The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology

Michael Sudduth

THE REFORMED OBJECTION
TO NATURAL THEOLOGY

Michael Sudduth examines three prominent objections to natural theology that have emerged in the Reformed streams of the Protestant theological tradition: objections from the immediacy of our knowledge of God, the noetic effects of sin, and the logic of theistic arguments. Distinguishing between the project of natural theology and particular models of natural theology, Sudduth argues that none of the main Reformed objections is successful as an objection to the project of natural theology itself. One particular model of natural theology – the dogmatic model – is best suited to handle Reformed concerns over natural theology. According to this model, rational theistic arguments represent the reflective reconstruction of the natural knowledge of God by the Christian in the context of dogmatic theology.

Informed by both contemporary religious epistemology and the history of Protestant philosophical theology, Sudduth's examination illuminates the complex nature of the project of natural theology and its place in the Reformed tradition.

ASHGATE PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION SERIES

Series Editors

Paul Helm, King's College, University of London, UK
Linda Zagzebski, University of Oklahoma, USA

The *Ashgate Philosophy of Religion* series spans many critical debates, and presents new directions and new perspectives in contemporary research and study within the philosophy of religion. This series presents books by leading international scholars in the field, providing a platform for their own particular research focus to be presented within a wider contextual framework. Offering accessible, stimulating new contributions to each topic, this series will prove of particular value and interest to academics, graduate, postgraduate and upper-level undergraduate readers world-wide focusing on philosophy, religious studies and theology, sociology or other related fields.

Titles in the series include:

The Sense of Creation
Experience and the God Beyond
Patrick Masterson

Problems of Evil and the Power of God
James A. Keller

Religion and Morality
William J. Wainwright

God and the Nature of Time
Garrett J. DeWeese

Rationality and Religious Theism
Joshua L. Golding

God and Realism
Peter Byrne

Religious Diversity
A Philosophical Assessment
David Basinger

The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology

MICHAEL SUDDUTH
San Francisco State University, USA

ASHGATE

For Richard Swinburne

This page has been left blank intentionally

Contents

This page has been left blank intentionally

Preface

The foundations of the present book were laid in my 1996 D.Phil. dissertation at the University of Oxford in which I explored the prospects for the compatibility of two very different approaches to the knowledge of God, one that regards the knowledge of God as immediate or intuitive and a contrasting viewpoint that sees the knowledge of God as a matter of logical inference or argument. Although both viewpoints have an old and interesting pedigree, in contemporary philosophy of religion they have crystallized into the dichotomy between 'Reformed epistemology,' represented by thinkers such as Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and William Alston, and 'evidentialism,' represented by thinkers such as Richard Swinburne, Anthony Kenny, Stewart Goetz and Stephen Wykstra. My doctoral thesis attempted to synthesize the Reformed epistemology of Alvin Plantinga and features of the evidentialist tradition with its emphasis on natural theology—rational arguments for the existence and nature of God.

It was only natural that this early project in the epistemology of religious belief should evolve into an examination of the place of natural theology in the Reformed stream of the Protestant theological tradition—the focus of the present book. First, Plantinga and Wolterstorff have each contended that the central insights of 'Reformed epistemology' may be found in the writings of prominent Reformed theologians such as Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, and John Calvin, a connection that is responsible for the arguably infelicitous designation 'Reformed epistemology.' Secondly, Reformed thinkers have long held that the natural knowledge of God is both innate, the product of a natural mental disposition, and acquired, a matter of inference from the existence, beauty, and order exhibited in the physical world. Historically, the reception of natural theology in the Reformed tradition (an underemphasized theme in the contemporary literature) has been grounded in this duplex conception of the natural knowledge of God. Hence the kind of synthesis I aimed at demonstrating in my dissertation is part of Reformed philosophical theology itself.

However, there is also in the Reformed tradition an interesting confluence of theological and philosophical objections to natural theology that renders this synthesis and the corresponding stance on natural theology problematic. An examination of these objections provides a context in which we can carefully evaluate the relationship between natural theology and the internal logic of Reformed thought. In addition to clarifying the place of natural theology in Reformed theology, such an examination will provide a range of conceptual distinctions concerning natural theology that will be of broader interest to the philosophy of religion. Theological objections to natural theology, for example, have not received nearly as much treatment in the literature as purely philosophical

objections. While there has been a vast amount of literature analyzing the cogency of various theistic arguments, there have been relatively fewer contributions to meta-level issues such as the function of such arguments. Theological objections to natural theology and the function of theistic arguments are both prominent themes in the present work.

The arguments developed in the course of the work owe much to important predecessors. Richard Swinburne's work in the area of natural theology and Alvin Plantinga's work in religious epistemology are perhaps the two most important intellectual influences that have inspired and shaped this work. (I have of course borrowed the title of the book from Plantinga's well-known 1980 paper by the same title.) Of considerable importance to the epistemological tier of the book is my appeal to 'multiple grounds' for theistic belief, a maneuver that allows natural theology to positively interface with immediate grounds for belief in God. This represents a development of insights articulated by William Alston in his 1991 book *Perceiving God*. In addition to Swinburne, my positive treatment of natural theology draws heavily on nineteenth-century Calvinists such as James Henry Thornwell, Charles Hodge, William Shedd, and Augustus Strong. My emphasis on the 'dogmatic' conception of natural theology owes much to early Protestant scholastic theologians, as well as Dutch neo-Calvinists such as Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck. In this context it would be important to mention Richard Muller's multi-volume *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725* and Rev. John Platt's *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism: Arguments for the Existence of God in Dutch Theology, 1575–1650*. Both works paved the way for the historical dimensions to this book, specifically my emphasis on the Reformed endorsement of natural theology.

<div align="right">
Michael Sudduth
San Francisco, California
</div>

Acknowledgements

This page has been left blank intentionally

Introduction

In the broad sense 'natural theology' refers to what can be known or rationally believed about the existence and nature of God on the basis of human reason or our natural cognitive faculties. Natural theology in this sense is a way of designating 'natural knowledge of God,' which in the western religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is typically contrasted with the knowledge of God derived from sacred scripture or divine revelation. Some philosophers and theologians have regarded the natural knowledge of God as an innate, intuitive, or experiential knowledge—ways of indicating that the idea of God is natural to the human mind or arises immediately, without any conscious process of reasoning. The more dominant tendency, though, has been to view the natural knowledge of God as something acquired by way of logical inference from other truths naturally knowable by the human mind. For this reason natural theology is more narrowly and perhaps more commonly identified with the project of developing arguments for God's existence, so-called 'theistic arguments.' In this sense natural theology attempts to reason to truths about God solely from what we know by way of sense perception, induction, intuition, and other natural cognitive processes.

There have been two general kinds of criticisms of the project of developing rational arguments for the existence and nature of God. There are distinctly *philosophical* criticisms stemming from fairly general considerations about the nature and limits of human cognition and language, logical constraints on proofs, and the nature of causation.[1] The upshot of such criticisms is that we cannot rationally infer anything about the existence or nature of God as 'God' has been defined in the western religious traditions, roughly, as an immaterial, eternal, and omnipresent personal being, infinite in power, goodness, and knowledge, and the creator and sustainer of the universe. There are also *theological* objections to natural theology stemming from the internal logic of religious traditions and their scriptural teachings. In the Christian tradition, for example, theistic arguments have been criticized on various theological grounds: the transcendent nature of God, the debilitating effects of sin on human reason, the experiential nature of

---

[1]   David Hume (1711–1776) and Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) both relied on principles that led to skepticism about reaching rationally justified conclusions about things beyond immediate experience. They each held that we are only justified in postulating observable processes or entities as the causal explanation of observable events. Such presuppositions clearly undermine many of the arguments of natural theology, which postulate God—a being who is not observable—as the causal explanation of observable events. Not surprisingly, Hume and Kant are well known for their philosophical opposition to natural theology.

religious faith and devotion, and the disparity between the God of philosophical proofs and the God revealed in Scripture who is the object of religious worship.

Philosophical and theological objections to natural theology have been fairly prominent in Protestant Christianity. Martin Luther, John Calvin, Søren Kierkegaard, and Karl Barth are regularly regarded as exemplars of Protestant anxieties over natural theology.[2] Some of the more forceful criticisms of natural theology have arisen in the Reformed streams of Protestantism. 'Reformed' here designates the tradition of Christian theology and theological reflection originating in the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century and historically articulated in Calvinistic documents such as the *Belgic Confession* (1561), *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563), *Canons of Dort* (1618–1619), and *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646). In addition to Luther and Calvin, representatives of the tradition include Philip Melanchthon, Peter Martyr Vermigli, Francis Turretin, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Hodge, B.B. Warfield, Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, and Louis Berkhof. Reformed thinkers represent various Protestant denominations, including Lutheran, Presbyterian, Dutch Reformed, Reformed Episcopal, and Protestant Reformed, as well as Congregationalists, Methodists, and Baptists who adhere to the Reformation or Calvinistic view of human nature and salvation.[3]

As a first approximation, the present book is about criticisms of natural theology that have emerged in the Reformed theological tradition. Since the resurrection of philosophy of religion in Anglo-American philosophy during the last fifty years, there has been a plethora of literature on natural theology. Most of this literature has concentrated on the philosophical axis of the dialogue concerning natural theology, largely ignoring religious objections to natural theology and their interface with more philosophically oriented objections.[4] The present book aims

---

[2]   Religious opposition to theistic arguments has not been restricted to the Protestant tradition, nor is it unique to modernity. St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) addressed religious objections to natural theology in his *Summa theologiae* (Ia.2.1–2) and *Summa contra gentiles* (I.10–12). For a discussion on modern opposition to natural theology in the Catholic tradition, see R. Garrigou-Lagrange, *God: His Existence and His Nature* (2 vols, London: B. Herder, 1949), vol. 1, chapter 1.

[3]   The present work will include thinkers representative of historic Reformed orthodoxy (as defined by the tradition's important confessional statements through the seventeenth century), as well as thinkers who deviate in various ways from historic Reformed orthodoxy but remain in dialogue with the tradition. On the difficulties involved in defining the Reformed tradition and setting its doctrinal parameters, see *Reformed Theology in America*, ed. David F. Wells (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1997), pp. 1–11.

[4]   Some notable exceptions include John Hick, *Arguments for the Existence of God* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), chapter 7; C. Stephen Evans, "Apologetics in a New Key: Relieving Protestant Anxieties over Natural Theology" in *The Logic of Rational Theism: Exploratory Essays*, ed. Mark McLeod and William Lane Craig (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen Press, 1990), pp. 65–75; Stephen Cahn, "The Irrelevance to Religion of Philosophical Proofs for the Existence of God," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 6:2 (1969): 170–2; John Baillie, "The Irrelevance of Proofs from the Biblical Point of View" in

to fill an important lacuna in the current literature. There is within the Reformed streams of Protestantism an interesting, and I think important, confluence of philosophical and theological objections to natural theology. Engaging these objections will bring greater clarity to both the nature of the project of natural theology itself and its proper place within Reformed theology.

Characterizing the Reformed Objection to Natural Theology

In the twentieth century the idea of Reformed opposition to natural theology has been characterized in two different ways. On the one hand, several prominent contemporary philosophers of religion have maintained that the dominant attitude of theologians within the Reformed tradition, stretching back to the Reformation, has been a negative one with respect to natural theology. On this view, most Reformed thinkers have allegedly either rejected natural theology altogether or at least not embraced it with much enthusiasm due to their suspicions about its propriety or usefulness.[5] On the other hand, some Protestant historians and theologians have argued that the endorsement of natural theology in the Reformed tradition represents a departure from Reformation theology. This view typically concedes the widespread acceptance of natural theology by thinkers within the tradition but goes on to contend that this acceptance, entering the tradition during the period of Protestant scholasticism, is at odds with the internal logic of Reformation theology.[6]

There is no doubt that quite a few prominent thinkers in the Reformed tradition have been highly critical of natural theology. This is particularly true of representatives of Reformed orthodoxy in the Dutch neo-Calvinist tradition originating with Abraham Kuyper in the Netherlands in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Herman Bavinck, Herman Dooyeweerd, and G.H. Kersten, for example, provide highly negative evaluations of natural theology. Objections to natural theology among conservative theologians are also present in twentieth-

---

The Existence of God, ed. John Hick (New York: Macmillan, 1964), pp. 204–10; Douglas Groothuis, "Proofs, Pride, and Incarnation: Is Natural Theology Theologically Taboo?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 38 (1995): 67–77, and "Do Theistic Proofs Prove the Wrong God?" *Christian Scholar's Review* 29 (1999): 247–60.

[5] Alvin Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 54 (1980): 49–63, and Nicholas Wolterstorff, "The Reformed Tradition" in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Philip Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 165–70.

[6] Paul Althaus, *Die Prinzipien, der deutschen reformierten Dogmatik in Zeitalter der aristotelischen Scholastik* (Leipzig: Deichert, 1914), pp. 73–95; Ernst Bizer, *Frühorthodoxie und Rationalismus* (Zurich: EVZ Verlag, 1963), pp. 32–50; Otto Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics*, trans. Darrell Guder (2 vols, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981–1982); Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957), vol. II.1, pp. 127–8.

century French and American Calvinism, for example in theologians such as Auguste Lecerf, and Herman Hoeksema, and apologists Cornelius Van Til and Gordon Clark. Opposition to natural theology is even more extreme if we broaden the Reformed tradition to include twentieth-century thinkers like G.C. Berkouwer, John Baillie, and Karl Barth. So there have been criticisms of natural theology *in* the Reformed tradition, and these criticisms have often dominated discussions of natural theology among Reformed thinkers in the twentieth century. It is also fair to say that natural theology in late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century dogmatic systems marks an important point of discontinuity with the theology of the Reformers. However, while there are elements of truth in both of these accounts of the genesis and character of Reformed objections to natural theology, neither viewpoint is plausible when viewed against the actual historical record. The first two chapters of this book are designed in part to rebut these two representations of Reformed objections to natural theology. In Chapter 1, I outline the emergence and development of the Reformed endorsement of natural theology, from the period of the Protestant Reformation to the end of the nineteenth century. I argue that there is a historically continuous commitment in the Reformed tradition to both the natural knowledge of God and the project of developing theistic arguments. In Chapter 2, I address the shortcomings of the two viewpoints above in the light of the historical outline.

Two important conceptual distinctions emerge from the historical discussion that will be essential to the subsequent analysis of Reformed objections to natural theology.

First, there is a distinction between natural theology as natural *knowledge* of God and natural theology as rational *proofs* or *arguments* for the existence and nature of God. Beginning in Chapter 2, I will designate the former natural theology α and the latter natural theology β. Reformed thinkers have traditionally distinguished between the knowledge of God engendered by philosophical argument and the knowledge of God that arises spontaneously in the human mind with our experience of the world. Although reasoning may be *a* source of natural knowledge of God, the natural knowledge of God typically does not first arise as the result of any conscious process of reasoning. From this viewpoint, natural theology β involves the conceptual clarification and reflective development of natural theology α, a kind of formalization of an innate or spontaneously acquired knowledge of God. Hence, we can think of natural theology β as grounded in natural theology α. Moreover, to the extent that Scripture itself affirms natural theology α (a traditional interpretation of Romans 1:19–20), we could view natural theology β as a clarification, development, and defense of a datum of Scripture. In this way, the project of natural theology β would have biblical warrant, in much the same way that the systematic development of other biblical doctrines is warranted.

Secondly, while there is consensus in the Reformed tradition on the propriety of the project of developing theistic arguments, there is a diversity of views on the *function* of theistic arguments. Failure to grasp this point has hampered prior

attempts at understanding the nature and ramifications of Reformed criticisms of natural theology β. In Chapter 2, I outline several models of natural theology β contained in the historical account of Chapter 1. By 'models' of natural theology β, I primarily mean ways of thinking about the *function* of theistic arguments, what they are supposed to accomplish, how they relate to the larger context of biblical theology, and so forth. The functional diversity of theistic arguments is of considerable importance, especially when assessing Reformed objections to natural theology β. It is also a motif that has been largely ignored by critics of natural theology β in the tradition. While I provide a taxonomy of several models of natural theology β, one of the important distinctions is between models of natural theology β that situate theistic arguments *within* dogmatic theology and those models of natural theology β that see theistic arguments as something external to dogmatic theology, a purely rational prolegomenon to or rational foundation for dogmatic theology. One of the important themes to be developed in this book is natural theology β as an activity carried out by the Christian as part of the discourse of dogmatic theology.

Evaluating Reformed Objections to Natural Theology

While the first two chapters of this book are concerned with clarifying and supporting a historical thesis concerning the *de facto* Reformed endorsement of natural theology α and β, the remaining part of this book is concerned with *defending* the normative status of this Reformed endorsement of natural theology α and β. This book will be largely concerned with evaluating the nature and force of a variety of philosophical and theological objections to natural theology β proposed by Reformed thinkers.

In the course of the work I will examine three kinds of Reformed objections to natural theology β. In Chapters 3 through 5, I consider objections to natural theology β from the alleged innate or immediate character of the natural knowledge of God. These arguments attempt to sever the connection between natural theology α and natural theology β. In Chapters 6 and 7, I examine objections to natural theology β based on Reformed anthropology; specifically, alleged epistemic implications of the Reformed doctrine of the total depravity of human nature. These arguments attempt to undermine natural theology β by denying or significantly restricting natural theology α. As a further response to such arguments, Chapter 8 explores the nature and plausibility of Christian natural theology; roughly, natural theology β as the rational reconstruction by the Christian of what can in principle be known about God from the order of nature. Chapters 9 through 11 evaluate objections to natural theology β from their alleged deficiencies as pieces of logical argumentation, that is, the failure of the arguments to prove, demonstrate, or rationally support their conclusions about the existence and nature of God. While theological considerations play a role in all three objections, they are most conspicuous in the

second objection, depending as it does on the Reformed doctrine of sin. The first and third objections are predominately philosophical in character.

Why these three objections? There are certainly other kinds of Reformed objections to natural theology β, some of which I will note as occasion arises. The above three objections, though, are the more frequently encountered criticisms in the literature, and at least two of the objections are of interest outside the context of Reformed theology. The logic of theistic arguments and the alleged immediacy of the knowledge of God have both been prominent topics in general philosophy of religion since the second half of the twentieth century. This gives the discussion broad appeal. More importantly, as I will argue, other sorts of Reformed objections to natural theology β often depend on at least one of the three above objections, so the latter are really the more fundamental sorts of criticisms. Finally, as I will show in the course of this book, engaging these particular objections illuminates different ways of construing the function of theistic arguments and thereby makes an important contribution to our understanding of the project of natural theology.

The central question of this book is whether any of the three Reformed objections to natural theology β is a *good* objection to natural theology β. However, given the diversity of Reformed models of natural theology β articulated in Chapter 2, it will be important to distinguish between an objection to some particular model(s) of natural theology β and an objection to the project of natural theology β itself. I will refer to the former sort of objection as a *model-specific* objection and the latter as a *project objection*. Reformed theologians are not always clear on this distinction, and this lack of clarity often leads Reformed critics of natural theology β to overstate the force of their criticisms. In asking whether any of the objections to natural theology β to be considered in this book is a good objection to natural theology β, I will be primarily interested in determining whether any of the objections, severally or jointly, constitutes a good project objection to natural theology β.

I will show that the most straightforward project objection to natural theology β is one that challenges the epistemic efficacy of theistic arguments, that is, that raises doubt about whether theistic arguments can be a source of knowledge of God or at least make a contribution to knowledge of God by conferring some positive epistemic status on theistic belief (for example, warrant, justification). Each of the models of natural theology β I discuss entails that theistic arguments are epistemically efficacious, and so arguments that challenge this constitute a fairly sweeping objection to natural theology β. However, my central thesis is that *none of the objections considered in the course of this book constitutes a good project objection to natural theology β*. The three objections I consider either fail to be project objections or are project objections but not good ones. At any rate, if the objections are so developed as to constitute project objections, they are either philosophically implausible or not an implication of Reformed theology. Either way, the objections fail to be both good and intrinsic to the logic of Reformed theology.

PART I
Natural Theology in the Reformed Tradition

This page has been left blank intentionally

Chapter 1

The Emergence and Evolution of the Reformed Endorsement of Natural Theology

Contrary to a widely held opinion in contemporary philosophy of religion, the Reformed theological tradition exhibits a deeply entrenched and historically continuous endorsement of natural theology. One of the contentions of the present work is that objections to natural theology, where they do arise within the tradition, are best understood in the light of the tradition's own positive, though complex, stance toward natural theology. So in preparation for the examination of Reformed objections to natural theology, in this chapter I provide an account of the emergence and development of the Reformed endorsement of natural theology from the period of the Reformation to the end of the nineteenth century.

The Reformation Period (1520–1564)[1]

> That which may be known of God is manifest in them, for God hath shown it unto them, for the invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and godhead, so that they are without excuse. (Romans 1:19–20)

First Generation Reformers: Martin Luther (1483–1546), Huldreich Zwingli (1484–1531), and Martin Bucer (1491–1551)

In his lectures on Romans 1:19–21 (given in 1515 at the University of Wittenberg, Germany), Martin Luther maintained that the Apostle Paul affirmed that all people have some knowledge of God. Idolatry and false religion show this, for it is evident that all who worship idols "have a knowledge of divinity in their hearts."[2] False religion presupposes some element of truth, which has been obscured and perverted. Luther says: "Thus they knew that the nature of divinity, or of God, is that He is powerful, invisible, just, immortal, and good. They knew the invisible

---

[1]   For an extensive account of natural theology in the Reformation period, see Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725* (4 vols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2003), vol. 1, chapter 6; vol. 3, chapters 3 and 4.

[2]   Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans: Glosses and Scholia* in *Luther's Works*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), vol. 25, p. 157.

things of God, His eternal power and Godhead."[3] While the pagans knew that there is *some* being who has these qualities, they incorrectly identified the bearer of these attributes and so falsely concluded that some being of their own imagination was God. Moreover, the general knowledge of God is a "natural knowledge of God," because the invisible things of God "are recognized in a natural way from their effects."[4] Luther illustrates the inference:

> One can see how one man helps another, one animal another, yes, how one thing helps and assists another. At all times the higher and the more privileged one helps or suppresses the lower and less privileged one. Therefore, there must be that in the universe which is above all and helps all.[5]

While the works of creation and providence manifest the attributes of God so that no person can plead ignorance of God, this is not a saving knowledge of God. In his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* (1535), Luther makes this clear by distinguishing between general knowledge of God and true knowledge of God:

> All men have the general knowledge, namely that God is, that He has created heaven and earth, that He is just, that He punishes the wicked, etc. But what God thinks of us, what he wants to give and to do to deliver us from sin and death and to save us—which is particular and the true knowledge of God—this men do not know.[6]

Huldreich Zwingli, Reformer at Zurich, concurred with Luther about a universal knowledge of God in fallen persons on the basis of Romans 1:19–20. In his *Commentary on True and False Religion* (1525) he affirmed that all people have some knowledge of the existence of God, though they fail to know his character and thus fail to know Him or worship Him as they ought. Zwingli emphasized, though, that this universal knowledge of God's existence comes from God Himself. It is not inherent in man or the product of his own unaided reasoning, "for *God* has revealed it unto them."[7] The tendency toward philosophical argument is more apparent in Zwingli's *Providence of God* (1530), where he provides philosophical descriptions of the nature of God (for example, *summum bonum*, *primus motor*) and develops an account of divine providence by relying largely on logical arguments,

---

[3]   Ibid.

[4]   Ibid., p. 156.

[5]   Ibid., p. 158.

[6]   Luther, *Commentary on Galatians* in *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and H.T. Lehman (St. Louis, MO: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955–1976), vol. 26, p. 399.

[7]   Huldreich Zwingli, *Commentary on True and False Religion*, ed. Samuel Macauley Jackson and Clarence Nevin Heller (Durham, NC: The Labyrinth Press, 1981), pp. 58–75.

typically citing Scripture at the conclusion of such arguments to confirm truths first established by philosophical argument.

Martin Bucer's *Commentary on Romans* (1536) provided a detailed exposition of the natural knowledge of God that relied heavily on Cicero's *De natura deorum*, specifically its Stoic epistemology and natural theology. Like Zwingli, Bucer begins by noting, "God gives knowledge of himself to all men,"[8] as indicated by the biblical phrase, "God has revealed it to them." However, Bucer utilizes Stoic insights to explicate this. Appealing to the character Balbus in Cicero's *De natura deorum*, Bucer says there is a certain idea or conception of God (*notio dei*) impressed and fixed in the minds of all people, namely that the divinity has power over all things and is the highest good. That there is a God is innate, engraved on the soul and incapable of being expunged.[9] Bucer says that the invisible attributes of God, signified by the locution "eternal power and Godhead," are clearly or certainly known, being gathered together from the visible world by the reasoning of the mind (*cogitatione mentis*). Thus the providential power and divinity of God can be inferred from the structure of the world (*machina mundi*), not just the existence of things but their magnitude, properties, actions, movement, and position.[10] Bucer illustrates this with another appeal to Balbus, according to whom the ideas of the gods (*notiones deorum*) are formed in the mind by means of the phenomena of order in the cosmos, successful divination, divine blessings, and awe-inspiring natural events.

Philip Melanchthon (1497–1560)

While originally pessimistic about the extent to which human reason could know truth about God, Philip Melanchthon later changed his position and affirmed a natural knowledge of God.[11] This change is first evident in the 1532 edition of his *Commentary on Romans*. Commenting on Romans 1:20, Melanchthon says, "For in some manner reason naturally understands and possesses signs [*signa*] and arguments [*argumenta*] collected from God's works in the whole natural order. … Hence we infer [*ratiocinamur*] the existence of God, by whom the natural order was founded."[12] What can be known about God in this manner is His *aeterna potentia*

---

8   Martin Bucer, *Metaphrases et enarrationes perpetvae Epistolarum D. Pauli Apostoli* (Basileae, 1562), 56f.

9   Ibid., 57b.

10   Ibid., 57c–d.

11   See John Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism: the Arguments for the Existence of God in Dutch Theology, 1575–1650* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1982), chapter 2, and T.H.L. Parker, *Commentaries on the Epistle to the Romans: 1532–1542* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986), pp. 1–7, 84–99.

12   Philip Melanchthon, *Römerbrief – Kommentar* 1532, ed. G. Ebeling and R. Schäfer, in Robert Stupperich (ed.) *Melanchthons Werke in Auswahl* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1965), vol. 5, p. 73. Translation by Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism*, p. 18.

and *divinitas*, which Melanchthon understood to refer to the oneness, eternity, wisdom, goodness, righteousness, and infinite creating and sustaining power of God.[13] While Melanchthon speaks of this knowledge as inferential, the ability to draw such inferences depends on the presence of a preconception (*prolepsis*) of God naturally implanted in the hearts of all people by God Himself.[14]

In the 1540 edition of the *Commentary on Romans*, Melanchthon provides nine theistic arguments designed to confirm and explicate the biblical claim that God can be known from the things He has made. While some of these arguments were briefly referenced in the 1532 edition—as testimonies (*testimonia*) to the existence and nature of God—here for the first time the arguments are stated and sequentially organized under their own distinct heading as one of Melanchthon's five *propositiones* for Romans chapter one. Human rationality, the distinction between things honorable and dishonorable, social and political order, correct prophetic utterances of future events, and heroic impulses that transcend human nature each implies the existence of a superior mind or intelligence. The punishment of bad people and despotic governments indicates the providential control of some divine being over human life and political institutions. Moreover, God's existence is evident since there is knowledge of God naturally implanted in the human mind.

Finally, Melanchthon includes two other arguments, one from cosmological order and another from the series of cause and effect in nature. The latter is stated as follows:

> From the chain of causes. Causes are ordered in nature, so that it is necessary to go back to one first cause which is not set in motion from elsewhere, but moves the others. If it is the first, it is necessary that it have the power to move itself; therefore it is of infinite power. And it is necessary that there be a first one, for otherwise there would be no succession of causes if they were scattered endlessly.[15]

Consistent with Melanchthon's humanistic background, most of his arguments are rhetorical rather than logically demonstrative.[16] Only the argument from the "chain of causes" in nature resembles the demonstrative arguments of the

---

[13] Melanchthon, *Römerbrief – Kommentar* 1532, pp. 71–2; see also Parker, *Commentaries*, pp. 97–8.

[14] Melanchthon, *Römerbrief – Kommentar* 1532, pp. 71–2.

[15] Melanchthon, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. Fred Kramer (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), pp. 78–9.

[16] Rhetorical arguments are aimed at *persuasion* rather than *logical demonstration*, often employing various unstated premises that would be assumed by the audience. For example, some of Melanchthon's arguments rely on the unstated premise 'either phenomenon ϕ came about by chance or ϕ was caused by God.' See also Cicero, *De natura deorum*, II.5, 16, 34–5. On the distinction between demonstrative and rhetorical proofs

medieval scholastics. The arguments tend to take phenomena of human experience and history as their starting points, as opposed to general physical facts about the universe such as order and cause and effect. As we saw in Bucer, there is a clear dependence on Cicero's *De natura deorum*, where we find the arguments from correct prophetic utterances, the universal idea of God, the utility of things for human and animal life, and the arrangement, beauty, and regular motion of the stars and planets.[17] Hence Melanchthon's arguments are for the most part not the causal arguments encountered in Thomas Aquinas and the medieval scholastic tradition. Melanchthon himself notes the superiority of the former over purely causal arguments, since the latter only prove that God is creator, whereas the former reveal the nature of God and thereby reinforce the ethical emphasis that more generally characterizes Melanchthon's thought with its emphasis on divine law.

In the *Commentary on Romans* theistic arguments function as an elaboration and development of Romans 1:19–20. However, their usefulness for the Christian is at least suggested, for "it is useful for strengthening good opinions to hold fast to the true reasoning fixed in the mind which testify that God is the founder and preserver of things."[18] The point is more dramatically made in the 1535 edition of the *Loci communes*, where the arguments are presented under the heading *De creatione*, a discussion of creation that draws heavily on Scripture and is clearly directed to Christian meditation:

> After the mind has been confirmed in the true and right opinion of God and of creation by the Word of God itself, it is then both useful and pleasant to seek out also the vestiges of God in nature and to collect the arguments [*rationes*] which testify there is a God.[19]

He then clarifies the nature of this utility: "Now works must be presented to the faithful, first so that they may again increase that knowledge of God by God's Word, and next that they may make such knowledge brighter with the added signs which are impressed on nature."[20] So Melanchthon places an emphasis on theistic arguments as a means of strengthening and deepening the Christian's knowledge of God.

---

among Reformed theologians, see Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, pp. 173–4, 178–9, 185–7.

[17] Cicero, *De natura deorum*, II.1–5.

[18] Melanchthon, *Commentary on Romans*, p. 77.

[19] Melanchthon, *Opera quae supersunt omnia*, *Corpus Reformatorum*, ed. C.B. Bretschneider and E.H. Bindweil (28 vols, Halle and Brunswick, 1834–1960), vol. 21, col. 369. Translation by Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism*, p. 20.

[20] Ibid., col. 370. Translation by Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism*, p. 20.

Second Generation Reformers: Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575),
Wolfgang Musculus (1497–1563), Andreas Hyperius (1511–1564), and
Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499–1562)

Heinrich Bullinger, Zwingli's successor at Zurich, reproduces two of the important epistemological insights of Bucer and Melanchthon. First, he affirms the innate character of the natural knowledge of God on the basis of Romans 2: "Wherefore the law of nature [is so called] … because God hath imprinted or engraven in our minds some knowledge, and certain general principles of religion, justice, and goodness, which, because they be grafted in us and born together with us, do therefore seem to be naturally in us."[21] Secondly, following Romans 1:19–20, Bullinger says that God is known by his works:

> Lo, the power and Godhead of God are these invisible things of God; and yet they are understood by the consideration of God's works; therefore even God himself is known by the works of God … heaven and earth, and all that is therein declare to us, and set as it were before our eyes, an evident argument that God, as he is most wise, is also most mighty, wonderful, and infinite majesty, of an incomprehensible glory, most just, most gracious, and most excellent.[22]

Wolfgang Musculus began his *Loci communes theologiae sacrae* (1560) with the *locus de Deo*, which treats four questions: whether there be a God, who God is, what God is, and of what quality God is. Musculus notes that there would be no cause to raise the first question "unless the heart of man were sometimes assaulted with this kind of impiety and led to deny God."[23] Musculus does not explicitly develop any theistic arguments, but he does affirm inferences from the natural world, in the context of elucidating how it is that God may be known. This implies the legitimacy of the argument from design. He suggests, for instance, pervading order in the cosmos as a ground for the knowledge of God among the philosophers: "they did observe in the works of God an exceeding great majesty, an infinite multitude, a wonderful variety, a most constant order, a seemly agreement,"[24] from which they derived a knowledge of God's power and goodness. Moreover, citing Plato, Aristotle, Virgil, and Cicero, Musculus claims that order in the cosmos supports the unity of God. While the vastness of the cosmos may seem to indicate the need for multiple governors, the "constant agreement of all things"[25] proves that one Supreme being has ordered and governs all things.

---

[21]   Heinrich Bullinger, *The Decades of Henry Bullinger*, ed. Rev. Thomas Harding (5 vols, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1849), I.ii, p. 194.

[22]   Ibid., IV.iii, pp. 150–51; see also I.ii, p. 196.

[23]   Wolfgang Musculus, *On Common Places of the Christian Religion*, trans. John Man (London, 1578), p. 2.

[24]   Ibid., p. 3.

[25]   Ibid., p. 10.

Like Musculus, Andreas Gerardus Hyperius introduced theistic arguments under the *locus de Deo* in his *Methodus theologiae* (1568) as a way of explicating the natural grounds for belief in God. Arguments from the beauty, magnitude, and order of the universe are central to the discussion. Both Scripture (for example, Psalms 104 and 134, Acts 14, and Job 5, 9, and 12) and a broad range of philosophers and theologians (for example, Aristotle, Cicero, Tertullian, John of Damascus, Aquinas, and Melanchthon) testify that we may infer the existence not only of some first cause but a most powerful and wise being. Like Musculus, Hyperius sees theistic arguments as necessary to fortifying believers who may be troubled by doubts.[26]

Italian Reformer Peter Martyr Vermigli distinguished between "divine mysteries that we cannot reach naturally" and "the knowledge of things divine that [are] attained by natural light." Commenting on Romans 1:19–20, he wrote, "They knew that God is most mighty by the very fabric of the world. They also knew by the beauty, appearance, and variety of things that such great power was ordered by the highest providence and wisdom. Moreover, the suitability and utility of created things taught them the divine majesty, which consists chiefly in acting well towards all. These are the gifts which God bestowed on the heathen."[27] Like Bucer and Melanchthon, Vermigli asserts the innate character of the natural knowledge of God, but he also refers to theistic arguments as a source of knowledge of God. On the natural philosophers, he asserts:

> they were led to knowledge of God on account of the wonderful properties and qualities of nature. Knowing the series of causes and their relation to effects, and clearly understanding that it is not proper to posit an infinite progression, they reasoned that there must arrive at some highest being, and so concluded that there is a God. Plato, Aristotle, and Galen have set forth these matters exceedingly well.[28]

John Calvin (1509–1564)[29]

In the opening chapters of Book I of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559) John Calvin claimed, "There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity … God himself has implanted in all men a certain

---

[26]   Andreas Hyperius, *Methodus theologiae* (Basel, 1568), pp. 73–80.

[27]   Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Commentaries on Romans* in *Philosophical Works* in *The Peter Martyr Library*: *Works*, trans. and ed. Joseph McLelland (7 vols, Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1996), vol. 4, pp. 18–19. Vermigli's *Loci* was first published posthumously in 1576.

[28]   Ibid., p. 21.

[29]   For Calvin's view of the natural knowledge of God, see Edward Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (1952; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B Eerdmans, 1994), chapters 1 and 3. On Calvin's view in relation to other Reformers, see

understanding of his divine majesty."[30] Closely related to this *sensus divinitatis* (sense of divinity) is an external manifestation of God in creation. God "not only sowed in men's minds that seed of religion of which we have spoken but revealed himself and daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe. As a consequence, men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see him."[31] Calvin speaks of the "innumerable evidences" in the fabric of the world that declare the wisdom, power, and goodness of God. These evidences are drawn from careful observation in astronomy, medicine, and the natural sciences, as well as the more obvious evidences of design in the cosmos that are available to the uneducated, for example, the movement and structure of the celestial bodies.

