”³⁴ – was coined in the pre-Christian classical world to describe a general mode of reasoning which ascended from the natural world to the world of the gods.³⁵ It could be seen as a variant on a *philosophia perennis*, which locates humanity’s “final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being.”³⁶ Despite writing his treatise in Latin, the philosopher Varro used

³⁰ E.g., see Leshner, *Xenophanes of Colophon*, 114–19; Enders, *Natürliche Theologie im Denken der Griechen*, 47–73.

³¹ Gerson, *God and Greek Philosophy*, 82; Naddaf, “Plato.” See also Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, 90–106.

³² Gerson, “Metaphysics in Search of Theology,” 1–2.

³³ Brague, *The Wisdom of the World*, 17–25.

³⁴ See Topham, “Natural Theology and the Sciences.” Padgett argues constructively for interpreting *theologia naturalis* philosophically as “natural theology” and theologically as “a theology of nature”: Padgett, “*Theologia Naturalis*: Philosophy of Religion or Doctrine of Creation?” There are important parallels here with the “thick” natural theology project I develop in this work.

³⁵ Klauck, “Nature, Art, and Thought.”

³⁶ Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, vii.

three Greek adjectives (*mythicon*, *politicon*, and *physicon*) to designate the *tria genera theologiae*, which strongly suggests that this categorization had been borrowed from a philosopher of the Hellenistic age.³⁷ In Roman religion, *theologia naturalis* was seen as part of a tripartite approach to religion, supplementing *theologia civilis* and *theologia mythica*.³⁸ The phrase was picked up by some early Christian theologians, such as Augustine,³⁹ who tended to treat it as little more than a pejorative way of referring to the inferior theologies of pagan philosophers. The term, however, did not find wide acceptance within the western theological tradition. As C. C. J. Webb rightly noted, it was rarely used during the patristic and medieval periods, and only came into wider use in the sixteenth century, mainly through the influence of the Catalan scholar Raymond de Sebonde (c. 1385–1436).⁴⁰

Although historians and theologians tend to use the term “natural theology” retrospectively – for example, in speaking of the “natural theology of Thomas Aquinas” (meaning “Thomas Aquinas on what many would now call ‘natural theology’”) – the general acceptance and wide use of the term *theologia naturalis* within the western theological tradition is actually a relatively late development, and reflects the influence of Sebonde’s *Liber naturae sive creaturarum* (later known, partly through the influence of the Renaissance philosopher Michel de Montaigne (1533–92), simply as *Theologia Naturalis*).⁴¹ Montaigne’s French translation of Sebonde’s work, published as *La théologie naturelle de Raymond Sebon* (1569), did much to popularize Sebonde’s approach in the later Renaissance, particularly in affirming the intrinsic rationality of faith and the use of analogies in

³⁷ See Augustine, *de Civitate Dei*, vi.v.12.

³⁸ Rüpke, *Die Religion der Römer*, 121–5; Heinze, *Virgil’s Epic Technique*, 233–4.

³⁹ Dihle, “Die *Theologia Tripartita* bei Augustin.” More generally, see Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, 22–39; 184–230.

⁴⁰ Webb, *Studies in the History of Natural Theology*, 1–83. Various spellings of this name are found in the literature, including the Catalan form “Raimundo Sibiunda.”

⁴¹ Simonin, “La préhistoire de l’Apologie de Raimond Sebond.” There is some confusion about the original title of Sebond’s treatise. The manuscripts held in leading European libraries have quite different titles: *Liber Naturae sive Creaturarum* (Paris), *Scientia Libri creaturarum seu Naturae et de Homine* (Toulouse), and *Liber Creaturarum sive de Homine* (Clermont-Ferrand). The critically important subtitle *Theologia naturalis* was only added to the second printing (1485) by the publishers, half a century after Sebonde’s death. The use of this subsequent subtitle has misled some as to the character and intentions of the book. See further Guy, “La *Theologia Naturalis*: Manuscripts, éditions, traductions.” The work was originally written in Sebonde’s native Catalan, and circulated in manuscript form.

theological reasoning.⁴² Yet Montaigne's influential translation also served to establish the phrase *théologie naturelle* or *theologia naturalis* as a generic way of referring to a way of doing theology that engaged the natural world – intellectually, aesthetically, and morally. By the close of the sixteenth century, the phrase *theologia naturalis* was generally assumed to mean a kind of theology that focussed on the contemplation of nature.

Like most thinkers of the Renaissance, Sebonde did not define natural theology in agonistic terms – for example, in contradistinction to divine revelation – seeing the “book of creatures” as itself being constituted as a species of revelation through which God chose to convey knowledge (both cognitive and affective) to human observers. On the basis of Sebonde's approach, it is difficult to provide a clear distinction between natural theology and natural philosophy.⁴³ Nor does Sebonde interpret *theologia naturalis* in purely cognitive terms; he clearly understands it to involve an *affective* engagement with or approach to the natural order. Sebonde's treatise, while including sections dealing with dogmatic theology, is as much a work of spirituality as of theology.⁴⁴ He lacks the over-intellectualization which impoverished some more recent accounts of the idea, particularly those to have emerged during the period of the Enlightenment.

⁴² Note the subtle modifications of Sebonde's original ideas which Montaigne introduced through his translation – such as the heightened importance of the imagination: Habert, *Montaigne traducteur de La Théologie Naturelle*, 198; 237. For Montaigne's use of analogical reasoning, see the masterly study of Carraud, “L'imaginer inimaginable.” Sebonde's original work was placed on the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* in 1559 and 1564 on account of some unwise statements in its preface concerning the sufficiency of Scripture; Montaigne judiciously “corrected” these passages; as a result, his translation of Sebonde attracted no official censure.

⁴³ See further Blair, “Mosaic Physics and the Search for a Pious Natural Philosophy in the Late Renaissance.” Blair suggests that natural theology is more characteristic of early Protestantism than of Catholicism. Although I concede the importance of certain forms of natural theology for Protestantism (particularly in England during the eighteenth century), historical research is uncovering a neglected Catholic exploration of the theme, especially in the Renaissance – for example, in the writings of Raymond Lull. Yet Catholicism tended to see natural theology as confirmatory of *Catholicism*, rather than a generic Christianity. The “three truths” affirmed in works such as Pierre Charron's *Lest trois Vérités* (1593) are that God exists; that Christianity is the true religion; and that the Catholic Church is the only true Church.

⁴⁴ Révah, *Une source de la spiritualité péninsulaire au XVIe siècle*. As Jean Balsamo notes, Sebonde's work – especially as translated by Montaigne – is best thought of as “a manual of private piety”: Balsamo, “Un gentilhomme et sa théologie,” 110. The affective aspects of some later forms of natural theology may be noted here: Crowther-Heyck, “Wonderful Secrets of Nature”; Ogilvie, *The Science of Describing*, 87–138.

While Sebonde's later interpreters – such as Montaigne – suggested that his approach to theology could be helpful in challenging atheists and skeptics,⁴⁵ Sebonde himself tended to see it as enhancing the rational credentials, the imaginative richness, and the moral commitment of religious believers.⁴⁶ The clarity and accessibility of the “book of nature” was contrasted with the inaccessibility of scholastic theology and the Bible.⁴⁷ Unlike some later writers, Sebonde does not argue the case for Christianity on the basis of first principles which are independent of Scripture and Church tradition, but rather anticipates (and at points even presupposes) basic Christian ideas, which are then shown to be consonant with the natural world. In the hands of their less accomplished advocates, such “proofs” for the existence of God tend to be rationally questionable and imaginatively dull: “Les preuves fatiguent la vérité” (Georges Braques).

There is a long tradition of linking natural theology with the demonstration of the rationality of faith. Although Montaigne suggested that Sebonde's *Theologia Naturalis* could serve to confute atheists, we find little interest in this topic on the part of Sebonde himself. The rise of atheism was a later development; Sebonde was more concerned to reassure his readers of the trustworthiness of their faith, and to draw them into a deeper understanding of themselves and the natural world within which they live. Yet his approach both expresses and ultimately depends upon Christian presuppositions. This is clear at several points, particularly this important passage dealing with the actuality of sin and necessity of divine grace:

No one can see this wisdom, or read this said open Book [of Nature and Creatures] by themselves, unless they are enlightened by God (*a Deo illuminatus*) and cleansed from original sin. And therefore none of the ancient pagan philosophers could read this science.⁴⁸

For Sebonde, natural theology was thus helpful and important – yet inadequate, without the illumination of divine grace.

⁴⁵ It is not clear that atheism was a significant issue at this time. The atheist positions engaged in French apologetic works of this age tend to treat atheism as a hypothetical possibility, allowing clarification of the Christian position: see Kors, “Theology and Atheism in Early Modern France.”

⁴⁶ Guy, “La *Theologia Naturalis* en son temps.”