> Likewise, in regard to the structure of the human body one must have the greatest keenness in order to weigh, with Galen's skill, its articulation, symmetry, beauty, and use. But yet, as all acknowledge, the human body shows itself to be a composition so ingenious that its Artificer is rightly judged a wonder-worker.[32]

In his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (1540), Calvin wrote:

> God is in himself invisible; but as his majesty shines forth in his works and in his creatures everywhere, men ought in these to acknowledge him, for they clearly set forth their Maker … He does not mention all the particulars which may be thought to belong to God; but he states, that we can arrive at the knowledge of his eternal power and divinity, for he who is the framer of all things, must necessarily be without beginning and from himself.[33]

A few themes are prominent in Calvin's treatment of the natural knowledge of God. First, as with all the preceding Reformers, the natural knowledge of God is closely tied to the exegesis of Romans 1:19–20. Secondly, while this knowledge (along with a natural knowledge of morality) underscores the moral responsibility of all human persons, it is insufficient for salvation.[34] Calvin clearly distinguishes between the knowledge of God as creator and the knowledge of God as redeemer. All saving knowledge of God requires the knowledge of God as redeemer, but this knowledge is only given in the Scriptures. Thirdly, like Melanchthon, Bucer,

---

David Steinmetz, "Calvin and the Natural Knowledge of God" in Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 23–9.

[30]   John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, tr. Ford Lewis Battles, in *The Library of Christian Classics* (2 vols, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1.3.1.

[31]   Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.1.

[32]   Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.2.

[33]   John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, tr. and ed. John Owen, in *Calvin's Commentaries* (22 vols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), vol.19/II, p. 70.

[34]   Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.14–15.

and Vermigli, Calvin affirms that the natural knowledge of God is both naturally implanted and acquired from the external world.

Finally, Calvin maintained that "no long or toilsome proof is needed to elicit the evidences that illuminate and affirm the divine majesty."[35] Calvin does not engage in any protracted philosophical argumentation for the existence of God. Nonetheless, the knowledge of God from the external world is explicated in terms of inferences from empirically observable features of the world. In his *Commentary on Acts*, Calvin claims that while the Apostle Paul did not reason "after the manner of the philosophers," he did present "natural arguments" to prove the providence of God to pagans.[36] Paul "showeth by natural arguments who and what God is, and how he is rightly worshipped,"[37] and "because he hath to deal with profane men, he draweth proofs from nature itself; for in vain should he have cited testimonies of Scripture."[38] Paul's arguments were not logically rigorous, but they were arguments nonetheless. As with other Reformers, Calvin's theistic arguments are not cast in the syllogistic or demonstrative form of the medieval scholastic theologians—not surprising given Calvin's background in the rhetorical argumentation of the Renaissance. Nor are these arguments aimed primarily at proving the existence of God; as if no one has knowledge of God's existence apart from such arguments. Calvin's theistic evidences form the basis of the inferential derivation of the principal attributes of God from the book of nature and thereby confirm and complement the *sensus divinitatis*.

Protestant Scholasticism: Early Orthodoxy (1565–1640)

Subsequent to the death of Melanchthon in 1560 and Calvin in 1564, Reformation theology moved into a new phase characterized by the systematizing and initial confessional articulation of the doctrines of the Reformation. The Reformed theologians of the early orthodox period inherited the Reformers' position on the natural knowledge of God. As the theological descendents of the Reformers consistently maintained, there is a natural knowledge of God, innate and acquired from the visible works of God, which, while insufficient for salvation, renders humans morally inexcusable. In addition to an increased emphasis on theistic arguments as a means of confirming and explicating the natural knowledge of God, the demonstrative causal arguments of the medieval scholastics become more prominent.

---

[35]   Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.9.

[36]   Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, trans. Christopher Fetherstone and ed. Henry Beveridge, in *Calvin's Commentaries* (22 vols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), vol. 19/I, p. 19.

[37]   Ibid., p. 154.

[38]   Ibid., pp. 157–8.

Immediate Successors of the Reformers

The various abridgements to Calvin's *Institutes* in the years following Calvin's death affirm the *duplex cognitio dei* as creator and redeemer, and they consistently divide the knowledge of God as creator into an innate and acquired knowledge of God.[39] In his *Aphorisms* (1589) Piscator parses the knowledge of God acquired from the external world in terms of philosophical reasoning and argument: "The knowledge of God the Creator is acquired by instruction, human and philosophical, deduced by reasoning from a consideration of God's works."[40] Genevan theology also asserted a connection between the natural knowledge of God and theistic arguments. Calvin's successor, Theodore Beza, along with M. Anthonie Faius, directed the student disputation on Reformed theology at Geneva originally published as *Theses theologicae in Schola Genevensi* (1586). Samuel Avienus of Bern, who defended the *locus de Deo*, said that "human reason" is "able to afford us some proofs, whereby we may be taught, that there is a God, and but only one: and whereby also his attributes, may be in some sort, made known unto us."[41]

The successors of the Reformers also paid increasing attention to the apologetic use of theistic arguments, that is, their deployment as a way of defending the faith. French Calvinist Philippe Du-Plessis Mornay presented a variety of theistic arguments as part of a defense of the Christian religion in his *Traité de la verité de la religion chrétienne* (1581). Mornay's work begins with a series of design arguments for the existence of God directed against atheism and deviant forms of theism. These arguments are followed by proofs for the beginning of the world and God as the creator of the world. In chapter three of his *Christianiae isagoges* (1583), Lambert Daneau (once a student at Geneva) addressed the question, *an sit Deus* (whether there is a God). According to Daneau, while this question seems superfluous, it is necessary as a means of refuting Epicureans and other atheists.[42] In this context Daneau develops both rhetorical and demonstrative style arguments. He favorably acknowledges Aquinas's demonstrations of God's

---

[39]   Edmund Bunney, *Institutionum christianae religionis compendium simul ac methodi enarratio* (London, 1578); Guillaume Delaune, *Institutionis christianae religionis a Joanne Calvino conscriptae* (London, 1583); Caspar Olevianus, *Institutionis christianae religionis Epitome. Ex Institutione Johannis Calvini excerpta, authoris methodo et verbis rententis* (Herborn, 1586); Piscator, *Aphorisimi doctrinae christianae maximam partem ex Institutione Calvini excerpti, sive Loci communes theologici, brevibus sententiis expositi* (Herborn, 1589). See Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism*, chapter 2.

[40]   Piscator, *Aphorisimi*, 3rd edition (Herborn, 1594), p. 12.

[41]   *Propositions and Principles of Divinitie Propounded and Disputed in the University of Geneva under Theod. Beza and M. Anthonie Faius*, trans. John Penry (Edinburgh, 1595), I.3.

[42]   Lambert Daneau, *Christianae isagoges ad christianorum theologorum locos communes, Libri II* (Geneva, 1588), fol. 3ʳ.

existence but moves on to construct his own arguments, the last of which is clearly scholastic in tone:

> the pagan philosophers themselves [for example, Aristotle and Plato] prove by their natural reason that there must be some supreme Deity; because in causes and events, in which there is some order, there must eventually be a procession to some single, supreme, most perfect and motionless being, which is God. Otherwise its progression would be to infinity and there would be no order, that is, nothing would be first or second.[43]

The influence of Aquinas is more prominent in Leiden theologian Franciscus Junius (1545–1602). Junius, who had studied under Calvin in the latter's final years at Geneva, affirmed that man could know God from natural principles innate within the mind, as well as by way of reasoning *a posteriori* from the works of God in creation.[44] Junius keeps himself within the Thomistic framework, relying solely on Aquinas's Five Ways, at points modified by Junius's own insights. These arguments first occur in Junius's Heidelberg disputation *De Deo seu Deum esse* and subsequently in a more developed form in Book I of his *Summa aliquot locorum communium SS. theologiae*.[45] Junius exhibits an exclusive preference for demonstrative arguments over rhetorically styled arguments.

Zacharias Ursinus (1534–1583) and the Heidelberg Commentary Tradition[46]

Melanchthon's student Zacharias Ursinus co-authored the *Heidelberg Catechism* with Caspar Olevianus and also composed the first published commentary on the catechism. While Ursinus lectured on the catechism regularly at Heidelberg and Neustadt, his notes were published in successive editions posthumously beginning in 1584. In his commentary, Ursinus affirms a twofold revelation: "God has revealed Himself to the church by His word and works."[47] Ursinus presents eleven arguments for God's existence, a somewhat surprising fact since the catechism does not raise the issue of theistic arguments. The arguments are prefaced with

---

[43]   Ibid., fol. 5^r. Translation by Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism*, p. 121.

[44]   Francis Junius, *Opera theologica* (2 vols, Geneva, 1607), I, col. 1778. See Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism*, pp. 131–43.

[45]   The former work is included within the *Theses theologicae Heidelbergenses* in Junius's *Opera theologica*, vol. 1, cols. 1777–78. The latter is in the 1613 Geneva edition of Junius's *Opera theologica*, cols. 1809–86.

[46]   For a detailed study of this, see Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism*, chapter 4.

[47]   Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. Rev. G.W. Williard, 4th American edition (Cincinnati: Elm Street Publishing Company, 1888), p. 3. This translation is based on the 1616 Latin edition, derived from Pareus's 1591 edition.

the opening statement: "That there is a God, is proven [*probatur*] by many arguments [*argumentis*] common to both philosophy and theology."[48] Nine of Ursinus's eleven arguments are found in Melanchthon's 1544 *Loci communes* and the other two are found in Melanchthon's *Commentary on Romans*. The earliest Latin edition of Ursinus's commentary (Geneva, 1584) begins with an exposition of the Apostle's Creed under the successive headings '*De Deo*,' '*De Creatione*,' and '*De Providentia*.' While Ursinus develops some theistic arguments in the context of explicating divine providence, he initially presents all eleven theistic arguments under the heading *De Deo*, where Ursinus begins with the question, *An sit Deus*.[49]

While Melanchthon's influence on Ursinus is readily apparent, Ursinus succeeded in altering Melanchthon's presentation in two crucial respects. He introduced the proofs under the *locus de Deo* not *de creatione*, and the function of the arguments is more broadly apologetic than they were for Melanchthon. Ursinus explicitly presents his proofs as a response to the errors of the Epicureans, Stoics, and Peripatetics. While Melanchthon recognized the proofs as refutations of deviant forms of theism, Ursinus's placement of the proofs under the *locus de Deo* suggests an expansion of this apologetic role of the arguments as a kind of preparatory apologetic against atheism. More importantly, Ursinus provides no qualifying statements about the arguments as part of the Christian's meditation on God as revealed in creation. The broad apologetic function of the arguments is fairly evident in his *Loci communes*. While recognizing that philosophy cannot show who is the true God, the testimonies to God in the natural order are not useless. God "will by natural testimonies … have men's minds stirred up to seek the true God in the Church, as it is said that men were therefore placed in the Theatre of the world, that they should seek the Lord, if so be they might have groped after him and found him."[50]

The distinguished line of subsequent commentators on the *Heidelberg Catechism* between 1588 and 1633 all affirm a natural knowledge of God in connection with Romans 1:19–20, often also appealing to Acts 14 and 17. This includes Jeremias Bastingius, Philip Lansbergen, Rudolf Acronius, George Spindler, Festus Hommius, Henricus a Diest, and two of Ursinus's students, Sibrandus Lubbertus and Johannes Kuchlinus.[51] Several also introduced theistic arguments to their discussion.[52] In

---

[48]   Ibid., p. 121.

[49]   Pareus's revised edition of the commentary in 1591 was altered to follow the order of the questions of the catechism. Theistic arguments in the *De Deo* section became a preamble to question 25 of the catechism, which treats the existence of God as Trinity. See Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism*, pp. 53–5.

[50]   Ursinus, *The Summe of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Parry (London, 1633), p. 150.

[51]   For a thorough discussion, see Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism*, chapter 4.

[52]   Corstens's commentary, written before Ursinus's commentary, did not make use of arguments for the existence of God. The commentaries of Bastingius, Lansbergen,

his *Commentarius in catechesin Palatino-Belgicam* (1618), Lubbertus devoted 27 octavo pages to the presentation of arguments for the existence of God in connection with question 25 of the Catechism. In his 1616 disputation on the Catechism, *De providentia*, Lubbertus made use of Ursinus's proofs for divine providence in order to present "demonstrative arguments" (*apodictis argumentis*) in refutation of the claims of Epicureanism.[53] In his disputation *De Deo uno et trino*, Kuchlinus distinguished between two kinds of "proofs and arguments" (*indicia atque argumenta*), one sort drawn from Scripture and another drawn from nature. The function of the arguments is apologetic: "It is necessary that the pious continuously place certain most sure proofs before their eyes with which they may both firmly refute that more than barbaric profanity and fortify themselves against all false diabolical scoffing."[54]

Trends in Early Orthodoxy

Lucas Trelcatius (senior) and Caspar Barlaeus at States College in Leiden discuss the natural knowledge of God in their respective theological disputations, *De cognitione Dei naturali et revelata* (1599)[55] and *Theses theologicae de cognitione dei* (1605).[56] In the former, Trelcatius identifies the natural knowledge of God and natural theology (*theologia naturalis*), the latter being defined as that which proceeds from principles that are known by the light of human intelligence according to human reason.[57] Barlaeus and Trelcatius favorably allude to theistic arguments. However, in the locus on divine providence in his *Compendium locorum communium s. theologiae*, Trelcatius actually provides seven of Ursinus's nine *a posteriori* arguments. The arguments are introduced to refute those who deny divine providence, though Trelcatius notes that the same arguments also prove the existence of God.[58]

---

and Acronius, written subsequent to Ursinus's commentary, also exclude arguments for the existence of God, though Bastingius and Lansbergen present *a priori* and *a posteriori* arguments for the providence of God, some of which clearly show the influence of Ursinus. See Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism*, chapter 4.

[53]   Lubbertus's 1616 disputation is in L. Guedtman, *Illustrium exercitationum*, *ao 1669* (Leeuwarden, 1669).

[54]   Johannes Kuchlinus, *De Deo uno et trino in Ecclesiarum Hollandicarum et west frisiacarum catechismus* (Geneva, 1612), p. 207. Translation by Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism*, p. 81.

[55]   Trelcatius, disputation *De cognitione Dei naturali et revelata in Compendium theologiae thesibus in Academia Lugduno-Bat ordine a DD et Professoribus Fr. Junio, Luco Trelcatio, et Francisco Gomaro publice propositio, ab anno 1598 usque ad annum 1605 concinnatum* (Hanover, 1611).

[56]   Barlaeus, *Theses theologicae de cognitione Dei* (Leiden, 1605).

[57]   Trelcatius, *De cognitione Dei*, p. 8.

[58]   Trelcatius, *Compendium* in *Opuscula theologica omnia* (Leiden, 1614), p. 112.

In his *Treatise on the Knowledge of God* (1634), French Calvinist Peter Du Moulin (1568–1658) probed the extent to which natural reason can know God. While underscoring the deficiencies of pagan ideas about God, Du Moulin argued that the writings of pagans do at least show that the existence of God and some of his essential attributes can be known by reason. "I am of opinion, mostaptly and as farre as Mans capacitie is able to conceive that God may be thus defined, God is the first, the most chiefe, and most perfect Being, from whom there floweth and dependeth all Entity and Perfection."[59] While common folks know that God exists because of evident tokens of design in the universe, the philosophers reason to this conclusion on the basis of logical demonstrations.[60] With respect to the latter, Du Moulin commends the arguments from motion to a first unmoved mover who is wholly simple, from the order of efficient causes to some first efficient cause, from the degrees of perfection in things to a single, primary perfect being, and from the beginning of the world to a creator with infinite power. While Du Moulin cites Plato, Cicero, and Aristotle, the conceptual territory of medieval scholasticism informs much of his account of theistic arguments, especially the derivation of various divine attributes from the more basic categories of perfection and simplicity.

By the end of the second phase of early orthodoxy the apologetic use of theistic arguments was deeply entrenched in Reformed theology. In Germany, Johann Alsted (1588–1638) composed *Theologia naturalis* (1615), which was directed toward "Atheists, Epicureans, and Sophists of the present day."[61] Over the course of more than eight hundred pages, Alsted presents a series of theistic arguments and an elaboration of the essential attributes of God. While Alsted quotes Scripture throughout, this is confirmatory of arguments that are independently developed on rational grounds. In England, Martin Fotherby (1549–1620) wrote over three hundred pages on the existence of God in his apologetic treatise *Atheomastix* (1622).[62] The apologetic function of theistic arguments was also well established among influential Leiden theologians. In his disputation *De natura Dei et divinis attributis* (1625) Antonius Thysius (1565–1640) wrote:

> However, although the existence of God is not a matter for questioning in theology
> since as a science presupposes its subject matter so theology presupposes this
> as clear by its own light and not to be disputed by the faithful; yet because of

---

[59] Peter Du Moulin, *A Treatise on the Knowledge of God* (London, 1634), p. 25.

[60] Ibid., pp. 5–12.

[61] Alsted, *Theologia naturalis* (Frankfurt, 1615), title page.

[62] Martin Fotherby, *Atheomastix: Clearing foure Truthes, Against Atheists and Infidels: 1. That, There is a God. 2. That, There is but One God. 3. That, Jehovah, our God, is that One God. 4. That, The Holy Scripture is the Word of that God* (London: Nicholas Okes, 1622). See also E.H. Gillett, *God in Human Thought; or, Natural Theology Traced in Literature, Ancient and Modern, to the Time of Bishop Butle*r (2 vols, New York: Scribner, Armstrong, & Co., 1874), chapter 35.

certain insane and more than diabolical blasphemies of atheists … we will prove this by the twofold evidence of nature and reason.[63]

Thysius's Leiden colleague Antonius Walaeus (1573–1639) concurred:

> It would be entirely superfluous to prove God's existence were it not that there are men to be found who are so impious and who "say in their hearts there is no God," … Since, however, atheistic men have been found in every century, it will therefore not be without use to strengthen belief against them and to confirm this also with invincible arguments.[64]

Thysius and Walaeus also favorably present a list of theistic arguments and the latter develops them in some detail. In addition to design in the cosmos, Thysius adds six arguments, including the argument "from the constancy and orderly motion of the heavens to the first mover and author of motion who exists by act" and another "from the order of efficient causes to the first efficient cause in which they are grounded and on which the rest depend."[65] Walaeus produced two versions of the *locus de Deo*, one in his *Enchiridion religionis reformatae* and another in his *Loci communibus sacrae theologiae et consiliis*. The first, aimed at introductory ministerial students, reproduces Ursinus's arguments in a very basic form, though excluding his more philosophically oriented causal arguments. Of the arguments Walaeus considers, he concludes: "These arguments invincibly prove God's existence."[66] Walaeus's treatment of theistic arguments is considerably more detailed and philosophically sophisticated in his *Loci Communibus*, composed for the more theologically advanced reader. Here we find a more elaborate presentation of theistic arguments, including a scholastic argument from final causality.[67]

---

[63]   Thysius, "De natura Dei et divinis attributis" in *Synopsis purioris theologiae* (Leiden, 1625), Thesis III, p. 63. Translation by Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism*, p. 162.

[64]   Antonius Walaeus, *Enchiridion* (published posthumously) in *Opera omnia* (Leiden, 1643) I, p. 25. Translation by Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism*, p. 165.

[65]   Thysius, *Synopsis*, Thesis VI, pp. 63–4. Translation by Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism*, p. 163.

[66]   Walaeus, *Enchiridion*, p. 25. Translation by Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism*, p. 165.

[67]   Walaeus, *Loci communibus* in *Opera omnia*, I, p. 151. Translation by Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism*, p. 166.

The Period of High Orthodoxy (1640–1700)

Confessional Statements and Treatises on Natural Theology

At the beginning of the high orthodox period, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646) affirmed the natural knowledge of God and its limitations: "Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence, do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men inexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation."[68] Theistic arguments are presented in many of the commentaries and bodies of divinity based on the *Shorter* and *Longer Westminster Catechism* (1648).[69] We also find theistic arguments in the first published commentary on the *Belgic Confession* (1561). In his commentary, Samuel Maresius presents a list of theistic arguments largely derived from Ursinus. They begin with arguments from motion and causality: "Nor will he have any doubts who attends the motion, by which the same philosopher (that is, Aristotle) arrived at the first mover; the chain of causes which must end in a first efficient and an ultimate final cause unless there is an infinite regress."[70] Although the confession does not raise the issue of God's existence, Maresius introduces theistic arguments in connection with the *De Deo* article to unpack the idea of natural knowledge of God affirmed by the confession.[71]

One of the other notable features of natural theology in the high orthodox period is the proliferation of works devoted largely if not entirely to natural theology, for example, Seth Ward's *A Philosophical Essay Towards an Eviction of the Being and Attributes of God* (1652), Richard Baxter's *Reasons for the Christian Religion* (1667), Matthew Barker's *Natural Theology, or the Knowledge of God from the Works of Creation, Accommodated and Improved for the Service of Christianity* (1674), William Bates's *Considerations on the Existence of God and of the Immortality of the Soul* (1676), and John Edwards's *Demonstration of the Existence and Providence of God from the Contemplation of the Visible Structure of the Greater and Lesser World* (1696). These works tend to underscore the apologetic function of natural theology, though in some cases the arguments are also interpreted as a means of confirming, strengthening, and deepening the Christian's knowledge of God.

---

[68]   In John Hardon*, The Spirit and Origins of American Protestantism: A Source Book in its Creeds* (Dayton, OH: Pflaum Press, 1968), pp. 125–6.

[69]   James Usher, *Body of Divinitie* (London, 1645); Thomas Vincent, *An Explicatory Catechism; or Explanation of the Assembly's Shorter Catechism* (Edinburgh, 1673); Samuel Willard, *Compleat Body of Divinity* (Boston, 1726, posthumously).

[70]   Maresius, *Foederatum Belgium orthodoxum sive confessionis ecclesiarum Belgicarum exegesis* (Gronigen, 1652), p. 17. Translation by Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism*, p. 115. Maresius also presents theistic arguments in his theological work, *Collegium theologicum, sive breve systema universae theologiae* (1645; 2nd edition, 1649)*.

[71]   See Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism*, chapter 5.

The ostensible usefulness of natural theology for the Christian may be illustrated from Edwards's *Demonstration*. In this work, Edwards focuses entirely on design arguments in the spirit of John Ray's famous *Wisdom of God in the Work of Creation* (1691). While the second part of the book presents various indications of purpose and contrivance in the structure of the human body, the first half of the book examines such evidences in the structure of the earth and the cosmos, for example, the arrangement, beauty, and regular motions of the planets and stars. Of particular importance to Edwards is the range of benefits animals and humans receive from their terrestrial environment. He argues that by virtue of its composition, structure, and natural processes, the earth is particularly well suited for animal and human life, and this cannot be adequately explained in terms of chance or necessity. Edwards is aware of the potential apologetic value of such arguments, but—like Ray—his main focus is on the Christian.[72] As Edwards sees it, if his arguments are ineffective in convincing atheists, he may nonetheless have succeeded in "*Confirming* and *Strengthening* such who are really persuaded of the Doctrine here treated of."[73] Indeed, his main intention is

> that this Discourse should afford variety of matter to the Religious for their Devout Contemplations. I have set the Greater and Lesser World before them, and have display'd the several parts of both, that they may every where discern the Eternal Godhead. I have propounded those Visible and Remarkable topicks whence pious Minds may infallibly deduce the truth and reality of Providence, and the adorable Excellency of the Power, Wisdom and Goodness of God, and his other Divine Perfections and Properties which respect mankind.[74]

Francis Turretin (1623–1687), Edward Leigh (1602–1671), and Stephen Charnock (1628–1680)

The use of natural theology in systematic theological works of the period is exemplified in Francis Turretin's *Institutio theologiae elencticae* (1679–1685). Turretin begins with the *locus de Theologia*, in which questions three and four are devoted to natural theology. On the basis of Romans 1:19–20, he affirms that there is a natural revelation and natural knowledge of God, though it is not sufficient for salvation. While Turretin suggests arguments for the existence of God under the first *locus*, the arguments are not presented until the third *locus*, *de Deo Uno et Trino*. Here Turretin argues that we can know that there is a God (against atheists), what his nature is (against the heathen), and that he exists in three persons (against the Jews and heretics). Theistic arguments are developed under question three:

---

[72]   John Edwards, *A Demonstration of the Existence and Providence of God, From the Contemplation of the Visible Structure of the Greater and Lesser World* (London, 1696), pp. vi–vii.

[73]   Ibid., p. vii.

[74]   Ibid., pp. vii–viii.

"Can the existence of God be irrefutably demonstrated against atheists?"[75] Turretin responds, "the existence of God can be demonstrated by unanswerable arguments, not only from Scripture, but also from nature herself."[76]

Turretin's theistic arguments are given an explicitly apologetic framework, despite their being located subsequent to the doctrine of Scripture. The apologetic function of the arguments is first indicated in the earlier discussion of natural theology under the *locus de Theologia*: "Theology labors to prove the existence of God not from a primary and proper intention, but, as it were, incidentally from an adventitious necessity (vis., for the purpose of confuting the profane and atheists who without shame and with seared consciences deny it)."[77] Turretin then begins his discussion of theistic arguments in the third *locus* with a clear statement of their purpose:

> Although that there is a God is an indubitable first principle of religion (rather
> to be taken for granted than proved, so that they who doubt it are to be punished
> and not disputed with, as Aristotle says), yet the execrable madness of modern
> atheists (of whom this most corrupt age is far too fruitful, who do not blush
> impiously to deny this clearest truth) renders this question necessary.[78]

Of the seven arguments Turretin develops, two are clearly cosmological in nature and three are design arguments. The other two arguments are from conscience and universal consent. Hence, Turretin presents the same combination of rhetorical and philosophical arguments originating with Melanchthon and passed down through Ursinus.

Edward Leigh's *Systeme, or Body of Divinity* (1654), initially published as *Treatises on Divinity* (1646) represents one of the outstanding period examples of the treatment of natural theology among Puritan writers within the context of the systematic presentation of Christian doctrine.[79] Leigh begins his work with a locus on Scripture, followed by a locus on God. Here he begins by noting the necessity of treating the topic, *that there is a God*: "Because the most universal and incurable disease of the World is Atheism … supreme truths should be laid up in the greatest certainty … It is good often to receive this truth of the being

---

[75]   Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger and ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (3 vols, Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1992), 3.1, vol. 1, p. 169.

[76]   Ibid., 3.1.4, vol. 1, p. 169.

[77]   Ibid., 1.5.6, vol. 1, p. 17.

[78]   Ibid., 3.1.3, vol. 1, p. 169.

[79]   Other Puritan contributions to natural theology include John Preston's *Life Eternall: or a Treatise of the Knowledge of the Divine Essence and Attributes*, 2nd edition (London, 1631) and John Howe's *Living Temple, or, A Designed Improvement of that Notion, that a Good Man is the Temple of God…* (London, 1675). For discussion on Puritan contributions to natural theology, see Gillett, *God in Human Thought*, chapters 29–31.

of God: the forgetfulness of God is a kinde of denial of him."[80] After presenting various theistic proofs, Leigh reaffirms the familiar value of such proofs for the Christian:

> We should oppose this Atheism, and labor to grow more and more in the knowledge of God, and to strengthen our Faith in this principle, That God is; meditate and ponder his Works, and be perfect in those lessons which the common book of Nature teacheth, pray to God to clear the eye of our minde, and to imprint a right knowledge of himself in us.[81]

Leigh clearly distinguishes between rhetorical and philosophical arguments, though he states that these arguments operate in tandem, with different arguments proving different attributes of God. "Every man may collect *ab effectu*, that there is a God: By that *Wisdom*, which we see to have been in the *Making*; that *Order* in the *Governing*, and that *Goodness* in the *Preserving* and Maintaining of the world. All of which prove effectually, that there must needs be a God."[82] Several of his arguments have a scholastic tone. For example, his second argument—from the preservation and sustenance of the world—draws on final causality with explicit reference to Aquinas.[83] The philosophical arguments from causality and motion are succinctly stated:

> Every thing that is, must needs have a cause, and nothing can be the cause of itself, and among all the causes, there can be but one first and principal cause; which is the true cause of all the rest, and of all those effects which proceed from all of them: then the first cause can be nothing else but God, for what can be, which giveth being unto all things, but only God? …
>
> All motion depends on some mover, the motion of sublunary things depends on the motion of the Heavens, and their motion must needs be caused by some supreme first mover. Therefore, we must necessarily come at least to some first mover, which is moved by no other, and that is God. This was the common argument of Plato, Aristotle, and all the rest of the philosophers.[84]

Stephen Charnock, one of the leading Puritan divines of the seventeenth century, is well known for his *Existence and Attributes of God* (1681). While the work presents a detailed analysis of the nature of God in the light of biblical revelation, chapter 1 employs arguments from reason to demonstrate the existence of God and the foolishness of atheism. Charnock maintains that the existence of

---

[80] Leigh, *Systeme, or Body of Divinity* (London, 1654), p. 123.
[81] Ibid., p. 131.
[82] Ibid., p. 123.
[83] Ibid., p. 126.
[84] Ibid., pp. 129–30.

God "is not only the discovery of faith, but of reason."[85] He is also clear that it is entirely proper for Christians to seek rational arguments for the existence of God:

> It is fit we should know why we believe, that our belief of a God may appear to be upon undeniable evidence, and that we may give a better reason for his existence, than that we have heard our parents and teachers tell us so, and our acquaintance think so. It is as much as to say there is no God, when we know not why we believe there is, and would not consider the arguments for his existence.[86]

Late Orthodoxy (1700–1790)

In the eighteenth century Reformed thinkers continued to compose entire works on natural theology, as is illustrated by Nehemiah Grew's *Cosmologia sacra* (1701), Bernard Nieuwentijt's *Religious Philosopher* (1716), Cotton Mather's *Christian Philosopher* (1721), and John Brown of Haddington's *Compendious View of Natural and Revealed Religion* (1782). Inspired by John Ray's *Wisdom of God in the Work of Creation* (1691), the first three works exploited developments in modern science to develop design arguments that would eventually find their famous expression in William Paley's *Natural Theology* (1802), a work that would eclipse Reformed contributions to natural theology.[87]

Natural Theology in Eighteenth-Century New England: Cotton Mather
(1663–1728) and Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758)

Mather's *Christian Philosopher* (1721) was the first book on natural theology published in America with the design argument as its main thesis. Mather may therefore rightly be viewed as the first person to have introduced the design argument, along with its key British and Continental sources, to the American intellectual and religious scene. Mather's theme, building his case on the basis of lengthy quotations from other philosophers and theologians (especially the work of John Ray and William Derham), is the manifestation of design in various parts of the cosmos, for example, in the laws of nature, the planetary and celestial systems, and the structure of the human body. Mather is impressed with the variety of created things: their beautiful arrangement, their conformity to basic laws, and the usefulness of nature to human life. Although Mather is clear that the created

---

[85] Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God* (2 vols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), vol. 1, pp. 26–7.

[86] Ibid.

[87] For a discussion of design arguments in Grew, Nieuwentijt, Ray, and Paley, see Lewis Ezra Hicks, *A Critique of Design-Arguments* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1883). See also Gillett, *God in Human Thought*, chapters 28–30.

order proves the existence and nature of God—even to the pagan who has no prior acquaintance with the Scriptures—his main purpose is not apologetic. Like Edwards of England, his primary goal is "to enkindle the Dispositions and the Resolutions of Piety in my Brethren."[88] So Mather's text is largely an attempt to show how the scientific discoveries and theories of his day illustrate the goodness, power, and wisdom of God.

By the time Mather died in 1728, Jonathan Edwards had already been writing extensively on proofs for the existence of God as part of his larger project of constructing a complete system of natural philosophy. He develops theistic proofs in his essays "Of Being" and "Wisdom in the Contrivance of the World," and there are over twenty-four entries devoted to natural theology in "the Miscellanies," including three lengthy essays. Some of Edwards's arguments attempt to show that it is unreasonable to suppose that matter and motion is without beginning, and so there must be a first cause.[89] However, he also argues that even if the universe is eternal, its beauty and contrivance require an intelligent author. Moreover, the uniform nature of objects and their laws of interaction provide evidence for the unity of this intelligent author.[90]

In *Freedom of the Will* (1754) Edwards defended the principled validity of inferences from the world to God with a defense of the causal principle, "what is not necessary in itself, must have a cause."[91] Without this principle, Edwards contended, "we can't prove that there is a God, either from the being of the world, and the creatures in it, or from the manner of their being, their order, beauty, and use."[92] Of course, if our intellects were sufficiently powerful, we would have an intuitive grasp of God's existence. We would see God's existence as necessary in itself, like other self-evident truths the denials of which are intrinsically absurd or contradictory. However, our intellects are not sufficiently powerful to have this vision of the general nature of existence, so we must come to know God naturally by way of observations of the world and the causal principle. Edwards explains the order of natural theological reasoning as follows:

> We first ascend, and prove a posteriori, or from effects, that there must be an eternal cause; and then secondly, prove by argumentation, not intuition, that this

---

[88]   Cotton Mather, *The Christian Philosopher*, ed. with an Introduction and Notes by Winton U. Solberg (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), p. 308, see also p. 7.

[89]   Jonathan Edwards, "Miscellanies" in *The Philosophy of Jonathan Edwards from His Private Notebooks*, ed. Harvey G. Townsend (Eugene: University of Oregon Monographs, 1955), Misc. 880, pp. 87–103.

[90]   Ibid., Misc. 976, pp. 103–9.

[91]   Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), II.3, p. 182.

[92]   Ibid., II.2, p. 183.

being must be necessarily existent; and then thirds, from the proved necessity of his existence, we may descend, and prove many of his perfections a priori.[93]

While Edwards believed that we can in principle acquire knowledge of God in this manner, he maintained that in fact all such knowledge depends on our moral temperament or the proper orientation of our passional nature. More precisely, our sense of the force of such inferences or proofs depends on a properly disposed heart; one in which egoism, prejudice, and hostility toward God have been replaced by the appropriate virtues, for example, altruism, and love of God.[94] For Edwards, this requires the operation of divine grace. So like many other Reformed thinkers, he viewed natural theology as operating most effectively in the context of the Christian life.

Eighteenth-Century British Calvinism: Thomas Ridgley (1667–1734) and John Gill (1697–1771)

Thomas Ridgley composed his *Body of Divinity* (1731–1733) on the model of the *Westminster Larger Catechism* (1647). Ridgley introduces theistic proofs to support the catechism's claim that God's existence is plain from the light of nature. Ridgley affirms, "we ought to be able to prove by arguments, or give a reason for our belief that there is a God."[95] He articulates fairly detailed versions of both rhetorical and demonstrative arguments, but he prefaces his presentation with five reasons for proving God's existence. First, belief in God is the foundation of all natural and revealed religion. Secondly, Christians are prone to question God's existence, so they must use all means necessary to fortify themselves. Thirdly, the rise of atheism must be countered by defending belief in God. Fourthly, the proofs help establish believers in the faith by strengthening the foundations of their faith. Lastly, the proofs help us appropriately value God's works. In this way, Ridgley justifies natural theology on both apologetic and devotional grounds.

Calvinistic Baptist John Gill of Kettering, Northamptonshire began his *Body of Doctrinal Divinity* (1769) with proofs for the existence of God, followed by articles on Scripture and the nature and names of God. Gill anticipates an objection to proving God's existence on the grounds that this is a self-evident truth. However, according to Gill theistic proofs must be presented because some people are likely to be swayed toward unbelief by the influence of Satan. Even pious minds can be harassed and distressed by doubts at times. So "it cannot be improper to endeavour to fortify our minds with reasons and arguments against such suggestions and

---

[93] Ibid., II.3, p. 182.

[94] Edwards, Misc. 628, p. 251.

[95] Thomas Ridgley, *A Body of Divinity: Wherein the Doctrines of the Christian Religion are Explained and Defended: Being the Substance of Several Lectures on the Assembly's Larger Catechism*, with notes by James P. Wilson (4 vols, Philadelphia, 1814–1815), vol. 1, p. 20.

insinuations."[96] Gill considers eight arguments: the argument from general consent, innate sense of God, works of creation, providence, uncommon heroic actions, prophecies, fears of men, and judgments in the world. He devotes most of his attention to the first and third arguments, with frequent quotations from classical authors such as Cicero, Juvenal, and Plutarch. Gill's emphasis on the less metaphysical sorts of arguments bears a striking resemblance to the presentation of the arguments in Melanchthon and the early scholastics. Only under the argument from the works of creation does Gill employ a more philosophical argument to first cause from the impossibility of an infinite regress of subordinate causes. Gill is convinced that Romans 1:19–20 sanctions such a proof.

The Pre-Dogmatic Model of Natural Theology[97]

While the treatment of natural theology among some eighteenth-century Reformed writers followed earlier streams of the tradition, the influence of Cartesianism on Reformed orthodoxy during the latter part of the seventeenth century led to an increasing reliance on reason among some Reformed theologians. Franz Burman and Abraham Heidanus both utilized insights from Descartes, including the latter's sharp separation of the spheres of philosophy and theology.[98] In the eighteenth century Jean-Alphonse Turretin presented natural theology as a system of purely rational truths accessible to reason apart from any supernatural revelation.[99] In Salomon van Til and Herman Venema there is a noticeable shift from Scripture to reason as the *principium cognoscendi theologiae*. Consequently, natural theology acquired the status of a prolegomenon to revealed theology. A purely rational discourse on the divine existence and attributes, separated from Scripture, laid a foundation for revealed theology.[100] The influence of Christian Wolff and Wolffian rationalism is evident in the works of Johann Friedrich Stapfer and Daniel Wyttenbach; both of whom provide a purely rational account of the existence and

---

[96] John Gill, *Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity* (Philadelphia: B. Graves, 1810), p. 21.

[97] On the transformation of natural theology during late orthodoxy, see Muller, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, pp. 82–4, 174–6, 305–8, 396–8; vol. 3, pp. 121–9, 141–59, 193–5, 254–72. I have relied heavily on Muller's work in this section.

[98] Franz Burman, *Synopsis theologiae et speciatim oeconomiae foederum Dei* (2 vols, Geneva, 1678), and Abraham Heidanus, *Corpus theologiae christianae in quindecim locos digestum* (2 vols, Leiden, 1687).

[99] J.-A. Turretin, *De theologiae naturali* (Geneva, 1748). On J.-A. Turretin's view of natural theology, see Martin I. Klauber, "The Eclipse of Scholasticism in Eighteenth-Century Geneva: Natural Theology from Jean-Alphonse Turretin to Jacob Vernet," in John B. Roney and Martin I. Klauber (eds), *The Identity of Geneva: The Christian Commonwealth, 1564–1864* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), pp. 129–42.

[100] Salomon van Til, *Theologiae utriusque compendium* (Leiden, 1704, 1719), I.i–iv, II.i–iii.

attributes of God as the first port of entry to the doctrine of God, only subsequently followed by a discussion of Scripture and the Christian doctrine of God.[101] In Great Britain, the Protestant response to Deism led many to erect a supernatural theology on the basis of a limited natural religion that included the existence and attributes of God, as well a range of moral duties accessible to reason; for example, Richard Fiddes, *Theologia Speculativa* (1718), Joseph Butler, *Analogy of Religion* (1736), and John Brown, *Compendious View of Natural and Revealed Religion* (1782).

In the period of late orthodoxy, then, natural theology was transformed into a distinct rational-theological locus upon which the biblical doctrine of God is based. This pre-dogmatic function of natural theology stands in sharp contrast to the way theistic arguments were utilized in sixteenth- and many seventeenth-century dogmatic systems. As illustrated earlier, when theistic arguments were presented in earlier dogmatic works they were typically placed under prolegomena or the *locus de Deo*, both of which exhibit dependence on and integration with Scripture and the Christian doctrine of God. Even where dogmatic systems began with the *locus de Deo*, there is no independent *locus* on natural theology, either within or prefaced to the theological system. This explains the reliance on Scripture in the *locus de Deo*, as is illustrated in the use of the "divine names" as a point of departure for articulating and systematizing the divine attributes. It also explains the inclusion of the doctrine of the Trinity under the *locus de Deo*.[102] Moreover, in some instances, the *locus de Deo* is located subsequent to the *locus de scriptura*,[103] so it is clear that the doctrine of God rests on scriptural revelation as its foundation, not reason. While this did not exclude the apologetic use of theistic arguments, it prevented them from developing into an autonomous system of rational theology prefaced to dogmatic theology.

The Nineteenth Century

Thomas Chalmers (1780–1847) and John Dick (1764–1833)

Perhaps the most important Reformed contributor to natural theology in nineteenth-century Great Britain was Scottish theologian Thomas Chalmers. An academic theologian and philosopher, he held the chair of moral philosophy at the

---

[101]   Johann Friedrich Stapfer, *Institutiones theologiae polemicae universae, ordine scientifico dispositae*, 4th edition (5 vols, Zurich, 1756–1757), and Daniel Wyttenbach, *Tentamen theologiae dogmaticae methodo scientifico pertractatae* (3 vols, Frankfurt, 1747–1749).

[102]   For example, Hyperius, *Methodus theologiae* (1568); Musculus, *Loci communes* (1560); Daneau, *Christianae isogoges* (1583); Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae* (1679–1685).

[103]   For example, Polanus, *Syntagma theologiae christianae* (Geneva, 1617) and Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae* (Geneva, 1679–1685).

University of Saint Andrews (1823–1828) and later replaced Dr. Ritchie as chair of divinity at the University of Edinburgh (1828–1843). Chalmers's *Adaptation of External Nature to the Moral and Intellectual Constitution of Man* (1833) was the first volume in the well-known Bridgewater Treatises *On the Power, Wisdom, and Goodness of God, as Manifested in the Creation*, an eight-book series established in 1829 at the bequest of Rev. Francis Henry Egerton (last Earl of Bridgewater) and inspired by William Paley's *Natural Theology* (1802). Chalmers also wrote *On Natural Theology* (1836).

Chalmers believed that the wide ranging utility that results from the dispositions of matter provide the best theistic argument.[104] "Dispositions of matter" refers to the arrangement of material objects and their parts. For instance, in the case of the eye and the end of vision, the dispositions of matter concern the position of the lenses and retina, which benefit humans and animals. It also refers to the actual strength of all the relevant forces that govern the behavior of objects on earth and in the universe. So, for example, Chalmers notes that there would be various adverse consequences for human life if certain adjustments were made to the force of gravity, the forces responsible for the cohesion of material substances, or the specific laws of planetary motion.[105] Chalmers admits that the above argument only proves the existence of God and His natural attributes. Evidence for the *moral* perfections of God (for example, benevolence and righteousness) must be drawn from other kinds of arguments concerning man's rational and moral nature.[106] Consequently, the case for theism is a two-stage argument that begins with an argument for the existence of God based on the dispositions of matter, followed by an argument for the character of God based on phenomena associated with man's rational and moral nature. Chalmers concludes: "We hold that the theology of nature shed powerful light on the being of a God; and that, even from its unaided demonstrations, we can reach a considerable degree of probability, both for His moral and natural attributes."[107]

In his *Lectures on Theology* (posthumously, 1834), John Dick described natural theology as "knowledge of God which the light of nature teaches, or which is acquired by our unassisted powers, by the exercise of reason, and the suggestions of conscience."[108] According to Dick,

> man, by contemplating the objects around him, is led to infer the existence of an invisible Being by whom they were created, possessed of certain perfections, the signatures of which are perceived upon his works; and from this first principle

---

[104] Thomas Chalmers, *On Natural Theology* in *The Works of Thomas Chalmners*, 5th edition (New York: Robert Carter, 1844), vol. 1, p. 191.

[105] Ibid., p. 193.

[106] Ibid., p. 423.

[107] Ibid.

[108] John Dick, *Lectures on Theology*, American edition (2 vols, New York: M.W. Dodd, 1846), vol. 1, p. 9.

deduces other doctrines of religion, as that God governs the world; that it is our duty to honor and please him, by the practice of piety, and justice, and benevolence.[109]

Of particular interest is Dick's awareness of religious opposition to the proofs:

But the existence of a First Cause seems so obvious, it may be deemed unnecessary to enter upon a proof of the existence of God; and to some it may appear to be presumptuous and irreverent because it seems to call into question a truth which it is impiety to doubt.[110]

Dick responds with three points. First, believers must be able to give a reason for their faith. Secondly, arguments for God's existence are useful to believers because this truth cannot be impressed too much on the mind, especially since we are prone to periods of doubt. Thirdly, the arguments proposed by atheism must be countered.[111] Nonetheless, Dick, much like Jonathan Edwards, distinguished between the *principled* validity of natural theology and its *de facto* efficacy. Dick thinks that pagans and other non-Christians have typically not been successful in deriving much truth about God by way of unassisted reason. The truth has been mixed with much error, and where the truth has been found, it has typically been derived initially from traditions influenced by revelation and buttressed with arguments after the fact. Moreover, Dick thinks that while the existence of God can be demonstrated by reason, it is easier to develop such arguments if one has already accepted the existence of God, for it is easier to find reasons for a truth already admitted than to discover *de novo* a truth through a proof.

American Southern Presbyterian Natural Theology

Robert J. Breckinridge (1800–1871), professor of divinity at Danville Seminary in Kentucky, provided a unified theistic proof in his *Knowledge of God, Objectively Considered* (1858).[112] Breckinridge emphasized the need for a simple argument and a single process of reasoning that can place the truth of God's existence "in a clear light" and "upon a firm foundation."[113] His theistic argumentation begins in Book I, chapter 5, with a version of the cosmological argument similar to the one developed by Samuel Clarke in his *Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God* (1823) and earlier by Puritan John Howe in his *Living Temple* (1675). This

---

[109]   Ibid.

[110]   Ibid., p. 158.

[111]   Ibid., pp. 158–9.

[112]   Robert J. Breckinridge, *The Knowledge of God, Objectively Considered, Being the First Part of Theology Considered as a Science of Positive Truth, Both Inductive and Deductive* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1858).

[113]   Ibid., p. 56.

proof is further refined with considerations of design in Book IV, chapters 23–5. While the *existence* of the universe logically allows us to prove the existence of "an original and eternal form of self-existence" that "must be an infinite spiritual form,"[114] a consideration of the special adaptation of finite existences is said to lead us to knowledge of God's *nature* or *perfections*. Finally, Breckinridge observes that Scripture nowhere attempts to demonstrate the existence of God, but the progress of philosophical thought has raised doubts that must be answered by the faithful.

Robert Lewis Dabney (1820–1898), professor at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, began his *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (1871) with two lectures on the existence of God. He engages arguments for the existence and nature of God as developed by Howe, Turretin, Clarke, Stillingfleet, Breckinridge, Paley, Chalmers, Dick, Thornwell, and Charnock. He also considers and responds to a variety of objections to theistic arguments raised by Hume and Kant, as well as challenges from Darwinian evolution. Dabney's overall attitude toward theistic arguments is positive: "That there is a science of Natural Theology, of at least some certain and connected propositions, although limited, and insufficient for salvation at best, is well argued from Scripture."[115] Dabney appeals to Romans 1:19, Psalm 19:1–7, and Acts 17:23. While Dabney is aware that "some old divines" deny natural theology for fear of granting too much to natural reason, Dabney argues that this fear is "ungrounded" and "extreme."[116] While it cannot be denied that some knowledge of God is the result of the influence of primeval traditions, it is essential to affirm a natural religious capacity in the human person. All revelation presupposes a natural apprehension of God's existence. Theistic arguments codify a natural reasoning process whereby human persons come to form beliefs about God.

In his *Lectures on Theology* James Henley Thornwell (1812–1862) defined natural theology as "that knowledge of God and of human duty which is acquired from the light of nature, or from the principles of human reason, unassisted by a supernatural revelation."[117] Although natural religion has never been conditioned solely by truths arrived at by reason due to the influence of tradition, Thornwell affirms that the mind is naturally constituted to arrive at truth about God by way of the principles of reason (for example, the law of causality) applied to the facts of experience. Theistic arguments articulate the grounds for the truths of natural theology. After a preliminary discussion on the nature of theology in Lecture I, Lecture II is devoted to a critical presentation of several theistic arguments: cosmological argument(s), the ontological argument, teleological argument(s), and the argument from conscience and the categories of good and evil. Citing Kant,

---

[114]   Ibid., p. 336.

[115]   Robert Lewis Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (1878; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985), p. 6.

[116]   Ibid.

[117]   James Henley Thornwell, *Theological Lectures* in *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, ed. John B. Adger (2 vols, Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publications, 1871), vol. 1, p. 31.

Thornwell dismisses the ontological argument, but he is more confident about the other traditional arguments.

Two features stand out in Thornwell's account. First, theistic arguments represent a formal articulation and confirmation of a natural, spontaneous process of reasoning about God. Thus theistic arguments are not the initial source of belief in God. Hence, "The real problem of theology is not to prove that a God exists, as if she were instructing the ignorant or imparting a new truth to the mind, but to show the grounds upon which we are already in possession of the truth."[118] Secondly, Thornwell cautions against taking the theistic arguments in isolation from each other. The cosmological argument, for example, "fails to give us any other conception of God that [sic] that of necessary being. It stops at His absoluteness. From his necessity and eternity you can infer nothing as to His nature and attributes."[119] Similarly, the teleological argument "fails to demonstrate the existence of an infinite author of the Universe. It proves intelligence, but it does not prove that that intelligence may not be derived."[120] Thornwell argues that the deficiencies of each argument may be compensated for by the other arguments. "In itself, it [design argument] is incomplete, but when added to the cosmological which gives us a Creator—an infinite, eternal, necessary Being— we perceive that this Being is intelligent, that he is an Almighty Spirit, and that the thoughts of His understanding have been from everlasting."[121]

Natural Theology at Princeton

Support for natural theology among Calvinists was especially strong at Princeton University in the nineteenth century, where it received development within the epistemological framework of Scottish common-sense philosophy, as well as the influence of Protestant scholastics such as Turretin and British divines such as George Hill, Dick, and Chalmers. From the latter, Princeton theologians received the positive estimate of natural theology within the context of the Reformed faith. From the former, it received a basis on which to defend natural theology against a variety of objections stemming from Hume and Kant. Although James McCosh (1811–1894), philosopher and president of Princeton, gave considerable attention to and support for various design arguments,[122] it is usually McCosh's contemporary Dr. Charles Hodge (1797–1878) who receives the greater attention as a Reformed defender of natural theology.[123]

---

[118]   Ibid., p. 58.

[119]   Ibid., p. 60.

[120]   Ibid., p. 62.

[121]   Ibid., p. 63.

[122]   See James McCosh, *The Method of Divine Government, Physical and Moral* (New York: R. Carter and Brothers, 1850).

[123]   For discussion on Hodge's view of reason and revelation, see Peter Hicks, *The Philosophy of Charles Hodge: A 19th Century Evangelical Approach to Reason, Knowledge, and Truth* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellon Press, 1997).

In his *Systematic Theology* (1872–1873), Hodge introduced natural theology by noting two extreme tendencies: "the one is that the works of nature make no trustworthy revelation of the being and perfections of God; the other, that such a revelation is so clear and comprehensive as to preclude the necessity of any supernatural revelation."[124] Hodge argues that although the revelation of God in the created order is neither comprehensive nor sufficient for salvation, "The Scriptures clearly recognize the fact that the works of God reveal his being and attributes … as to lay a stable foundation for natural theology.[125] Hodge provides the standard Reformed scriptural argument for natural theology from Romans, Acts, and the Psalms, while also appealing to the *Bridgewater Treatises* and works by Wolff, Butler, and Paley. The exclusive reliance on sources drawn entirely from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century natural theology is fairly perspicuous.

Hodge presents theistic arguments under 'theology proper'. He regarded theistic arguments as primarily establishing truths about the nature of the Being whose existence is grasped by an intuitive perception. The arguments are significant, then, even if they are not the initial source of belief in the existence of God, for they help unpack what lies enclosed in the intuitive grasp of God's existence. Hodge says: "The arguments are not designed so much to prove the existence of an unknown being, as to demonstrate that the Being who reveals himself to man in the very constitution of his nature must be all that Theism declares him to be."[126] Hodge also recognized that the strength of theistic arguments depends on their not being taken in isolation from each other. So, for example, the teleological argument primarily shows that the maker of the universe is an extramundane, intelligent and voluntary being. God's omnipotence is properly shown through the cosmological argument since, according to Hodge, infinite power is needed for creation *ex nihilo*. The argumentation is cumulative, with each argument filling out some aspect of the concept of God. Hodge thinks that the failure to appreciate this point is the source of objections to the conclusiveness of the arguments.[127]

Hodge's son, A.A. Hodge (1823–1886), also emphasized the cumulative nature of theistic arguments in his *Outlines of Theology* (1860, 1879):

> The cosmological argument led us to an eternal, self-existent First Cause. The argument from the order and adaptation discovered in the processes of the universe revealed this great First Cause as possessing intelligence and will; that is, as a personal spirit. The moral or anthropological argument furnishes new data for inference, at once confirming the former conclusions as to the fact of the existence of a personal intelligent First Cause, and at the same time adding to the conception the attributes of holiness, justice, goodness, and truth. The

---

124   Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols, n.d.; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), vol. 1, pp. 21–2.

125   Ibid., pp. 24–5.

126   Ibid., p. 203.

127   Ibid.

argument from design includes the argument from cause, and the argument from righteousness and benevolence includes both the arguments from cause and from design, and adds to them a new element of its own.[128]

While A.A. Hodge affirmed that the natural knowledge of God develops spontaneously in the minds of most people, he affirms the value of "formal arguments":

1ˢᵗ. These arguments are of value as analyses and scientific verifications of the mental processes implicitly involved in the spontaneous recognition of the self manifestations of God. 2ⁿᵈ. They are of use also for the purpose of vindicating the legitimacy of the process against the criticisms of skeptics. 3ʳᵈ. Also for the purpose of quickening and confirming the spontaneous recognition by drawing attention to the extent and variety of the evidences to which it responds. 4ᵗʰ. The various arguments are convergent rather than consecutive. They do not all establish the same elements of the theistic conception, but each establishes independently its separate element, and thus is of use (a) in contributing confirmatory evidence *that* God is, and (b) complementary evidence as to *what* God is.[129]

The Close of the Nineteenth Century

In his *Dogmatic Theology* (1888) William Shedd (1820–1894) introduced theistic arguments after chapters on the nature and definition of God and the innate idea of God. Since Shedd first argues for a universal, innate knowledge of God, theistic arguments are placed in a distinctly epistemological context. For Shedd, theistic arguments are not considered the primary mode of knowing God. They "assist the development of the idea of God, and contain a scientific analysis of man's natural consciousness of the deity."[130] The arguments are not a source *de novo* for the idea or knowledge of God. In fact, according to Shedd, the arguments possess their psychological force only because of an antecedent idea and knowledge of God. Moreover, Shedd acknowledged the legitimate apologetic function of theistic arguments since "these arguments reply to the counter-arguments of materialism and atheism."[131] While Shedd lists five main theistic arguments (the ontological, cosmological, teleological, moral, and historical), he devotes most of the chapter to articulating and defending a version of the ontological argument.

---

[128]   A.A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (Chicago: Bible Institute Colportage Ass'n, 1879), p. 41. Hodge's discussion of natural theology in this enlarged, revised edition was greatly influenced by Robert Flint's *Theism* (Edinburgh: W. Blackwood, 1877). Flint was a leading Scottish Presbyterian apologist.

[129]   Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, p. 32.

[130]   William Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 2nd edition (3 vols, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1980), vol. 1, p. 221.

[131]   Ibid., p. 222.

John Girardeau (1825–1898), professor at Theological Seminary, Columbia, South Carolina, provided a philosophical analysis and defense of theistic arguments in his *Discussion of Philosophical Questions* (posthumously, 1900). Girardeau considers two versions of the cosmological argument, the teleological argument, and the ontological argument. He maintains that the theistic arguments each complement each other and should not be treated as separate arguments. "The proofs, like globules of quicksilver running into one mass, or tributaries emptying into a great river, flow together and coalesce in one powerful demonstration."[132] He regards the cosmological argument as essentially an argument from causality to First Cause, specifically either from the contingency and changeableness of the world or from the finitude of the universe. The design argument at the very least proves the existence of a being with vast intelligence, power, and wisdom in the organizing of the cosmos. Combining the considerations of each argument gives us a proof for the existence of an intelligent creator who is infinite in power and knowledge. Moreover, we are led to conceive of these two arguments as converging on the same being because the principle of simplicity demands it.

Girardeau also considers the relevance and purpose of theistic arguments, especially since the existence of God appears to be a truth that does not stand in need of any demonstration. While the question as to the existence of God seems particular to the fallen world, "it is conceivable that unfallen intelligences would take delight in reflectively demonstrating the spontaneous faith in God's existence, which is the necessary product of their nature."[133] Moreover, the question of God's existence is in a sense forced upon the theist by the rise of philosophical defenses of atheism and agnosticism, which must be answered. Like the Southern Presbyterians and Princetonians, Girardeau emphasized that theistic arguments are not the source of belief in God, nor do these arguments presuppose that God's existence is in some sense initially doubtful.

> The view of the argument is just, which some writers propound, that it is not so much a demonstration of the divine existence as originally a doubtful and debatable fact, as it is an exposition and defense of our spontaneous faith in the fact; or rather, that it is the reflective construction of the spontaneous process by which the native tendency to believe in the divine existence is developed into actual faith. It is, from this point of view, vindicated against the position, maintained by some, that it is gratuitous, if not irrelevant.[134]

Nineteenth-century Calvinistic natural theology arguably reached a culmination in the work of Baptist theologian Augustus Strong (1836–1920). Strong's philosophically informed analysis and defense of theistic arguments is found in his

---

132 John Girardeau, *Discussion of Philosophical Questions*, ed. George A. Blackburn (Richard, VA: The Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1900), p. 305.

133 Ibid., p. 304.

134 Ibid.

Systematic Theology (1886) and lecture "Scientific Theism" in his *Philosophy and Religion* (1888). While Strong is critical of theistic arguments as purported logical demonstrations, he is favorable toward versions of the cosmological, teleological, and anthropological arguments as probable arguments that work together as parts of a cumulative case for theism. "These arguments," Strong says, "are probable, not demonstrative. For this reason they supplement each other, and constitute a series of evidences which is cumulative in its nature."[135] Strong also viewed theistic arguments as a mode by which the intuitive grasp of God's existence is "explicated and confirmed," not the initial source of belief in God.[136]

Historical Thesis: The Reformed Endorsement of Natural Theology

In this chapter I have outlined the emergence and development of a Reformed endorsement of natural theology beginning in the Reformation period and extending to the end of the nineteenth century. The Reformed tradition has consistently affirmed both natural knowledge of God and rational arguments for the existence and attributes of God. While Reformed theology has exhibited an interesting pluralism with respect to the function of theistic arguments, this pluralism presupposes a fundamental consensus on the propriety of developing theistic arguments. The representative character of the sources cited from diverse streams of the Reformed tradition during different historical epochs provides sufficient grounds for maintaining that there has been a widely instantiated, deeply entrenched, and historically continuous endorsement of natural theology in Reformed thought.

---

[135]   Augustus Strong, *Systematic Theology* (1907; reprint, Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1979), p. 71.

[136]   Ibid., pp. 67–71, 87–9.

Chapter 2

Understanding the Reformed Objection
to Natural Theology

The Reformed endorsement of natural theology articulated in Chapter 1 is part of a more complex story about natural theology in the Reformed tradition. While many Calvinistic theologians have supported the project of developing theistic arguments, prominent representatives of the tradition have also been critical of this project. This is particularly true of Reformed thought since the first half of the twentieth century. So it is not entirely surprising that more recent theologians and philosophers would characterize the Reformed tradition's stance toward natural theology in largely negative terms and speak, as Alvin Plantinga has, of a 'Reformed objection'[1] to natural theology. The historical thesis of Chapter 1 is of course consistent with there being objections to natural theology within the Reformed tradition, and the remaining chapters of the book will examine these ostensible objections. However, there seems to be two misconceptions about the significance of these objections in the larger context of the tradition—two mistaken historical perspectives on the place of natural theology in the Reformed tradition. In this chapter, I will address these misconceptions, as well as lay out a few conceptual distinctions essential to my own approach to Reformed criticisms of natural theology.

The Broad 'Reformed Objection' to Natural Theology

Twentieth-Century Philosophy of Religion

One prevalent misconception about natural theology in the Reformed tradition concerns the *extent* to which Reformed theology has rejected natural theology. Since the 1980s it has become increasingly fashionable in Anglo-American philosophy of religion to associate the Reformed tradition *in general* with opposition to natural theology, as if the majority of Reformed theologians have rejected theistic arguments or such a rejection has been the dominant position of the tradition.

In his highly influential paper, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology" (1980), Plantinga wrote:

---

[1] Alvin Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 54 (1980): 49–63.

> Suppose we think of natural theology as the attempt to prove or demonstrate the existence of God. This enterprise has a long and impressive history. … Many Christians, however, have been less than totally impressed. In particular Reformed or Calvinistic theologians have for the most part taken a dim view of this enterprise. A few Reformed thinkers—B.B. Warfield, for example,—endorse the theistic proofs; but for the most part the Reformed attitude has ranged from tepid endorsement, through indifference, to suspicion, hostility and outright accusations of blasphemy.[2]

Similarly, Nicholas Wolterstorff has said, "Characteristic of the Continental Calvinist tradition has been a revulsion against arguments in favor of theism or Christianity."[3] Wolterstorff has spoken of the rejection of the possibility of natural theology by "the bulk of Reformed theologians"[4] and linked this to the work of contemporary philosophers of religion in the Reformed tradition:

> One of the most salient features of contemporary philosophy of religion in the Reformed tradition of Christianity is its negative attitude toward natural theology—this negative attitude ranging all the way from indifference to hostility. In this regard, the philosophers of the tradition reflect the dominant attitude of the theologians of the tradition, going all the way back to its most influential founder, John Calvin.[5]

There is some truth lurking in the claims of Plantinga and Wolterstorff. There certainly have been objections to natural theology *within* the Reformed tradition. Moreover, as we will see in subsequent chapters, these criticisms have often been among the sharper and more aggressive sorts of Protestant criticisms of natural theology. However, it is inaccurate to say that the *bulk* of Reformed theologians have rejected natural theology, or that a revulsion against theistic arguments has been *characteristic* of the Continental Calvinist tradition. Charles Hodge and B.B. Warfield are not aberrations in a larger tradition dominated by opposition to natural theology. Of course, while Plantinga and Wolterstorff have contributed

---

[2] Alvin Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology" in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, ed. Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, David Basinger, 2nd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 329–41, at p. 329.

[3] Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Introduction" in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), pp. 1–15, at p. 7.

[4] Nicholas Wolterstorff, "The Reformed Tradition" in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Philip Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 165–70, at p. 166.

[5] Ibid., p. 165.

to the popularity of this idea in contemporary philosophy of religion,[6] it certainly did not originate with them. Various philosophers of religion in the first half of the twentieth century suggested the idea—for example Edgar Sheffield Brightman and Robert Leet Patterson.[7] So the notion that most Reformed thinkers have rejected natural theology runs deeper than the recent ruminations of Plantinga and Wolterstorff, but perhaps not too deeply. There is good reason to suppose that it is the product of twentieth-century thinking.

The Conspicuous Absence of a 'Reformed Objection' to Natural Theology

Reformed theologians in the seventeenth century made no appeal to any 'Reformed objection' to natural theology, despite its blatant abuse in the theology of the Remonstrants or Arminianism, specifically as developed by Corvinus and Episcopius. The Arminian exaggeration of the efficacy of human reasoning with reference to God and morality compromised the Reformed doctrine of total depravity and the correlated Reformed principle *sola gratia*.[8] An emphasis on human ability to make the right use of reason was viewed as essential to responsible moral agency. Natural theology increasingly typified a realm in which humans could autonomously make their approach to God through reason and advance their own moral improvement or prepare themselves for grace. The Reformed countered the Arminian position, not by denying natural theology, but by underscoring the limits imposed by the effects of sin on the powers of human reason and consequently the non-saving character of all natural knowledge of God. In fact, when the Socinians rejected natural theology, Reformed theologians were quick to challenge their denial![9]

---

[6]   For further examples, see C. Stephen Evans, "Apologetics in a New Key: Relieving Protestant Anxieties over Natural Theology" in *The Logic of Rational Theism: Exploratory Essays*, ed. Mark McLeod and William Lane Craig (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen Press, 1990), pp. 65–75, at p. 65, and Kenneth Konyndyk, "Faith and Evidentialism" in *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment*, ed. Robert Audi and William Wainwright (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 82–108, at p. 91.

[7]   See Robert Leet Patterson, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Holt and Company, 1958), p. 142; Edgar Sheffield Brightman, *A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1940), pp. 23–5, 172.

[8]   On Reformed orthodox disputes with Arminianism and Socinianism on natural theology and the correlated concepts of nature and grace, see John Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism: the Arguments for the Existence of God in Dutch Theology, 1575–1650* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1982), chapters 7 and 8.

[9]   Faustus Socinus denied both innate knowledge of God and any knowledge of God acquired by way of inferences from the created order. He held that the knowledge of God available to man independent of Scripture descended by way of "tradition" beginning with an initial revelation to Adam and supplemented periodically with further divine revelations. While the Reformed orthodox appealed to Romans 1:19–20 to support the doctrine of a natural knowledge of God, Socinus argued, on exegetical grounds, that the text refers to divine promises that were invisible from the *time* of the creation of the world,

In the eighteenth century, the deists inflated the sphere of natural theology, thereby undermining the necessity of supernatural theology. As in the prior century, Calvinists did not collectively rally against natural theology. They argued for the insufficiency of natural theology as a basis for religion and hence the need for supernatural revelation. For example, in his treatise *Natural Religion Insufficient* (1714), Scottish Calvinist Thomas Halyburton did not demand a rejection of natural theology, nor did he make any such objection the common ground for Calvinists. He argued that natural theology is most effectively developed within the context of the Christian faith. Since Christianity came into the world, "philosophers have much improven natural theology, and given a far better account of God, and demonstrated many of his attributes from reason. … From the excellent performances of this kind, which are many, I design not to detract."[10]

I think it is fair to say that a Reformed objection to natural theology simply did not belong to the consciousness of Reformed theology in either the seventeenth or eighteenth century. In fact, while John Dick, Robert Dabney, and Charles Hodge acknowledged Christian opposition to natural theology, they did not identify such opposition as uniquely Calvinistic. It would be surprising if these prominent nineteenth-century Reformed thinkers ignored a widespread opposition to natural theology as a distinctive feature of their own theological tradition.

It is also significant that a widespread Reformed objection to natural theology is not found in the prominent historical examinations of natural theology composed prior to the twentieth century.[11] E.H. Gillett's two-volume work *God in Human Thought* (1874)[12] was perhaps the most detailed nineteenth-century historical examination of natural theology from classical philosophy to the eighteenth century, but he makes no mention of any 'Reformed objection' to natural theology. Gillett discusses over a dozen contributions to natural theology by Reformed thinkers such as Edwards of England, Preston, Bates, and Charnock. In *A Critique of Design-Arguments* (1883),[13] Lewis Ezra Hicks examined the design argument

---

not a knowledge of God derived from the created order *itself*. See Socinus, *Praelectiones Theologicae* (Racow, 1609), pp. 3–5.

[10]   Thomas Halyburton, *Natural Religion Insufficient, and Revealed Necessary, to Man's Happiness in his Present State: Or, a Rational Enquiry into the Principles of the Modern Deists* (Albany: H.C. Southwick, 1812), p. 76. See also pp. 72–9. Halyburton's treatise was a response to the deism of Lord Herbert of Cherbury.

[11]   Two other studies include Thomas Turton, *Natural Theology, Considered with Reference to Lord Brougham's Discourse on that Subject* (London, 1836), pp. 206–18, and Thomas Flint, *Theism*, 7th edition (1877; reprint, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901), pp. 323–9. While providing an account of Christian opposition to natural theology, neither Turton nor Flint mentions any distinctly Calvinist objectors.

[12]   E.H. Gillett, *God in Human Thought* (2 vols, New York: Scribner, Armstrong, & Co., 1874).

[13]   Lewis Ezra Hicks, *A Critique of Design-Arguments: A Historical Review and Free Examination of the Methods of Reasoning in Natural Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1883).

from ancient philosophy to the end of the nineteenth century. Only one moderately Reformed author is mentioned as a critic of natural theology (William Irons), but several are mentioned as advocates of natural theology (Grew, Nieuwentyt, Chalmers, McCosh, Hodge). There is no hint that the Reformed tradition opposed natural theology. In his *History of the Philosophy of the Christian Religion from the Reformation to Kant* (1887),[14] Bernhard Pünjer notes the reception of natural theology in different forms among Reformed theologians such as Melanchthon, Zwingli, and Calvin. While noting deist deviations from Reformed doctrine, Pünjer makes no mention of Reformed opposition to natural theology. Alfred Caldecott's *Philosophy of Religion in England and America* (1901)[15] is of particular importance since he devotes considerable space to British and American theologians who rejected natural theology. No mention is made of Reformed theologians in this context, but Calvinists are discussed in Caldecott's chapter on "demonstrative rationalism," his designation for those versions of theism that affirm that God's existence can be demonstrated.

It is astonishing that a widespread 'Reformed objection' to natural theology would have existed and yet gone unnoticed by all these authors, especially since each of them considers Calvinism and Christian objections to natural theology. I think we must conclude that the 'Reformed objection' to natural theology, as characterized by twentieth-century philosophers of religion, simply did not exist before they invented it.[16]

Plausible Sources of the Misconception

Several factors plausibly explain the rise of the twentieth-century misconception concerning the extent of the Reformed tradition's rejection of natural theology.

First, some twentieth-century Reformed theologians have characterized the Reformed tradition in this fashion. In his *Reformed Dogmatics* (1947) G.H. Kersten wrote:

> Now we must consider the question whether the Reformed theologians have not been extremely remiss in neglecting to prove that God exists. … The Reformed have always been careful that they do not seek to deduce the existence of God from any of the arguments mentioned or any other proof. In not one of our doctrinal statements has this been attempted. The attempt to conclude the existence of

---

[14] Bernhard Pünjer, *History of the Christian Philosophy of Religion from the Reformation to Kant*, trans. W. Hastie (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1887).

[15] Alfred Caldecott, *The Philosophy of Religion in England and America* (London: Methuen & Co., 1901).

[16] This conclusion is corroborated by the two most thorough recent works on natural theology in the Reformed tradition: Richard Muller's *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* (3 vols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2003) and John Platt's *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism*.

God by means of human reasoning did not come from the Reformers, but from the days of the supremacy of the Wolffian philosophy. The Romish Church may teach in agreement with its anthropology and its idea of philosophy that we indeed have real proofs in the arguments mentioned above, but the Reformers have rejected this theory entirely.[17]

Secondly, as illustrated by philosophers such as Plantinga and Wolterstorff, analytic philosophers of religion have tended to focus on narrow and more recent streams of the Reformed tradition when it comes to their examination of natural theology in Reformed thought. For example, they have approached the Reformed tradition largely from the perspective of late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Dutch Calvinism represented by thinkers such as Abraham Kuyper, Herman Dooyeweerd, D.H.T. Vollenhoven, Herman Bavinck, G.C. Berkouwer, Herman Hoeksema, and Cornelius Van Til. Among these thinkers we do encounter largely negative assessments of natural theology, but one cannot draw conclusions about the majority of Reformed thinkers from these particular streams of Reformed theology. Much less can we validly draw conclusions about the Reformed tradition as a whole on the basis of an examination of theologians such as Karl Barth. Although Barth's theology was undertaken in dialogue with traditional Reformed theology, it represents a significant departure from Reformed orthodoxy, especially on the issues of the knowledge of God and natural theology. When Barth says, "[a]s a Reformed theologian I am subject to an ordinance which would keep me away from 'Natural Theology' even if my personal opinions inclined me to it,"[18] we must conclude that he speaks as a new brand of Reformed theologian.

Thirdly, advocates of the broad 'Reformed objection' have not been adequately sensitive to the distinction between the propriety of developing theistic arguments, on which the Reformed tradition has exhibited consensus, and the propriety of using such theistic arguments for some specific purpose, on which representatives of the tradition have exhibited a divergence of opinion. Consequently, there has been a tendency among some contemporary philosophers of religion to read Reformed criticisms of natural theology, where they find them, as absolute rejections of theistic arguments, when the criticisms are in fact directed toward particular ways of thinking about natural theology and not the project *per se*. This is especially true in the Dutch neo-Calvinist tradition. For example, Herman Bavinck and Abraham Kuyper each affirm the importance of developing theistic arguments, and even

---

[17]   G.H. Kersten, *Reformed Dogmatics: A Systematic Treatment of Reformed Doctrine*, trans. Rev. J.R. Beeke (2 vols, 1980; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1981), vol. 1, pp. 37, 41.

[18]   Karl Barth, *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God according to the Teaching of the Reformation* [The Gifford Lectures, 1937–1938], trans. J.L.M Haire and Ian Henderson (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1938), p. 5.

using them in Christian apologetics. They simply deny their role as a pre-dogmatic foundation for faith.[19] They do not reject natural theology *per se*.

Finally, where philosophers of religion have turned to early representatives of the Reformed tradition, they have typically focused on John Calvin. There have been two problems with this strategy. First, Calvin has often been read through distinctly twentieth-century lenses, which—due largely to the influence of Barth and neo-orthodox theology—either marginalize or ignore Calvin's positive view of the natural knowledge of God and theistic arguments. Coupled with the prior two deficiencies, this has led to a failure to see important continuities between Reformers like Calvin and the Reformed scholastic endorsement of natural theology. Secondly, despite Calvin's prominence as a Reformer, the exclusion of the viewpoints of other Reformers such as Melanchthon and Vermigli results in a distorted generalized picture of Reformation attitudes toward natural theology.

The Narrow 'Reformed Objection' to Natural Theology

Quite a few twentieth-century Protestant theologians and historians, though, have accepted the existence of a widespread and deeply entrenched appropriation of natural theology in the Reformed tradition, but they have argued that this appropriation is a departure from the viewpoint of Reformers such as Luther and Calvin.[20] Karl Barth, for example, argued that natural theology is not a genuine element of Reformation theology. It represents a scholastic departure from the theology of the Reformation and a capitulation to Roman Catholic theology.[21] Barth, of course, had to qualify his position since he admitted that there were elements of natural theology in Luther and Calvin. He had to argue that the Reformed endorsement of natural theology was incompatible with Reformation *principles*, not the actual theology of the Reformation.[22] Others, however, have argued that the

---

[19] See chapter 8 for a discussion of Bavinck and Kuyper.