⁴⁷ Printing was still in its infancy at this time, so that it was both impractical (and expensive) for lay people to gain access to such texts, let alone to understand them. Sebonde's point is that nature is publicly available, accessible, and intelligible – even if Sebonde reads the “book of nature” in the light of an informing Christian perspective.

⁴⁸ Sebonde, *Theologia naturalis seu Liber creaturarum*, fol. A3. The context indicates that Sebonde intends the term *scientia* to be understood here as *theologia naturalis*.

Many today assume that *theologia naturalis* means something like “the enterprise of providing support for religious beliefs by starting from premises that neither are nor presuppose any religious beliefs.”⁴⁹ Some scholars thus suggest that Sebonde develops an idiosyncratic or unorthodox notion of natural theology⁵⁰ which is out of line with modern thinking on the matter. Yet this judgment results from allowing an understanding of natural theology that became prevalent in a later cultural context to determine what is normative for the notion in earlier periods. A more realistic approach might be to see Sebonde’s broader understanding of natural theology as normative, with later formulations of the notion representing a restriction or narrowing of its scope.

This specific notion of natural theology as “providing support for religious beliefs by starting from premises that neither are nor presuppose any religious beliefs” gained the ascendancy during the Enlightenment, and appears to have its roots in the English Deism of the early eighteenth century.⁵¹ Both Samuel Clarke’s *Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God* (1706) and George Cheyne’s *Philosophical Principles of Religion, Natural and Revealed* (1715) set out trajectories of reasoning which would now be described as “natural theology,”⁵² and were both cited as significant sources by Johann August Eberhard (1739–1809) in his important 1781 lecture “Vorbereitung zur natürlichen Theologie,” which influenced Kant’s account of the topic.⁵³

Yet this rational natural philosophy is to be seen as one specific formulation of the notion of natural theology which assumed hegemony for cultural reasons, reflecting the historical contingencies of the “Age of Reason.”⁵⁴ This formulation of natural theology is not present in Sebonde’s work, nor in

⁴⁹ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 289.

⁵⁰ For example, see the comments of Hartle, *Michel de Montaigne*, 141.

⁵¹ It is historically problematic to assert that “the environmental niche in which natural theology evolved was the competition of ideas within early modern science and philosophy”: Schults, “Wising Up,” 547. Yet Schults is surely right, if we interpret him to mean that a *certain form* of natural theology emerged as culturally significant at that time, and that this partly reflected tensions between science and philosophy.

⁵² For the intellectual context, see Pfizenmaier, *The Trinitarian Theology of Dr. Samuel Clarke*, 29–85. See also Khamara, “Hume versus Clarke on the Cosmological Argument”; Guerrini, *Obesity and Depression in the Enlightenment*, 72–88.

⁵³ Reprinted in Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 20, 491–606. For comment, see D’Aniello, “Von der Religion zur Theologie,” 168–72; Hanke, “Kein Wunder und keine Instruktion,” 18–21.

⁵⁴ For the concept of “natural philosophy” in the eighteenth century, see Gascoigne, “Ideas of Nature: Natural Philosophy.” Haakonssen, ed., *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy*; Irving, “Public Knowledge, Natural Philosophy, and the Eighteenth-Century Republic of Letters.”

most seventeenth-century Protestant works of systematic theology. For example, the Reformed dogmatician Johann Heinrich Alsted's influential *Theologia naturalis* (1615) seems to treat natural theology as a theology of nature – something quite distinct from philosophy, especially metaphysics.⁵⁵ We must resist any suggestion that this rationalized natural theology of the “Age of Reason” is a definitive or normative account of natural theology, against which other approaches are to be judged and found wanting. From the outset, *theologia naturalis* was a conceptually fluid notion, shaped by the apologetic and dogmatic needs of the moment, and possessing multiple derivative meanings and associations.⁵⁶

It is simply not possible to offer an essentialist definition of “natural theology,” as if there exists or existed some correct or normative understanding of the notion which is necessary to its identity and function, and grounded in its intrinsic nature.⁵⁷ Its relationship to both kindred and rival intellectual enterprises – such as “natural philosophy” – is frustratingly difficult to define.⁵⁸ Rather, we find a series of constructed interpretations and applications of the notion, often developed or appropriated in response to cultural situations and challenges. Precisely the same issue arises with the even more contested notion of “natural religion,”⁵⁹ and possibly even with the notion of “religion” itself.⁶⁰

Yet if we cannot define what natural theology is, or ought to be, we can at least describe how it has been understood, and reflect on the implications of these observations, not least whether these various construals point to something more fundamental as their ultimate base and norm. When seen in the light of its history, the phrase “natural theology” designates a plurality of possibilities, raising the question of whether the notion is fundamentally incoherent, or whether there exists some overarching notion

⁵⁵ Lohr, “Metaphysics and Natural Philosophy as Sciences,” 290–3.

⁵⁶ Casserley, *Graceful Reason*, 2–4; Fergusson, “Types of Natural Theology”; G. L. Murphy, *The Cosmos in the Light of the Cross*, 8–25; Re Manning, ed., *Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology*, passim. For the contested notion of “natural revelation,” often elided with “natural theology,” see Welker, *Schöpfung und Wirklichkeit*, 42–55.

⁵⁷ For the problems of such an approach, see H. C. Barrett, “On the Functional Origins of Essentialism.”

⁵⁸ The natural philosophy of the seventeenth century implicitly assumed some aspect of natural theology, such as a religiously motivated engagement with nature: Gaukroger, *The Emergence of a Scientific Culture*, 129–54; Calloway, *Natural Theology in the Scientific Revolution*. For the concept in general, see Dear, *The Intelligibility of Nature*, 1–14.

⁵⁹ Pailin distinguishes eleven different meanings of the term “natural religion,” noting that “the complex variety of ways” in which the term has been understood raises questions about the coherence of the notion: Pailin, “The Confused and Confusing Story of Natural Religion.”

⁶⁰ Boyer, *The Fracture of an Illusion*, 96. For Boyer, the idea that there exists “some special domain of thought and action that is ‘religion’” is a modern delusion.

of natural theology that is capable of accommodating its multiple implementations. I argue that a Christian *imaginarium* allows these multiple conceptions of natural theology to be seen as culturally localized adaptations of a grander and richer vision of the concept, which is capable of accommodating its multiple historical instantiations.

Natural Theology: Six Approaches

Six main understandings of the notion of natural theology can be identified within the western theological tradition.⁶¹ None can be considered as definitive, and each is open to development beyond the somewhat narrow scope which I shall outline below.⁶² Each can be seen as a construction or interpretation of a broader and richer underlying concept, reflecting the needs or opportunities of the particular context within which it is embedded. In what follows, I shall offer a brief account of these approaches.

1 Natural theology is the “branch of philosophy which investigates what human reason unaided by revelation can tell us concerning God.”⁶³ It is here understood as an attempt to demonstrate the existence or determine the characteristics of God without recourse to divine revelation.⁶⁴ For many, this has become the default understanding of natural theology. This approach does not depend upon or express any specifically Christian ideas,⁶⁵ and thus has considerable apologetic appeal within a secular cultural context. It does not make an appeal to the natural world itself, but rather to a priori

⁶¹ For other accounts of the conceptual diversity of “natural theology,” see Casserley, *Graceful Reason*, 2–4; Fergusson, “Types of Natural Theology”; A. E. McGrath, *Darwinism and the Divine*, 15–18.

⁶² For example, a “ramified” natural theology appeals to a range of considerations, some intrinsic to nature and reason (a “bare” natural theology), others to the Christian tradition – such as the notion of the fulfilment of biblical prophecy, or the resurrection of Christ (a “ramified” natural theology). For an influential statement of this approach, see Swinburne, *The Resurrection of God Incarnate*, especially 204–16. For reflection and comment, see Langtry, “Richard Swinburne,” 292–6.

⁶³ Joyce, *Principles of Natural Theology*, 1. Note also Joyce’s comment that “the Natural Theologian bases his conclusions purely and solely on the data afforded by natural reason.” For reflections on the role of deductive arguments in such an approach to natural theology, see McGrew and DePoe, “Natural Theology and the Uses of Argument.” For theological concerns about such approaches, see A. Moore, “Should Christians Do Natural Theology?”

⁶⁴ Clavier, *Qu’est-ce que la théologie naturelle?*; Mascal, *The Openness of Being*, 36–74; Weidemann, *Die Unverzichtbarkeit natürlicher Theologie*, 44–7.

⁶⁵ Peterfreund, *Turning Points in Natural Theology from Bacon to Darwin*, 41–58. For an assessment of the various arguments for God’s existence associated with this approach to natural theology, see Craig and Moreland, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*.

ideas which might be considered “natural,” and explores their theistic entailments. Natural theology thus designates a theology that comes “naturally” to the human mind.