[20] See Paul Althaus, *Die Prinzipien, der deutschen reformierten Dogmatik in Zeitalter der aristotelischen Scholastik* (Leipzig: Deichert, 1914), pp. 73–95; Ernst Bizer, *Frühorthodoxie und Rationalismus* (Zurich: EVZ Verlag, 1963), pp. 32–50; Otto Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics*, trans. Darrell Guder (2 vols, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981–1982); Barend Johannes van der Walt, "Natural Theology with Special Reference to the Viewpoints of Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, and the 'Synopsis Purioris Theologiae'" in *Heartbeat: Taking the Pulse of our Christian Theological and Philosophical Heritage* (Potchefstroom: Potchefstroom University, 1978), pp. 253–8. See also Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism*, pp. 2–9, 237–41, and Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, pp. 270–76.

[21] Barth is well known for tracing this alleged corruption of Reformation theology to the Belgic Confession. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F Torrance, vol. II.1 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957), pp. 127–8; and Barth, *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God*.

[22] Barth, *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God*, pp. 8–10.

Reformers, at least Luther and Calvin, rejected all natural theology, so Reformed scholasticism is discontinuous with the actual theology of the Reformation.[23]

The historical account of Chapter 1 implies that the narrow 'Reformed objection' is not a reasonable reading of the historical record. To be sure, unlike their scholastic descendents, the Reformers did not use the technical phrase *theologia naturalis* (natural theology), but they did favorably describe and refer to natural knowledge of God and theistic arguments; both of which subsequent thinkers in the tradition designated *theologia naturalis*. Nor will it do to suppose that the 'natural theology' of the Reformers reduces simply to an objective revelation of God in nature minus the appropriation of this revelation in the form of actual knowledge of God.[24] The Reformers accepted the actuality of the natural knowledge of God, not its mere potentiality. While this knowledge is distorted by the noetic effects of sin and is insufficient for salvation, they did not deny *de facto* natural knowledge of God, even in unregenerate persons.

Two factors explain this other prevalent twentieth-century misconception: (a) an overly narrow view of the nature of theistic arguments and (b) an inaccurate view of the function of theistic arguments within the dogmatic systems of early and high orthodoxy.

As suggested in the previous chapter, there is a distinction during the Reformation period between 'natural' and 'philosophical' arguments.[25] By 'natural arguments' I refer to the simple design argument and the collection of historico-anthropological arguments (for example, from universal consent, conscience, and prophecy), typically cast in a rhetorical form and having their historical ancestry in Cicero and Stoic natural theology. By 'philosophical arguments' I refer to arguments from efficient and final causality, Aquinas's arguments from motion and degrees of perfection, and arguments from the contingency and beginning of the universe. These are often cast in a more rigorous form as logical demonstrations, resembling the argumentation of medieval scholasticism, and, for some arguments, ultimately the natural theology of Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*. Admittedly, this distinction is not an entirely sharp one, but it is helpful inasmuch as it captures a broad notion of theistic argument that has operated within the Reformed tradition as a result of its assimilation of both humanist and scholastic forms of discourse. The tendency to read Calvin and other Reformers as having no place for theistic arguments results from a failure to recognize the distinction between two kinds of theistic arguments.

---

[23]   For example, Gordon J. Spykman, *Reformational Theology: a New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1992), pp. 20–39.

[24]   G.C. Berkouwer, *General Revelation* (1955; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979), pp. 47, 152–3; Spykman, *Reformational Theology*, pp. 168–72; Stanley James Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), p. 135.

[25]   The co-mingling of the two kinds of arguments is a common feature of Calvinism well into the nineteenth century. See Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, pp. 181–95.

The function of theistic arguments in relation to dogmatic theology is also an important issue. As explained in Chapter 1, the introduction and development of theistic arguments in early and high scholastic dogmatic systems, whether under theological prolegomena or the *locus de Deo*, was not an attempt to make natural theology a rational, pre-dogmatic foundation for revealed theology. This misreading of Reformed orthodoxy, perpetuated by Barth among others, naturally results in the perception of a discontinuity between Reformed orthodoxy and Reformation theology. But the perception is based on a faulty assumption that conflates the place of natural theology in early Reformed dogmatics and its role in post-Enlightenment theological systems developed by Reformed thinkers under the influence of Cartesianism and Wolffian rationalism.[26]

Viewed from the present perspective, then, the proliferation of theistic arguments in the Reformed tradition during early orthodoxy represents a development and expansion of a motif already present in Reformation theology, not the introduction of a new motif that marks a point of discontinuity with Reformation theology. What we find beginning in the phase of early orthodoxy is an expansion of the domain and significance of philosophical arguments and their apologetic deployment, though orthodox Reformed theologians continued to place natural and philosophical arguments side by side in their dogmatic works and theological disputations. If there is a discontinuity within the tradition concerning natural theology, it is between the earlier and later scholastics with respect to the function of natural theology, not the basic acceptability of the project of constructing theistic arguments. Twentieth-century thinkers may have identified a discontinuity between the dominant forms of natural theology in the eighteenth century and the earlier tradition but not between the Reformers and their immediate scholastic descendants.

Mapping Out the Conceptual Territory

So two prominent twentieth-century views of natural theology in the Reformed tradition fail to place Reformed objections to natural theology in their proper historical perspective. They exaggerate the extent of Reformed objections to natural theology in the tradition or wrongly maintain a radical discontinuity between Reformation theology and Reformed scholasticism. Unfortunately, these misconceptions have placed limitations, if not obstacles, in the way of properly understanding and evaluating objections to natural theology where they do arise within the tradition. With the pluralistic Reformed endorsement of natural theology in view, though, we can adopt a more effective strategy for examining Reformed objections to natural theology. The historical account in Chapter 1 entails a set of conceptual distinctions essential to properly handling Reformed objections to natural theology, the focus of the remaining chapters of this book.

---

26   See ibid., vol. 3, pp. 153–9.

Duplex Natural Theology: Natural Theology α and Natural Theology β

One of the crucial conceptual distinctions implied by the historical account of Chapter 1 is the distinction between natural knowledge of God and theistic argument.[27] Owing to the centrality of this distinction for the remainder of the book, I will henceforth designate the former natural theology α and the latter natural theology β.

We saw in Chapter 1 that since the Reformation, Reformed thinkers have distinguished between a naturally implanted knowledge of God (*cognitio dei insita*) and an acquired knowledge of God (*cognitio dei acquisita*). The former is knowledge that arises in some way other than by explicitly formulated arguments, either because the knowledge is non-inferential or spontaneously inferred from principles internal to the mind. The latter refers to either (i) knowledge that is produced by reflection and argumentation, or (ii) knowledge that is a more spontaneous inference from the visible works of creation. If (i) is in view, then natural theology β is identified with *cognitio dei acquisita* but distinguished from *cognitio dei insita*. If (ii) is in view, then natural theology β is distinct from both the *cognitio dei insita* and the *cognitio dei acquisita*. In either case, the orthodox Reformed account of the natural knowledge of God entails a distinction between natural theology α and natural theology β.

This distinction does not imply that theistic arguments are not a source of natural knowledge of God, or that they do not otherwise contribute to the natural knowledge of God. Where thinkers in the tradition identify theistic arguments with the *cognitio dei acquisita*,[28] theistic arguments have an explicit epistemic value, for they are equated with one mode of the natural knowledge of God. Where thinkers in the tradition contrast theistic arguments with both the *cognitio dei insita* and *cognitio dei acquisita*, theistic arguments are typically construed as the reflective clarification and development of the implanted and acquired natural knowledge of God. Theistic arguments have epistemic value here as contributing to *scientia dei*, a reflective or philosophical knowledge of God. Of course, this is natural knowledge of God, but natural knowledge of God acquired by way of explicit argument. The point of the distinction between natural theology α and natural theology β is to emphasize that there is *some* natural knowledge of God that is not derived from theistic arguments. So natural theology β, if epistemically efficacious, entails natural theology α, but the converse is not true.

---

[27]   Wolfhart Pannenberg has recently drawn a very similar distinction between natural knowledge of God and natural theology (construed as philosophical knowledge of God). See Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991), vol. 1, p. 76.

[28]   For example, Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt and trans. John Vriend (2 vols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003–2004), vol. 2, pp. 72–6; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th edition (1939; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), pp. 35–6; Kersten, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, pp. 8–9.

Theistic Arguments as the Reflective Development of Natural Theology α

The above account suggests that natural theology β is properly construed as the reflective development of natural theology α, not the initial source or basis of natural theology α. There is what we might call a *pre-philosophical* natural knowledge of God, which is reflectively developed by way of theistic arguments. I will refer to this process as one of *formalizing* the natural knowledge of God.[29] If we assume that the natural knowledge of God is spontaneously inferential, theistic arguments would unpack the details of such inferences. The process of formalizing the natural knowledge of God would include (a) rendering the premises and conclusions of such inferences explicit, (b) providing support for or defending the premises of the inference, and (c) establishing and defending the relevant principles that would sanction the inference.[30]

It should be emphasized that the formalization thesis is not unique to the Reformed tradition. Prominent Catholic philosophers have held that philosophical arguments for the existence and nature of God, such as those articulated by Aquinas, represent the reflective articulation and development of a more spontaneous mode of knowing God.[31] A large number of nineteenth-century Protestant theologians also took this position. While emphasizing that theistic belief is based on grounds or evidences, they nonetheless distinguished between these grounds and explicitly formulated arguments. For these thinkers, theistic arguments represent the reflective development of natural grounds or evidences that are causally operative in producing a spontaneous knowledge of God's existence.[32] Nineteenth-century

---

[29]   I am assuming at this stage that what is formalized is *de facto* natural knowledge of God. One might also suppose that what is formalized is what can in principle be known about God from the created order. For further discussions on this, see Chapter 5.

[30]   Broadly speaking, sanction principles would include principles concerning cause and effect (metaphysical principles), the nature of knowledge (epistemological principles), and the tightness of the inferential connection between the premises and conclusion of the argument form (logical principles).

[31]   Jacques Maritain, *Approaches to God* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954), chapter 1; George Hayward Joyce, *Principles of Natural Theology*, 2nd edition (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1924), pp. 8–10; John F. McCormick, *Scholastic Metaphysics, Part II: Natural Theology* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1943), pp. 8–9; R. Garrigou-Lagrange, *God: His Existence and His Nature* (2 vols, London: B. Herder, 1949), vol. 1, pp. 27–31, 66, 346.

[32]   Robert Flint, *Theism*, pp. 60–81; George Fisher, *The Grounds of Theistic and Christian Belief* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1886), p. 37; J. Lewis Diman, *The Theistic Argument as Affected by Recent Theories* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Co., 1881), pp.76–80, 364–5; John Caird, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, new edition (1880; reprint, New York: Macmillan and Co., 1891), pp. 1–6, 37–48, 125–50; Samuel Harris, *God the Creator and Lord of All* (2 vols, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1896), vol. 1, chapter 2; Francis J. Hall, *Theological Outlines*, 3rd edition (1892; reprint, New York: Morehouse-Gorham, 1933), p. 54.

Reformed thinkers who took this position were not only refining earlier insights of the Reformed tradition, but echoing a motif prevalent in nineteenth-century philosophical theology.

The formalization thesis is also closely connected to the standard biblical justification for natural theology β in the Reformed tradition. If natural theology is the reflective development of natural theology α, then the biblical affirmation of natural knowledge of God provides a basis for the project of developing theistic arguments. The appeal to Romans 1:19–20 must be interpreted in this context. Reformed theologians rarely take this text to be a direct affirmation of natural theology β. They do not take the Apostle Paul to be presenting a theistic argument of any sort, nor even referring to theistic arguments. They typically take the text to affirm the reality of natural knowledge of God, which *may* be confirmed, clarified, and developed by theistic proofs. Such a justification for natural theology β is, of course, strengthened by passages of Scripture that ostensibly illustrate natural theistic reasoning (for example, Acts 14, 17). The main point here is that the formalization thesis allows a more indirect biblical justification of natural theology β on the basis of Romans 1:19–20.[33]

The Diversity of Models of Natural Theology

The formalization thesis brings us back to one of the important motifs implied by the historical account in Chapter 1: the functional diversity of theistic arguments. The formalization thesis suggests that theistic arguments can operate in the context of the exposition of Scripture itself, as a way of validating, clarifying, and developing the natural knowledge of God *as a biblical datum*. If Scripture affirms that God can be known by a self-revelation in the natural order of things, then natural theology β can be viewed as an exploration of the content of this revelation. This is precisely what we have seen in the historical Reformed endorsement of natural theology. Moreover, in this context, theistic arguments have also been viewed as assisting the systematic development of a biblically based doctrine of God, for example, by bringing conceptual clarity to the divine attributes affirmed by Scripture. In this way, the reflective exploration of the natural knowledge of God becomes a scientific consciousness of God the creator. It is not surprising, then, that Reformed theologians have viewed natural theology β as a way of both extending and strengthening Christian belief in God.

---

[33]   This effectively undercuts two common criticisms of the Romans argument for natural theology β: (i) the Apostle Paul was not offering any proof of God's existence and (ii) Paul affirms natural revelation, not natural theology. For these criticisms, see Robert McGregor Wright, "The Greek Origins of Natural Theology," *Journal of Biblical Apologetics* 1:1 (Fall 2000): 8–17, at p. 15; Charles D. Heck, "The Apologetic of R.C. Sproul: Biblical and Reformed? A Critique," *Journal of Biblical Apologetics* 6:9 (Winter 2003): 19–55, at p. 54; Stephen R. Spencer, "Is Natural Theology Biblical?" *Grace Theological Journal* 9:1 (1988): 59–72.

Following the historical account in Chapter 1, we can discern at least three closely related uses of natural theology β here: (i) confirming and explicating the natural knowledge of God as a biblical datum, (ii) assisting the systematic development of a biblically based doctrine of God, and (iii) strengthening and augmenting the Christian's knowledge of God. I will refer to these uses of natural theology β under the general rubric of the *dogmatic function* of natural theology β; for in each case natural theology β presupposes and operates as part of the discourse of dogmatic theology. Technically, I will understand the dogmatic function of natural theology β to be the disjunction of (i)–(iii).

But we have also seen two other important functions for natural theology β in the Reformed tradition: the *pre-dogmatic function* and *apologetic function*. According to the former, theistic arguments are parts of a system of theology that is independent of dogmatic theology and serves as its rational foundation. According to the latter, theistic arguments are used to defend theism against the objections of atheists and agnostics. While they appear similar, it is important to distinguish between these two functions of natural theology β. Theologians of the early and high orthodox period recognized a defensive use of theistic arguments to *refute objections* made against the faith. This is entirely compatible with the instrumental use of reason affirmed by the theologians of these periods. So theistic arguments often appear as digressions within the dogmatic system designed to counter atheistic objections, or at any rate, designed to supply the Christian with such responses. Indeed, in this context we often see a close connection between the apologetic use of theistic arguments and their use to strengthen the Christian's belief in God, which presumably might be threatened by atheistic criticisms. The pre-dogmatic function of natural theology β, however, entails a more positive use of theistic arguments to *establish* the faith. Here reason has become a *principium* of the dogmatic system. Consequently, reason plays a substantive and formative role in the dogmatic system, including the subtle implication that faith, or at least the reasonableness of faith, rests on the prior establishment by reason of Christian doctrine.

The functional diversity of natural theology β is one aspect of a broader pluralism we have encountered in the Reformed tradition regarding theistic arguments. Not only have Reformed theologians differed on the function of theistic arguments, but they have taken different positions on what exactly theistic arguments are supposed to prove, how strongly they prove it, what are the preferable kinds of theistic arguments, and how these kinds of theistic arguments relate to each other. These considerations all belong to what we might call the logic of theistic arguments. To best capture the tradition's pluralism with respect to the function and logic of theistic arguments, I believe we should speak in terms of different *models* of natural theology β. A model of natural theology β will specify some function(s) for natural theology β and provide a particular account of the logic of theistic arguments.

The Approach to Reformed Objections to Natural Theology

The diversity of models of natural theology β in the Reformed tradition introduces a crucial conceptual issue for the understanding and evaluation of Reformed objections to natural theology. For any ostensible Reformed objection to natural theology β, we have to consider the possibility that the objection targets only a particular model of natural theology β. For example, perhaps there are objections to natural theology β that are only objections to a pre-dogmatic model of natural theology β. Perhaps there are objections to the idea that God's existence can be logically demonstrated or proved in some rationally compelling manner. In these scenarios, we may not be driven to reject natural theology β altogether but only certain models of natural theology β.

An examination of ostensible Reformed objections to natural theology β should determine whether there is an objection to natural theology β that would constitute an objection to *all* models of natural theology β. This would be the most potent kind of objection to natural theology β. The easiest way to handle this possibility is to distinguish between an objection to the project of natural theology β, the very idea of developing theistic arguments, and an objection to some particular model(s) of natural theology β. I will refer to the former as 'project objections' and the latter as 'model-specific objections.' A 'project objection' will be an objection to *any* model of natural theology β (a kind of maximal model objection), but a 'model-specific objection' need not be a project objection. Ultimately we want to know whether there is any Reformed objection to natural theology β that is a project objection and whether the objection is a good one.[34]

What exactly could count as a project objection to natural theology β? Clearly, if there were some essential feature of natural theology β, and an objection targeted this feature, we would have a project objection. Let me suggest one such essential feature. For the remainder of the book I will assume that natural theology β is epistemically loaded. As a first approximation, this means that natural theology β can be a source of knowledge of God. The general idea will be clarified and adjusted in subsequent chapters. While it is possible that this is not an essential feature of natural theology β, it seems that all the models of natural theology β I have summarized above presuppose the epistemic efficacy of natural theology β. Hence, an objection to the epistemic efficacy of theistic arguments will constitute a project objection to natural theology β, at least from the vantage point of the models of natural theology I have outlined. Is there a Reformed objection to natural theology β that is a project objection? If so, how good of an objection is it? These are the two questions that will be the focus of the remaining chapters of the book.

---

[34]   There could be a set of model-specific objections to natural theology β that jointly constitute an objection to all models of natural theology β, even if none of the objections is individually a project objection. In this case, I will regard the conjunction of model-specific objections as a project objection (a kind of complex project objection), for the conjunction of objections in this case would be a maximal model objection.

PART II
Natural Theology and the Immediate Knowledge of God

This page has been left blank intentionally

Chapter 3

The Naturally Implanted Knowledge of God[1]

Following the Stoic stream of classical philosophy and many of the early church fathers,[2] the Reformed tradition has consistently affirmed that the knowledge of God is *innate* or *naturally implanted* in the human mind. Reformed theologians have typically denied that this knowledge is conscious or occurrent knowledge impressed on the mind from the time of birth. It is best construed as an innate disposition, present from birth, to form belief in God in a spontaneous manner upon mental maturation and experience of the world. It is contrasted with knowledge acquired by testimony or teaching, lengthy investigation, or reflective thinking and logical analysis. Belief in God, then, originates from the natural constitution of the human person as a rational moral agent.[3]

The attraction of this particular epistemological thesis is closely tied to two aspects of Reformed theology. First, it underscores the sovereignty and goodness of God, for if the knowledge of God is something first implanted by God Himself, the knowledge of God is a gift from God and does not depend on human intellectual ability. This is one of the implications of the Reformed interpretation of Romans 1:19–20. Secondly, if the knowledge of God is part of our natural constitution as human persons, it will be common to all people. In that case, no one can plead ignorance of God.[4] Hence, the naturally implanted knowledge of God functions as a ground for human accountability before God. This is another implication of Romans 1:19–20, according to which God's perspicuous revelation of Himself in the created order renders everyone without excuse. Of equal significance in this regard is Romans 2:15–16: "They [the Gentiles] show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them on that day when, according

---

[1]   Parts of this chapter have been reprinted by kind permission of the publisher, vol. 3, *The History of Western Philosophy of Religion*, Graham Oppy and Nick Trakakis (eds), 2009, Acumen Publishing.

[2]   Cicero, *De natura deorum*, II.12; St. John Damascene, *De fide orthodoxa*, 1.3.

[3]   For a good summary of the Reformed view, see Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt and trans. John Vriend (4 vols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), vol. 2, pp. 71–2.

[4]   More precisely, no one can plead *non-culpable* ignorance of God. All people may be born with an innate disposition to know God, but the Reformed doctrine of sin entails that people will suppress and corrupt this natural disposition to know God in various ways. One of the consequences of this is ignorance of God to varying degrees, but this ignorance will be culpable inasmuch as it is the product of voluntary actions.

to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus." This implies that an innate knowledge of divine law provides a basis for moral accountability. Given that law implies a lawgiver, innate moral principles imply that God Himself can be known from the moral constitution of human persons. So Romans 1:19–20 and 2:15–16 converge on a common theme and together support the Reformed doctrine of a naturally implanted knowledge of God.

In this chapter, I want to begin considering whether the doctrine of the innate idea of God, or any similar epistemology of theistic belief, provides a good objection to natural theology β. More precisely, I am interested in determining the prospects for a good *project* objection to natural theology β. If there is no good project objection here, do we at least have some good model-specific objection to natural theology β? There are two reasons for selecting this starting point. First, some historians and theologians of the Reformed tradition have appealed to the innate idea of God as grounds for either rejecting natural theology β or regarding it as unnecessary. Secondly, since the nineteenth century there has been a trend in Protestant theology to take the naturally implanted knowledge of God as intuitive or immediate and to place it in opposition to natural theology β.[5] So this motif in religious epistemology has been fertile ground for criticisms of natural theology β.

The Innate Idea of God, Immediacy, and Reformed Models

At first glance, it is difficult to see why the naturally implanted knowledge of God should constitute a project objection to natural theology β. The idea that the knowledge of God begins with a spontaneous recognition of the existence of God seems at least logically consistent with there being epistemically efficacious arguments for God's existence. Indeed, Reformed theologians have sometimes appealed to the naturally implanted knowledge of God to prove that God exists.[6] Roughly stated, beliefs that are natural to the human mind are true, theistic belief is natural to the human mind, so God exists. Moreover, if the naturally implanted

---

    5   For a discussion of these trends, see Robert Flint, *Theism*, 7th edition (1877; reprint, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901), p. 81; John Caird, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1891), chapters 3 and 5; Alfred Caldecott, *Philosophy of Religion* (London: Methuen and Co., 1901), pp. 86–92, 97–104, 273–337.

    6   See Philip Melanchthon, *Opera quae supersunt omnia*, *Corpus Reformatorum*, ed. C.B. Bretschneider and E.H. Bindweil (28 vols, Halle and Brunswick, 1834–1960)*, vol. 21, col. 642; Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. Rev. G.W. Williard, 4th American edition (Cincinnati: Elm Street Publishing Company, 1888), p. 121; Edward Leigh, *A Treatise of Divinity* (London, 1646), 2.1; Francis Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae* (Geneva, 1679–1685), 3.1.16–17; John Edwards, *Theologia Reformata, or the Body and Substance of the Christian Religion* (London, 1713), 1.3.

knowledge of God is inferential, then—as indicated by the formalization thesis—we can easily view natural theology β as a means of confirming and developing this natural knowledge of God. Nonetheless, perhaps a potential objection to natural theology β lurks here. While some theologians in the Reformed tradition have interpreted the naturally implanted knowledge of God as something inferentially derived, howbeit in a spontaneous manner, from principles internal to the mind,[7] others have taken it to be immediate, and not inferential at all. Perhaps the *immediacy* of natural theology α generates a problem for natural theology β.

We might suppose that if the natural knowledge of God is immediate, natural theology β is unnecessary. In other words, immediate knowledge of God might be viewed as a sufficient source of natural knowledge of God. I will refer to this as the SI thesis. This thesis does not simply claim that there are conditions that suffice for there being immediate natural knowledge of God, but that immediate natural knowledge of God is itself sufficient. The idea seems to be that any important truth about God that could be known by rational inference can also be known immediately (though the converse may not be true), and in fact nearly everyone who has natural knowledge of God acquires it in an immediate manner. Hence, even if natural theology β can be epistemically efficacious, it is epistemically superfluous. Here we have a kind of project objection to natural theology β, one that denies its relevance not its epistemic efficacy.

A more radical immediacy thesis would be that God is naturally known *only* in an immediate manner. In this case, the natural knowledge of God is exclusively immediate. Since the formalization thesis rests on the presupposition that there is some inferential natural knowledge of God, this stronger immediacy thesis undercuts the idea of natural theology β as the reflective development of natural theology α. More significantly, the exclusive immediacy thesis entails that natural theology β cannot be a source of knowledge of God. Since natural theology β is epistemically loaded, the exclusive immediacy thesis looks like a fairly straightforward project objection. I will focus primarily on the exclusive immediacy thesis (hereafter EI thesis) in this chapter, while noting the bearing of the arguments on the SI thesis. Since we are looking for *Reformed* objections to natural theology β, a fairly basic question is whether there *is* any Reformed model of immediate knowledge of God that entails either the EI or the SI thesis.

---

[7]   For example, see Franciscus Junius, *Opera theologica* (1607), vol. 1, col. 1391–3; Turretin, *Institutio*, 1.3.4, 9; Robert L. Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (1972; reprint, Grand Rapids,MI: Baker Book House, 1985), pp. 7–8; A.A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (Chicago: Bible Institute Colportage, 1878), pp. 30–32.

Calvin and the Natural Knowledge of God

The Exclusive Immediacy Interpretation of Calvin

As stated in Chapter 1, Calvin affirmed a naturally implanted knowledge of God or *sensus divinitatis* (*Institutes*, 1.3) as well as knowledge of God from the external manifestation of God in the works of creation and providence (*Institutes*, 1.5). Traditionally, Calvin commentators have interpreted this account of the natural knowledge of God as at least including an inferential element—specifically inferences to the attributes of God from empirically accessible features of the world, such as its beauty and order.[8] While the *sensus divinitatis* refers to the nearly universal conviction that there is some sort of divinity, yet by means of God's manifestation in creation we are able to *infer* the goodness, wisdom, and providential power of this deity. On this traditional view the natural knowledge of God is both naturally implanted and acquired discursively from observable features of the world.

However, some twentieth-century thinkers have proposed that Calvin's account of the natural knowledge of God plausibly involves no inferential element at all.[9] They maintain that, for Calvin, the natural knowledge of God is exclusively immediate. We have simply been designed with an innate disposition (*sensus divinitatis*) to form various theistic beliefs in experiential circumstances such as the observation of the beauty or orderly nature of the cosmos. The position does not deny the conceptual mediacy of the natural knowledge of God, or that the knowledge of God is mediated by creation in some way. The idea is rather that we do not arrive at belief in God by way of argument or inference from other beliefs or items of knowledge. The natural knowledge of God is analogous to widely held accounts of our sensory perceptual knowledge, knowledge of other minds, and knowledge of self-evident truths. The beliefs are spontaneously and non-inferentially formed in us. For some authors, this account of Calvin's position on

---

[8]   See B.B. Warfield, *Calvin and Calvinism* in *The Works of Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield* (10 vols, 1932; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2000), vol. 5, pp. 39–44; Edward Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (1952; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 72–81; Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 2nd edition (4 vols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), vol. 1, p. 275; vol. 3, pp. 173–4; Edward Adams, "Calvin's View of Natural Knowledge of God," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 3:3 (November 2001): 280–92.

[9]   T.H.L. Parker, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959), p. 9, n. 1; Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 171–7, and "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 15 (1980): 49–63; Paul Helm, *Faith and Understanding* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), pp. 180–82; Dewey Hoitenga, *Faith and Reason from Plato to Plantinga: an Introduction to Reformed Epistemology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), pp. 155–7.

the natural knowledge of God partly explains Calvin's alleged rejection of theistic arguments.[10] Indeed, this is a particularly attractive interpretation for Reformed theologians who want to affirm natural revelation but deny natural theology β, for immediate natural knowledge of God may be viewed as natural revelation, where this is distinct from knowledge produced by the human activity of drawing rational inferences.

Calvin's Theistic Arguments and the Nature of Inference

While we find nothing like Aquinas's Five Ways in Calvin, or the extended philosophical argumentation of a Descartes or Leibniz, it does not follow that Calvin rejected either theistic arguments or the inferential character of the natural knowledge of God.

First, as shown in Chapter 1, Calvin believed that some knowledge of God as creator was mediated by God's works of creation and providence, which supply "innumerable evidences" of God's wisdom power, and goodness. These evidences can be expressed in the form of "natural arguments" or "proofs." In both the *Institutes* and his biblical commentaries, Calvin attempted to show that the phenomena of beauty and order in the cosmos are best explained by theism, and not by chance or natural principles. Calvin aptly summarized the theistic inference in his commentary on Romans: "God has presented to the minds of all the means of knowing him, having so manifested himself by his works, that they must see what of themselves they seek not to know—that there is some God; for the world does not exist by chance, nor could it have proceeded from itself."[11] Calvin here alludes to the design argument on which he elaborates with greater detail in the *Institutes* 1.5.2–3, 6–8, and in his commentaries on Psalm 19 and 104.[12] The argument is brief and rhetorical, but it is an argument nonetheless. Calvin is of course careful to distinguish these "natural arguments" from the arguments of the philosophers. He avoids "long and toilsome" proofs in favor of a more simple and rhetorically effective presentation, which underscores that we can in principle reach truths about God by way of inferences from God's works. So those who interpret Calvin as advocating an exclusivist immediacy thesis fail to do justice to Calvin's own explicit endorsement of natural theistic arguments.

---

[10]   Parker, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, pp. 7–9; Auguste Lecerf, *Introduction to Reformed Dogmatics* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1949), pp. 242–5; Helm, *Faith and Understanding*, pp. 181–2.

[11]   John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. and ed. John Owens, in *Calvin's Commentaries* (22 vols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), vol. 19, II, p. 71.

[12]   Calvin's endorsement of simple design arguments follows the Romans commentaries of Bucer and Melanchthon, both of whom Calvin mentions favorably in the preface to his own commentary.

Moreover, it is important to remember that the evidences expressed in the form of theistic arguments can function as the grounds of a more or less spontaneous sort of theistic inference. This point has not been sufficiently appreciated by advocates of the exclusivist immediacy interpretation of Calvin. Humans engage in inferential patterns of reasoning every day, but these inferences rarely come packaged as explicitly formulated arguments, much less logical demonstrations. Upon seeing my neighbor's front porch light on and the car in the driveway, I believe that my neighbor is home. After entering a room and seeing a steaming cup of coffee, I believe that someone was recently in the room. I believe that a person has a bad character after learning that he has repeatedly lied to me, beats his wife on a regular basis, and has embezzled money from his company for several years. These are plausibly cases of beliefs being formed by inference, even though they are not the product of any conscious process of reasoning or argumentation.

Why say that the target belief in these cases is formed inferentially? As a first approximation, in the above cases the target belief is plausibly based on *reasons* in the form of other belief states, as opposed to being based purely on perceptual states. What precisely is involved in one belief being based on another belief?[13] If a person's belief in some proposition p is based on some other belief that q, then the person believes p *because* she believes some other proposition q. Her believing q explains *why* she believes p. While the explanatory relation here is causal, the target belief must be caused in the appropriate way. The formation of the belief that p must be *guided* by the belief that q, as opposed merely to being the effect of the belief that q. The cognizer should be aware or take it that q is evidence for p, supports p, or is otherwise an indicator of the truth of p. It follows that inferential beliefs, though they are based on reasons, need not be based on explicitly formulated arguments.[14] They are fundamentally beliefs based on *reasons* in the form of other beliefs. In the above cases, I form a particular belief after acquiring new information, and the process is guided by both the new information and at least one antecedent though perhaps implicit belief. Since there is a kind of latent, abstract argument structure in these natural inferential patterns, we can make such structures explicit and develop them with greater precision upon reflective analysis. So where there is a spontaneous inference of some sort, it can, at least in principle, be developed into an explicit argument.

Now according to Calvin, God's wisdom, power, and goodness are *displayed*, *exhibited*, or *manifested* in particular aspects of the physical world. Consider

---

[13]   For discussion on the so-called "basing relation," see Keith Allen Korcz, "Recent Work on the Basing Relation," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 34 (1997): 171–91; and Robert Audi, "Belief, Reason, and Inference" in Audi, *Structure of Justification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 233–73.

[14]   On the distinction between beliefs that are due to a *reason* and beliefs due to a *reasoning* process, see Audi, *Structure of Justification*, pp. 237–9. I apply this to Calvin's account of the natural knowledge of God in "The Prospects for 'Mediate' Natural Theology in John Calvin," *Religious Studies* 31 (1995): 53–68.

Calvin's comments on Psalm 19: "David shows how it is that the heavens proclaim to us the glory of God, namely, by openly bearing testimony that they have not been put together by chance but were wonderfully created by the Supreme Architect."[15] How do they bear such testimony? Not by automatically engendering theistic beliefs, as though the heavens are to theistic belief what sensation is to perceptual beliefs, but by exhibiting the properties of order and beauty that indicate intelligence, power, and goodness. The psalmist, for instance, is said "to extol the matchless wisdom God has shown in creating the heavens; for the sun, moon, and stars are not confusedly mixed together, but each has its own position and station assigned to it, and their manifold courses are regulated."[16] So knowledge of God is *derived from* the contemplation of these features of the world, not merely *occasioned by* the experience of them. There is a certain mental attending to features of the world that are taken by the subject as indications of God's nature by virtue of logical connections between the features in question and various divine attributes. The inference may be spontaneous but it is still an inference. It depends on beliefs to the effect that the world exhibits order, beauty, and utility in the arrangement of things, and that these properties are indications of wisdom, goodness, and power.[17]

Sensus Divinitatis *and External Witness*

In contrast to the interpretation of Calvin just offered, Alvin Plantinga has argued that Calvin is plausibly read as simply affirming an immediate knowledge of God that is engendered by widely realized experiential circumstances that include empirical observations concerning the order and beauty of the world.[18] The *sensus divinitatis* is a faculty or disposition to form various theistic beliefs, and it is triggered by seeing the star filled night sky, crashing waves of the sea, and so on. Seeing the orderly or beautiful nature of the universe, the belief that 'God created all of this' just spontaneously arises in the mind. Just as we do not take

---

[15]   Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. Rev. James Anderson, in *Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 4, II, p. 309.

[16]   Ibid., p. 305. Calvin suggests here that chance would lead us to expect disorderly phenomena, but this is the opposite of what we actually observe. The reasoning follows the general pattern of inference to best explanation.

[17]   It may be, as Thomas Reid maintained, that the principle of design is an intuitive truth known immediately by the mind. That is, we may see directly that property Q is an indication of intelligent design. We may also know immediately that the universe exhibits Q. But the knowledge of God would still be mediated by these other items of knowledge and hence would be inferential. We shouldn't confuse the immediate knowledge of truths implicated in the theistic inference with the immediacy of the target belief.

[18]   See Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, pp. 170–79. See Chapter 4 for an exposition of Plantinga's own model of immediate knowledge of God, inspired by Calvin's *sensus divinitatis*.

our experience of being appeared to treely as evidence from which we infer that there is a tree in front of us, we do not take the experience of order and beauty as a premise from which we infer that 'God created all of this.'

Plantinga is surely correct that Calvin did not view theistic belief as the result of a toilsome line of philosophical argumentation. Of course, it does not follow that theistic belief is immediate. Given Plantinga's own account of inferential belief, the crux of the issue is whether theistic belief is held on the *evidential basis* of other beliefs. "A necessary condition for S's believing A on the basis of B is S's believing both A and B, and a sufficient condition is S's believing A, believing B, believing that B is good evidence for A, and believing that he believes A on the basis of B."[19] On Calvin's account, individuals hold a belief that there are orderly phenomena in the world. Moreover, the ideal cognizer is one who recognizes that these phenomena are evidence or proof of various divine attributes. Finally, I think several of the Calvin passages above indicate that typically a person who reflects on the matter believes that his relevant theistic beliefs (for example, in God's goodness, power, and wisdom) are held at least partly on the basis of the evidences in question. So we have some support for Calvin's endorsing inferential knowledge of God.[20]

Nothing in the traditional inferential interpretation of Calvin on the external witness entails that people first come to believe that there is a God by way of inference, or that the natural knowledge of God is exclusively inferential. The traditional interpretation distinguishes between the *sensus divinitatis* and the external witness. Accordingly, it affirms that some knowledge of God (for example, a creator who ought to be worshipped) is a belief that is naturally implanted in us. This can be taken as immediate knowledge. Where the present account deviates from Plantinga is in the relationship between the *sensus divinitatis* and the external witness. The *sensus divinitatis* is itself knowledge of God, and not merely a faculty or cognitive mechanism for acquiring such knowledge. Moreover, Calvin distinguished between the *sensus divinitatis* and the knowledge of God that is derived from the fabric of creation. "Not only," writes Calvin, has God "sowed in men's minds that seed of religion of which we have spoken but revealed himself and daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe."[21] Since the *sensus divinitatis* is considered knowledge of God independent of the external witness, and the external witness is also considered a source of knowledge of

---

[19]   Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God" in *Faith and Rationality*, ed. Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), pp. 16–93, at p. 52.