2 Natural theology is a demonstration or affirmation of the existence of God on the basis of the regularity and complexity of the natural world. This specific formulation of natural theology appears to have emerged in Protestant contexts during the early modern period primarily for apologetic reasons.⁶⁶ It is often referred to as “physico-theology,”⁶⁷ on account of its appeal to an a posteriori discernment of the regularity of nature which is held to entail or imply divine existence, rather than to a priori ideas of God, such as those traditionally held to underlie the ontological argument.⁶⁸ Because of its appeal to the public world of nature, this approach avoids the “scandal of particularity,” which arises from modernism’s insistence that knowledge of the divine must be universally accessible, not historically or culturally particular.⁶⁹

Within Catholicism, this approach to natural theology became increasingly significant in the nineteenth century, as secularism became a pressing concern in western Europe.⁷⁰ This move is reflected in the First Vatican Council’s declaration that God “can be known with certainty from the consideration of created things in the natural light of human reason.”⁷¹ For the purposes of this classification, we may leave open the question of whether a natural theology adopts a deductive or inferential mode of reasoning in defending a theistic outlook.⁷² Although there are obvious similarities

⁶⁶ Freedman, “‘Professionalization’ and ‘Confessionalization,’” 335.

⁶⁷ See P. Harrison, “Physico-Theology and the Mixed Sciences”; Ogilvie, “Natural History, Ethics, and Physico-Theology.”

⁶⁸ Abbruzzese, “The Structure of Descartes’ Ontological Proof.” For the quite distinct approach adopted by Anselm of Canterbury in the eleventh century, see Schumacher, “The Lost Legacy of Anselm’s Argument.”

⁶⁹ O. Anderson, “The Presuppositions of Religious Pluralism and the Need for Natural Theology,” 206–7. For the broader issues, see Clayton and Knapp, *The Predicament of Belief*, 80–92.

⁷⁰ For the impact on Catholic higher education, see Hütter, “University Education, the Unity of Knowledge – and (Natural) Theology.”

⁷¹ “Si quis dixerit, Deum unum et verum, creatorem et Dominum nostrum, per ea, quae facta sunt, naturali rationis humanae lumine certo cognosci non posse: anathema sit”: Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, #3043. This is not to be understood as entailing that the existence of God could be proved by rational argument: see Kerr, “Knowing God by Reason Alone”; White, *Wisdom in the Face of Modernity*, 6–9; Echeverria, “The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology.” For the historical context of this statement, see Menozzi, “Antimodernismo, secolarizzazione e cristianità.”

⁷² Gagnon, “Raymond Ruyer, la biologie et la théologie naturelle,” 159–62; Koons, “A New Look at the Cosmological Argument”; A. E. McGrath, “New Atheism – New Apologetics,” 102–8.

between this approach and the first, noted above, their point of departure is significantly different: one proceeds from pure reason, the other from engagement with the world of nature.

3 Natural theology is the intellectual outcome of the natural tendency of the human mind to desire or be inclined toward God. This approach traditionally makes an appeal to the “natural desire to see God,” developed by Thomas Aquinas,⁷³ although more recent developments in the cognitive science of religion have opened up alternative ways of developing this theme.⁷⁴ Other theologians have developed this notion in important ways – most notably, Bernard Lonergan’s reformulation of this principle as an innate tendency of the human intellect, equivalent to the unrestricted desire to understand being.⁷⁵

4 Natural theology is the exploration of an analogy or intellectual resonance between the human experience of nature on the one hand, and of the Christian gospel on the other. This approach to natural theology often limits itself to establishing the possibility of coherence or congruence between the specific claims of Christian faith and a knowledge of the world derived from other disciplines or areas of life.⁷⁶ Natural theology thus articulates and expands the notion of an “isomorphism between our reason and the structure of reality.”⁷⁷ Variants of this approach are found in Joseph Butler and John Polkinghorne.⁷⁸ We might also include in this category those who see natural theology as affirming the rationality of an existing faith, rather than as demonstrating the necessity of that faith in the first place, providing an intellectual “framework for articulating one tradition’s existing beliefs about ultimacy in a plausible and faith-nurturing way.”⁷⁹

5 Natural theology is an attempt to demonstrate that “naturalist” accounts of the natural world and the achievements of the natural sciences are intrinsically deficient, and that a theological approach is required to give a comprehensive and coherent interpretation of the natural order.⁸⁰ This approach involves engaging what now seems to be the culturally dominant

⁷³ Ashley, “What Is the End of the Human Person?”; Feingold, *The Natural Desire to See God According to St. Thomas and His Interpreters*; Kerr, *Immortal Longings*, 159–84; Haldane, “Philosophy, the Restless Heart, and the Meaning of Theism”; Hütter, “*Desiderium naturale visionis Dei*”; Wang, “Aquinas on Human Happiness and the Natural Desire for God.”

⁷⁴ J. L. Barrett, “Exploring the Natural Foundations of Religion”; J. L. Barrett, *Born Believers*.

⁷⁵ Stebbins, *The Divine Initiative*, 142–82; Himes, “Lonergan’s Position on the Natural Desire to See God.”

⁷⁶ See the discussion in M. M. Adams, *Christ and Horrors*, 1–28.

⁷⁷ Wasmaier-Sailer and Göcke, “Idealismus als Chance für die natürliche Theologie,” 9–10.

⁷⁸ Penellhum, *Butler*, 89–112; Irlenborn, “Konsonanz von Theologie und Naturwissenschaft?”; Steinke, *John Polkinghorne: Konsonanz von Naturwissenschaft und Theologie*, 57–82.

⁷⁹ Wildman, “Comparative Natural Theology,” 180–1; Macquarrie, *In Search of Deity*, 12–13.

⁸⁰ This approach is found in Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, 168–74.

belief that intellectual reflection on nature is presently more likely to lead to a “natural atheology” rather than a “natural theology,”⁸¹ while avoiding the theologically questionable notion of the “god of the gaps.”⁸²

This approach to natural theology is particularly important in contemporary debates about the metaphysical implications of science, in that it challenges the idea that a naturalist account of nature is epistemologically privileged or “neutral.” While being open about its own metaphysical assumptions and narrative precommitments, it challenges naturalism to acknowledge its own implicit foundations and assumptions.⁸³ In particular, this approach to natural theology holds that a “scientistic” account of reality – which in effect reduces reality to a single stratum or perspective – is simply inadequate to account for the complexities of human experience of the world.⁸⁴ We shall return to consider the problems of such a flat account of the world later in this work (pp. 161–3).

6 Natural theology is to be understood primarily as a “theology of nature” – that is, as a specifically Christian understanding of the natural world, reflecting the core assumptions of the Christian faith, which is to be contrasted with secular or naturalist accounts of nature.⁸⁵ The movement of thought here is from within the Christian tradition toward nature, rather than from nature toward faith (as in the second approach, noted above). Such a theology of nature is often framed primarily in terms of a doctrine of creation.

Given this plurality of interpretations, some might be tempted to conclude that the concept of “natural theology” is incoherent, open to such a wide variety of interpretations that it has ceased to be a legitimate or meaningful

⁸¹ Lustig, “Natural Atheology”; Sosa, “Natural Theology and Naturalist Atheology.” Caution needs to be exercised here, in that an “atheological” reading of nature (or other texts) may represent a novel form of discourse, which avoids the assumptions and language of traditional theologies. but which is not necessarily atheistic or anti-theological: see T. Dixon, “Theology, Anti-Theology and Atheology.”

⁸² A notion criticized by Charles Coulson: see A. Hough, “Not a Gap in Sight.” For a response, see Larmer, “Is There Anything Wrong with ‘God of the Gaps’ Reasoning?”

⁸³ For the basic issues, see Draper, “God, Science and Naturalism.” For theism as the most “natural” explanation of experience and a critique of naturalist accounts, see Visala, *Naturalism, Theism and the Cognitive Study of Religion*, 85–193.

⁸⁴ This is often developed in terms of a cumulative account of theistic explanation, perhaps best seen in Tennant’s *Philosophical Theology*. For comment, see Bertocci, *The Person God Is*, 159–71. Tennant is one of the few philosophers of this era to develop theistic arguments based on the beauty of nature: see Tennant, *Philosophical Theology*, vol. 2, 89–93.

⁸⁵ Barbour, *Issues in Science and Religion*, 452–63; Morley, *John Macquarrie’s Natural Theology*, 97–120; Gunton, “The Trinity, Natural Theology, and a Theology of Nature,” 98–103.

concept. Some have responded to this plurality of interpretations by asserting the intellectual or historical hegemony of one way of conceiving natural theology, insisting that rival construals of the notion are defective, possibly even degenerate. Yet this diversity of modes of discourse about natural theology can more plausibly be argued to reflect the multi-layered nature of a richer vision of “natural theology,” which we shall explore in the following section.