[20]   Plantinga's primary philosophical problem with this interpretation is that it looks like the putative theistic inferences are not strong enough for the target beliefs to constitute knowledge, in which case Calvin's model would be epistemologically inadequate. For a response to this objection, see Chapter 4.

[21]   Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, tr. Ford Lewis Battles, in *The Library of Christian Classics* (2 vols, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1.5.1.

God, the clause "not only has God sowed a seed of religion in man but daily discloses himself" should be read as indicating two modes of natural knowledge of God—one of which concerns inferences from creation. Also, Calvin only introduces the divine attributes of wisdom, power, and goodness in connection with the visible manifestation of God in creation (*Institutes*, 1.5), not in the context of the affirmation of the *sensus divinitatis* (*Institutes*, 1.3). While the attributes of God are plausibly contained in the concept of God as creator, the idea of God implicated in the *sensus divinitatis* needs to be tethered to the revelation of God in creation. Inferences from creation serve both to confirm and to refine a native belief in God, but these inferences presuppose an antecedent *sensus divinitatis*.[22]

The Reformation Model and Reformed Scholasticism

I conclude, then, that it is implausible to read Calvin as supporting either the SI or the EI thesis. As further confirmation of this, we should consider some of the striking similarities between Calvin's account of the natural knowledge of God and Stoic natural theology.[23] This is particularly relevant given the influence of Cicero's *De natura deorum* on Calvin's opening chapters of the *Institutes*.

Stoic Preconception and Theistic Argument

Stoic natural theology appealed to both an innate knowledge of God and knowledge of God acquired by way of inferences from the natural world.[24] On the one hand, the Stoics borrowed from Epicurus the doctrine of *prolepsis* (preconception). This is a general concept that is latent in the mind, is activated with experience, and the content of which can be expressed in the form of propositions. Preconceptions function as criteria or canons for testing truth claims. Among such preconceptions in Stoic thought is a preconception of the gods, which renders it evident that the gods exist. Given the adherence to an evident preconception of God, it is an

---

[22]　For example, knowledge of God as creator presupposes a being with power, but it does not analytically entail the exercise of power in providential control over the world. When Calvin speaks of the power of God manifested in the created order, it is typically power exercised in providence. Hence, the visible works of creation may here be viewed as extending the content of a preconception of God implanted in human nature. Calvin's position would then differ from Stoic philosophers who held that we have a preconception of God as provident, allocating to inference the role of *confirming* the preconception of God.

[23]　See Adams, "Calvin's View of Natural Knowledge of God," pp. 284–8.

[24]　See M. Schofield, "Preconception, Argument, and God" in *Doubt and Dogmatism: Studies in Hellenistic Epistemology*, ed. M. Schofield, M. Burnyeat, and J. Barnes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), pp. 283–308; and F.H. Sandbach, "Ennoia and Prolepsis in the Stoic Theory of Knowledge," *Classical Quarterly* 24 (1930): 44–51. My brief account of Stoicism here is indebted to these two essays.

interesting feature of Stoic natural theology that it should devote considerable effort to presenting theistic arguments. What, then, is the relationship between *prolepsis* and argument in Stoic natural theology?

The answer to this question is not entirely clear, but a few plausible candidates are worth noting. First, we might suppose that natural theology β simply provides a way of *confirming* what is or can be known by way of theological preconceptions.[25] This would be important in a context where there were incompatible claims about the content of theological preconceptions, as there was between the Stoics and Epicureans. Secondly, perhaps theistic arguments provide a way to establish that truth of theological preconceptions whose truth is not guaranteed by the mere preconception itself. Thirdly, while the preconception may be sufficient to establish the truth of a very generalized proposition about God, theistic argument may help with the derivation of more specific theological propositions. For example, it might identify the actual bearer of the divine attributes implicated in the preconception of God. Hence, the Stoic could argue, on the basis of the preconception of God as a sentient, rational animal, that the world itself is divine since the world has these qualities of divinity. Alternatively, we might view theistic argument as a means of enlarging our understanding of the nature of God, whose *existence* is antecedently given by way of a preconception.[26] We do not need to settle on any one of these candidates, for each shows that the Stoic epistemology of theistic belief entails the negation of the EI thesis. It is equally unfriendly to the suggestion that inferential natural knowledge of God is superfluous. To the extent that Calvin reproduced these central elements of Stoic natural theology, we should expect to find a similar incompatibility between his own view and the SI and EI theses outlined earlier.

Reformers: Bucer, Vermigli, and Melanchthon

In Chapter 1, we saw that Bucer referred to both a preconception (*prolepsis*) of God and a knowledge of God inferentially derived from the observation of

---

[25]   When Cotta asks Balbus why argument is necessary if God's existence is so evident, Balbus responds that this is like asking why he should look at an object with two eyes if he could see it with one eye closed. Cotta responds by noting that arguments tend to make an evident belief less evident by engendering doubt. Cotta relies on tradition for his confidence in the existence of the gods. Cicero, *De natura deorum*, III.3–4.

[26]   The difficulty with the Stoic position is that Epicurean philosophers appealed to the preconception of God to deny that God is provident. This problem would not have gone unnoticed by Calvin given its prominence in Cicero's *De natura deorum*. Although we might suppose that this problem of conflicting theistic intuitions is exploited by Calvin to underscore the necessity for special revelation, it also lends support to viewing the external witness in Calvin as a means of refining and augmenting a conceptually thin preconception of God. In that case, Calvin's position would be closer to those Stoic philosophers who held that while people differ in their preconceptions of the *nature* of God, all have a preconception of the *existence* of God. See Cicero, *De natura deorum*, 2.13, Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus mathematicos* 9:61.

cosmological order, successful divination, the utility of things, and awe-inspiring events. The exact nature of the relationship between these elements is not entirely clear in Bucer. It may suffer from the same ambiguity encountered in the Stoic sources on which Bucer relies. His position seems to be either that the implanted knowledge of God is an innate disposition that predisposes the mind to acquire knowledge of God by inferences from aspects of the created order or that inference confirms and enlarges a prior knowledge of God.[27]

Like Bucer, Vermigli claimed that the Romans' clause "God has revealed it unto them" indicates that the truth about God comes from God Himself. Nonetheless, he recognized that there remains a further question as to *how* precisely truth comes from God.

> Some say that it is because God has made those things by which we can perceive these truths. But others (whom I prefer) hold that God has planted *prolepsis* in our minds, that is, anticipations and notions through which we are led to conceive noble and exalted opinions about the divine nature. These ideas of God naturally engrafted in us are daily confirmed and refined by the observation of created things.[28]

Vermigli here indicates his preference for an account of the natural knowledge of God that includes an innate element. This innate element does not exclude or render superfluous an inferential knowledge of God through the observation of created things. Inference *confirms* and *refines* the idea of God naturally contained within the human mind. Vermigli goes on to articulate, in reference to natural philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, the argument to God's existence by way of causality. Although God is invisible, he argues that he reveals himself through created "symbols" or "signs," by which some have reached knowledge of God by considering the order of cause and effect and the impossibility of an infinite regress of causes.[29] Vermigli is here referring to a version of the cosmological argument for God's existence found in ancient Greek philosophy. It is clear that Vermigli recognizes a twofold distinction with respect to the natural knowledge of God. While there is some basic knowledge of God derived from principles God has implanted in the human mind, there is also a natural knowledge of God that comes by way of reasoning *a posteriori* from features of the external world.[30]

---

[27] For discussion on Bucer's account of the natural knowledge of God, see T.H.L. Parker, *Commentaries on Romans 1532–1542* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986), pp. 107–11; David Steinmetz , "Calvin and the Natural Knowledge of God" in *Calvin in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 23–39.

[28] Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Commentaries on Romans* in *Philosophical Works* in *The Peter Martyr Library: Works*, trans. and ed. Joseph McLelland (7 vols, Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1996), vol. 4, p. 20.

[29] Ibid., vol. 4, p. 21.

[30] See Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, pp. 170–71.

Commenting on the phrase "God has revealed it to them," Philip Melanchthon takes it that God has implanted in all minds the knowledge of His existence, goodness, righteousness, justice, power, and so forth. "Some knowledge of God is innate in man from the law of nature."[31] The law of nature refers to man's knowledge of God and moral law as conveyed by certain common principles innate in the mind. While some of these principles are theoretical (for example, geometry and physics), others are practical (for example, the distinction between right and wrong, the honorable and shameful). The latter is closely connected to the knowledge of God in at least two ways. First, Melanchthon suggests that the voice of conscience and sense of right and wrong *imply* the existence of a lawgiver and being to whom we are morally accountable. Secondly, the knowledge of God is itself found among the practical principles implanted in us; for instance in the knowledge that 'there is a God,' 'God must be obeyed,' and 'God punishes crimes.' So Melanchthon presents an account of the knowledge of God as arising from principles internal to the mind, especially moral principles.

Melanchthon, however, did not restrict the natural knowledge of God to what can be derived from the moral constitution of the human person. He extends it to what can be known about God from the created order. Both the 1532 and 1540 editions of his *Commentary on Romans* provide useful insights here. After asserting Paul's description of the natural knowledge of God grounded in signs and evidences from the created order, he lists a variety of reasons and arguments taken as grounds for inferences about God drawn by the human mind. He concludes: "For in some manner reason naturally understands and possesses signs and arguments collected from God's works in the whole natural order … hence we infer God's existence, by whom the natural order was founded."[32] Melanchthon's various theistic arguments show the ways in which knowledge of God may be inferentially derived from observations of various features of the world and cosmos.

Moreover, Melanchthon recognizes the connection between the naturally implanted knowledge of God and the knowledge of God arrived at by way of argument and evidence. Referring to St. Paul, he says:

> For although, as he states, the intellect is able to deduce something of God from consideration of His wonderful works in the natural universe, yet reason would not have this syllogistic faculty if God had not also put into our minds some awareness and πρόληψιν. And those marvelous spectacles in the natural order are signs which stir our minds so as to think about God and to arouse that πρόληψιν.[33]

---

[31]   Philip Melanchthon, *Römerbrief – Kommentar 1532*, ed. G. Ebeling and R. Schafer, in Robert Stupperich (ed.) *Melanchthons Werke in Auswahl* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1965), p. 71. Translation by John Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism: the Arguments for the Existence of God in Dutch Theology, 1575–1650* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1982), p. 16.

[32]   Melanchthon, *Römerbrief – Kommentar*, *1532*, p. 73. Translation by Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism*, p. 18.

[33]   Ibid., pp. 71–2. Translation by Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism*, p. 17.

Melanchthon does not suggest here that the visible works of God merely provide the occasion for triggering an innate disposition to believe in God. What he explicitly states is that the ability to rationally *infer* truth about God from the observation of the visible works of God depends on an antecedent implanted knowledge of God. We can take this in a few ways. It may be that the *prolepsis* contains the requisite theological concepts for theistic inferences. Alternatively, it may be that the *prolepsis* provides a premise for such inferences. Perhaps the idea is that the *prolepsis* just is the innate disposition to infer the existence of God from the created order. In any case, we find that innate knowledge of God operates in tandem with logical inference.

There is pretty clearly a *Reformation model* of the natural knowledge of God—the basic epistemological viewpoint shared by Reformers such as Calvin, Bucer, Melanchthon, and Vermigli. This Reformation model entails that either the naturally implanted knowledge of God is not immediate knowledge at all or it is immediate knowledge supplemented by inferential knowledge. This Reformation model, though, is clearly incompatible with the EI thesis and the weaker SI thesis.

Reformation to Protestant Scholasticism

In these early Reformation sources we see the initial emergence of a twofold distinction with respect to the natural knowledge of God. There is some knowledge of God that is innate to the mind, whether immediate or inferentially derived from principles internal to the mind. By contrast, there is some knowledge of God that is arrived at by inference from and reflection on various features of the world and its government. Theologians in early orthodoxy systematized this distinction by designating the former *cognitio dei insita* and the latter *cognitio dei acquisita*.[34]

Francis Turretin wrote:

> The theology of revelation is again divided into natural and supernatural. The natural, occupied with that which may be known of God (*to gnoston tou theou*), is both innate (from the common notions implanted in each one) and acquired (which creatures attain discursively) … The orthodox … uniformly teach that there is a natural theology, partly innate (derived from the book of conscience by means of common notions) and partly acquired (drawn from the book of creatures discursively).[35]

---

[34]   See Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, pp. 284–7. The distinction remained operative in Reformed theology well into the twentieth century. See Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, pp. 59–76; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th edition (1941; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), p. 36; and Bruce Demarest, *General Revelation*: *Historical Views and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982), pp. 63–8, 117, 119–20, 146, 223–44.

[35]   Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger and ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (3 vols, Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1992), 1.2.7, 1.3.4.

Turretin is clear that the innate knowledge of God is not actual knowledge at birth. It is a natural disposition or inborn habit to acquire such knowledge upon mental maturation and experience of the world. Consequently, it "spontaneously exerts itself in all adults of sound mind."[36] The fact that it is contrasted with discursive knowledge implies that it is not inferential.[37] However, Turretin explicitly states that this knowledge is "derived from the book of conscience by means of common notions." Given that Turretin cites Romans 2:14 in support of this contention, this suggests that the *cognitio dei insita* is spontaneously inferred from the knowledge of moral principles. Of course, it may be that while the knowledge of God is self-evidently entailed by the facts of conscience, it is not an item of inferential knowledge. Thankfully, we need not decide this matter, for in either case it is clear that Turretin maintains that some natural knowledge of God is inferentially derived from observations of the physical world—a claim he defends with a variety of demonstrative and rhetorical theistic arguments. So Turretin rejects the EI thesis.

Turretin of course is representative of the Reformed scholastics at this juncture. He accurately conveys a model of the natural knowledge of God that was both widespread and deeply entrenched in the tradition by the later part of the seventeenth century, and which was first systematized in the early abridgments to Calvin's *Institutes*.[38] We can conclude, then, that prominent Reformers, and their scholastic and Puritan descendents, affirmed a model of the natural knowledge of God involving two important theses: (i) the natural knowledge of God is naturally implanted and acquired, and (ii) the acquired knowledge of God is an inferential knowledge that refines, augments, and/or confirms the naturally implanted knowledge of God. This model entails a denial of the EI thesis and the SI thesis.

The Theistic Intuitionist Model

In the nineteenth century the doctrine of the innate idea of God is expressed in terms of an intuitive, natural knowledge of God. Since the intuitionist model seems to entail some kind of immediacy thesis, we should consider whether it entails either of the immediacy theses outlined earlier.

---

[36]   Ibid., 3.1.18.

[37]   Ibid., 1.3.11.

[38]   Guillaume Delaune, *Institutionis christianae religionis a Joanne Calvino conscriptae* (London, 1583); Polanus, *Syntagma theologiae christianae* (Geneva, 1617), 1.8–10; Walaeus, *Loci communibus in Opera omnia* (Leiden, 1643), I; Maresius, *Foederatum Belgium orthodoxum sive confessionis ecclesiarum Belgicarum exegesis* (Groningen, 1652), pp. 48–50; Leigh, *Body of Divinity* (London, 1654), 2.1; Rijssen, *Summa theologiae didactico-elencticae* (Amsterdam, 1695), 1.4; Cloppenburg, *Exercitationes super locos communes theologicos in Opera theologica* (2 vols, Amsterdam, 1684), 2.1.4; Pictet, *Theologia christiana* (Geneva, 1696), 1.2.

Reformed Intuitionist Models

Charles Hodge affirmed that the knowledge of God is innate. Hodge is clear that this does not mean that the knowledge of God is a conscious conviction from birth, or that it is knowledge dormant in the mind, waiting to be awakened upon certain occasions. He takes 'innate' to refer to the source of the knowledge of God. It springs naturally from the moral and intellectual constitution of the human person. We simply see some things to be true "immediately in their own light,"[39] without any proof or teaching. According to Hodge, knowledge is the perception of a truth, and innate knowledge is the perception of a truth without argument or instruction. Hodge says, "[a]ll that is meant [by innate knowledge], is that the mind is so constituted that it perceives certain things to be true without proof or instruction."[40] These truths are called intuitions or primary truths. He identifies three kinds of intuitive truths: sense perceptions (for example, I see a tree), intuitions of the intellect (for example, axioms of geometry, every effect must have a cause) and fundamental moral beliefs (for example, distinction between right and wrong).

To the three classes of intuitive truths, Hodge adds the existence of God. "All men have some knowledge of God. That is, they have the conviction that there is a Being on whom they are dependent, and to whom they are responsible."[41] The qualities of this knowledge force us to recognize that it is intuitive knowledge. First, it is not due exclusively to tradition or testimony, nor is it derived from any process of reasoning. "We do not thus reason ourselves into the belief that there is a God; and it is very obvious that it is not by such a process of ratiocination, simple as it is, that the mass of people are brought to this conclusion."[42] Secondly, everyone is compelled by their natural constitution to assent to it. It thus bears the marks of all intuitive truths: universality and necessity. So we must conclude that the origin of the idea of God lies in the very constitution of our nature—much like our belief in other minds and the external world.[43]

William Shedd maintained that the idea of God is natural to the human mind in much the same way that ideas of mathematics and our own existence are natural to us. This knowledge is direct and not inferential.

> The idea of God is rational in its source. It is a product of reason, not of sense. In this respect it is like mathematical ideas. It is an intuition of the mind, not a deduction or conclusion from an impression upon the senses by an external object. St. Paul [in Romans 1:20] describes the nature of the perception by the particle *nooumena*, which denotes the direct and immediate intuition of reason

---

39 Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols, n.d.; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), vol. 1, p. 191.

40 Ibid., vol. 1, p. 192.

41 Ibid., vol. 1, p. 191.

42 Ibid., vol. 1, p. 200.

43 Ibid., vol. 1, pp. 10, 200, 340, 360.

… The reason is stimulated to act by the notices of the senses; but when thus stimulated, it perceives by its own operation truths or facts which the senses themselves never perceive.[44]

Furthermore, Shedd understands this knowledge of God to be closely connected to the knowledge of self. In the perception of ourselves as finite, we have a perception of the infinite. In the perception of ourselves as imperfect, we have a perception of the perfect. In the perception of ourselves as sinful, we have a perception of the holy. Hence, all true self-consciousness implies a God consciousness. "It follows, therefore, that man has the same kind of evidence for the Divine existence, that he has for his own personal existence: that of immediate consciousness."[45]

Similarly, Augustus Strong regarded the existence of God as a rational intuition.[46] According to Strong, intuitions generally considered are simply items of direct knowledge. This entails in part that such knowledge is not based on inferential reasoning. There are two kinds of intuitions: rational and presentative intuitions. Self-consciousness and sense perception are presentative intuitions. Here the mind comes to know particular things by their being presented directly to consciousness. Rational intuitions are first or primary truths that provide the basis of all intelligible experience and thought. There are three kinds of rational intuitions: (i) intuitions of relations (for example, space and time), (ii) intuitions of principles (for example, cause and substance), and (iii) "intuition of absolute Being, Power, Reason, Perfection, Personality, as God."[47] Intuitive knowledge of first truths is neither conscious knowledge present from birth nor unconscious knowledge present at birth but merely undeveloped. Their priority is logical, but the knowledge is temporally posterior to experience and reflection. Observation and reflection serve as the *occasion* for the application and hence development of rational intuitions in consciousness. What is true of intuitions in general, is true of belief in God in particular. The knowledge of God is not the result of sense perception or a process of deductive or inductive reasoning, or even any sort of condensed syllogistic reasoning.[48]

Strong explains the similarity between the genesis of other rational intuitions and the knowledge of God as follows:

---

[44]   William Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 2nd edition (3 vols, 1888; reprint, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1980), vol. 1, pp. 198–9.

[45]   Ibid., vol. 1, p. 212.

[46]   Yale theologian Samuel Harris (1814–1899) influenced Shedd and Strong. See Harris, *Self-Revelation of God*, 2nd edition (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1887), pp. 2–3, 30–38, 47, and 72.

[47]   August Strong, *Systematic Theology* (1907; reprint, Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1979), p. 53.

[48]   Ibid., p. 66.

We hold that, as upon occasion of the senses cognizing (a) extended matter, (b) succession, (c) qualities, (d) change, (e) order, (f) action, respectively, the mind cognizes (a) space, (b) time, (c) substance, (d) cause, (e) design, (f) obligation, so upon occasion of our cognizing our finiteness, dependence and responsibility, the mind directly cognizes the existence of an Infinite and Absolute Authority, Perfection, Personality, upon whom we are dependent and to whom we are responsible.[49]

The Intuitionist Model's Incompatibility with the EI and SI Theses

It is not entirely clear that the intuitionist model advocated by Hodge, Shedd, and Strong is a model of *immediate* knowledge of God. Spontaneous inferential knowledge could be universal and necessary, especially if it involves a self-evident inference from intuitive truths.[50] Such inferences may of course be temporally immediate—not requiring protracted reflection. However, even if we took the intuitionist model as a model of immediate natural knowledge of God, such a model would actually entail the negation of the EI and SI theses.

William Shedd, for instance, held that theistic arguments "assist the development of the idea of God, and contain a scientific analysis of man's natural consciousness of the deity."[51] Shedd here suggests that inference plays a role in developing a pre-existing natural knowledge of God, as well as making a contribution toward a philosophical or scientific knowledge of God. In fact, reminiscent of earlier Reformed thinkers, he explicitly states that the force of theistic arguments rests on the innate idea of God.

Hodge notes that some theologians reject natural theology β because they maintain that the natural knowledge of God is intuitive.[52] He believed this was an error. While there is an intuitive knowledge of God, this knowledge does not involve a developed or full-blown theistic conception. "It is in the general sense of a Being on whom we are dependent, and to whom we are responsible, that the idea [of God] is asserted to exist universally, and of necessity, in every human mind."[53] It is only by reflection that the fuller conception of God emerges as a personal being with the other essential divine attributes. By limiting the content of the innate idea of God and the correlated theistic belief Hodge can justify the project of developing theistic arguments. Hence, while inference does not generate belief in God, inference is a means whereby a pre-existing belief in God is confirmed and developed.[54]

---

[49] Ibid., p. 52; see also p. 58.

[50] For this criticism, see Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 7–8; A.A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, pp. 30–32; Flint, *Theism*, pp. 75–86.

[51] Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, vol. 1, p. 221.

[52] See Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, pp. 22–3, 202–3.

[53] Ibid., vol. 1, p. 195.

[54] Ibid., vo1. 1, p. 200.

Hodge argues:

> it is to be remembered that theistical arguments are deigned to prove not only
> that there is a necessity for the assumption of an extra-mundane and eternal
> being, but mainly, to show what that Being is; that He is a personal being, self-
> conscious, intelligent, moral. All this may lie inclosed in the primary intuition,
> but it needs to be brought out and established.[55]

Augustus Strong was slightly more optimistic than Hodge about the scope of the intuitive knowledge of God. Strong claimed that: "In this fundamental knowledge *that* God is, it is necessarily implied that to some extent men know intuitively *what* God is, namely, (a) a Reason in which their mental processes are grounded; (b) a Power above them upon which they are dependent; (c) a Perfection which imposes law upon their moral natures; (d) a Personality which they may recognize in prayer and worship."[56] However, Strong also recognized that inference has an important role to play in developing or enlarging this intuitive knowledge of God since its actual contents are not evident to all. Strong says that these arguments serve the purpose of "awakening, explicating, and confirming a conviction which, though the most fundamental of all, may yet have been partially slumbering for lack of thought."[57] He also notes "the loss of love to God has greatly obscured even this rational intuition [of God], so that the revelation of nature and the Scriptures is needed to awaken, confirm, and enlarge it."[58]

It is important of course to distinguish between the awakening and enlarging of the innate idea. In the first case, reflection or inference plays a role in the emergence of an awareness of God that *is* intuitive. In the second case, reflection enables the propositional content of the intuitive awareness of God to be inferentially expanded or augmented. The ontological argument, for example, could be the occasion for awakening the intuition of a perfect being; or reflection and inference might enable a mind aware of the existence of a perfect being, and to clarify and enlarge this knowledge by examining the concept of perfection and the sort of specific attributes it entails. So even if the idea of an eternal being is *logically* contained in the idea of an absolutely perfect being, it may not be *psychologically* contained in the idea. Inference can help develop a full theistic conception.

There is an important continuity, then, between the above nineteenth-century Calvinistic theologians and the Reformed scholastics. While both defend the innate character of the natural knowledge of God, each is equally convinced of the necessity of inference and natural theology β as a means of confirming, refining, and augmenting the innate idea of God. Since these motifs also establish an important point of continuity between the Reformed scholastics and the Reformers, our

---

[55]   Ibid., vol., 1, p. 202.
[56]   Strong, *Systematic Theology*, p. 67.
[57]   Ibid., p. 88.
[58]   Ibid., p. 67.

nineteenth-century thinkers were actually refining an old idea under the rubric of intuitive knowledge of God rather than proposing an altogether new one.

Summary

In this chapter, I have examined three Reformed models of the naturally implanted knowledge of God: the Reformation model, the scholastic model, and the nineteenth-century theistic intuitionist model. None of these models entails either the EI or the SI immediacy thesis. These models actually entail the negation of the EI and SI theses. Each of the models is part of a larger epistemology of belief in God that affirms two modes of natural knowledge of God. Moreover, according to these models, immediate and inferential elements in the natural knowledge of God supplement and complement each other in various ways. Immediate knowledge of God operates in tandem with and actually grounds inferential knowledge of God. Ultimately, natural theology β is a desideratum because of the importance of a systematic doctrine of God, which requires the careful articulation of the contents of natural revelation. In this way, the project of natural theology β is grounded in, not undercut by, the fact of a naturally implanted knowledge of God. Consequently, the models of the naturally implanted knowledge of God examined in this chapter do not provide us with a project objection to natural theology β.

This page has been left blank intentionally

Chapter 4

The Immediate Knowledge of God in Twentieth-Century Religious Epistemology

Twentieth-century Dutch Calvinism perpetuated the historic Continental Reformed theology of the natural knowledge of God with its distinction between the naturally implanted knowledge of God and the acquired knowledge of God.[1] Typically the distinction is parsed as a distinction between a spontaneous knowledge of God and knowledge of God acquired by way of study, reflection, and hence a conscious process of reasoning. So the acquired knowledge of God is identified with natural theology β and represents the human attempt to reflect on, develop, and systematize the contents of general revelation and man's innate awareness of God. American Calvinists similarly distinguished between intuitive knowledge of God and natural theology β, with the latter being a means of confirming and developing the former.[2] Consequently, we find in at least two major streams of twentieth-century Reformed thought a continuation of epistemological motifs encountered earlier in the tradition that are incompatible with the EI and SI theses introduced in the previous chapter. Not surprisingly, these thinkers raise no project objection to natural theology β on the grounds of the immediacy of the natural knowledge of God.

The twentieth century, however, presents us with two models of immediate knowledge of God that diverge in important ways from the Reformed models already considered. John Baillie and Alvin Plantinga may each be credited with developing epistemologies of religious belief in dialogue with the Reformed tradition, but which present important variations on the models articulated in the

---

[1]   Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt and trans. John Vriend (2 vols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003–2004), vol. 2, chapter 2; W. Hastie, *Theology as a Science and its Present Position and Prospects in the Reformed Church* (Glasgow: James MacLehose and Sons, 1899), pp. 77–82; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th edition (1984; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1939), pp. 34–6; G.H. Kersten, *Reformed Dogmatics: A Systematic Treatment of Reformed Doctrine*, trans. J.R. Beeke (2 vols, 1980; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1981), vol. 1, pp. 7–10; William Masselink, *General Revelation and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1953), pp. 87–95.

[2]   B.B. Warfield, "God" in *Works of Benjamin B. Warfield* (10 vols, 1932; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Company, 2000), vol. 9, p. 110; August Strong, *Systematic Theology* (1907; reprint, Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1979), pp. 71–2, 88; Walter Thomas Conner, *Revelation and God: an Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1936), chapters 2 and 3.

previous chapter. Moreover, some have construed the models developed by Baillie and Plantinga as undermining or at least marginalizing natural theology β. In this chapter, I will consider whether the models of immediate knowledge of God proposed by Baillie and Plantinga logically entail either the EI or the SI theses.

John Baillie, the Immediate Knowledge of God, and Natural Theology

In *Our Knowledge of God* (1939), John Baillie provided a detailed account of experiential, immediate knowledge of God. Baillie's starting point is an affirmation and defense of the universal awareness of God. As Baillie sees it, there is no merely human consciousness, for all human consciousness is pervaded with the divine. This awareness is a direct knowledge of God, not the product of any kind of inference. Just as we do not arrive at the knowledge of other minds by way of inference but perceive this directly, so the knowledge of God, a divine person, will also be direct. This is not to say that our awareness of God is wholly independent of our awareness of other things. Baillie makes it clear that our awareness of the external world, self, other minds, and God is interdependent. In particular, the knowledge of God comes to us through our awareness of Christ. Baillie calls this a mediated immediacy.[3] It excludes argument or logical inference, but it involves the presence of God to the soul through our awareness of other beings, especially Christ.

Immediacy and Baillie's Critique of Theistic Arguments

Baillie's account of the immediacy of the knowledge of God stands in sharp contrast to what he calls the "inferential approach" to God—the attempt to make the existence of God the conclusion of argument or proof. This approach, he argues, is rooted in the Greek tradition, specifically in Plato's attempt to refute the denial of the existence of God among the Sophists. It then passed into the anti-mystic psychology of Aristotle, according to which there is no direct knowledge of incorporeal substances. Hence, God's existence, as an incorporeal substance, must be inferred from what is more directly known. When the Christian tradition absorbed Greek philosophical presuppositions, the inferential approach to God became central to the Christian tradition. The synthesis of Greek and biblical thought gave rise to the distinction between natural and revealed theology. While noting traditional objections to the validity or cogency of theistic arguments, Baillie focuses his criticisms at a more fundamental level.

    First, the Greek inferential approach is at variance with the biblical tradition according to which nature itself is permeated with the divine and so all knowledge of God is in some sense a revealed knowledge—there is no unaided natural knowledge of God. Also, all proof or argument moves from what is more evident

---

[3]   John Baillie, *Our Knowledge of God* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939), pp. 178–98.

to what is less evident, and all demonstration must eventually terminate in some proper starting point of knowledge. Since there is nothing more evident than God's existence, it is fundamentally wrong-headed to employ a method that assumes that there is something better known than God. It is central to religion to affirm that God is not only first in the order of being, but also first in the order of knowing. "The witness of all true religion is that there is no reality which more directly confronts us than the reality of God."[4] Hence, God is the proper starting point of knowledge, not the self or external world.

Secondly, Baillie contends that since we do not *in fact* come to believe in or know God by way of theistic arguments, all such arguments, even if valid or logically cogent, are in fact either useless or superfluous.

> It is evident, then, that our real quarrel with the traditional argumentation for God's existence is of a very deep-going kind. We are rejecting logical argument of any kind as the first chapter of our theology or as representing the process whereby God comes to be known. We are holding that our knowledge of God rests rather on the revelation of His personal Presence as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We are thus directly challenging St. Thomas's doctrine that we have no knowledge of God *per se* but only *per ea quae facta sunt*—through His effects in the world of nature, and are allying ourselves rather with that other strain in medieval thought, which was opposed by St. Thomas. … the doctrine represented by St. Bonaventure's dictum that God is present to the soul itself (*Deus praesens est ipsi animae*). Of such a Presence it must be true that to those who have never been confronted with it argument is useless, while to those who have it is superfluous.[5]

Here Baillie challenges the idea that our knowledge of God is exclusively inferential. He also seems to imply that theistic arguments could not be epistemically efficacious in the absence of an antecedent immediate awareness of God. Both points are compatible with traditional Reformed theology. Baillie, however, goes further than traditional Reformed theologians when he adds that theistic arguments would be *superfluous* to those who already have an immediate knowledge of God. In connection with his analysis of St. Anselm, Baillie notes the possibility of construing theistic arguments as attempts to render explicit the implicit inferential logical structure of the mental processes that produce the knowledge of God. But this is rejected on the grounds that the knowledge of God is not inferential.[6] However, it is not clear that Baillie intends to go as far as to claim that the knowledge of God is exclusively immediate. While Baillie says, "our knowledge of God is not inferential in character,"[7] he clarifies this in places

---

4   Ibid., p. 155.
5   Ibid., p. 132.
6   Ibid., p. 143.
7   Ibid., p. 147.

as a denial that God "comes to be known" by way of either argument or inference. A charitable interpretation would suggest that Baillie simply intends to deny that the knowledge of God *originates* with inference or argument, thereby leaving open the possibility that inference can contribute to the development of this knowledge in some way. To clarify Baillie's position, we can turn to his analogical argument from other minds.

The Analogical Argument from Other Minds

Baillie's central argument for the claim that the knowledge of God is immediate is based on a purported analogy between belief in God and belief in other minds. Since belief in other minds is immediate, and belief in God is relevantly similar to belief in other minds, belief in God must also be immediate.[8]

> Our knowledge of other minds is not merely a derivative from our knowledge of other bodies or of our own minds or of both together, but is itself a primary and original mode of consciousness of equal right with these others and having, like them, a character *sui generis*.[9]

Baillie quotes John Cook Wilson in support of his position.

> If we think of the existence of our friends; it is the direct knowledge which we want; merely inferential knowledge seems a poor affair. To most men it would be as surprising as unwelcome to hear it could not be directly known whether there were such existences as their friends, and that it was only a matter of (probable) empirical argument and inference from facts which are directly known. And even if we convince ourselves on reflection that this is really the case, our actions prove that we have a confidence in the existence of our friends which can't be derived from an empirical argument (which can never be certain), for a man will risk his life for his friends. Could we possibly be satisfied with an inferred God?[10]

It is evident that Baillie's analogical argument from other minds does not support the *exclusive* immediacy of the knowledge of God since our knowledge of other minds, even if immediate, is not exclusively immediate. Baillie himself

---

[8]   Some nineteenth-century thinkers (for example, James McCosh, Thomas Flint, A.A. Hodge, and Samuel Harris) agreed that belief in God is relevantly similar to belief in other minds. However, since they assumed that belief in other minds is inferential, they argued to the conclusion that belief in God is inferential. See George Fullerton's *A Plain Argument for God* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, Co., 1889).

[9]   Baillie, *Our Knowledge of God*, p. 213; see also pp. 204–7.

[10]   John Cook Wilson, *Statement and Inference* (2 vols, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926), vol. 2, p. 853; quoted in Baillie, *Our Knowledge of God*, p. 207.

admits this. In the case of belief in the existence of other minds what is immediate is my belief that 'there are other minds' or perhaps more specifically 'this *here* is another mind.' But the immediacy of our knowledge of the existence of other minds permits a role for inference in developing and augmenting our knowledge of other minds by inferring further details about the *characteristics* of other minds; for example, our belief that one person is kind and another person cruel is typically based on observation and inference, in conjunction with our moral beliefs. In short, at least some of our knowledge of persons is acquired by way of inferences from their effects. Nor does Baillie's argument here support the idea that inferential theistic belief is superfluous, no more than the inferential element in our knowledge of other minds is superfluous. So the analogy between God and other minds does not undermine either the possibility or value of inferential knowledge of God.[11]

Although obscured by Baillie himself, inference would seem to be important within Baillie's own epistemology of belief in God. The idea of a universal awareness of God, as developed by Baillie, involves a thin concept of God.

> It may be a matter of dispute whether all peoples are aware of deity as personal, or even as spiritual, being; but it is not disputed that all peoples have such an awareness of the divine as is sufficient to awaken in them what is impossible to regard otherwise than as a typically religious response.[12]

Elsewhere Baillie suggests that individuals have an awareness of God, but they do not think of God as the creator. Baillie later parses the immediate knowledge of God in terms of knowledge of absolute, personal being implied by our moral consciousness. Even if we suppose that this qualifies as knowledge of *God*, it is knowledge of a fairly minimal sort. It is radically implausible to suppose that inference cannot add significantly to the content of such knowledge, just as it would be radically implausible to suppose that inference cannot extend our knowledge of other minds. Baillie seems to concede the point:

> All this is not to say that inference has no part to play in our knowledge of one another. Clearly it has a very large part to play. An inferential element is involved, first, in our *identification* of a particular self as a self … second, in the guidance afforded me towards my interpretation of the character of others by my observation of their bodily behavior, and above all of their speech. What we are

---

[11]   Our knowledge of other minds derives from sources other than intuition and inference, for example, testimony (that is, accepting what others tell us) and enculturation (that is, adopting beliefs through the influence of our social environment). Theistic belief too is sometimes, if not often, the result of societal influences shaping belief formation, either by instilling specific beliefs in us or by disposing us toward their acceptance.

[12]   Baillie, *Our Knowledge of God*, p. 6.

demanding, then, is not the exclusion of an inferential element but the inclusion of an element that is not inferential.[13]

Baillie's account of immediacy is motivated by his emphasis on the experiential nature of the knowledge of God. It is fundamentally knowledge by *acquaintance*, not knowledge of *propositions*. God Himself is directly present to the soul. We do not first come to know God in this intimate way by entertaining propositions about God or by inferring one proposition from another. It is certainly sensible to suppose that knowledge by acquaintance gives us something—knowledge of persons—that cannot be given by knowledge of propositions about the person. This seems no less true in the case of the knowledge of God. However, when viewed this way, the criticism of natural theology β must take on a very different character. What is at issue is not whether there *is* an inferential knowledge of God, but whether such knowledge is *religiously* adequate, sufficient, or the best kind of knowledge of God we can have. Of course, natural theology β need not assume that propositional knowledge of God is either religiously adequate or the best kind of knowledge of God humans can have. So Baillie's insight, even if correct, would not constitute a project objection to natural theology β.

Alvin Plantinga and the Immediate Knowledge of God

Beginning in the last quarter of the twentieth century, there has been a resurgence of interest in the prospects for immediate knowledge of God in Anglo-American philosophy of religion. This interest has been at the center of the so-called Reformed epistemology movement in America represented by thinkers such as Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and William Alston. Each of these philosophers has challenged various Enlightenment epistemological assumptions that have tended to militate against the possibility of immediate knowledge of God. Since these more recent discussions focus on propositional knowledge of God, as opposed to knowledge of God by acquaintance, they are directly relevant to the role of inference and natural theology β.

The Epistemological Framework

A deeply entrenched view of knowledge in the western philosophical tradition, going back at least as far as Plato, takes propositional knowledge to be true belief that satisfies some third condition.[14] Knowledge has a surplus value over true belief, though the precise nature of this surplus value has been a matter of debate. Socrates spoke of "knowledge" as true belief for which there is a *logos*, a reason or

---

13   Ibid., p. 212.

14   See Robert Shope, "Propositional Knowledge" in *A Companion to Epistemology*, ed. Jonathan Dancy and Ernest Sosa (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1993), pp. 396–401.

account.[15] Socrates' insight here is that knowledge is not merely a matter of getting it right, as that might happen just by a stroke of luck, but getting it right for the right reason. So knowledge is true belief for which a person has truth-indicating reasons, grounds, or evidence. What these conditions capture is the intuition that the surplus value of knowledge over true belief is located in a positive connection between belief and the truth goal of believing, that is, the goal of securing true beliefs and avoiding false beliefs. We can call this truth-directedness, the 'epistemic point of view.' What makes the difference between true belief and knowledge is that in the case of knowledge the cognizer is in a good or strong position vis-à-vis the epistemic point of view. This strong position is typically labeled 'justification' or 'warrant.'

The prospects for immediate knowledge of God, then, depend on two things: (i) the truth of a general epistemological principle about warrant being conferred on beliefs in some way other than by their being based on other warranted beliefs, and (ii) theistic belief satisfying the criteria for immediate warrant stipulated by such a principle. Pretty clearly, adopting certain criteria will not achieve this result. For example, if we suppose that immediately warranted beliefs must be immune from error, doubt, or revision, then it seems implausible to suppose that there can be immediately warranted theistic beliefs.[16] The popularity of such criteria in various versions of modern foundationalism explains the modern tendency to suppose that theistic belief is warranted only if it is inferentially warranted.[17] However, persuaded of the philosophical difficulties generated by modern foundationalism, a more recent trend has been to adopt versions of foundationalism that are friendlier to the prospects for immediate knowledge of God.

Plantinga's Theory of Warrant

Alvin Plantinga has developed one such epistemological theory.[18] According to Plantinga, a belief has warrant just if it is produced by cognitive faculties functioning properly in a congenial environment according to a design plan

---

[15]   Plato, *Meno* 97e–98a.

[16]   Indeed, there would be very few immediately warranted beliefs at all, for the only beliefs that would plausibly satisfy such criteria would be beliefs about one's current states of consciousness (for example, I am tired, and it seems to me that it is raining outside) and belief in self-evident truths (for example, $2 + 2 = 4$, and all bachelors are unmarried males).

[17]   'Foundationalism' refers to a particular view about the structure of warranted beliefs (or knowledge). On a foundationalist scheme, some beliefs are immediately warranted (that is, warranted in some way other than by being based on some other warranted beliefs), whereas other beliefs are mediately warranted (that is, warranted by virtue of being based on other warranted beliefs). The latter class of beliefs ultimately terminates in the former as foundations are related to a superstructure.

[18]   See Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), and *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

successfully aimed at truth. Proper function implies the idea of a cognitive design plan—a set of blueprints or specifications for a well-formed, properly functioning human cognitive system. Since the specifications relevant for warrant are truth-oriented, they are specifications for that segment of our cognitive design plan that has as its purpose the production of true beliefs, as opposed to non-alethic purposes, such as survival or relief from suffering. The design plan specifies what the appropriate doxastic response of our cognitive faculties should be in a wide range of circumstances for the purpose of acquiring true beliefs and avoiding false ones. But proper function must take place in the right sort of cognitive environment, the one for which our faculties were designed. There must be the right sort of fit between our cognitive systems and the external environment. Moreover, the design plan must be a good one vis-à-vis the truth goal of believing. There must be a high objective statistical probability that a belief produced by a certain faculty is true. Call this the reliability constraint on warrant. Lastly, the degree of warrant is a function of the degree of belief, so the more firmly a warranted belief is held, the more warrant it will have. A belief constitutes knowledge just if it is a sufficiently warranted true belief.

In *Warranted Christian Belief* (2000), Plantinga utilizes his theory of warrant to present a model for how theistic belief could have immediate warrant or—in Plantinga's terms—be "properly basic" with respect to warrant. According to Plantinga, we have a natural disposition to form various beliefs about God in a wide range of experiential circumstances: starry night sky, majestic grandeur of the mountains, beauty of a small flower, and so on. The beliefs formed in these circumstances include beliefs like God is powerful, present, glorious, to be worshipped, obeyed, all of which self-evidently entail that God exists. Following Calvin, Plantinga refers to this disposition as the *sensus divinitatis*, which Plantinga interprets as a natural mechanism, faculty, or process that is triggered in the appropriate experiential circumstances. These circumstances do not involve the direct perception of God,[19] but publicly observable phenomena that engender theistic beliefs; nor do we infer theistic beliefs from these observations by way of argument. Like the formation of sensory perceptual beliefs, theistic beliefs arise spontaneously in these circumstances. Like sensory perceptual beliefs, they are psychologically immediate—they are not held on the evidential basis of other beliefs. Moreover, these theistic beliefs are immediately warranted, since they are warranted when formed in the manner specified. Since a warranted true theistic

—————————

[19]   According to William Alston, immediate knowledge of God can be grounded in the direct non-sensory perceptual awareness of God. Alston develops the idea of a non-sensory perceptual awareness of God in his book *Perceiving God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989). For a comparison of Plantinga's notion of immediacy with Alston's notion of immediacy, see Alston, *Perceiving God*, pp. 195–7 and Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 180–84. Plantinga, it should be noted, does not deny that God can be and sometimes is known in the way Alston proposes.

belief constitutes knowledge, the satisfaction of the truth condition will entail that there is some immediate knowledge of God.

Plantinga, Theistic Belief, and Inferential Warrant

I will adopt the following as a working formulation of Plantinga's main thesis with respect to immediacy:

> [P] There are appropriate experiential circumstances C, such that, given any person S, if S is in C and S's relevant cognitive faculties are functioning properly, then (i) S will firmly hold some corresponding theistic belief T in an immediate way and (ii) S's belief that T will be warranted to a degree sufficient—along with truth—for knowledge.[20]

As in the previous chapter, I am not interested in the truth of the proposed epistemological model, but rather its implications for natural theology β. Does [P] entail either the EI or the SI thesis? Does it otherwise constitute an objection to natural theology β?

The Range of Target Beliefs

The first thing to note is that [P] affirms that there are circumstances that are sufficient for *some* range of theistic beliefs to be immediately warranted, if the person is in the appropriate circumstances and his relevant cognitive faculties are functioning properly. [P] does not state that there are no circumstances in which such a person can hold some range of theistic beliefs inferentially, nor does [P] entail that such beliefs would lack warrant. Like nineteenth-century theistic intuitionism, it may be that while some theistic beliefs are immediately warranted others are inferentially warranted. In this case, there are really (at least) *two* specific grounds or sources of theistic belief that work in tandem to fill out one's general body of natural knowledge of God. While we can speak generically of 'theistic belief,' we should keep in mind that we are actually dealing with a multiplicity of theistic belie*s*. Indeed, even the 'simple' belief that there is a God will not be the same belief as the content of 'God' changes. So, even if there are paradigm cases of theistic beliefs that are immediately warranted, we have to take seriously the possibility that other theistic beliefs are inferentially warranted.

---

[20]   Recall that for Plantinga it is not the belief that God exists that is formed in these circumstances, but more specific theistic beliefs that self-evidently entail that God exists. Plantinga does not specify whether we should pair some particular theistic belief that t´ with some particular experiential circumstance c´, or to what extent there is variation here among different cognizers.

The suggestion here can be unpacked in different ways. First, it may be that the sort of circumstances to which Plantinga appeals produce various theistic beliefs with personal indexicals, such as 'God is forgiving *me*,' 'God is guiding *me*,' and 'God is exercising his goodness toward *me*.' In this case, the *sensus divinitatis* produces beliefs about what God is doing vis-à-vis the cognizer at the moment. By contrast, inferences from empirical observation may confer warrant on more general sorts of theistic beliefs, such as 'God is wise,' 'God is good,' and 'God is powerful.' Secondly, perhaps what we know immediately in C is that there is some creator of the universe, but beliefs that attribute certain properties to God are inferentially warranted, like goodness, omniscience, omnipotence, necessary existence, and eternity. Thirdly, maybe the range of theistic beliefs that are inferentially warranted are those that arise only upon philosophical reflection on the immediate knowledge of God. Here we might suppose that a philosophical understanding of the divine existence and attributes is a matter of inference. So, while John's belief that God is merciful to him may be immediately warranted, his belief that God is infinitely powerful, timelessly eternal, or logically necessary may be warranted by virtue of philosophical considerations.[21]

I do not pretend to say just which of these scenarios is the best way of unpacking my general suggestion, but these possibilities do at least illuminate how inference could plausibly play a role in conferring warrant on theistic beliefs in a way consistent with [P]. Much like our knowledge of the external world and other minds, some of the propositional content of our knowledge of God may rest sufficiently on immediate sources, while some may rest on inference. This is sensible given the dialectical context in which this model emerged in Plantinga's thinking; namely the critique of the evidentialist epistemologies according to which *no* theistic belief is warranted for a person unless the belief is based on other warranted beliefs. A rejection of this position only requires some theistic beliefs be items of immediate knowledge, not that no theistic belief is inferentially known. While Plantinga emphasizes the immediate character of the natural knowledge of God, his model does not preclude an inferential dimension to this knowledge.

---

[21]   It seems that Plantinga's paradigm cases of properly basic theistic beliefs all *presuppose* that the person who forms these specific theistic beliefs already believes in the existence of God. In that case, though, one might argue that the warrant of Plantinga's specific theistic beliefs depends on the warrant of more generalized propositions about what God is like. So Plantinga's paradigm cases of properly basic theistic beliefs are at least not *epistemically* basic. Their warranted status depends on other items of knowledge or warranted beliefs about God. For this argument, see Stewart C. Goetz, "Belief in God is not Properly Basic" in *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology*, ed. R. Douglas Geivett and Brendan Sweetman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 168–77. Originally published in *Religious Studies* 19 (1983): 475–84.

Cooperative Psychological and Epistemic Support

Up to this point we have considered ways in which [P] is compatible with *some* theistic beliefs being warranted wholly by way of inference.[22] However, there is another way [P] is logically consistent with inferentially warranted theistic beliefs. Some theistic beliefs may be warranted *in part* by way of inference. In addition to items of wholly immediate knowledge and wholly inferential knowledge, there is a third category of knowledge that is partly immediate and partly inferential. Generally, different grounds or sources of belief can combine and operate in tandem as the psychological and epistemic basis for specific beliefs, a kind of *cooperative support*. This is plausibly true in the case of theistic belief in particular. We can envision situations in which a person's believing and knowing some particular proposition, p, about God may depend on more than one ground or source. So, for instance, while Jack may suddenly find himself with the belief that God is sustaining or guiding him, this belief may at the same time also be grounded partly in inference, say, from the course of events in the person's life. It may be that Jack's knowing that God is sustaining him depends on both sources, and in the absence of either ground he would not know the theistic proposition in question.

There are two sides to this principle of cooperative support. In its psychological extension, cooperative support refers to the conditions under which a particular belief is produced or sustained. A belief receives cooperative support in this sense if a person's coming to hold or continuing to hold some belief requires more than one ground. In its epistemic extension, cooperative support refers to the conditions under which a belief is warranted. A belief receives cooperative support in this sense when its being warranted, or being warranted to some degree, depends on more than one ground or source. In the present context we are interested in cases of cooperative support that combine inferential and immediate grounds, so that the target belief and its warrant are partly inferential and partly immediate. The distinctions here are significant because, while a particular ground may be sufficient for a person's belief being warranted, it may not be sufficient for the belief's being warranted to a degree required for knowledge. In such instances, cooperative support would be required for a person's belief to constitute knowledge.

It is important to note that Plantinga has agreed that inference, while not the sole source of warrant for theistic belief, can *contribute* to the warrant of theistic belief. For Plantinga, degree of warrant is in part a function of degree of belief. All other things being equal, the more firmly a person believes some proposition, the more warrant this belief will have for her. But it is plausible to suppose that, at least for some people in some circumstances, the *sensus divinitatis* produces a less than firm belief in God. In this situation, "good theistic arguments could play the role of confirming and strengthening my belief in God, and in that way they might

---

22   Alston argues that different grounds of theistic belief (tradition, natural theology, and religious experience) will often provide support for different kinds of theistic propositions. See Alston, *Perceiving God*, pp. 293–4.

increase the degree of warrant belief in God has for me."[23] Plantinga links the epistemic contribution of theistic inferences to their psychological contribution in strengthening the degree of belief. Moreover, this sort of contribution might very well make the difference between whether or not a true theistic belief constitutes knowledge. Plantinga holds that knowledge requires a certain level of warrant, and the degree of warrant is partly a function of degree of belief. A less than firm belief, then, can reduce warrant to a level that a true belief no longer constitutes knowledge. Inference could shore up this deficiency by increasing the degree of warrant.[24]

Up to this point I have argued that [P] is logically consistent with some theistic beliefs being wholly or partly inferentially warranted. I have assumed that the individuals under discussion are those who satisfy the conditions stipulated in the antecedent of [P]. These persons are in circumstances designed to trigger corresponding theistic beliefs and their relevant cognitive faculties are functioning properly. We can refer to such individuals as *ideal* rational cognizers. However, the conditions that suffice for immediately warranted theistic beliefs may not suffice if someone is not an ideal rational cognizer. It is consistent with [P] to affirm that there is some range of theistic beliefs that are solely or partly inferentially warranted for less than ideal rational cognizers.

The Defeasibility of Theistic Belief and the Role of Inference

The importance of the above contributions of inferential warrant for theistic belief may also be illustrated by drawing attention to circumstances in which at least partial inferential grounding of a belief is necessary for a belief to remain warranted or at least warranted enough for knowledge. There is agreement among many contemporary epistemologists that the warrant of most beliefs, immediate and inferential, can be degraded over time. Warrant is typically a *defeasible* positive epistemic status.[25] It is possible for a belief that is immediately warranted at time t_1 to cease to be immediately warranted at some later time t_2, or at least cease to be warranted to the degree needed for knowledge. So while a person might have an immediate knowledge of God at time t_1 on the sole grounds of the *sensus divinitatis*, the person would cease to have this knowledge at some later time t_2 if the warrant of her theistic belief was lost or sufficiently degraded. In this

[23]   Plantinga, "The Prospects for Natural Theology" in *Philosophical Perspectives 5: Philosophy of Religion*, ed. James Tomberlin (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview, 1991), pp. 311–12.

[24]   Alston recognizes the additive role of different grounds. See Alston, *Perceiving God*, pp. 292–3.

[25]   For a thorough account of defeasibility and defeaters, see my "Defeaters in Epistemology," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/e/ep-defea.htm/>.

context, inference can make an important contribution to the natural knowledge of God either by *restoring* warrant to theistic beliefs that have been defeated or by *insulating* beliefs from defeat.

Plantinga and Rational Defeaters

According to Plantinga, a properly functioning cognitive system has a cognitive sub-system called the defeater-system.[26] This aspect of our cognitive system regulates the modification of our beliefs with the acquisition of new beliefs and experiences. Since our cognitive systems have a defeater sub-system, the proper function requirement for warrant extends to the proper functioning of the defeater-system. A belief B will fail to be warranted if a person, who holds B at time t_1, acquires a belief D at time t_2, and proper function requires withholding B given that the person acquired D. In this circumstance, a person acquires what Plantinga calls a 'rationality defeater.'[27] This sort of defeater represents a kind of internalist condition for warrant: cognitively accessible items, experiences and other beliefs can fully or partially defeat warrant. There is what we might call an 'internalist no-defeater condition' for warrant: S's belief that p is warranted (to degree N) only if S does not have an internalist type defeater for the belief that p.[28]

It follows that if a person acquired a rationality defeater for some theistic belief, his theistic belief would be defeated and thus lack warrant, or at least lack the degree of warrant it possessed prior to the acquisition of the defeater. Hence, even if we suppose that theistic beliefs can be, and are, sometimes immediately warranted, it doesn't follow that such beliefs would *remain* warranted in just any circumstance. And even if they remained warranted, they might not remain warranted to the degree necessary for knowledge. So even if theistic belief can be immediately warranted, negative evidence could *eliminate* or significantly *reduce* warrant and thereby undermine the immediate knowledge of God. Plantinga himself seems to recognize this. For example, suppose someone comes to believe that her theistic belief is the product of wish fulfillment and that beliefs produced in this way are unlikely to be true. In this case, the person would acquire an *undercutting* defeater

---

[26]   See Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, pp. 40–42, and *Warranted Christian Belief*, chapter 11. Since not all cognitive processes are aimed at the production of true beliefs, warrant gets defeated only if the proper functioning of one's *truth-aimed* cognitive faculties specifies that one should withhold the belief, even if the proper functioning of non-truth-aimed processes requires holding the belief.

[27]   For a detailed discussion of Plantinga and defeaters, see my "The Internalist Character and Evidentialist Implications of Plantingian Defeaters," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 45 (1999): 167–87.

[28]   On the role of internalist type defeaters in externalism, see Michael Bergmann, "Internalism, Externalism, and the No-Defeater Condition," *Synthese* 3 (March 1997): 399–417, and Bergmann, *Justification without Awareness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), chapter 6.

for her theistic belief. She has lost her grounds for continuing to believe in God, at least with the same degree of firmness.[29] Such a defeater should be distinguished from a 'rebutting defeater' against belief in God, namely, an overriding reason for supposing that theism is false. The problem of evil and arguments for the logical inconsistency of theism would provide potential sources for this sort of defeater. Of course, it may be—as Plantinga contends—that a fully rational cognizer will not acquire any defeaters for theistic belief.[30] The present account requires only that some cognizers acquire defeaters for theistic belief, not that they are fully rational in doing so.

While Plantinga focuses on defeaters against the general belief that there is a God, one can get defeaters of various sorts for any number of more specific theistic beliefs, without thereby also acquiring a defeater against theistic belief as such.[31] Consider how defeaters work in the rest of our cognitive life. I might get a defeater for my belief that Dr. McDonald is an honest colleague by observing his regularly cheating the cafeteria cashier and learning that he attempted to sabotage my tenure application by fabricating events that paint me in a negative light. Here I acquire a defeater for my prior positive belief about Dr. McDonald's character, but I do not thereby acquire a defeater for my belief that Dr. McDonald exists. Something similar is true in the case of theistic belief. I may acquire a defeater against the belief that God has knowledge of future contingent propositions. I thereby get a reason for revising my belief about divine omniscience, though not necessarily for giving up divine omniscience altogether, much less theism altogether. Similarly, I might acquire a defeater for a particular understanding of divine eternity or necessary existence without thereby acquiring a defeater for my belief that there is a God. Since our knowledge of God consists of beliefs in various different theistic propositions, some of which are not essential to our belief in God, it is possible to get a defeater for some of our knowledge of God without getting a defeater for all of it.[32]

Defeater-Defeaters and Inferential Warrant

Given that some theistic belief is defeated, what is needed is a cognitive state in which the defeater no longer carries defeating force; because other conditions now

29   Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, pp. 229–31.

30   Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, pp. 485–99. For a contrary argument, see my "Can Religious Unbelief be Proper Function Rational?" *Faith and Philosophy* 16:3 (1999): 297–314.

31   Even if Plantinga is correct that a fully rational person will not acquire a defeater for theistic belief *simplicter*, it is implausible to suppose that a fully rational person will not acquire defeaters against more specific kinds of theistic beliefs.

32   In his discussion on the experiential grounds of theistic belief, Alston typically focuses on defeaters for particular theistic beliefs, not belief in God as such. See Alston, *Perceiving God*, pp. 191–3, 261–2, 295–6.

either neutralize its defeating force or eliminate it altogether. In other words, the defeater must be defeated. What is needed is a 'defeater-defeater,' a defeater that defeats the defeater.[33] After all, as long as the defeater is present, the no-defeater condition for warrant is not satisfied and so the belief will not have warrant (or at least not as much warrant).

So someone who acquires a defeater for theistic belief by virtue of acquiring the belief that theistic belief is a product of wish fulfillment and that beliefs produced in this way are unlikely to be true might later acquire reasons for supposing that one of these defeating beliefs is in fact false. Alternatively, a person could come to believe something else that in conjunction with the earlier defeating reasons now neutralizes the defeating force of the prior beliefs. For instance, a person might come to believe that wish fulfillment is a natural mechanism that God has implanted in humans to act as a secondary cause in the production of theistic belief. Natural theistic inferences in particular can play an important role in producing defeater-defeaters. A person who is agnostic about the existence of God at t_1 because of an argument from evil may find at t_2 that theism carries significant explanatory power for the existence of the Universe, its spatial and temporal regularities, and the degree of fine-tuning it exhibits.

What the above examples also show us is that theistic beliefs, even if not originally dependent on reasons or evidence, may become so dependent in drawing support from defeater-defeaters. This is not to say that in these cases warrant depends solely on the defeater-defeater. It is plausible to suppose that in many cases the original source of warrant still confers some warrant. It is just that the original source would not have this power unless the person had the defeater-defeater. For instance, there is no reason to suppose that a defeater-defeater must replace the *sensus divinitatis* as the source of warrant, though this might be the case if the defeater-defeater constituted strong evidence for theism. However, it may be that the *sensus divinitatis* regains warrant-conferring power only because of the acquisition of the defeater-defeater. Perhaps the original ground works with the defeater-defeater to jointly confer enough warrant for knowledge. In either case, theistic belief exhibits partial epistemic dependence on the defeater-defeater.[34]

---

[33]   'Defeater-defeater' is Plantinga's designation, and he seems to agree with the reasoning here. Writing with reference to a theist who finds herself with an undercutting defeater due to reading too much Freud, he says: "if that defeater remains itself undefeated and if she has no other source of evidence, then the rational course would be to reject belief in God." Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, p. 231.

[34]   This is not to say that the defeater-defeater is *evidence* for the *truth* of the theistic belief. This would only be the case where the defeater-defeater is a reason to suppose that some theistic proposition is true. Not all defeater-defeaters are of this sort. Defeater-defeaters are, of course, evidence for the truth of higher-level *epistemic* propositions to the effect that one's belief is *once again* rational or warranted, just as a defeater is evidence for supposing that one's belief is *no longer* rational or warranted. However, if a defeater-defeater *replaces* some original warrant-conferring ground of belief the defeater-defeater must be suitably

It follows from the above considerations that inferential warrant can also play a role in insulating theistic belief from defeat in the first place. Suppose that at time t_1 the warrant of theistic belief is vulnerable to defeat at time t_2 to degree N. Suppose further that this vulnerability is tied to weaknesses in the immediate character of the grounds of theistic belief. In this case, the partial inferential grounding of theistic belief at time t_1 can compensate for these weaknesses and insulate theistic belief from defeat to varying degrees. This is particularly relevant since defeaters against theistic belief are commonly directed toward the reliability of religious traditions, testimony as a source of theistic belief, or take aim at religious experience or the *sensus divinitatis* as an adequate ground for theistic belief. If some defeaters take aim at theistic belief by attempting to defeat immediate grounds of theistic belief, theistic belief will be insulated (to varying degrees) from that sort of defeat if it is based, at least in part, on inferential grounds.

As far as I can see, there is no specific truth about how the warrant of theistic belief will be restored for every person, or how it will be insulated from defeat for every person. Nor have I argued that defeater-defeaters are always the result of inference. A particular type of immediate ground for theistic belief may be sufficient in some circumstances to insulate theistic belief from defeat.[35] In other situations, inference will be necessary.

A Potential Plantingian Objection: The Strong P-Thesis

While the above contributions of inferential warrant are logically consistent with [P], in places it seems that Plantinga actually affirms a stronger immediacy thesis, one that entails the EI thesis. I will call this the 'strong P-thesis.'[36]

---

truth-indicating. In cases of partial epistemic dependence, the defeater-defeater does not bear the entire weight of this epistemic burden. Rather it provides the appropriate epistemic patchwork together with the original ground. See Christoph Jaeger, "Warrant, Defeaters, and the Epistemic Basis of Religious Belief" in *Science and Religion*, ed. Michael Parker and Thomas M. Schmidt (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), pp. 81–98.

[35]   According to Plantinga, properly basic theistic belief can, by virtue of its own degree of warrant, defeat defeaters. See Plantinga, "The Foundations of Theism: A Reply," *Faith and Philosophy* 3:3 (July 1986): 310–12. I think Plantinga's idea of an intrinsic defeater-defeater is better spelled out in terms of conditions in which properly basic beliefs are insulated from defeat. A defeater is simply never acquired. See my "The Internalist Character and Evidentialist Implications of Plantingian Defeaters," pp. 180–82.

[36]   The strong P-thesis has been recognized by Dewey Hoitenga, *Faith and Reason from Plato to Plantinga* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), pp. 183, 209, 220–22; John Zeis, "Natural Theology: Reformed?" in *Rational Faith: Catholic Responses to Reformed Epistemology*, ed. Linda Zagzebski (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), pp. 48–78, at p. 49; Patrick Lee, "Evidentialism, Plantinga, and Faith and Reason" in *Rational Faith*, pp. 140–67, at p. 142; and Paul Feinberg, "A Cumulative Case

Plantinga has claimed in a few places that one element in the Reformed objection to natural theology is the view that "belief in God *ought not* to be based on arguments."[37] This would seem to imply that there is something *wrong* with a person who holds his theistic belief on the basis of theistic arguments or inference. Writing with reference to Calvin and Bavinck, Plantinga says: "The correct or proper way to believe in God, they thought, was not on the basis of arguments from natural theology or anywhere else; the correct way was to take belief in God as basic."[38] Now this implies that there is something incorrect, improper, or defective in holding theistic belief on the basis of theistic arguments or as a matter of inference. The argument, then, would be that a person who accepted theistic belief in an inferential manner exhibits some sort of cognitive disorder or malfunction.[39] Consequently, such beliefs would not be warranted.

Inference and the Original Design Plan

The strong P-thesis entails that the original cognitive design plan would make no provision for inferential theistic beliefs. But it is hard to see why this is so. In *Warranted Christian Belief*, Plantinga presents reasons for supposing that if theism is true, then something like [P] is likely true. The reasons include God's desiring us to form true beliefs about Him and our duties to him. However, the argument only shows that if theism is true, then it is likely that our cognitive design plan would have a theistic belief forming and sustaining provision, not necessarily anything as specific as *how* we would form such beliefs. There is not an obvious argument from the truth of theism to a design plan specifying an *exclusively* immediate mode of theistic belief formation. However, Plantinga indicates that the way in which we actually do form theistic beliefs is likely the way God planned it. In that case, the case for exclusively immediate natural knowledge of God can be constructed in

---

Apologist's Response" in *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), pp. 302–6, at p. 302.

[37]   Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God" in *Faith and Rationality*, ed. Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1983), pp. 16–93, at p. 71; see also pp. 72–3.

[38]   Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," pp. 72–3 where Plantinga speaks of basic belief in God as the *best* way to believe in God, clearly a weaker claim than speaking of the *correct* way to believe in God.

[39]   That Plantinga construed the "ought" here along these lines is suggested by his associating "ought" with "correctness" and a "well-formed noetic structure." He says, "As these Reformed thinkers see things, one who takes belief in God as basic is not thereby violating any epistemic duties or revealing a defect in his noetic structure; quite the reverse. The correct or proper way to believe in God, they thought, was not on the basis of arguments from natural theology or anywhere else; the correct way is to take belief in God as basic" ("Reason and Belief in God," p. 72). Plantinga confirmed this interpretation in correspondence (7/16/01).

part on an empirical premise. As Plantinga sees it, people do not typically come to belief in God on the basis of evidential considerations.

We can admit that few people come to believe in God on the basis of philosophical arguments, or indeed explicitly formulated arguments of any sort, but this does not imply that most people believe in God in an immediate way, especially when we consider the spontaneous character of many everyday inferences. However, Plantinga argues that if a person *reasoned* from the experiential circumstances Plantinga identifies as the grounds of theistic belief to the conclusion that God exists, then the person's reason for believing in God would not be a very strong one and would thus not possess much warrant.[40] But inferences might still confer warrant, even if a simple statement of the inference constitutes a poor argument. This should be evident given Plantinga's epistemology, according to which a belief will have warrant by way of inference, roughly, just if the belief is produced by truth-aimed cognitive faculties functioning properly in the appropriate environment. The crucial question is whether a *rational* person would believe p on the basis of q.[41] Perhaps we are so designed that if our relevant cognitive faculties are functioning properly we should form a firm belief that 'a supremely intelligent being created the universe' on the basis of beliefs about the beauty and orderly nature of the universe. The inference need not make for what we might consider a good argument.[42]

Partial Inferential Grounding and the Content Issue

But let us suppose that it is unreasonable to view belief in God as resting wholly on inference, spontaneous or otherwise. Surely it is plausible to suppose that some people hold belief in God at least on the *partial* basis of evidential considerations. Now perhaps they do not come to believe in God on this basis, but perhaps such considerations play a role in sustaining their belief in God at times after its acquisition. There is no obvious reason why the design plan cannot specify multiple grounds for holding theistic belief, which include both Plantinga's *sensus divinitatis* and inference. Moreover, since Plantinga admits that theistic arguments can increase the degree of warrant for theistic belief, the cognitive design plan must have specifications for holding theistic belief at least in part of the basis of propositional evidence.[43]

---

[40]   Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 175.

[41]   Ibid., pp. 167–8.

[42]   This is true from a purely reliabilist perspective too. If a belief is warranted just if it is the output of a reliable cognitive process, theistic inferences will produce beliefs that constitute knowledge just if the processes are reliable and the belief is true. It will not be required that we *know* that the process is reliable or that we have *determined* the truth of the metaphysical principles that sanction such inferences.

[43]   Plantinga, "Prospects for Natural Theology," pp. 311–12, and *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 179, n. 16.

Furthermore, under the rubric 'theistic beliefs' we must recognize not merely the sorts of beliefs that Plantinga selects (for example, 'God is present,' 'God is forgiving me,' and 'God created all of this'), but more philosophical beliefs about God's necessity, eternality, omniscience, and omnibenevolence—where such beliefs are most plausibly regarded as at least partly the result of inference. While it is important not to exaggerate the extent to which ordinary believers acquire such philosophically sophisticated beliefs by way of reflection, neither can a theory of religious epistemology ignore such cases.

So we should understand the strong P-thesis as maintaining that

> [P*] In a fully rational noetic structure, or a noetic structure in which at least the *sensus divinitatis* and other relevant faculties are functioning properly, inference will not be the *sole* source of warrant for a certain range of theistic beliefs.

Clearly, though, [P*] entails neither the EI thesis nor the SI thesis. Despite the popular impression to the contrary, Plantinga's epistemology of belief in God leaves considerable space for natural theology β. In the final analysis, neither Baillie nor Plantinga provides a model of the natural knowledge of God on which we can base a project objection to natural theology β.

This page has been left blank intentionally

Chapter 5

Immediacy and Reformed Models of Natural Theology

In the previous two chapters, I examined the prospects for a project objection to natural theology β (theistic arguments) on the basis of the immediacy of natural theology α (natural knowledge of God). I outlined two kinds of immediacy theses that would constitute project objections. The SI thesis challenges the epistemic relevance of natural theology β, whereas the EI thesis challenges the epistemic efficacy of natural theology β. Since it is frequently held that Reformed views on the immediacy of the natural knowledge of God ground an objection to natural theology β, my strategy has been to examine what prominent thinkers in the Reformed tradition (from the Reformation to contemporary philosophy of religion) have actually said about the natural knowledge of God. I have argued that prominent Reformed views of immediate natural knowledge of God are either compatible with the denial of the SI and EI theses or actually entail their denial. There are clearly important streams of Reformed thought that reject the rigid dichotomy so frequently drawn between immediate and inferential modes of knowing God in favor of a more pluralistic epistemology in which immediacy and inference complement each other. In the case of Calvin, Baillie, and Plantinga, I have argued that this pluralism is at least a logical implication of their viewpoints.

In this chapter, I want to highlight and fine-tune the salient points of argumentation in the previous two chapters. This includes exploring more systematically the epistemic contribution of inference and clarifying the inferential presuppositions of natural theology β; both of which will be essential to subsequent argumentation in this book. I will also consider a modified exclusive immediacy thesis and examine the main reasons why the EI thesis would be attractive to some Reformed theologians. In this way, I hope to more directly address the plausibility of a Reformed case for the EI thesis.

Clarifying the Epistemic Contribution of Inference

My critique of the SI and EI theses has up to this point relied heavily on articulating ways in which inference can make significant contributions to the natural knowledge of God, even if some natural knowledge of God is immediate. While in the first instance I have been thinking of inference in the broad sense (as inclusive of more spontaneous and natural processes of reasoning), the point is

particularly applicable to more reflective modes of inferential reasoning exhibited by the project of natural theology β.

We may summarize the role of inference in relation to immediate natural knowledge of God as follows:

> [I] Inference can augment, refine, or confirm the immediate natural knowledge of God.

Inference *augments* the immediate natural knowledge of God if it provides knowledge of theistic propositions that are not immediately known. The scope of immediate knowledge of God depends on the specifics of the model of immediacy, but since it is implausible to suppose that the knowledge provided by immediate sources is exhaustive, this opens up the possibility that some theistic propositions could be inferentially known, thereby extending the scope of natural knowledge of God. For example, we might have immediate knowledge that there is some infinite or unconditioned being, but perhaps we inferentially know that this being is provident, wise, or good. Inference *refines* immediate knowledge of God if it provides knowledge of theistic propositions that are not immediately known but which have similar content as immediately known theistic propositions. Inference would thereby fill out immediate knowledge of God. If we have immediate knowledge that there is an infinite being, we might inferentially know that this being is infinitely wise. Finally, inference *confirms* the immediate natural knowledge of God if it provides knowledge of theistic propositions that are immediately known.

In the light of Chapter 4, though, it is important to draw a distinction between strong and weak versions of [I]. Since warrant, the property that distinguishes true belief from knowledge, comes in degrees, we should distinguish between the following:

> [SIP] Rational inference confers a degree N of warrant on some range of theistic beliefs, where N is a degree of warrant sufficient[1] to transform true belief into knowledge.

> [MIP] Rational inference confers a degree of warrant less than N on some range of theistic beliefs, where the Nth degree of warrant is sufficient to transform true belief into knowledge.

According to [SIP] inference is sufficient to generate some natural knowledge of God. Inference provides its own stock of knowledge of God, which augments,

---

[1]   Or at any rate, nearly so. I leave open the possibility that an additional condition must be satisfied to rule out so-called Gettier cases. There may be cases where a warranted true belief fails to constitute knowledge because it is a matter of luck that the person holds a true belief. See Chapter 7 for discussion on Gettier cases.

refines, or confirms the immediate knowledge of God. This appears to be the way the Reformers, Protestant scholastics, and nineteenth-century theistic intuitionists thought of the matter. In the previous chapter, though, we saw that theistic beliefs based solely on inference might fail to constitute knowledge, but they might still be warranted. According to [MIP], inference confers warrant on theistic belief, but just not enough for knowledge. This would still be a good thing since warrant is a positive epistemic status and it is a good thing from the epistemic point of view to have beliefs with this status, even if they fall short of constituting knowledge. Inferential warrant may nonetheless contribute to knowledge of God. Inference could add a degree of warrant to some immediately warranted theistic belief that pushes it over the boundary that separates true belief from knowledge. As argued earlier, multiple sources of belief can operate in tandem, each conferring a certain degree of warrant, where the sources jointly confer the degree of warrant needed for knowledge. While this might be a consequence of inference simply adding warrant to an immediately warranted theistic belief, inference might also defeat defeaters that would otherwise lower the degree of warrant for theistic belief or even insulate immediately warranted theistic beliefs from defeat. So we shouldn't underestimate the significance of [MIP] as a way of weakly augmenting, refining, and confirming immediate natural knowledge of God. Finally, given the broad range of theistic beliefs, [SIP] might be true for some theistic beliefs and [MIP] true for other theistic beliefs.