The Natural Theology Project: Thick and Thin Descriptions

As will be clear from the above analysis, the fluidity of the notion of *theologia naturalis* raises a concern about its coherence. It is a simple matter of observation that there are several very different projects that have been designated “natural theology” by their advocates or critics in different historical contexts. Explanations may, of course, be given as to why these different projects chose to designate themselves as “natural theology,” or why they were designated as such by others. So is there sufficient “family resemblance” between them to allow us to suggest that there is a plausible “meta-project” that unifies or gives some fundamental cohesion to these very diverse projects? Or are they essentially disconnected and independent projects, with at best tangential connections and correlations? Or is there a Platonic *synoptikon*, a “view from somewhere,” that allows these to be seen as different aspects or levels of the same reality?

These are not new questions, and are frequently revisited when considering other potentially complex and incoherent notions, such as that of “religion” itself.⁸⁶ In 1912, James H. Leuba found his attempt to develop a psychology of religion hindered somewhat by the fact that he encountered at least 50 definitions of the term “religion.” “Religion” is often understood as a category of *genus*, which enfolds a series of *species* (individual religions). Yet the category of religion is a social construction, reflecting a specific tradition of interpretation,⁸⁷ which cannot be reified in this manner. If we cannot resolve the question of the identity of natural theology in a rationally compelling manner, we may have to agree to live with definitional plurality.

Yet virtually every major term used in philosophical, theological, or cultural discourse shows at least some degree of definitional elusiveness

⁸⁶ E.g., see Fitzgerald, “Religion, Philosophy and Family Resemblances”; B. Saler, “The Definition of Religion in the Context of Social-Scientific Study”; Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 15–24.

⁸⁷ See especially Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 2–29.

or ambiguity. Terms such as “ontology” and “ideology,” widely encountered in the scholarly literature, are open to multiple – and often widely diverging – interpretations.⁸⁸ Such polyvalence can be accommodated without undue difficulty, so long as it is understood what an author means when using the term, and how this might be related to other understandings of the notion.

The analysis presented in the previous section suggests that natural theology requires, to use Gilbert Ryle’s term, a “thick” description, in that it is a “many-layered sandwich, of which only the bottom slice is catered for by the thinnest description.”⁸⁹ Ryle’s approach has been developed by social anthropologists to highlight the difference between a surface-level “thin account” of cultural phenomena that are directly observed with a “thick account” which included reference to the intentions of social actors, and the perceived meaning of events. Although it is not without its difficulties,⁹⁰ Ryle’s model of description has obvious potential for enabling a richer exploration of the history of ideas.⁹¹

The concept of *theologia naturalis* ultimately requires and merits a thick description, not a thin definition. The six approaches to natural theology noted earlier are best seen as interconnected “slices of a sandwich” (Ryle). Each can be seen as an enactment of an aspect of natural theology, rather than as defining in itself what natural theology actually is. Natural theology has been a “thick” concept from the outset, finding expression in “thinner” forms in response to specific cultural opportunities or challenges – such as the rise of the “Age of Reason,” which led some to accentuate its potential to demonstrate the rationality of faith.⁹² Others, however, would challenge this as representing an excessive intellectualization of faith, suggesting that we must learn to live without any ultimate or definitive resolution of these issues.⁹³

⁸⁸ Think, for example, of the radically different understandings of “ideology” in Quine’s writings of the 1950s, and Althusser’s writings of the 1970s, or the supplementation of traditional philosophical debates about “ontology” with the more recent use of the term within the knowledge engineering community as “explicit specifications of conceptualizations.” See Knight, “Transformations of the Concept of Ideology in the Twentieth Century”; Corcho, *A Layered Declarative Approach to Ontology Translation*, 1–24.

⁸⁹ Ryle, “The Thinking of Thoughts.” For the application of this notion to descriptive ethnography, see C. Geertz, “Thick Description.”

⁹⁰ Noted by Cyrenne, “Is Thick Description Social Science?”

⁹¹ See, for example, Darnton, “Intellectual and Cultural History,” 327; McMahan, “The Return of the History of Ideas?,” 15–17; Kaiser, *Toward a Theology of Scientific Endeavour*, 2–5.

⁹² Wolterstorff, “The Migration of the Theistic Arguments”; A. E. McGrath, *A Fine-Tuned Universe*, 21–34.

⁹³ For example, Meister Eckhart’s emphasis on living “without a why”: see Yamazaki, “Leben ohne Warum.”

A “thick” description of natural theology could take the form of an intuited link between the everyday world of natural human experience and a transcendent reality, which arises within human experience in general, yet is capable of being accommodated within various religious traditions, including Christianity. This approach is given added significance on account of recent work in the field of the cognitive science of religion, which has reinforced the perception that religious belief is natural. This “thick” description of natural theology extends to include intuitions and inferences that seem natural to human beings, occurring naturally or spontaneously on beholding a beautiful landscape or the night sky.⁹⁴

Natural theology thus designates – without being limited to – ways of thinking, both rational and imaginative, that arise naturally within human minds on account of innate cognitive processes,⁹⁵ and which might subsequently be developed or enriched within a given tradition of interpretation such as that expressed by a *sensorium* or *imaginarium* (pp. 41–61). Natural theology is rooted in the natural ways in which human beings cognize the natural world, while being capable of being enhanced and redirected by the specific way of seeing the world which is endorsed and mandated by a specific tradition-mediated rationality. As we shall see, this opens the way to speaking about a “Christian natural theology,” distinguished in at least some respects from other interpretations or implementations of the notion.

Natural theology might thus be best conceived as a certain *way of thinking* about the natural world and God, or a *way of seeing* the natural order, rather than any specific explanatory or normative theory about the world or God. It could be seen as a set of what R. G. Collingwood termed “absolute presuppositions” (even if, paradoxically, these are conceded to be provisional) that govern how we are to engage and understand the natural world, rather than a distinctive set of propositions about it.⁹⁶ It is an angle of approach to the natural world, framed as much in terms of imaginative engagement as rational comprehension – a new way of seeing its landscapes, given added depth and resonance by the reflections of those who have discovered and applied it.⁹⁷

Yet while conceding this point, some will still want to press the issue: is there a “natural meta-theology” – so to speak – which itself provides

⁹⁴ De Cruz and de Smedt, *A Natural History of Natural Theology*, 41–60.

⁹⁵ J. L. Barrett, *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?*; J. L. Barrett, *Born Believers*, Bloom, “Religion Is Natural.”

⁹⁶ Collingwood *An Essay on Metaphysics*, 408–9. See further Connelly, “R. G. Collingwood, Analytical Philosophy and Logical Positivism.”

⁹⁷ Proust, *La prisonnière*, 69. “Le seul véritable voyage, le seul bain de Jouvence, ce ne serait pas d’aller vers de nouveaux paysages, mais d’avoir d’autres yeux, de voir l’univers avec les yeux d’un autre, de cent autres.”

justification and resourcing for each of these six implementations of a natural theology? Is there a “Grand Theory” or metanarrative which creates space for these diverse notions of natural theology, and allows us to position and correlate them on a conceptual map? In this work, I shall argue for a “Christian natural theology project,” by which I mean an approach to and understanding of natural theology which is grounded in the specifics of the Christian tradition, and suggest that this enables us to hold together the various strands of the notion as a coherent whole, rather than as competitive and unrelated strategies, seeing them as specific historically situated and culturally embedded implementations of a more general natural theology project.

This position will be defended and expounded in the remaining chapters of this work. In the following section, I shall outline the reasons for believing that this is both possible and necessary, providing a sketch map of the themes that will be explored later in this work.

In Defense of a “Christian” Natural Theology Project

Despite postmodern chastenings, the appeal of a “Grand Theory” has never disappeared.⁹⁸ Indeed, many would now argue that postmodernity “has died in a kind of *fin de siècle* despair at its inability to interrogate the consequences of its own provisionality and indecipherability.”⁹⁹ In disciplines as diverse as sociology and theology, there is growing interest in retrieving the notion of a “big picture” – a way of seeing things which aims to frame and hold together the elements of our experience and observation.¹⁰⁰

The capacity of Christianity to offer such a “big picture” of reality has been affirmed since the earliest of times. Although the early Pauline letters tend to stress the coherence of the future age, when all has been reconstituted and renewed in Christ, later New Testament writings affirm that Christ is the ground of coherence within the present age: “in him all things hold together” (Colossians 1: 17).¹⁰¹ More recently, C. S. Lewis affirmed the

⁹⁸ For postmodern concerns about such theories, see especially Straus, “Grand Theory on Trial.” These concerns focus especially on the abuse of power that is associated with such claims to ultimacy or hegemony.

⁹⁹ Wall, “Ethics, Knowledge, and the Need for Beauty,” 757.

¹⁰⁰ For the importance of this idea in sociology, see J. H. Turner and Boyns, “The Return of Grand Theory.” Note especially their comments about how such a theory might hold together the “macro- and micro levels of reality” (353).