The Epistemic Presuppositions of Natural Theology β

In Chapter 2, I adopted the assumption that natural theology β is epistemically loaded. The project of natural theology β (or at least a successful one) presupposes that theistic arguments can be a source of knowledge of God. It follows from the above considerations, though, that there are actually two ways in which natural theology β can be epistemically loaded. Natural theology β is *strongly* epistemically loaded just if it entails [SIP], but it is *weakly* epistemically loaded just if it entails [MIP]. The distinction is highly relevant to the idea of a project objection to natural theology β. In Chapter 2, I said that a reason to deny the epistemic efficacy of natural theology β would constitute a project objection to natural theology β. However, it should now be clear that a reason to deny the epistemic efficacy of natural theology β in the sense of [SIP] is *not* a project objection. To demonstrate this, we need only consider the sufficiency of [MIP] in relation to several of the functions of natural theology β discussed in Chapter 2.

Dogmatic Functions of Natural Theology β

First, consider the formalization thesis, and the closely allied notion that natural theology β confirms and explicates the biblical testimony to natural knowledge of God. If we adopt the idea that natural theology β formalizes the natural knowledge

of God, it is not necessary to suppose that the inferences being formalized are strongly epistemically efficacious. We may view theistic arguments as formalizing the inferential element in our natural knowledge of God, and this element by itself may be insufficient for knowledge of God. This is also consistent with the idea that natural theology β explicates, develops, and confirms the biblical testimony to the natural knowledge of God. This presupposes that there is some natural knowledge of God, but it does not commit us to the more specific claim that this knowledge is the product of inference alone. It may be *knowledge* of God because there is an intuitive element. By the same token, it will not be necessary to suppose that the arguments that formalize the natural knowledge of God must be strongly epistemically efficacious. The formalization thesis entails that there is some natural knowledge of God independent of explicitly formulated theistic arguments. So if theistic arguments do not produce knowledge of God, this is a negligible epistemic loss. If theistic arguments produce warranted beliefs about God, they have positive epistemic value.

Suppose now we think of natural theology β as a way of strengthening a pre-existing belief in God or increasing its degree of warrant. We should not suppose that inferential support must confer a very high degree of warrant to accomplish this, for much the same reason that reinforcing a roof beam or floor joist only requires shoring up pre-existing support. Moreover, the sorts of rational considerations that function as defeaters against theistic belief, and thereby reduce firmness of belief, do not typically carry a very high degree of warrant. Their defeating power is often only partial, reducing the degree of warrant of some theistic belief but not eliminating it altogether. In such a situation, considerations in favor of the partially defeated theistic belief (or reasons that neutralize the defeating power of the defeater) need only outweigh the defeater. There is no need for rational inference to confer a high degree of warrant. Indeed, if the function of rational inference is simply to increase the degree of warrant of a pre-existing belief, the degree of warrant conferred by rational inference may be quite modest. The key issue here is the diversity of grounds of belief—each of which makes its own contribution to theistic belief. If the theist's beliefs about God draw on multiple warrant-conferring sources or grounds (such as intuition, religious experience, scripture, tradition, natural theology), rational inference need not carry the entire epistemic load.

Turning to the potential contribution of natural theology β to a systematic doctrine of God, one of the ways that natural theology β can make this sort of contribution is by extending the theologian's stock of warranted theistic beliefs, even if these beliefs do not possess enough warrant for knowledge. Warranted beliefs are worth having in any domain. This is no less true in theology. Warranted beliefs about God's goodness, wisdom, and power as manifested in the physical world contribute to our understanding of general revelation, especially where the attributes of God are conceptually clarified through philosophical reflection and argument. Our conclusions here may not have a very high degree of warrant, but the warrant conferred by rational inference need not be very low either. Again,

it is important to see rational inference as augmenting and confirming what is ostensibly known about God from other sources, including Scripture. This is particularly relevant where Scripture provides only modest support for certain theological beliefs (for example, divine timelessness, logical immutability, logically necessary existence, and simplicity) but where natural theology β can provide its own support for the same beliefs.

Apologetics and the Pre-Dogmatic Model of Natural Theology β

I think something similar needs to be said for the apologetic use of theistic arguments. This use of natural theology β does not require [SIP]. At all events, this will be true given that (a) theistic arguments aim to refute atheism and (b) the arguments against theism do not confer a high degree of warrant on the negation of theism. It will only be necessary in these circumstances for inference to confer a degree of warrant on theistic propositions that is *greater than* the degree of warrant conferred on the denial of theism (or propositions that putatively undermine the grounds for theistic belief). But unless the latter is extremely high, which does not seem very plausible, it will not be necessary for the former to be high enough for knowledge. In fact, one might reasonably suppose that atheistic arguments will be at least weakly refuted if the reasons for theism confer at least as much warrant on theism as the atheistic arguments confer on the negation of theism. So the apologetic use of natural theology β requires only the modest inferential commitment of [MIP].

The pre-dogmatic model of natural theology β seems to be in a slightly different position than these other functions of natural theology β. Here rational inference is allegedly responsible for providing the philosophical foundations of dogmatic theology. It is at least not clear that [MIP] would be sufficient as a principle of inferential warrant here. It would seem that an epistemic foundation must be pretty firm. Arguably this requires [SIP]. At all events, inference would have to confer a high degree of warrant on a basic set of theistic beliefs for natural theology β to function as a rational foundation for faith. Strictly speaking this is consistent with [MIP], but it is logically entailed by [SIP]. So it would be natural to adopt [SIP] as the inferential presupposition of natural theology β here. This is, of course, historically what we find in the Cartesian and Wolffian systems of natural theology, in which it is assumed that God's existence can be logically demonstrated, that is, proved in a rationally compelling manner from various self-evident or epistemically certain truths. While we need not suppose that foundations must be *this* strong, it would seem that natural theology β must still be a source of knowledge. So there seems to be a potentially important difference in the inferential presuppositions of the dogmatic versus pre-dogmatic models of natural theology β.

Returning to the Exclusive Immediacy Thesis

Given the distinction between [SIP] and [MIP] there are actually two kinds of exclusive immediacy (EI) theses. In Chapter 3, I took the EI thesis to affirm that the natural knowledge of God is solely immediate. Thus formulated, the immediacy thesis denies that theistic beliefs can have a particular epistemic status based on inference, namely *knowledge*. In other words, [SIP] is false. But as the discussion of Plantinga made clear, there are other ways that inference can contribute to the knowledge of God, even if God is never known solely on the basis of inference. Moreover, as the above discussion has demonstrated, the fate of natural theology β does not depend on the plausibility of [SIP], but on [MIP]. So if considerations from immediacy are to constitute a project objection to natural theology β, a stronger EI thesis is needed, one that denies [MIP].[2] We would have to suppose that our only *warranted* natural beliefs about God are immediately warranted. This is an exceedingly strong claim. Not surprisingly, none of the prominent Reformed accounts of the natural knowledge of God examined in the previous two chapters entails this stronger exclusive immediacy thesis, even if some of them (like Baillie, and Plantinga) may be plausibly interpreted as denying [SIP].

Grounds for the EI Thesis

This raises the question as to what grounds a Reformed theologian might have for advocating the EI thesis in either of its two forms. Two issues stand out at this juncture.

First, as we will see in later chapters, quite a few late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Reformed theologians have been critical of the logic of theistic arguments (for example, Herman Bavinck, G.H. Kersten, Auguste Lecerf, and Herman Hoeksema). They simply do not think theistic arguments are very good arguments. On the reasonable assumption that only good arguments can transmit knowledge, this clearly entails a denial of [SIP]. However, if one is committed, on the basis of Scripture, to the existence of natural knowledge of God, this knowledge must take a form other than logical inference, and this leads some theologians to fairly strong claims about the immediacy of the natural knowledge of God. Auguste Lecerf, for example, maintained that theistic arguments cannot produce any "firm conclusion" and that human reason is "incapable of establishing the certainty of religious knowledge."[3] Lecerf repeatedly points out alleged logical shortcomings of the cosmological and design arguments, which at best prove "the existence of a

---

[2]   If the pre-dogmatic model of natural theology β entails [SIP], then good reason to accept the EI thesis as articulated in Chapter 3 would constitute a model-specific objection to natural theology β.

[3]   Auguste Lecerf, *Introduction to Reformed Dogmatics* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1949), pp. 28–9.

more or less indeterminate god."[4] Lecerf poses the question as to how the Calvinist can know that God exists and responds: "He cannot know it by the mediate evidence of discursive reason."[5] The epistemological corollary of this critique of theistic arguments is that religious knowledge can only be accounted for in terms of an intuitive perception of God.

> But there is no man who, in the depths of the profaned sanctuary of his own soul, does not perceive the presence of this God by the aid of an intuition whose certitude equals that which he has concerning the existence of all other things … In the case of the spontaneous knowledge of God, His presence is felt by a sensible intuition of the religious man (*sensus divinitatis*) with a certainty analogous to that which accompanies the perception of the external world by the senses, or the perception of logical agreements and identities by reason.[6]

Lecerf concludes: "In the last resort, then, God is knowable only by the intuition of faith."[7] The "intuition of faith" is for Lecerf a form of adherence to testimony, specifically a firm adherence to the testimony God gives to Himself in the created order and which makes its appeal to the sensible intelligence, not discursive intellect, of human persons.

Now if one carries the logical deficiencies of theistic arguments one step further than Lecerf, we might suppose that only good arguments can transmit warrant. In that case, [MIP] is true only if there are good theistic arguments. If no such arguments exist, the only way our natural theistic beliefs can receive warrant is in an immediate manner. So one would be driven to deny that natural theology β is even weakly epistemically efficacious.

An adequate response to this line of argument will require a careful engagement of logical objections to natural theology β, something I reserve for later chapters. At this point, I will consider only one salient point. When we examine the standard Reformed objections to the logic of theistic arguments (for example, Lecerf's objections), the criticism is typically that these arguments fail as logical demonstrations. They are not rationally compelling arguments. However, while theistic arguments may not be logical demonstrations, it does not follow that they are not good arguments. We might even suppose that their failure as logical demonstrations counts against [SIP], but it does not follow that we have a case here against [MIP]. It is fallacious to argue that since theistic arguments fail to confer maximal warrant on theistic beliefs, they fail to confer any significant warrant. So I think this argument will be unsuccessful at providing a basis for accepting the stronger EI thesis, unless of course the logical deficiencies of theistic arguments

---

4   Ibid., p. 41; see also pp. 242–5.
5   Ibid., p. 237.
6   Ibid., pp. 40, 111.
7   Ibid., p. 42.

are severe enough to undermine even a modest warrant-conferring power. I will consider this possibility in the final chapters of the book.

Secondly, and related to the preceding argument, while it is common for Reformed theologians to maintain that God cannot be known unless He reveals himself, some also contend that all such revelation must be immediate, something God directly produces. In this way, we avoid making the knowledge of God depend on the rational powers of humans, which might compromise the Reformed doctrines of total depravity and divine sovereignty. Lecerf suggests this in his account of the natural knowledge of God as something that arises spontaneously from God's revealing Himself to sensible intuition, which is strongly contrasted with the products of human inferential reasoning. According to William Masselink, Romans 1:19–20 affirms a general revelation in the created order, but this general revelation takes the form of *testimonies* to God that are rendered epistemically efficacious only by the activity of the Holy Spirit. This activity of the Holy Spirit is not redemptive. It is a general illumination applied to all humans, the workings of common grace. The resultant knowledge is intuitive and must be contrasted with what humans infer about God through a process of logical reasoning.

> The knowledge of God which the natural man receives through the testimony of the Holy Spirit is intuitive and aprioristic, whereas rationalistic proof is the result of reflective or aposterioristic thinking … Natural man knows that God is, not because of a process of reasoning, but because of the Holy Spirit.[8]

This line of argument merits several brief observations. First, if the natural knowledge of God had saving power of some sort, there would be a transparent conflict between construing this knowledge as the product of human reasoning and the Reformed doctrines of human inability and efficacious divine grace. But there is no reason to suppose that the natural knowledge of God is salvific. (Beginning in the next chapter, I will directly address the epistemic implications of the Reformed doctrine of total depravity.) Secondly, supposing that human reasoning produces knowledge of God is no more incompatible with divine sovereignty than attributing the recovery of a brain tumor patient to the medical abilities of the brain surgeon who removed the tumor. Divine sovereignty is compatible with the efficacy of secondary causes.[9] Thirdly, as long as there is some spontaneous natural knowledge of God, human inexcusability will not be contingent on the efforts of human reasoning. We need not adopt an exclusive immediacy thesis to secure universal human inexcusability. Finally, while knowledge impressed directly by God may carry with it a greater degree of warrant than inference (as both Lecerf and Masselink claim), it does not follow that inference confers no

---

[8]   William Masselink, *General Revelation and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1953), pp. 95, 118.

[9]   See the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, III.I.

significant degree of warrant on theistic belief, or even that inference cannot be a source of knowledge of God.

Modified EI Thesis

So I do not see much hope for a well-grounded Reformed account of immediate knowledge of God that entails the denial of either [SIP] or [MIP], but then it's hard to see a project objection to natural theology β from the immediate character of the natural knowledge of God. So perhaps we should consider a modified EI thesis and redirect it as a model-specific objection to natural theology β.

> [EI*] For most human cognizers, rational inference does not confer significant warrant on any theistic beliefs.

Unlike the earlier immediacy theses, [EI*] is compatible with both [SIP] and [MIP], so we avoid the difficulties involved with the denial of [SIP] and [MIP]. Theistic inferences might still be strongly epistemically efficacious for some people; however, they aren't even weakly epistemically efficacious for most people. [EI*] attempts to focus on the epistemic situation of ordinary cognizers, leaving open the possibility that some people are in a different epistemic situation in relation to theistic inferences.

While [EI*] does not generate a project objection to natural theology β, it does present a *prima facie* difficulty for the formalization thesis and the related idea that theistic arguments confirm and explicate the natural knowledge of God. According to many Reformed theologians, there is a widely instantiated natural knowledge of God that is at least partly inferential. Theistic arguments ostensibly formalize a more informal commonly instantiated pattern of inferential reasoning. The apparent problem here is that if inference does not confer any significant degree of warrant on the theistic beliefs of most cognizers, theistic arguments would not involve an explication of the process whereby the natural knowledge of God was *actually* acquired for most people. But must the formalization thesis and the use of theistic arguments to confirm and explicate the natural knowledge of God as a biblical datum rely on such an assumption? I do not think so. First, if there are good theistic arguments, then inference can at least confirm immediate natural knowledge of God by providing reasons for supposing that the target theistic propositions are true. Secondly, theistic arguments could explicate the *content* of a widely instantiated immediate knowledge of God, even if such arguments did not explicate the process that engendered this knowledge. Theistic inferences could thereby ground a philosophical knowledge of God, which enlarges, refines, and clarifies the immediate natural knowledge of God. So even if something like [EI*] is true, we would have to suppose that theistic arguments simply formalize what can *in principle* be known or believed with warrant about God from the natural order and where this serves to confirm and develop a widely instantiated immediate natural knowledge of God.

Ultimately, then, I do not think the modified exclusive immediacy thesis [EI*] generates a good objection to either the formalization thesis or the idea that natural theology β confirms and develops the natural knowledge of God as a biblical datum.

Immediacy and Christian Apologetics

But might [EI*] not constitute a good objection to the apologetic use of theistic arguments? Some Reformed theologians have argued that since all human persons already know God by virtue of the innate idea of God or God's revelation in creation, theistic proofs are irrelevant to apologetics. A more specific version of this objection is based on the alleged immediacy of the natural knowledge of God. Since God is known immediately, theistic arguments are superfluous. Indeed, to the extent that the apologetic deployment of such proofs implies that the unbeliever does not already know God, the apologetic function of natural theology β rests on a false presupposition. Several twentieth-century Reformed thinkers have taken this position. For example, Robert Reymond has said, "To use them [theistic proofs] with the intent of *proving* the existence of God is to imply that men do not already have a *sensus deitatis* within them."[10] Unfortunately, these arguments are less than persuasive.

First, we need not suppose that the apologetic use of theistic arguments is ostensibly aimed at producing belief in God in anyone. The apologetic significance of theistic arguments need not depend on theistic arguments being a source of knowledge of God. The apologetic use of theistic arguments is fundamentally aimed at the activity of justifying theistic belief, showing that such beliefs are true or showing that we are warranted in accepting them. In fact, suppose we think of the apologetic use of theistic arguments as a particular implementation of the formalization thesis. If the formalization thesis is correct, then the apologetic deployment of theistic arguments actually presupposes an antecedent natural knowledge of God. Theistic arguments will not be proposed as a basis for belief in God. We would have to view them as formally articulating and developing the grounds of an antecedent knowledge of God. In their apologetic employment, they would do this with the goal of refuting varieties of unbelief.

Secondly, theistic arguments could still be epistemically significant for the apologetic target, even if we assume an antecedent immediate knowledge of God. Theistic arguments can remove obstacles to belief, even if they do not provide positive grounds of belief in God. Moreover, I have already argued that immediate and inferential knowledge of God are logically compatible, whether the latter is parsed as [SIP] or [MIP]. In that case, even if one presented theistic arguments in

---

[10]   Robert Reymond, *Justification of Knowledge* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1976), p. 125; see also Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), pp. 142–3.

apologetics as a putative source of knowledge of God for one's target audience, this would not entail that one's target audience had no antecedent immediate knowledge of God. Nor would their having antecedent knowledge of God render such arguments superfluous, for the arguments may be construed as augmenting an antecedent knowledge of God.[11]

Summary

With reference to the central question of this book, I have argued that considerations from the immediacy of the natural knowledge of God do not easily constitute a project objection to natural theology β. Since the epistemic commitments of natural theology β need be only minimal, what I have designated [MIP], a project objection from immediacy would require a particularly strong sort of exclusive immediacy thesis. It is difficult to see a plausible Reformed motivation for such a thesis, and in fact the prominent Reformed accounts of the natural knowledge of God examined in Chapters 3 and 4 entail the denial of such a radical thesis. So if there were a project objection to natural theology β from considerations of immediacy, it might be exceedingly difficult to argue that it is actually a *Reformed* objection. Furthermore, the attempt to modify the exclusive immediacy thesis in the way suggested by [EI*] is equally unsuccessful at providing a good model-specific objection to the dogmatic and apologetic models of natural theology β. If there is a good Reformed objection to natural theology β it will have to be grounded in considerations other than the alleged immediacy of the natural knowledge of God.

---

[11] On the compatibility of the apologetic use of theistic arguments and immediate knowledge of God in connection with the Reformed epistemology of Alvin Plantinga, see my "Reformed Epistemology and Christian Apologetics," *Religious Studies* 39 (September 2003): 299–321.

This page has been left blank intentionally

PART III
Sin and the Christian Reconstruction of Natural Theology

This page has been left blank intentionally

Chapter 6
Natural Theology and the Noetic Effects of Sin[1]

Perhaps the most common objection to natural theology in the Reformed tradition is based on alleged implications of the Reformed doctrine of sin, specifically the so-called *noetic effects of sin*.[2] An essential feature of traditional Reformed theology, the first of the so-called 'five points of Calvinism,' is the doctrine of total human depravity. According to Reformed anthropology, while human persons were created in a state of original righteousness and holiness, this first state was lost through the fall, and sin has corrupted every aspect of human nature. The doctrine of total depravity does not entail that humans are as bad as they can be, but it does entail that human nature is radically corrupted. This corruption, traditionally thought of as inherited from Adam as the natural head of humanity, extends to the moral and intellectual life of the entire human race, to the functioning of our volitional and rational faculties. We are not only naturally incapable of any spiritual good, much less any saving act, our wills are positively inclined toward evil. Our interest here, though, is the cognitive dimension to this Reformed anthropology: the impairment of our rational faculties through inherited and personal sin, and consequently the effects of sin on human knowledge, specifically the knowledge of God.

The *French Confession of 1559*, an authoritative confession of faith in the French Reformed churches into the nineteenth century, provides a classic statement of the noetic effects of sin:

> We believe that man, having been created pure and perfect, and in conformity with the image of God, by his own fault fell from grace which he had received … so that his nature became wholly corrupt. Being blinded in his mind and depraved in his heart, he lost all integrity, so that even the light which he possesses transforms itself into darkness when he seeks for God, and this in such fashion that man can in no wise approach God by his reason and his intelligence.[3]

---

[1]   Parts of this chapter have been reprinted by kind permission of the publisher, vol. 3, *The History of Western Philosophy of Religion*, Graham Oppy and Nick Trakakis (eds), 2009, Acumen Publishing.

[2]   For a detailed discussion of this topic, see Stephen K. Moroney, *The Noetic Effects of Sin: a Historical and Contemporary Exploration of How Sin Affects our Thinking* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2000).

[3]   *French Confession of 1559*, art. 9.

There are different ways the doctrine of the noetic effects of sin could provide resources for an objection to natural theology β. First, it might be argued that the epistemic consequences of total depravity entail that there is no natural knowledge of God, immediate or inferential, in which case natural theology β could not be epistemically efficacious. Theologians who develop this argument typically accept the objective reality of a divine revelation in nature but deny its subjective corollary, the natural knowledge of God, on the grounds that all people are by nature epistemically blind to the manifestation of God in the created order. Secondly, it might be argued that the noetic effects of sin, while compatible with some natural knowledge of God, are incompatible with theistic arguments being epistemically efficacious. In the first case, the objection to natural theology β is based on the denial of natural theology α. In the second case, the objection is based on a restriction of natural theology α that rules out inferential natural knowledge of God. Thirdly, it might be argued that total depravity has one or the other of the above epistemic consequences only for fallen, unregenerate persons, that is, human persons whose natures have not yet been spiritually renewed by the operation of divine grace.

It is clear that the third objection is not a project objection to natural theology β, though it might be a model-specific objection, for example, against at least some models of natural theology β that assign an apologetic function to theistic arguments. Taken at face value, the first and second objections are also not project objections, since they only target models of natural theology β that are strongly epistemically loaded, that is, models that maintain that theistic arguments are a source of true beliefs about God that have a very high degree of warrant, enough for *knowledge*. As argued in the previous chapter, this strong position is not a necessary feature of natural theology β, though it is a feature of some models of natural theology β. However, we can imagine variations on the above objections that would constitute a project objection to natural theology β. Perhaps total depravity entails a degree of epistemic blindness that prevents naturally engendered theistic beliefs from even being *warranted*. So it is possible in principle to generate a project objection to natural theology β from the Reformed doctrine of total depravity.

In this chapter I begin a critical examination of these issues. My main goal is to clarify the nature of some ostensible Reformed denials of the natural knowledge of God and determine whether these denials are incompatible with natural theology α or otherwise undermine the project of natural theology β. I first examine John Calvin's alleged denial of the natural knowledge of God since Reformed theologians hostile to natural theology have often appealed to this aspect of Calvin's theology. I will then turn my attention to the doctrine of sin and the natural knowledge of God in twentieth-century thinkers Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, and Herman Hoeksema.

John Calvin's Alleged Denial of the Natural Knowledge of God

While it would appear that in the opening chapters of the *Institutes* Calvin unambiguously asserts that humans possess some natural knowledge of God (see Chapter 1), this reading is problematic. Calvin argued that inherited and personal sin corrupts the *sensus divinitatis* and blinds humans to the revelation of God in the created order. Calvin speaks of this knowledge as "the primal and simple knowledge to which the very order of nature would have led us if Adam had remained upright" (*Institutes*, 1.2.1).[4] The last clause suggests that the natural knowledge of God (that is, the *sensus divinitatis* and knowledge derived from God's works) is a reality only before the fall of Adam and the corruption of human nature. Calvin says, "if men were taught only by nature, they would hold to nothing certain or solid or clear-cut, but would be so tied to confused principles as to worship an unknown god" (1.5.12). Calvin ends the discussion of the natural knowledge of God by saying, "men soon corrupt the seed of the knowledge of God, sown in their minds out of the wonderful workmanship of nature," and "we lack the natural ability to mount up unto the pure and clear knowledge of God" (1.5.15). The chapter immediately following the discussion of the natural knowledge of God and its corruption by sin is on the necessity of Scripture as a guide not merely to knowledge of God as redeemer but equally to rectify the knowledge of God as creator. On the basis of this sort of textual evidence, some prominent Calvin commentators (for example, Karl Barth, Peter Barth, G.C. Berkouwer, T.H.L Parker, and John Beversluis) conclude that according to Calvin the natural knowledge of God is nothing more than an abstract *possibility* for fallen, unregenerate persons.[5] According to these thinkers, Calvin maintained that the noetic effects of sin have *in fact* completely extinguished the natural knowledge of God.

Calvin on the 'Knowledge of God'

The interpretation of Calvin's position at this juncture largely depends on how we understand Calvin's use of the phase 'knowledge of God.' He begins his entire discussion on the knowledge of God in the *Institutes* by clarifying this:

----

[4]   John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, in *The Library of Christian Classics*, vols XX–XXI (2 vols, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960).

[5]   Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, *Natural Theology*, trans. Peter Fraenkel (1946; reprint, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), p. 106; see also, pp. 107–9; Peter Barth, "Das Problem der natürlichen Theologie bei Calvin," *Theologische Existenz Heute* 18 (1935); T.H.L. Parker, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, revised edition (1952; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1959), pp. 27–39; John Beversluis, "Reforming the 'Reformed' Objection to Natural Theology," *Faith and Philosophy* 12 (April 1995): 189–206; G.C. Berkouwer, *General Revelation* (1955; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979), pp. 30–31, 46–7, 152–3.

> Now, the knowledge of God, as I understand it, is that by which we not only conceive that there is a God but also grasp what befits us and is proper to his glory, in fine, what is to our advantage to know of him. Indeed, we shall not say that, properly speaking, God is known where this is no religion or piety. Here I do not yet touch upon the sort of knowledge with which men, in themselves lost and accursed, apprehend God the Redeemer in Christ the Mediator; but I speak only of the primal and simple knowledge to which the very order of nature would have led us if Adam had remained upright. (1.2.1)

Here Calvin implies a distinction between knowledge of God as creator and knowledge of God as redeemer—the so-called *duplex cognitio Dei* (twofold knowledge of God). Our interest, though, is in knowledge of God as creator, specifically what Calvin refers to above as the "primal and simple knowledge" of God. This knowledge is aptly designated *natural* knowledge of God, for it is derived from the order of nature. Calvin subsequently unpacks this by linking the knowledge of God the creator to "natural instinct" (1.3.1), "the light of nature" (1.4.2), its being "naturally implanted" (1.3.3), "by nature engraven" (1.4.4), "taught by nature" (1.5.12), and "sown in [men's] minds out of the wonderful workmanship of nature" (1.5.15). Calvin also refers to this knowledge of God as "the contemplation of the one and only true God" (1.2.2), "pure and clear knowledge of God" (1.5.15), and "right knowledge of God" (1.6.2).

For Calvin the natural knowledge of God has both propositional content and an affective/moral aspect. The propositional content includes (1) conceiving that there is a God and (2) grasping what benefits us and is proper to his glory. Calvin links the perception of various divine attributes to (2), for example, God's goodness, power, and wisdom as they are manifested in the works of creation and providence. He links the perception of our religious duties to both (1) and (2). However, Calvin's conception of knowledge of God is not merely propositional. There is an affective/moral dimension.[6] Calvin calls it 'piety,' which he defines as "that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces" (1.2.1). Calvin contends that where there is no piety, God is not known. So Calvin emphasizes that "our knowledge should serve first to teach us fear and reverence" (1.2.2) and "knowledge of this sort, then, ought not only to arouse us to the worship of God but also to awaken and encourage us to the hope of the future life" (1.5.10; see also 2.13.1). Again, he writes: "the knowledge of God does not rest in cold speculation, but carries with it the honoring of him" (1.12.1).

---

[6]   See Parker, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, pp. 106–7; Edward A. Dowey, Jr., *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (1952; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 3, 24–31; Francis Wendel, *Calvin*, trans. Philip Mairel (London: William Collins and Sons, 1963), pp. 152–3.

The Impact of Sin on the Natural Knowledge of God

In several passages where Calvin draws attention to the effects of sin on the natural knowledge of God, he focuses on the impact of sin on the affective/moral aspect of the knowledge of God. The corruption of the natural knowledge of God involves an absence of piety, false worship, and disobedience to God. The post-lapsarian "confused knowledge of God" is contrasted with the "piety from which religion takes its source" (1.4.4., see also. 1.4.1).

> For where they ought to have remained consistently obedient throughout life, they boldly rebel against him in almost all their deeds, and are zealous to placate him merely with a few paltry sacrifices … while their trust ought to have been placed in him, they neglect him and rely on themselves. (1.4.4)

God's revelation of Himself in nature is said to "flow away without profiting us" (1.5.11) and "in no way lead[s] us into the right path" (1.5.14). "[Men] ought, then, to break forth in praises of him but are actually puffed up and swollen with all the more pride" (1.5.4). He concludes: "we lack the natural ability to mount up unto the pure and clear knowledge of God" (1.5.15). In these passages, Calvin contrasts the pre-lapsarian ethical and religious efficacy of the knowledge of God with its post-lapsarian failure in this regard.

The loss of piety is of course logically compatible with the retention of some theistic beliefs with correct propositional content. Calvin explicitly affirms this. He refers to an instinctual "awareness of divinity" by which all perceive that "there is a God" and that "He is their maker." He also speaks of a "deep-seated conviction that there is a God" (1.3.1), "a sense of deity inscribed on the hearts of all" (1.3.1), "some conception of God is ever alive in all men's minds" (1.3.2), men's minds as "imbued with a firm conviction about God" (1.3.2), and "this conviction … that there is some God" (1.3.3). He says, "the unity of God has been engraved on the hearts of all" (1.10.3). The context indicates that Calvin is speaking of fallen, unregenerate human persons. For instance, Calvin says, "to prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretense of ignorance, God himself has planted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty" (1.3.1). There is "no nation so barbarous, no people so savage, that they have not a deep-seated conviction that there is a God" (1.3.1). "The impious themselves," he says, "exemplify the fact that some conception of God is ever alive in all men's minds" (1.3.2). He says this sense of divinity "can never be effaced" (1.3.3), or "uprooted" (1.4.4). The permanence of the sense of divinity withstands the sinful attempt to "cast away all knowledge of God" (1.3.3). "I only say that though the stupid hardness in their minds, which the impious eagerly conjure up to reject God, wastes away, yet the sense of divinity, which they greatly wished to have extinguished, thrives and presently burgeons" (1.3.3). Even the person who says, "there is no God" (Psalm

14:1 and 53:1) does not actually deny the being of God but denies God's power and glory by not acknowledging His providential control of creation (1.4.2).[7]

The Noetic Effects of Sin

While a *sensus divinitatis* remains in nearly all, sin does negatively impact the propositional content of the natural knowledge of God. Humans fall into a "huge mass of errors" in their thoughts about God (1.4.4), especially when it comes to their thoughts about the nature of God.[8] Speaking of the manifestation of God's wisdom, power, and goodness in creation, Calvin says, "most people, immersed in their own errors, are struck blind in such a dazzling theater … however much the glory of God shines forth, scarcely one man in a hundred is a true spectator of it!" (1.5.8). "Human reason, therefore, neither approaches nor strives toward, nor even takes a straight aim at, this truth: to understand who the true God is or what sort of God he wishes to be toward us" (2.2.18). Humans "do not therefore apprehend God as he offers himself, but imagine him as they have fashioned him in their own presumption" (1.4.1). Also, the noetic effects of sin are often mediated by personal sins, so epistemic blindness is in many instances self-inflicted (1.4.2). Finally, Calvin does not deny "competent and apt statements about God here and there in the philosophers," but he claims that they merely happen upon these truths (2.2.18).

Calvin frequently parses the ignorance of the unregenerate mind as an ignorance of *who* God is or *what* God is like.[9] With respect to Romans 1:20 Calvin wrote: "We conceive that there is a Deity; and we conclude, that whoever he may be, he ought to be worshipped: but our reason here fails, because it cannot ascertain who or what sort of being God is."[10] While the noetic effects of sin leave the knowledge that there is some God intact, they infect with confusion and error the knowledge of who or what sort of being God is. I believe Calvin's intent here is to restrict the *scope* of the natural knowledge of God in fallen, unregenerate people, going as

---

[7]   The idea that fallen, unregenerate persons retain some knowledge (or true beliefs) about God is a fairly standard interpretation of Calvin. See B.B. Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1956), pp. 33–48; Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology*, pp. 50–55, 72–86; John Newton Smith, "Natural Theology in the Thought of John Calvin" in *Calvin and Calvinism*, vol. 7, ed. Richard C. Gamble (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992), p. 152; David Steinmetz, "Calvin and the Natural Knowledge of God" in Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 23–39; Paul Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), pp. 235–40.

[8]   See Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.4.2–3, 1.5.4, 1.5.11–12.

[9]   On the Reformed distinction between *an deus sit* (whether there is a God), *quid sit* (what He is), *quails sit* (what sort of being He is), see Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* (3 vols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), vol. 3, pp. 155–9.

[10]   John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, trans. and ed. John Owen, in *Calvin's Commentaries* (22 vols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), vol.19/II, p. 70.

far as to say that the unregenerate mind does not recognize the divine attributes of eternity, wisdom, justice, and goodness. What then is the propositional content of the *sensus divinitatis*? Perhaps little more than knowledge that there is some creator and that he ought to be worshipped.[11] This self-evidently entails the existence of some being(s) with power and knowledge, but it does not entail the existence of an all-wise and good being who exercises complete providential care over the world. What all unregenerate minds grasp by nature is fairly general, though it can in principle be clarified and augmented by the evidences of God's nature in the created order.[12]

Calvin and the Project of Natural Theology β

We can now consider the implications of Calvin's account of the noetic effects of sin for the assessment of natural theology β.

First, since Calvin affirms that unregenerate persons retain some beliefs about God with correct propositional content, it would be a category mistaken to conclude that his denial of "true knowledge of God" in the unregenerate entails a denial of any unregenerate propositional natural knowledge of God. But it is knowledge of God in this latter sense that is relevant for natural theology α and natural theology β. Of course, if propositional knowledge involves more than true belief, it may be that the unregenerate still fail to have knowledge of God but it will not be for the reasons traditionally associated with Calvin's discussion of the topic. I will consider the prospects for such an argument in the following chapter. The point here is that there is no good reason to suppose that Calvin denies natural theology α, or that his discussion of the noetic effects of sin has this implication. Calvin may be uninterested in natural theology β, but the sense in which he sees the natural knowledge of God compromised by sin does not undermine this project.

Secondly, it would be an equal mistake to suppose that Calvin's view is compatible with any extensive unregenerate natural theology α, much less as the product of natural theology β. For Calvin the noetic effects of sin do have a negative impact on the range or scope of unregenerate propositional knowledge

---

[11]   Paul Helm suggests that we take Calvin's "sense of divinity" as an awareness of something(s) that performs a unique categorical function. For example, we use the phrase "material object" to refer to a class of three-dimensional physical objects in space and time, though we disagree about what material objects there are. Similarly, 'the divine' may refer to an 'object of worship' or 'ultimate origin of things,' even if people have conflicting beliefs about the character or identity of the divine. See Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas*, p. 234.

[12]   Reducing the content of the *sensus divinitatis* in this manner is logically consistent with an epistemic basis for human accountability. First, barring the individual debasement of the mind through habitual sinning, all know that there is some creator who should be worshipped, and all have some notions of right and wrong. Secondly, God has placed sufficient evidence of his majesty throughout creation. If people are blind to this evidence, it is through their own fault. Everyone knows just enough to place an obligation on further inquiry.

of God. They fail to believe many things that are true about God, and they believe many things about God that are false. Since unregenerate persons misperceive the revelation of God in the created order, natural theology β—which reflectively engages God's revelation in the world—will be unreliable if carried out by the unregenerate person and without the illumination of Scripture. But even here, it is important not to overstate the implications of Calvin's position. The noetic effects of sin do not rule out a substantial natural theology α or natural theology β. As I will show in Chapter 8, Calvin thinks that regenerate persons are capable of deriving knowledge of God from the contemplation of the cosmos with the aid of Scripture. So there remains an interesting prospect for a true natural theology of the regenerate.

So I think the kind of criticism of natural theology that arises from Calvin is considerably more modest than it first appears. To the extent that Calvin's discussion is relevant to the issue of propositional knowledge, Calvin raises doubt about the *scope* of propositional natural knowledge of God in unregenerate persons not the *reality* of such knowledge. So Calvin should be read as limiting natural theology rather than denying it altogether. This is especially true once we realize that Calvin had an optimistic view of the perception of general revelation by the Christian. This calls for a very different kind of assessment of natural theology as a project carried out in the context of the Christian faith, a topic I will consider in Chapter 8.