¹⁰¹ Kooten, *Cosmic Christology in Paul and the Pauline School*, 106–34; Tanzella-Nitti, “La dimensione cristologica dell’intelligibilità del reale.”

importance of this “big picture” in one of his most widely cited remarks: “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it, I see everything else.”¹⁰² Lewis held that the Christian *imaginarium* allows the beauties of nature to be correlated with an “indescribable something of which they become for a moment the messengers.”¹⁰³

If natural theology is understood as the “branch of philosophy which investigates what human reason unaided by revelation can tell us concerning God,” it would seem to be somewhat problematic to speak of a “Christian natural theology” (although it might be possible to speak of a natural theology which ultimately leads to Christianity). Yet this philosophical understanding of natural theology accentuates its independence of any religious tradition and its eschewal of dependency upon revelation. It envisages human reason operating autonomously, without any theological or religious precommitments.

Yet it is questionable whether this approach to natural theology can, in fact, be sustained as an independent project. Four serious concerns need to be noted about the viability of this “traditional” approach (which in fact dates from the early modern period, and reflects so many its core assumptions and preoccupations). These four concerns are:

- 1 it assumes a culturally invariant notion of human reason;
- 2 it fails to recognize the constructive activity of the human mind in the process of observation;
- 3 it fails to appreciate the importance of tradition-mediated rationalities; and
- 4 it is inattentive to the aesthetic, moral, and intellectual ambiguity of nature.

We shall consider each of these concerns in detail in what follows.

1 *It assumes a culturally invariant notion of human reason.* The “scandal of particularity” is avoided by positing a universal mode of human reasoning, accessible to all peoples at all times and in all places. It is no accident that this assumption lay at the heart of the Enlightenment project, with its foundational notion of a universal reason, independent of the historical and cultural location of the thinker. Yet this judgment can no longer be maintained, except in the specific domains of mathematics and logic. It is a “view from

¹⁰² Lewis, *Essay Collection*, 21. For further analysis, see A. E. McGrath, “The Privileging of Vision.”

¹⁰³ Lewis, “The Weight of Glory,” in *Essay Collection*, 103.

nowhere,” which fails to recognize the critical role of values and judgments that are embedded within the social context of the thinker.¹⁰⁴ Thomas Nagel has shown that every viewpoint is actually a “view from somewhere.”¹⁰⁵ We “cannot escape the condition of seeing the world from our particular insertion in it”; however much we may aspire to conditions of absolute cultural detachment, we are forced to settle for a view that is “incurably open to bias and limitation.”¹⁰⁶

Some writers, especially within the New Atheist movement, adopt the unreconstructed view of rationality characteristic of *bien pensants* of the eighteenth century. A. C. Grayling, for example, believes that religious arguments – for example, in defense of theism – are unpersuasive because they are elaborated within “the premises and parameters” of their own system.¹⁰⁷ Yet this concern applies to any discipline other than logic and mathematics – including the natural sciences. The methods of natural sciences cannot evade an entanglement of theory and observation, making it impossible to reflect scientifically outside “the premises and parameters” of their system.¹⁰⁸ The discovery of the structure of DNA, for example, depended on theory-driven interpretations of observations, particularly the theory of “helical diffraction.”¹⁰⁹ Likewise, estimates of the age of the universe are dependent on estimates of the speeds and distances of galaxies – which are then interpreted within “the premises and parameters” of contemporary physical theories to yield the age of the universe. Furthermore, the speeds and distances of those galaxies are not observed directly, but are inferred on the basis of “the premises and parameters” of additional physical theories – such as the correlation between velocity and the Doppler red-shift.¹¹⁰

As these examples indicate, the exercise of human rational judgment is an activity carried out within a particular theoretical context (whether this is recognized or not), and is essentially dependent on it. We cannot overlook Karl Marx’s opinion (originally framed in terms of ideas as the outcomes of underlying socio-economic realities) that reason is both embedded within and shaped by its cultural context, particularly power groups.¹¹¹ Later in this

¹⁰⁴ For comment and reflection, see Kim, “Ideology, Identity, and Intercultural Communication”; Larrain, *Ideology and Cultural Identity*.

¹⁰⁵ Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, 67–89.

¹⁰⁶ Weinstein, “The View from Somewhere,” 85.

¹⁰⁷ Grayling, *The God Argument*, 66.

¹⁰⁸ See, for example, Machamer, “Feyerabend and Galileo”; Chang, *Inventing Temperature*, 159–219.

¹⁰⁹ S. Schindler, “Model, Theory, and Evidence in the Discovery of the DNA Structure.”

¹¹⁰ E. Harrison, “The Redshift-Distance and Velocity-Distance Laws.”

¹¹¹ P. Smith, *Cultural Theory*, 6–9.

work (pp. 42–7), we shall return to consider the importance of the *sensorium* – a term which has come to be used to designate the sensory environments within which individuals are located, which shape they understand themselves and their world, and which are determined by both the natural abilities of individuals, and the cultural environment in which they are embedded.¹¹²

A central theme of this work is that both the forms which a natural theology takes and its cultural plausibility are shaped by their historical and social location (pp. 101–5). It is no accident that the historical emergence of forms of natural theology which sought to demonstrate the existence of God by pure reason, or rational reflection on the world, dates from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the influence of rationalism was at its height. Earlier demonstrations of the rationality of belief in God – such as those developed by Anselm of Canterbury and Thomas Aquinas – were more concerned to affirm the resonance or convergence of reason and faith, avoiding the inflated notions of reason that became characteristic of some elements of the Enlightenment.¹¹³

2 *It fails to recognize the constructive activity of the human mind in the process of observation.* The mechanical philosophy of the early Scientific Revolution appears to have encouraged the idea that perception was “another process in a mechanistic universe” involving “the passive reception of impressions from the external world.”¹¹⁴ The Enlightenment’s emphasis on the objectivity of judgment was surprisingly inattentive to the question of how the human mind processes experience of the world, perhaps reflecting the lingering influence of Aristotelian conceptions of passive perception into the seventeenth century.¹¹⁵ The “scopic regime” of modernity is embedded within a specific cultural understanding of both vision and visuality, which shapes both what we see, and what we *expect* to see.¹¹⁶

Yet even within a modernity that was characterized by an attempted homogenization of experience,¹¹⁷ there was a realization, however reluctantly conceded, that there was more than “one unified ‘scopic regime’ of the modern.”¹¹⁸ Multiple “scopic regimes” entail multiple visions of reality.

¹¹² See Ong, “The Shifting Sensorium.”

¹¹³ See Schumacher, “The Lost Legacy of Anselm’s Argument”; Schumacher, “The Logic of Faith.”

¹¹⁴ C. Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments*, 3–4.

¹¹⁵ See the important collection of material in Knuuttila and Kärkkäinen, eds., *Theories of Perception in Medieval and Early Modern Philosophy*.

¹¹⁶ See the discussion in Metz, *Le signifiant imaginaire*.

¹¹⁷ Elder, *Body of Vision*, 162.

¹¹⁸ Jay, “Scopic Regimes of Modernity,” 3.

“There is no privileged vantage point outside the hermeneutic circle of sight as perceptual experience, social practice, and discursive construct.”¹¹⁹

Passive approaches to perception – famously criticized by John Dewey as “spectator theories of knowledge” – fail to appreciate the activity of the human mind in constructing representations of the external world, or the engagement of the observer with what is observed.¹²⁰ Like the narrator in John Fowles’s *French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969),¹²¹ or the artist in Ford Maddox Brown’s *Hayfield* (1855), the observer is now recognized to be part of what is being observed, and cannot be detached or dissociated from such involvement. Many would now argue that a failure on the part of theorists to recognize their own cultural embeddedness amounts to narcissism.¹²² Theorists and theories emerge and exist within a cultural matrix, whose covert influence requires acknowledgment and evaluation. Dewey himself argued for a participatory notion of knowledge based on the integration of theory and practice.

Yet the issues here go deeper than the recognition of the cultural embeddedness of the human observer. The human process of perception itself involves interpretation. The heavens might indeed declare the glory of the Lord; yet, as the Cambridge Platonist John Smith (1618–52), argued, “though the whole of this visible universe be whispering out the notions of a Deity,” we “cannot understand it without some interpreter within.”¹²³ Early experimental psychologists, such as Hermann von Helmholtz (1821–94), drew a distinction between “sensation” – the taking in of data by the individual senses (such as sensing heat against one’s skin) – and “perception” – the combining and making sense of those data (perceiving that one’s hand is resting on a hot-plate). While the basic notion of perception as “making sense” of sensory input remains helpful, contemporary cognitive psychology has shown that the simple conceptual distinction between sensation and perception is unsustainable.

The process of perception involves the creation of representations, which are often referred to as *schemas* (or occasionally *schemata*). These can be

¹¹⁹ Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 587.

¹²⁰ For an assessment and extension of Dewey’s concerns, see Pratt, “Two Cases against Spectator Theories of Knowledge”; Kulp, *The End of Epistemology*; Kulp, “Dewey, the Spectator Theory of Knowledge, and Internalism/Externalism.” Hannah Arendt’s notion of “spectatorial vision” should also be noted here: see Birmingham, “Hannah Arendt: The Activity of the Spectator.”

¹²¹ For comment on this device in relation to the literary environment of this era, see Onega, “Self, World and Art in the Fiction of John Fowles.”

¹²² Altman, *Analyst in the Inner City*, 156.

¹²³ J. Smith, *Select Discourses*, 136. For reflections on Smith’s notion of an “interpreter within,” see Micheletti, “‘Some interpreter within’: l’ermeneutica religiosa di John Smith, platonico di Cambridge.”

thought of as mental maps of the world, as sets of rules for negotiating the world, or as schemes for classifying the world. While some schemas or their components are largely “culture-free,” it is important to note that others (especially those which incorporate pre-existing verbal classification systems) are culturally dependent.¹²⁴

We thus see and interpret the world through existing mental maps. A phrase in the writings of the great nineteenth-century philosopher of science William Whewell (1794–1866) expresses an idea that is fundamental to any Christian natural theology. There is, Whewell declared, “a mask of theory over the whole face of nature.”¹²⁵ What some see as naïve facts about nature are recognized by others to be theoretical interpretations of nature. Observation and interpretation were found to be interconnected in a seemingly inescapable circularity. “A fact under one aspect is a theory under another.” It is a point that has been made more recently by N. R. Hanson, who argued that the process of observation was inexorably “theory-laden.”¹²⁶ We do not merely “see” nature; we understand it in a certain way, seeing it *as* something.

Observation is not a neutral process, but is a theory-laden process which involves implicit conceptual schemas, even though these are open to challenge and change.¹²⁷ We thus approach an engagement with nature with an implicit set of assumptions or expectations which create a degree of perceptual bias. Our perceptual schemes often lead us to overlook or disregard evidence because it does not fit with our existing mental schemes. For example, it is now known that many observations of the planet Uranus were made before its “discovery” by William Herschel in 1781; while Uranus was indeed “seen” by earlier observers, it was not seen *as a new planet*.¹²⁸

These considerations have clear implications for natural theology. William Paley’s classic *Natural Theology* (1802) worked so well partly because it resonated with the cultural assumptions and biases of his day;¹²⁹ today, it is generally regarded as discredited. Most people in western culture would now approach nature from the perspective of an “immanent frame,”¹³⁰ which inclines them not to expect the natural world to point beyond itself to a

¹²⁴ Lillard, “Ethnopsychologies”; Tomasello, *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition*, 13–55.

¹²⁵ Whewell, *The Philosophy of the Inductive Sciences*, vol. 1, p. 1. For comment, see Yeo, *Defining Science*, 9–13.

¹²⁶ Hanson, *Patterns of Discovery*.

¹²⁷ Adam, *Theoriebeladenheit und Objektivität*, 51–97.

¹²⁸ Forbes, “The Pre-Discovery Observations of Uranus.”

¹²⁹ Eddy, “The Rhetoric and Science of William Paley’s *Natural Theology*”; Topham, “Biology in the Service of Natural Theology”; Gates, *Kindred Nature*, 39–40.

¹³⁰ C. Taylor, “Geschlossene Weltstrukture in der Moderne.”

transcendent domain – an issue which we shall consider in greater detail later in this work (pp. 138–43).

Once it is appreciated that we approach the observation of the natural world from an theoretical perspective, the question of the role of communities in shaping our perceptions of reality becomes increasingly important – a matter to which we now turn.

3 *It fails to appreciate the importance of tradition-mediated rationalities.* In an important discussion, the American theologian John Cobb points out that any natural theology is freighted with precommitments.

Every natural theology reflects some fundamental perspective on the world. None is the pure result of neutral, objective reason. Every argument begins with premises, and the final premises cannot themselves be proved.¹³¹

Cobb himself offers a definition of both theology and natural theology which excludes any reference to God, which nevertheless recognizes that both arise within a community, and reflects its specific perspectives. Theology, he argues, may be understood as “any coherent statement about matters of ultimate concern that recognizes that the perspective by which it is governed is received from a community of faith.”¹³² Yet this informing and controlling “perspective” is specific to that tradition. If natural theology is understood as emerging from within such a community, it is already laden with presuppositions, whether these are explicitly acknowledged or implicitly assumed.

The force of Cobb’s point would be significantly weakened if the implicit assumptions of any natural theology were universal, shared by all peoples at all times. This, of course, was the implicit presupposition lying beneath and behind the Enlightenment “natural theology” project, which held that a universal human reason reflected on a universal nature, and reached conclusions that were universally binding. Yet this belief can no longer be maintained.

Human rationality is increasingly recognized to be shaped and delineated, at least in part, by cultural forces.¹³³ Recent studies have highlighted how the “voyager” literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries exposed a diversity in human patterns of reasoning that were difficult to reconcile with the notion of a “universal rationality.”¹³⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, one of the more perceptive critics of the flawed core assumptions of the “Age of Reason,” argues that the Enlightenment aspired to confront the world in

¹³¹ Cobb, *A Christian Natural Theology*, 175.

¹³² Cobb, *A Christian Natural Theology*, 165.

¹³³ See Nisbett, *The Geography of Thought*; Sauer-Thompson and Smith, *The Unreasonable Silence of the World*.

¹³⁴ Carey, *Locke, Shaftesbury, and Hutcheson*, 14–97.

an empirical, presuppositionless way, believing that it was possible to ground public debate in objectified standards of rational justification, using “principles undeniable by any rational person and therefore independent of all . . . social and cultural particularities.”¹³⁵ This project must now be recognized as having failed, in that it adopted “an ideal of rational justification which it has proved impossible to attain.”¹³⁶ In place of this deficient innovation, MacIntyre urged the recognition of the role of tradition and communities in rational discourse.¹³⁷ We have to recognize that “there is no standing ground, no place for enquiry, no way to engage in the practices of advancing, evaluating, accepting and rejecting reasoned argument apart from that which is provided by some particular tradition or other.”¹³⁸

A similar conclusion is reached by Michael Polanyi, as a result of his reflections on the scope and limits of the natural sciences. Scientific knowledge is not generated infallibly by a mechanical process, but involves our personal, provisional, and ultimately *fallible* judgment that certain beliefs are to be trusted.

We must now recognize belief once more as the source of all knowledge. Tacit assent and intellectual passions, the sharing of an idiom and of a cultural heritage, affiliation to a likeminded community: such are the impulses which shape our vision of the nature of things on which we rely for our mastery of things. No intelligence, however critical or original, can operate outside such a fiduciary framework.¹³⁹

Engagement with the natural world thus takes place from “somewhere,” reflecting a specific “point of view,” whether this is concealed, implied, or explicitly acknowledged. As we noted earlier, the seemingly neutral process of observation is shaped by covert fiduciary frameworks, which are linked to traditions of inquiry and reflection. There is no neutral standpoint, no universal viewpoint, from which a tradition-independent “natural theology” can be undertaken. Natural theology – unlike mathematics or logic – always arises within, and is informed by, a tradition of rationality.

4 *It is inattentive to the aesthetic, moral and intellectual ambiguity of nature.* Belief in a good, loving creator God could be defended through an

¹³⁵ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 6. For some of the cultural issues which confirm MacIntyre’s analysis, see Shore, *Culture in Mind*, 75–187.

¹³⁶ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 6. Note also his comment that “progress in rationality is achieved only from a point of view” (144).

¹³⁷ See especially Herdt, “Alasdair MacIntyre’s ‘Rationality of Traditions’ and Tradition-Transcendental Standards of Justification”; Porter, “Tradition in the Recent Work of Alasdair MacIntyre.”

¹³⁸ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 350.

¹³⁹ Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 266.

appeal to the attractive aspects of the natural world, such as beautiful sunsets or alpine meadows. Yet at times, this “scopic regime” seems indefensibly selective. What about nature’s more ugly and distressing aspects? What of a “rotten carcass of an elk full of maggots” in the midst of an otherwise beautiful landscape?¹⁴⁰

In part, the issue is that of taste. The idea that natural landscapes are beautiful is quite recent; earlier generations sought to transmute natural landscapes into constructed gardens, supplementing any natural virtues with those of structure, form, regularity, and symmetry, and filtering out less seemly aspects of the natural world – such as death, decay, and pain. A wild nature could be made to be beautiful; until quite recently, there were few who regarded it as possessing aesthetic merit without recourse to human intervention.¹⁴¹ The aesthetic complexity of nature, when set alongside the subjectivity of human judgment,¹⁴² makes any attempt to allow nature to *determine* its own interpretation highly problematic.

Nature is intellectually, morally, and aesthetically ambiguous – a point which is of such importance that we shall return to it at several points in this work. Nature does not coerce us evidentially into any specific “clear and distinct ideas” (Descartes) concerning its meaning or significance. It can be argued to be consistent with atheism, agnosticism, and theism – but entails none of them. The meaning of nature must be unlocked using a key which nature itself does not supply.

In his criticism of Paley’s *Natural Theology*, John Henry Newman argued that our epistemic situation was such that we had to approach the natural world in the light of an informing “mental map” derived from revelation, rather than try to derive a mental map from an amorphous and ambiguous natural world: “I believe in design because I believe in God; not in God because I see design.”¹⁴³

These four sets of considerations seriously, probably fatally, undermine any attempt to construct a “neutral” or “tradition-free” natural theology. We are socially embedded creatures, and cannot escape the particularities of our social and cultural contexts. Every natural theology is a “view from somewhere.”

¹⁴⁰ Saito, “The Aesthetics of Unscenic Nature.”

¹⁴¹ Parsons, *Aesthetics and Nature*, 6–11.

¹⁴² As noted by Ross, “Landscape Perception: Theory-Laden, Emotionally Resonant, Politically Correct.”

¹⁴³ Newman, letter to William Robert Brownlow, April 13, 1870; in *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, vol. 25, 97. For further comment on Newman and arguments from design, see Roberts, “Newman on the Argument from Design”; Mongrain, “The Eyes of Faith.”

This conclusion does not in itself justify a specifically Christian understanding of natural theology. It does, however, neutralize any concern that this might be tainted by its particularity by creating a context which is intellectually permissive of a specific way of seeing nature, based on a particular tradition of interpretation. A Christian natural theology represents a “view from somewhere”; yet since there is no allegedly objective “view from nowhere,” such as that optimistically yet mistakenly advocated during the “Age of Reason,” this observation cannot reasonably be considered to be subversive of this enterprise.

Modernity assumed that there was a universal rational framework which was authoritative in all matters of human reasoning. All other positions were dismissed as forms of “fideism,” based on local accounts of rationality which were held to be inferior to a universal rationality. From an Enlightenment perspective, describing a system to be “fideist” was framed as a legitimate criticism, even though this is now seen to be an “evasive manoeuvre”;¹⁴⁴ from a postmodern perspective, it is simply an acknowledgment of the epistemic situation of humanity, describing the predicament of every system of thought and value. There is no longer any “scandal of particularity” or objectionable “fideism” implicit within the notion of a “Christian natural theology.”¹⁴⁵ Like every other perspective on the world, it amounts to a view from somewhere (pp. 26–82).

Some might object, following Heidegger, that speaking of a “Christian natural theology” is as meaningless as speaking of a “Protestant mathematics.”¹⁴⁶ If natural theology is treated as analogous to mathematics, the point is fair. Yet the analogy is flawed. Mathematics and logic belong in a class of their own, transcending the boundaries of history and culture. As Stephen Toulmin pointed out, the attraction of pure mathematics to rationalist writers lay partly in the fact that it was seen to be the only intellectual activity whose problems and solutions are “above time.”¹⁴⁷ Everything else is embedded in an historical and cultural context, with indeterminate yet significant implications for their patterns of reasoning. This extends to the natural sciences, which deploy at least some culturally conditioned criteria of assessment to determine whether a theory “makes sense.”¹⁴⁸ To speak of a “Christian natural theology” is both to recognize this cultural

¹⁴⁴ M. M. Adams, *Christ and Horrors*, 5.

¹⁴⁵ For recent philosophical reflections on defensible approaches to fideism, see especially Evans, *Faith beyond Reason*, 1–54; J. Bishop, *Believing by Faith*, 1–25.

¹⁴⁶ Heidegger makes this observation in relation to “Catholic phenomenology”: see Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, 20.

¹⁴⁷ Toulmin, *The Uses of Argument*, 118.

¹⁴⁸ Dear, *The Intelligibility of Nature*, 194: The history of science shows “how ‘making sense’ depends on who is doing the judging, and in what cultural circumstances.”

embeddedness, and to be explicit about the perspective from which this project is being undertaken.

My concern in this work is not to demonstrate the truth of the Christian faith, but to explore what approaches to natural theology emerge from within the Christian narrative.¹⁴⁹ What ways of seeing reality arise from immersion in this narrative, and the process of reframing and reviewing that results from this? Stanley Hauerwas rightly argues that we can only see the world rightly “by being trained to see,” which results from the acquisition of “disciplined skills” which result from “initiation into a narrative.”¹⁵⁰ Yet this is true more widely; the “naïve eye” needs to be trained if it is to know what to look for, and what it might see.¹⁵¹

This approach to natural theology does not interpret it as an autonomous discipline or tradition of inquiry, but rather provides an informing context which both stimulates and directs it. From the standpoint of a Christian way of looking at things, natural theology is to be framed and pursued as a specific aspect of the theological enterprise as a whole.¹⁵²

So does this specifically Christian point of view allow us to develop a broader vision of natural theology, which holds together the multiple elements noted earlier in this chapter? Can a specifically Christian natural theology project create conceptual space for the classical notion of natural theology as “the enterprise of providing support for religious beliefs by starting from premises that neither are nor presuppose any religious beliefs?”¹⁵³ In the next section, we shall explore this important issue.

The Christian Accommodation of Classic Natural Theology

The grand themes of the Christian faith provide an interpretative framework by which nature may be seen in profound and significant ways. The web of Christian theology is the elixir, the philosopher’s stone, which turns the mundane into the epiphanic, the world of nature into the realm of God’s creation. Like a lens bringing a vast landscape into sharp focus, or a map helping us grasp the features of the terrain around us, the Christian vision of reality offers a new way of understanding, imagining, and behaving. It invites

¹⁴⁹ See also Kärkkäinen, *Trinity and Revelation*, 108–22.

¹⁵⁰ Hauerwas, “The Demands of a Truthful Story,” 65–6.

¹⁵¹ Varnelis, “The Education of the Innocent Eye.” The important study of de Bolla, *The Education of the Eye*, further develops these themes, especially in relation to the adoption of “regimes of looking” at visual objects.

¹⁵² Polkinghorne, “The New Natural Theology,” 42.

¹⁵³ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 289.

us to see the natural order, and ourselves within it, in a special way – a way that might be hinted at, but cannot be confirmed by, the natural order itself.

In a brief discussion of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, C. S. Lewis noted its powerful imaginative vision of a unified cosmic and world order. For Lewis, works such as the *Divine Comedy* reflected a "unity of the highest order," because they were able to cope with "the greatest diversity of subordinated detail."¹⁵⁴ So does the intellectual map that might be offered by the Christian tradition fit in the classical notion of natural theology as a religiously uncommitted reflection on the natural order – "the enterprise of providing support for religious beliefs by starting from premises that neither are nor presuppose any religious beliefs"? It is my belief that the Christian *imaginarium* – a notion we shall explore in more detail in the following chapter – offers an imaginative and cognitive framework which is able to *accommodate* and *position* this classic notion of natural theology. By this, I mean that it is able to show that this approach to natural theology can be seen to be part of a greater vision of reality, and that by understanding its position within that vision, its distinct strengths and weaknesses may be appreciated.

Analogies lie to hand within many disciplines. A good example can be found in narratology, an increasingly important player in the field of literary theory. What theoretical model can be developed to give coherence to this field, given that there are so many ways of understanding the concept of narrative itself, as well as its various themes – such as the place and role of the narrator in the narrated world?¹⁵⁵ Classical approaches to the theme have been displaced by alternatives, such as those influenced by Gérard Genette's notion of focalization, allowing a distinction to be drawn between the questions of "who sees?" and "who speaks?"¹⁵⁶ (The idea of a "natural narratology" has also been proposed,¹⁵⁷ with some interesting potential connections with at least some formulations of natural theology.) Post-classical narratology is characterized by "a plurality of models for narrative analysis"; yet, crucially, it incorporates classical narratology as one of its "moments."¹⁵⁸ The larger theory thus creates conceptual space for an earlier iteration or articulation, which is now seen to be one possibility among others, rather than a defining moment or normative formulation.

What is probably the best analogy for conceptualizing the multiple instantiations of natural theology *within a single narrative* comes from the development of scientific theories, specifically the all-important

¹⁵⁴ Lewis, *Allegory of Love*, 142. See also the points made by Claudel, "Introduction à un poème sur Dante."

¹⁵⁵ Nünning, "Narratology or Narratologies?"

¹⁵⁶ Pier, "Gérard Genette's Evolving Narrative Poetics."

¹⁵⁷ Fludernik, *Towards a "Natural" Narratology*, 1–67.

¹⁵⁸ Herman, "Introduction: Narratologies."

transition from classical Newtonian mechanics to relativistic quantum mechanics, which took place during the first few decades of the twentieth century.¹⁵⁹ In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, classical mechanics was seen as a self-sufficient area of theory, capable of accounting for what could be observed in nature. Based on the extensive earlier observational and analytical work of individuals such as Nicolas Copernicus (1473–1543), Johann Kepler (1571–1630), Galileo Galilei (1564–1642), and Isaac Newton (1643–1727), classical mechanics was widely regarded as a fundamental theory, capable of mathematical formalization.¹⁶⁰ It did not require to be positioned within a richer intellectual framework to be understood, but was seen as an autonomous and essentially complete theory.

Yet following the work of Max Planck (1858–1947), Albert Einstein (1879–1955), and Niels Bohr (1885–1962) in the early twentieth century, it was realized that there was a more fundamental theory, of which classical mechanics was a special, limiting case. As the theory of quantum mechanics developed in response to a growing body of evidence which older theoretical models simply could not accommodate, it became clear that relativistic quantum mechanics was the more fundamental theory, capable of far greater explanatory capacity. And, perhaps most importantly of all for our purposes, this more fundamental theory was able to account for both the successes and the failures of classical mechanics, by identifying its limited sphere of validity. The “correspondence principle,” first identified by Niels Bohr in 1923, sets out, clearly and elegantly, how quantum mechanics reduces to classical mechanics under certain limits.¹⁶¹

Neither relativistic quantum mechanics nor quantum field theory invalidated classical mechanics; they were able to position it within a wider and more comprehensive context, which indicated that it possessed validity in some circumstances – but not all. The classical model was not autonomous and complete in itself, but was a special case of a more comprehensive and complex theory.¹⁶² In effect, classical mechanics was seen as a special case of relativistic quantum mechanics, applying to large bodies moving at low speeds – in other words, the everyday world that we experience, and which classical mechanics mistakenly (though understandably) assumed to amount to the totality of things. The classical model was thus accounted for on the

¹⁵⁹ This topic is covered in standard textbooks, such as Tang, *Fundamentals of Quantum Mechanics*; Wachter, *Relativistic Quantum Mechanics*; Pilkuhn, *Relativistic Quantum Mechanics*. For some accessible reflections on the theological relevance of such developments, see Polkinghorne, *Quantum Physics and Theology*, 48–72.

¹⁶⁰ Illiffé, “Newton, God, and the Mathematics of the Two Books.”

¹⁶¹ For comment, see Pais, *Niels Bohr’s Times*, 192–6.

¹⁶² See, for example, Landsman, *Mathematical Topics between Classical and Quantum Mechanics*, 7–10; Gross, *Relativistic Quantum Mechanics and Field Theory*, 18–22.

basis of the greater explanatory capacity of the relativistic model, and the limits of their correspondence established. And, perhaps more importantly, the relativistic approach explained why the classic theory worked in certain situations, and not in others. Its validity was affirmed within certain limits.

We see here an important and well-understood insight from the world of scientific theory development: that a better theory is able to accommodate all the valid insights of an earlier theory, while at the same time expanding its horizons and identifying the basis of its plausibility.¹⁶³ A theory with considerable explanatory capacity is able to create conceptual space, valid under certain limiting yet significant conditions, for a theory which might, at first sight, appear to be quite independent, yet, on closer examination, turns out to be a special case of the higher-order theory. A robust Trinitarian theology of creation is able to create conceptual space for the traditional mode of natural theology, limited to a specific domain – in this case, the perception of someone outside the Christian faith, viewing nature without its distinctive conceptual framework.

To appreciate this point, consider James Barr's oft-cited description of natural theology:

Traditionally, “natural theology” has commonly meant something like this: that “by nature,” that is, *just by being human beings*, men and women have a certain degree of knowledge of God and awareness of him, or at least a capacity for such awareness; and this knowledge of awareness exists anterior to the special revelation of God made through Jesus Christ, through the Church, through the Bible.¹⁶⁴

It is important to note that Barr's definition of natural theology explicitly includes anthropological elements – that is to say, an understanding of what it means to “just” be a human being, along with any capacities or inclinations that this entails. When Barr speaks of thinking in certain ways “by nature,” he opens up major questions of the impact of nature and culture on our patterns of thinking, which invites critical exploration in terms of the impact of social and cultural embodiment on what is considered to be a “natural” line of thought and what is not.¹⁶⁵ For Barr's somewhat limited purposes, this is perhaps not necessary. For others, it cannot be overlooked, not least because

¹⁶³ For a discussion of the “progress as incorporation” dimension of the development of scientific theories, see Losee, *Theories of Scientific Progress*, 5–61.

¹⁶⁴ Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology*, 1 (my emphasis).

¹⁶⁵ See for example Kimmel, “Properties of Cultural Embodiment”; R. M. Frank, “Socio-cultural Situatedness”; Shore, *Culture in Mind*.

it subverts any notion of culturally universal patterns of thinking, save outside the specific realms of mathematics and logic.

As Emil Brunner rightly noted, any approach to natural theology ultimately rests upon a prior *theological* understanding of human nature.¹⁶⁶ For Brunner, a Christian understanding of human nature, especially the all-important insight that humanity bears the image of God, when set alongside the doctrine of God as creator (so that the created order bears a “permanent capacity for revelation”), creates the intellectual matrix from which the classic project of natural theology emerges. It is not enough to suggest that God is disclosed through nature; human beings must have the capacity to recognize this disclosure as such, whether through their natural capacities, or through the healing of those capacities through grace.¹⁶⁷ The doctrine of the *imago Dei* represents a theological formulation of the “preparedness” of humanity for divine disclosure.¹⁶⁸

A Christian theological framework – such as those articulated in different ways by Athanasius, Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, and Brunner – thus enables us to account for the existence of the natural human activity of seeking to find God within or through the world of nature.¹⁶⁹ For Athanasius, a Christian anthropology leads directly into a natural theology: God created humanity bearing the “image of God” in order that God might be known through the “works of creation.”¹⁷⁰ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* summarizes this consensus: “The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself. Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for.”¹⁷¹ For Bernard Lonergan, any account of nature which omits discussion of the phenomenon of human *attentiveness* toward nature is necessarily deficient.¹⁷² A Christian vision of reality provides an account of human capacities and inclinations on the one hand, and God’s relationship with the created order on the other, which make it *natural* for human beings to want to undertake natural theology, and achieve some degree of success in doing so.

¹⁶⁶ For what follows, see A. E. McGrath, *Emil Brunner*, 90–148.

¹⁶⁷ For this theme in Augustine, see Couenhoven, *Stricken by Sin, Cured by Christ*, 19–105.

¹⁶⁸ For the concept of “preparedness” in the cognitive science of religion, see Barrett and Richert, “Anthropomorphism or Preparedness?”

¹⁶⁹ See, for example, Feingold, *The Natural Desire to See God*; Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin’s Theology*; Sudduth, *The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology*, 60–5.

¹⁷⁰ Athanasius, *de Incarnatione*, 3.12. See further Bienert, “Zur Logos-Christologie des Athanasius von Alexandrien in *Contra Gentes* und *De Incarnatione*.”

¹⁷¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §27.

¹⁷² Lonergan, *Insight*, xvii–xxx. For further development of this point, see the “richer empiricism” proposed by Haught, *Is Nature Enough?*, 119–25.

Yet – and the importance of this point must not be understated – that success is limited. For Calvin, any knowledge of God derived from nature will be fragmentary and incomplete; the clearer way of seeing nature, provided through the biblical narrative, is required if the partial insights about divinity available within the created order are to be supplemented and integrated into a coherent whole.¹⁷³ Humanity thus – to draw on the analysis in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* – “stands in need of being enlightened by God’s revelation” to grasp the true significance of nature.¹⁷⁴ Just as relativistic quantum mechanics helped clarify the boundaries of classical mechanics, so Christian theology clarifies the limits of a classic natural theology, helping us grasp its potential for apologetics and other forms of cultural engagement, while appreciating its limits as a resource for systematic theology.

Most importantly, a Christian approach offers a framework which enables the proposed “thick” description of natural theology to be seen as a coherent intellectual option.¹⁷⁵ It proposes a web of interconnected conceptualities – including specific notions of creation, human nature, and divine activity and presence – which allows the six broad approaches noted in this chapter to be seen as intrinsically coherent and interrelated, rather than as a artificially constructed and superficially colligative “meta-project” which amounts to little more than an opportunistic aggregation of essentially disparate and possibly disconnected possibilities.¹⁷⁶

In this chapter, we have set out the case for a Christian – as opposed to a generic – natural theology. Where some hold that “natural theology” is an attempt to articulate the religious dimension of common human experience independently of special revelation and to relate this experience to the received tradition,¹⁷⁷ I take the view that it is an attempt to interpret and appreciate common human experience of the natural world – including ourselves as observers of nature and participants within nature – in the light of the received Christian tradition. In the following chapter, we shall develop this approach further, exploring the notion of a Christian *imaginarium* and considering its outcomes.

¹⁷³ Husbands, “Calvin on the Revelation of God in Creation and Scripture.” For related concerns about such a fragmentary knowledge in Spinoza, see den Uyl, *God, Man, and Well-Being*, 107–10.

¹⁷⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §38.

¹⁷⁵ A. E. McGrath, *The Open Secret*, 171–216.

¹⁷⁶ On these issues, see A. N. Williams, *The Architecture of Theology*, 23–78.

¹⁷⁷ J. J. Collins, “The Biblical Precedent for Natural Theology.”