The *Imago Dei*, Sin, and Natural Knowledge of God

Following the testimony of Genesis 1 Christian theologians have held that human persons are created in the image of God (*imago dei*). This doctrine has often been viewed as relevant to the question of natural theology. Critics of natural theology contend that sin has either effaced or significantly defaced the image of God, thereby undermining the possibility of any knowledge of God by nature. Theologians who support natural theology sometimes argue that post-lapsarian remnants of the image of God provide a basis for natural knowledge of God. These viewpoints link the image of God and knowledge of God by supposing that the image of God either includes knowledge of God or includes epistemic capacities involved in acquiring knowledge of God.[13]

Reformed theologians have typically distinguished between the image of God in a *broad* and *narrow* sense. In the broad sense, the image of God refers to human nature. As such, the image of God includes the rational faculties and volitional powers of human persons, both of which ostensibly distinguish humanity from the

---

[13]   For an extended discussion of the alleged connections between the doctrine of the image of God and natural theology, see James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), chapter 8. Barr argues that the doctrine of the image of God is less relevant to the issue of natural theology than many theologians have contended.

animal world. In the narrow sense, the image of God refers to the moral rectitude of the soul, its complete conformity to God's will, which characterized Adam prior to the fall.[14] The theologians of the tradition who have taken this view usually hold that as a result of the fall the image of God in the narrow sense has been lost and in the broad sense has become defaced. Humans have lost an 'original righteousness,' and the integrity or proper functioning of the faculties of the soul (for example, reason, will) has been compromised in various ways. Reformed critics of natural theology appeal either to the loss of original righteousness or the impairment of our rational faculties as a basis for denying natural knowledge of God or otherwise rejecting the project of natural theology.

Herman Hoeksema and the Loss of the Image of God

Conservative Reformed theologian Herman Hoeksema illustrates the more radical position. In his *Reformed Dogmatics* (1957), Hoeksema argued that while there is a general revelation in the created order, sin has darkened the human mind so that it cannot understand this revelation.[15] Humans have inherited an epistemic blindness as the result of the *total loss* of the image of God. The *imago dei*, as understood by Hoeksema, refers to the original righteousness of humans, which included true knowledge of God, righteousness, and holiness. Not only was the image of God lost in the fall but it was actually turned into its opposite.[16] Hoeksema opposes the tendency of other Reformed theologians to distinguish between the *imago dei* in a narrow and broad sense. As he sees it, 'image of God' denotes goodness, and it is a contradiction to apply this to anything that has become completely depraved. To speak of 'remnants' of the image of God implies that there is a remnant of original righteousness and thus that man is not totally depraved.[17] Consequently, Hoeksema concludes, "There is nothing left of man's original integrity, of his knowledge of God, righteousness, and holiness."[18] This fact forms the basis of Hoeksema's protest against all natural theology, the inability of human reason to derive any truth about God.

> And no 'natural theology' can ever be constructed by that fallen man! So darkened is his understanding that he will always lie about the living God. There

---

[14]   Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols. n.d.; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), vol. 2, pp. 96−102; Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. John Vriend and ed. John Bolt (2 vols. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003–2004), vol. 2, pp. 548−62; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (1939; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), pp. 202−10.

[15]   Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (1966; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1985), pp. 38, 45.

[16]   Ibid., pp. 209, 269.

[17]   Ibid., pp. 206−7.

[18]   Ibid., p. 213.

is indeed a revelation of God in all the things that are made; but this cannot be understood properly, except through faith in Jesus Christ and in the light of that other, that higher, revelation God gave in and through Him.[19]

Response to Hoeksema

Reformed critics of natural theology like Hoeksema tend to link knowledge of God and original righteousness, and they draw the conclusion that there is no knowledge of God by nature for fallen human persons. But this argument is problematic.

First, let us suppose with Hoeksema that the image of God has been completely lost as a result of the fall. Let us also suppose the image of God refers to an original righteousness, holiness, and knowledge of God. Does it follow that unregenerate persons have no natural knowledge of God? Only if we suppose that 'knowledge of God' in this context means *natural* knowledge of God, specifically propositional natural knowledge of God. The biblical passages adduced as support for this understanding of the image of God do not make this clear,[20] and Hoeksema provides no additional argument to suppose otherwise. What does seem clear, though, is that Reformed anthropology does not claim that Adam's knowledge of God was solely natural, anymore than his righteousness was purely natural. Moreover, even if we suppose that the image of God consisted of natural knowledge of God, we would also have to suppose that none of this knowledge could be the product of the use of human rational powers, which according to Hoeksema are not part of the image of God. This seems equally dubious. Indeed, it is entirely question begging against natural theology β.

If we turn to the *Canons of Dort*, Reformed orthodoxy makes it clear that the loss of the image of God did not result in complete or total epistemic blindness.

> Man was originally created in the image of God and was furnished in his mind with a true and salutary knowledge of his Creator and things spiritual, in his will and heart with righteousness, and in all his emotions with purity; indeed, the whole man was holy. However, rebelling against God at the devil's instigation, and by his own free will he deprived himself of these outstanding gifts.[21]

The text clearly does not equate the "true and salutary knowledge of God" with natural knowledge of God, for the confession goes on to state:

---

[19]   Ibid., p. 42.

[20]   "and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:23, RSV). The text speaks of a mental renewal, but this entails neither the complete loss of the property being renewed nor that this property should be understood as natural knowledge of God.

[21]   *Canons of Dort* in *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (Grand Rapids, MI: CRC Publications, 1988), p. 133, III & IV, article 1.

> There is, to be sure, a certain light of nature remaining in man after the fall, by virtue of which he retains some notions about God, natural things, and the difference between what is moral and immoral, and demonstrates a certain eagerness for virtue and for good outward behavior. But this light of nature is far from enabling man to come to a saving knowledge of God and conversion to him.[22]

"Some notions about God" are retained by fallen humanity. Although the text does not explicitly state that these notions about God are correct or true, there would be little point in taking them as illustrations of a "certain light of nature," unless they were taken as true. It also makes little sense to ground human responsibility in false notions about God, much less deny their saving efficacy unless it is assumed that these notions about God are correct. For these reasons we must take the confession as affirming that fallen humans possess by nature some true beliefs about God, or at any rate, possess the natural disposition to form true beliefs about God. To be sure, the confession does not state the content of these beliefs, a point already noted in connection with Calvin. But it is precisely at this point that the confession opens the door to the project of natural theology as a project situated within the larger context of dogmatic theology. The confession of faith does not claim anything about the content of the light of nature, but this can be properly viewed as a function of the dogmatic theologian who engages the project of natural theology β.

It is interesting to note that despite his otherwise strong statements, Hoeksema did not altogether deny an *awareness* of God in fallen, unregenerate persons, for he affirms—as an interpretation of Romans 1 and 2—"there is, no doubt, a testimony of God through the Spirit, binding the truth of God's eternal power and Godhead irrevocably upon the inmost consciousness of every man."[23] He ventures a little further when expounding the *Belgic Confession*. There he admits, "although the image of God was changed into reverse, he [man] nevertheless retained some remnants of his natural gifts and natural light. However, this means no more than that he has remained a rational, moral being."[24] Apparently it means more than this, for Hoeksema concedes: "Through these small remnants of natural light he retained some knowledge of God."[25] I suspect the resolution to the apparent inconsistency in Hoeksema is found in a clarification of the nature of the knowledge that was part of the image of God. Reflecting the confessional statements of the Reformed faith, Hoeksema held that humans were created with a 'true knowledge' of God. According to Hoeksema this knowledge did not result in a mere theoretical theology. It was not a mere intellectual knowledge, but "original rectitude of mind

---

[22] Ibid., p. 133, III & IV, article 4.
[23] Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 38.
[24] Ibid., p. 271.
[25] Ibid.

by virtue of which he immediately and spontaneously knew God."[26] By virtue of knowing God with his whole being and inmost heart, "he responded in love to the speech of God concerning Himself."[27] Hoeksema emphasized the ethical character of the knowledge that comes from general revelation.[28] However, in this case, Hoeksema's criticism of the natural knowledge of God leaves the project of natural theology β intact.

The Barth–Brunner Dialogue

The relationship between the image of God and natural knowledge of God was an important theme in the dialogues on natural theology between Karl Barth and Emil Brunner in the 1930s. While Barth is well known for his unqualified rejection of natural theology in these dialogues, Brunner sought an ostensibly more modest position that affirmed some limited natural knowledge of God on the basis of remnants of the image of God. In *Nature and Grace* (1934) Brunner agreed that "the original image of God in man has been destroyed,"[29] a position that he also attributed to Barth. However, Brunner insisted on qualifying the destruction of the image of God by distinguishing (as earlier Reformed theologians had) between two aspects of the image of God. For Brunner, these are the *material* and *formal* aspects of the image of God. The material aspect of the image of God is original righteousness, whereas the formal aspect of the image of God is the essential nature of human persons as rational, moral agents. The fall resulted in the loss of the material aspect of the image of God but not the formal aspect. Human persons are sinners, but they are still responsible agents. This responsibility, inasmuch as it implies conscience, implies some residual knowledge of divine law and knowledge of God. For Brunner, this is a necessary point of contact between God and humans. "What the natural man knows of God, of the law and of his own dependence upon God, may be very confused and distorted. But even so it is the necessary, indispensable point of contact for divine grace."[30] So, according to Brunner, at least his early position, there remains some natural knowledge of God in fallen humanity.

By way of response Barth argued that Brunner did not consistently adhere to his position that the image of God had been materially lost and only formally retained. Barth of course agreed that human persons are responsible, rational agents, but he denied that this entailed any remnant of knowledge of God in fallen humanity. By affirming some natural knowledge of God, Barth thought that Brunner had in effect denied that the image of God had been materially lost. According to Barth,

---

[26] Ibid.*,* p. 210.

[27] Ibid., p. 18.

[28] Ibid., p. 39.

[29] Brunner, "Nature and Grace" in *Natural Theology*, trans. Peter Fraenkel, p. 22.

[30] Ibid., pp. 32–3.

the formal aspect of the image of God would do no more than establish the formal *possibility* of knowing God, but Brunner had affirmed some *actual* knowledge of God in fallen humans derived from creation. So humans are not entirely blind, even though their perception of God in creation is dimmed and distorted by sin. Related, Barth argued that Brunner's position undermined the Reformed principle of salvation *sola gratia* (by grace alone). Brunner spoke of a continuing "capacity for words" (*Wortmächtigkeit*), which Barth interpreted as "capacity for revelation" (*Offenbarungsmächtigkeit*). Since Barth viewed all divine revelation as redemptive, he drew the conclusion that Brunner had capitulated to the idea that humans could assist in their own salvation. While Brunner insisted on the non-saving character of the natural knowledge of God, Barth questioned the coherence of this kind of knowledge. "How can Brunner maintain that a real knowledge of the true God, however imperfect it may be (and what knowledge of God is not imperfect?) does not bring salvation?"[31]

Brunner's Subsequent Clarification

In his subsequent *Dogmatics* (1946) Brunner reaffirmed his commitment to natural knowledge of God, but he offered two important qualifications.[32] First, Brunner parsed his earlier endorsement of natural theology in the debates with Barth as an affirmation of the reality of a divine revelation in creation, not its subjective appropriation in the form of *actual* knowledge of God. Christian natural theology means a Christian doctrine of general revelation, but we should not confuse this with a genuine knowledge of God among pagans, for "between the revelation in Creation and the natural man stands the fact of Sin."[33] Brunner underscores how sin obscures the perception of God's revelation of Himself in creation. Secondly, we can speak of pagan natural theology if by this we simply mean pagan *ideas* or *thoughts* about God, without thereby affirming the validity or correctness of these ideas. So although we can speak of natural knowledge of God, we cannot speak of true natural knowledge of God or natural knowledge of the true God.[34]

> If it is a mistake, and from the standpoint of the Bible and theology an impossibility, to contest the reality of the revelation in Creation, it is no less mistaken to deny the negative significance of sin for the perception of the truth of the revelation in Creation. Sin not only perverts the will, it also "obscures" the power of perceiving truth where the knowledge of God is concerned. So where

---

[31]   See Barth, "No" in *Natural Theology*, p. 82. See also Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F Torrance, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957), vol. II.1 pp. 67–8, 97–8.

[32]   Brunner noted these qualifications in his 1935 edition of *Nature and Grace*.

[33]   Emil Brunner, *the Christian Doctrine of God*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1950), p. 133.

[34]   Ibid., p. 121.

a man supports the view of the reality of a "*theologia naturalis*" in the sense of correct, valid knowledge, he is actually denying the reality of sin, or at least its effect in the sphere of man's knowledge of God. Thus, on the one hand, the reality of the revelation in Creation is to be admitted, but, on the other hand, the possibility of a correct and valid natural knowledge of God is to be contested. … There is, it is true, no valid "natural theology", but there is a Natural Theology which, in fact, exists … Human beings, even those who know nothing of the historical revelation, are such that they cannot help forming an idea of God and making pictures of God in their minds. The history of the religions of mankind provides incontrovertible evidence of this fact. The formation of theological ideas is an empirical fact of the reality of sinful humanity. This fact cannot be denied; all that we can contest is how it should be interpreted.[35]

Response to the Barth–Brunner Debate

Brunner's affirmation of natural knowledge of God appears to place him closer to Reformed orthodoxy than Barth. This is the impression left by the early Barth–Brunner dialogue. In the light of Brunner's subsequent clarification, though, the point of dispute between Barth and Brunner was clearly over the existence of general revelation, not its subjective appropriation in the form of actual knowledge of God. In affirming general revelation, Brunner's position expresses traditional Reformed orthodoxy. Brunner also followed Reformed orthodoxy in speaking of pagan knowledge of God. Brunner, however, denies that this knowledge is "correct" or "valid." As he says, due to general revelation humans cannot help but have thoughts about God, but these thoughts about God become "lying pictures of idols."[36] Brunner seems reluctant to attribute correct propositional content to this knowledge. As Brunner sees it, the remnant of the image of God entails the rationality of human persons. This rationality, however, does not lead to a correct understanding of general revelation but rather to ideas about God that are distortions of general revelation. He argues at length in his *Dogmatics* that philosophical and pagan ideas of God are logically incompatible with the Christian view of God, and that it is impossible to find some common notion of God within the pluralism exhibited in the world's religious traditions. There is no common truth about God, for example, to be found in polytheistic personalism and monistic impersonalism. Even the philosophy of theism attains nothing more than an approximation to the knowledge of the true God when it follows general revelation according to the resources of reason: "It is not the Creator, in the Biblical sense of the word, who is here perceived; but it is still the closest approximation to the idea of the Creator of which reason is capable when left to itself."[37]

---

[35]   Ibid., pp. 133–4.

[36]   Ibid., p. 134.

[37]   Ibid., p. 156.

Admittedly there is an ambiguity in Brunner's discussion of the natural knowledge of God, an ambiguity present in a host of Reformed writers. It simply is not adequately clear whether the unregenerate person's lacking a 'correct' understanding of general revelation or a 'valid' knowledge of God entails the absence of *all* true beliefs about God. However, we have already seen in Chapter 1 and the selection from the *Canons of Dort* cited earlier that from the standpoint of Reformed orthodoxy, fallen, unregenerate persons do possess correct ideas or true beliefs about God. The denial of natural knowledge of God in this sense is contrary to the teaching of the Reformers and the Reformed tradition.

There is a sense, though, in which the possibility of true beliefs about God within the realm of natural reason is irrelevant to knowledge of God from Brunner's perspective. Brunner equates knowledge of God with personal *encounter* with God and not the propositional content of beliefs about God. "The God who is 'conceived' by thought is not the one who discloses Himself; from this point of view He is an intellectual idol."[38] Neither the abstractions of philosophical theology, nor the idolatrous images of wood and brass, are knowledge of God. Knowledge of God is a relation to God, but humans cannot be related to God by way of thought or reasoning. Herein lies Brunner's fundamental objection to natural theology β. The 'knowledge of God' that is the starting point or terminus of natural theology β is not actually knowledge *of God*.

This of course is the important shared territory between Barth and Brunner. While Brunner accepts general revelation and Barth rejects it, they are equally pessimistic about natural knowledge of God in a sense that is relevant to natural theology β. The crucial point is that this pessimism is not related to the debate about the image of God, traditionally thought to be relevant to the issue of natural knowledge of God. The Barth–Brunner debate demonstrates that discussions on the corruption of the image of God do not resolve the problem of the natural knowledge of God.

Conclusions

In this chapter I have argued that the ostensible denial of natural knowledge of God in some of the prominent theologians of the Reformed tradition accomplishes less than it first appears as a critique of natural theology. First, upon examination the denial of natural knowledge of God often turns out to be a denial of knowledge in some sense other than propositional knowledge. Secondly, even where there are clear noetic effects of sin, they seem to entail limitations on the scope of propositional knowledge, not a denial of its reality. Finally, it would seem that some theologians in the tradition have exaggerated the relevance of the doctrine of the image of God to the question of the existence and scope of natural knowledge of God. The whole argument proceeds on the assumption that the natural knowledge of God is

---

[38]   Ibid., p. 136.

tied to the image of God. This is a dubious assumption. Indeed, the doctrine of the image of God looks like an unhelpful digression from the question of whether the effects of sin render our rational faculties epistemically impotent. There remains the possibility that there are epistemic effects of sin other than a mere limit on the scope of the natural knowledge of God. It may be, for example, that while the noetic effects of sin do not exclude true beliefs about God, they do undermine propositional *knowledge* of God. Due to their focus on non-propositional features of knowledge of God, I do not think any of the above theologians really addresses this epistemological question. I will attempt to do so in the next chapter.

Chapter 7
The Noetic Effects of Sin and Contemporary Epistemology

In the previous chapter I argued that several alleged objections to natural theology α based on the noetic effects of sin fail to present a very formidable challenge to the idea that fallen unregenerate persons possess some natural knowledge of God, especially if this knowledge is construed as propositional knowledge. In fact, it is doubtful that some writers, Calvin for example, even intended to deny this. However, given the importance of the doctrine of total depravity to Reformed theology, the suggestion that this idea conflicts with natural knowledge of God deserves further analysis. In this chapter I will draw on insights from contemporary epistemology to examine the prospects for a case against *propositional* natural knowledge of God based on the noetic effects of sin.

We should begin with the classical statement of the Reformed doctrine of sin, found in the famous *Canons of Dort* (1619):

> Man was originally created in the image of God and was furnished in his mind with a true and salutary knowledge of his Creator and things spiritual, in his will and heart with righteousness, and in all his emotions with purity; indeed, the whole man was holy. However, rebelling against God at the devil's instigation and by his own free will, he deprived himself of these outstanding gifts. Rather, in their place he brought upon himself blindness, terrible darkness, futility, and distortion of judgment in his mind; perversity, defiance, and hardness in his heart and will; and finally impurity in all his emotions.[1]

The basic question, then, is whether the Reformed doctrine of sin articulated here is logically inconsistent with

[K] Unregenerate persons possess some natural propositional knowledge of God.

We have already seen that, according to prominent representatives of the Reformed tradition, total depravity does not entail that unregenerate people have no true beliefs about God. The subsequent article in the *Canons of Dort* confirms this.

---

[1] *Canons of Dort* in *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (Grand Rapids, MI: CRC Publications, 1988), III & IV, article 1, p. 133.

> There is, to be sure, a certain light of nature remaining in man after the fall, by virtue of which he retains some notions about God, natural things, and the difference between what is moral and immoral, and demonstrates a certain eagerness for virtue and for good outward behavior. But this light of nature is far from enabling man to come to a saving knowledge of God and conversion to him.[2]

If we supposed that knowledge is merely true belief,[3] the Reformed doctrine of sin would be logically consistent with [K], even if the presence of many false beliefs about God entails a certain limit on the scope of natural knowledge of God. However, it seems sensible to ask whether the Reformed doctrine of sin is logically consistent with natural knowledge of God in a stronger sense of 'knowledge.' There is a long-standing tradition in western philosophy according to which propositional knowledge, while it entails true belief, is not equivalent to true belief. After all, one might acquire a true belief by accident, but intuitively it seems that an accidentally true belief cannot constitute knowledge. True belief is transformed into knowledge only by some third condition that eliminates this element of epistemic luck. I will refer to this third condition as 'warrant'. In assessing the extent to which the noetic effects of sin might be logically inconsistent with [K], we should focus on the logical relation between warrant and the noetic effects of sin. Of course, warrant is typically construed as a degreed notion, and knowledge requires a high degree of warrant. Our central question, then, is whether the Reformed doctrine of sin, specifically the idea of total depravity, is incompatible with naturally produced theistic beliefs in unregenerate human persons having enough warrant for knowledge.

The Strong Unreliability Thesis

While total depravity does not entail the absence of all true beliefs about God, it does plausibly entail that human reason is *unreliable* in theological matters, and this might be the kind of noetic defect that is incompatible with beliefs having the degree of warrant needed for knowledge. We can begin, then, by examining what I will call the 'strong unreliability thesis' and its implications for warrant.

> [N] No natural belief-forming cognitive process in unregenerate persons reliably produces any true beliefs about God.

---

2   Ibid., III & IV, article 4, p. 133.

3   See Crispin Sartwell, "Knowledge is Merely True Belief," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 28:2 (1991): 157–65; Sartwell, "Why Knowledge is Merely True Belief," *Journal of Philosophy* 89:4 (1992): 167–80; and William Lycan, "Sartwell's Minimalist Analysis of Knowing," *Philosophical Studies* 73:1 (1994): 1–3. See also Alvin Goldman's distinction between a weak and strong sense of knowledge in Goldman, *Knowledge in a Social World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), pp. 23–5.

[N] is not a statement about the unreliability of all cognitive faculties or processes in the unregenerate person, but only the unreliability of those processes that yield beliefs about God as output.[4] It may be that humans have been created with some special cognitive faculty or mechanism whose sole purpose is the production and sustenance of some range of theistic beliefs (for example, Plantinga's *sensus divinitatis*). Since this faculty is part of our native cognitive endowment, the knowledge it produces would be natural knowledge of God. If there is such a faculty, then [N] entails that this faculty is unreliable. Alternatively, it may be that there is a cognitive process that yields beliefs about God, where this cognitive process utilizes any number of other cognitive faculties that independently function to produce various non-theological beliefs. For example, sense perception produces sensory perceptual beliefs and intuition produces *a priori* beliefs. [N] need not entail that any of these faculties is unreliable, but rather that any process of *theistic* belief formation that utilizes these faculties is unreliable. So [N] only concerns cognitive processes directed toward the production of theistic beliefs.

A 'reliable' cognitive process is often understood as one that has an actual track record that is favorable vis-à-vis the goal of producing true beliefs, that is, produces mostly true beliefs. Alternatively, 'reliable' can mean a *propensity* to deliver a significantly high number of true beliefs. In the latter case, a cognitive process could be reliable even if it has never been deployed, whereas an actual track record requires some number of actual deployments.[5] As long as the faculty, mechanism, or process *would* yield a significant proportion of true beliefs in a suitable run of deployments, it is reliable. I will take 'unreliability' in [N] as the negation of reliability in this dispositional sense. As far as I can see, Reformed theologians who assert that human reason is unreliable in theological matters intend in the first instance to make a dispositional claim. Indeed, it looks like [N] will entail not only the *absence* of a propensity toward producing mostly true theistic beliefs, but a propensity toward producing mostly *false* theistic beliefs. Of course, Reformed thinkers will also affirm that unregenerate human reason has an actual poor track record in delivering truths about God. Calvin, for example, speaks of the "heap of errors" and "boundless filthy mire of errors" found in the human mind concerning God. This can be taken as evidence for dispositional unreliability.

---

[4]   Calvin, for instance, takes a fairly optimistic view of the ability of fallen reason to discover truth in "earthly things" (for example, government, household management, mechanical skills, liberal arts). See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, in *The Library of Christian Classics*, vols XX–XXI (2 vols, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 2.2.12–18. For a Reformed defense of the general reliability of our cognitive faculties, see Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger and ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (3 vols, Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1992), 1.9.1–18, 1.10.1–16, 1.11.1–10.

[5]   See William Alston, "How to Think about Reliability," *Philosophical Topics* 23 (1995): 1–29.

Finally, [N] is logically consistent with the production of some true beliefs about God. But we must suppose that no natural belief-forming cognitive processes be defined too *narrowly*. Suppose, for example, that unregenerate reason is capable of forming the true theistic belief that 'there is some supremely powerful and intelligent creator of the universe.' If the process type responsible for the production of this token belief is defined in such a way that this belief is its only output, the process will be reliable since its only output is true. So [N] will be false. More generally, if [N] is logically consistent with there being some true theistic beliefs produced by natural cognitive processes, then the process types cannot be defined in such a way that these true theistic beliefs are severally or jointly the only outputs of the processes in question.

Externalism and Internalism

To assess the implications of [N] for warrant, let us consider the relevance of [N] to both externalist and internalist theories of knowledge.

Externalist Theories of Knowledge

In Chapter 4 we saw that externalist theories of knowledge have provided a helpful framework in contemporary religious epistemology for thinking about immediate natural knowledge of God. But the conjunction of externalism and [N] seems to entail that [K] is false.

First, consider *reliabilism*, according to which knowledge is reliably engendered true belief. Reliabilist theories construe warrant in terms of the reliability of the process that produced a belief or the reliability of the ground on which the belief is based. But if theistic beliefs are the product of some unreliable cognitive process or based on an unreliable ground, these beliefs will not constitute knowledge, even if they happen to be true. This can play out in a few different ways. It might be that a special faculty, specifically designed to produce some range of true theistic beliefs, is no longer reliable because sin has directly impaired the operation of this faculty. Alternatively, it might be that otherwise reliable cognitive faculties (for example, rational intuition, inference) that are implicated in reliable processes of belief formation on non-theological matters fail to achieve this when they are deployed on theological matters. It is also possible that natural beliefs about God, while designed by God to be the product of reliable, truth-directed cognitive processes, are now in fact the product of unreliable, non-truth directed cognitive processes analogous to beliefs produced by hunches, wish-fulfillment and the like. In any case, [K] and [N] are inconsistent from a reliabilist view of knowledge.

We find a similar result with *proper function* accounts of warrant. On Plantinga's view, warrant requires the proper functioning of cognitive faculties successfully aimed at the production of true belief. Warrant here has a reliability constraint, so the observations above would apply here also. Moreover, if the

noetic effects of sin entail something like [N], it would be sensible to suppose that whatever cognitive faculties were designed to form theistic belief are now subject to malfunction or impedance in various ways. In fact, their unreliability might be tied to malfunction or impedance. Just as the cognitive design plan exhibits a confluence of reliability and cognitive proper function, cognitive malfunction plausibly engenders unreliability. Even if the *sensus divinitatis*, construed as a cognitive mechanism*,* was originally designed to produce a high proportion of true theistic beliefs in a wide variety of experiential circumstances, malfunction could easily undermine this. Alternatively, perhaps the deliverances of the *sensus divinitatis* are now impeded by a kind of wish fulfillment or projection in which humans attempt to fashion a god after their own perverted desires. They hit on the truth every now and then, but the process is not truth-directed and is hence unreliable. Once again, [K] and [N] are inconsistent.

Internalism and the Gettier Problem

At first glance, it would appear that matters look different from the perspective of epistemic internalism. Suppose we take a vanilla form of internalism, which construes warrant in terms of *adequate evidence*.[6] If we grant that the facts of general revelation constitute evidence for the existence and nature of God and that this evidence is adequate, then it follows that there is adequate evidence for true beliefs about God. In that case, assuming that a person is in *possession* of this evidence, we have an account of natural knowledge of God in terms of warranted true belief, but where this is consistent with [N].

Unfortunately, a vanilla version of internalism is inadequate as a theory of knowledge. If warrant transforms true belief into knowledge, adequate evidence—even if a necessary component of warrant—would not be the whole story. Edmund Gettier showed that there are situations in which (i) a person is evidentially justified in holding some true belief that p on the basis of other justified beliefs q and r, (ii) where q and r either entail or make probable p, and (iii) a person does not know p. The heart of these cases is epistemic luck, for (i) and (ii) can be true even if it is by sheer epistemic serendipity that a person believes what is true. In the original Gettier cases, epistemic luck resulted from valid deductive inferences

---

6   Internalist theories have typically construed *justification* in terms of 'adequate evidence,' even where they have recognized that justified true belief is not sufficient for knowledge. Post-Gettier internalists attempt to Gettier-proof knowledge either by strengthening the justification condition or by adding some fourth condition that is necessary for knowledge. In either case, if *warrant* designates the condition or set of conditions that transforms true belief into knowledge, then a post-Gettier internalist will not construe warrant solely in terms of 'adequate evidence,' even if *justification* is so construed. While [N] may not undermine the production of a true belief that is justified by virtue of the possession of adequate evidence, it might—due to Gettier considerations—still undermine knowledge. See below in text.

from false justified beliefs to a true justified belief. This specific problem can easily be remedied by stipulating that justification should not proceed by any explicit or implicit inference from a false belief. While there are cases where the noetic effects of sin would result in the production of false beliefs that are utilized in theistic inferences, this is not inevitable. At least some people would avoid this bad luck and still possess natural knowledge of God. In that case, [K] and [N] are consistent from an internalist perspective even with Gettier considerations.

However, there are Gettier-type cases that do not depend on either an implicit or explicit inference from a false belief. Driving through a Wisconsin town, I see what appears to be a barn and form the belief 'there is a barn in front of me.' It is a barn, so my belief is true. However, this real barn is located in a fairly large cluster of fake barns that are indistinguishable from the real one. Perhaps in this scenario I believe that 'most of these barn-looking objects nearby are barns,' even if the target belief is not inferred from this belief. But if I were apprised of the falsity of the belief 'most of these barn-looking objects nearby are barns,' I would no longer be justified in holding the belief that 'there is a barn in front of me.' So some contend that a person S's knowing p requires that S not believe some false proposition, q, such that if S were made aware of the falsity of q, he would no longer be justified in believing p. Similarly, those who naturally form various theistic beliefs may believe that the cognitive faculties involved in producing such beliefs are reliable. But if [N] is true, this belief would be false. If they came to see this, they would no longer be justified in whatever theistic beliefs they formed on the basis of their natural cognitive processes. The presence of this false belief entails that their theistic beliefs, even if true and justified, do not constitute knowledge. In much the same way, we might suppose that if I came to see that my memory is unreliable, I would no longer be justified in any of my memorial beliefs, even if they happened to be evidentially justified and true. So the conjunction of [N] and [K] would seem after all to be inconsistent.

Of course holding a false belief may not be necessary to generate a Gettier-type case. Suppose that in the above fake-barn case, I did not actually believe the false proposition 'most of the barn-looking objects nearby are barns'. It still looks like I do not know that 'there is a barn in front of me', however justified I might be in this belief. While my justification for believing 'there is a barn in front of me' is not dependent on any false belief, nonetheless there is some relevant *true proposition* ('most of the barn-looking objects nearby are *not* barns') such that if I were made aware of *it*, I would cease to be justified in my original belief. For this reason, some internalists have adopted a so-called indefeasibility condition for warrant. Roughly stated, S knows that p only if there is no true proposition, q, such that if S were to believe q, S would no longer be justified in believing p.[7] Now

----

[7]   Keith Lehrer and Thomas Paxson, "Knowledge: Undefeated Justified True Belief," *Journal of Philosophy* 66 (1969): 225–37; Peter Klein, "A Proposed Definition of Propositional Knowledge," *Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1971): 471–82; Gilbert Harman, *Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 143–4; Robert Shope, *The Analysis of Knowing: A Decade of Research* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983).

if [N] is a true proposition, it will violate this indefeasibility clause, for it is a true proposition such that if I believed it, I would no longer be justified in believing any theistic propositions derived from natural reason. Hence, the mere truth of [N] suffices to undermine natural knowledge of God.[8]

The heart of the Gettier problem is epistemic luck, and it looks like the truth of [N] entails that it is a matter of luck if anyone acquires a true belief about God. I mean 'luck' in the strong sense. There are situations where we are lucky to have the evidence we do, but it is not a matter of luck that we hold a true belief given the evidence we have. These are cases of epistemic luck in the weak sense, or what is called *evidential* epistemic luck. But there are situations in which, given the evidence we have, we are lucky to believe what is true. These are cases of epistemic luck in the strong sense, or what is called *veritic* epistemic luck. The heart of Gettier problems is veritic not epistemic luck.[9] [N] entails that if any natural cognitive process yields a true theistic belief it will be a matter of veritic epistemic luck, not merely evidential epistemic luck. Given [N] humans are not simply lucky to have the evidence they possess, they are lucky to get it right given the evidence they have. They might just as easily have acquired a false belief about God. So we come to the same conclusion as we did for externalism. If [N] is true, there can be no propositional, natural knowledge of God for fallen, unregenerate persons.

The Truth of [N]

The crucial issue, then, is the truth of [N]. I have been assuming—for the sake of argument—that [N] is a logical entailment of the Reformed doctrine of sin. While [N] provides one way of understanding the noetic effects of sin, it is not the only way. Starting with this formulation shows us that there is a way of thinking about the noetic effects of sin that would lend credibility to a case against natural theology α given both externalist and internalist theories of knowledge. The problem is that [N] does not look like a plausible way of thinking about the noetic effects of sin, at least not from a Reformed perspective.

---

[8]   There is general agreement (see references in footnote 7) that not just *any* true proposition suffices to prevent an overall justified belief from counting as knowledge. Some maintain that the true proposition must be widely held in one's community, others that it must be something a person could fairly easily discover. Some maintain a true proposition q will defeat knowledge as long as there is no other true proposition q* that would render one unjustified in accepting q. On the last of these views, [N] would undermine theistic knowledge, but perhaps not on the others. However, since [N] appears to entail that true theistic beliefs would be a matter of veritic epistemic luck, it looks like [N] will undermine natural knowledge of God.

[9]   See Peter Unger, "An Analysis of Factual Knowledge," *Journal of Philosophy* 65 (1968): 157–70; Mylan Engel, "Is Epistemic Luck Compatible with Knowledge?" *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 30 (1992): 59–75.

First, while total depravity entails that every aspect of the human person has been adversely affected by sin, including the mind, we are not compelled to conclude from this that every natural process of theistic belief formation is unreliable, at least not in the sense specified earlier. Sin may have rendered such processes of belief formation less reliable than they were initially, but it does not follow that the processes are *un*reliable. To be sure, unregenerate persons may entertain many false beliefs about God, but this does not entail that none of their true theistic beliefs is the product of a reliable cognitive process. It is possible that different cognitive processes produce theistic beliefs. One of these processes may be reliable, even if the rest are unreliable. On a reliabilist view of knowledge, the beliefs generated by the reliable process would constitute knowledge. Of course Reformed theology denies that human persons have the natural capacity for a saving knowledge of God or any extensive non-saving natural knowledge of God. But the denial of [N] seems entirely compatible with each of these alleged noetic effects of sin. Finally, if we intend to retain the Reformed doctrine of human accountability on the basis of an actual natural knowledge of God in fallen unregenerate persons, then we have good reason internal to the logic of Reformed theology to deny [N], that is, if [N] has the sort of negative epistemic implications I have outlined above.

The Modest Unreliability Thesis

There are other ways, though, of thinking about cognitive unreliability as a noetic effect of sin. Given that the Reformed tradition typically affirms at least two different grounds or sources for naturally engendered theistic belief (corresponding to the distinction between innate and acquired natural knowledge of God), we can modify the unreliability thesis in such a way that it would be consistent with [K].

Inferential Unreliability

In *Common Grace and General Revelation*,[10] William Masselink distinguished sharply between an intuitive knowledge of God produced by general revelation and conclusions or inferences drawn from this intuitive knowledge by the power of human reasoning. Masselink maintains that the process whereby general revelation becomes intuitive knowledge of God requires the work of the Holy Spirit in *testifying* to general revelation.[11]

> Nature and history are media which the Holy Spirit uses to witness to the natural man that God exists, that God is Holy, that God is good, etc. … General

---

[10]   William Masselink, *General Revelation and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1953).

[11]   Ibid., pp. 67–72, 107–8, 117–18.

revelation can become *principium cognoscendi* for the natural man only through the witness of the Holy Spirit.[12]

This is not the special work of the Holy Spirit in regenerating persons, but a universal work of the Spirit in enlightening the minds of all people as a part of God's common grace, that is, a grace that restrains the effects of total depravity. As Masselink sees it, total depravity entails that *by nature* human persons retain no actual knowledge of God. They only retain a disposition to receive general revelation and knowledge of God as a consequence of human rationality remaining intact.[13] Actual knowledge of God in fallen, unregenerate persons depends on God's common grace and the work of the Holy Spirit. The testimony of the Holy Spirit secures a basic intuitive knowledge of God's existence and nature, and the target beliefs are reliably engendered because the Holy Spirit produces them using the objectively infallible media of general revelation.[14] This stands in sharp contrast to the products of human thinking and reasoning as reflections on general revelation and the intuitive knowledge of God. Commenting on Romans 1:21, Masselink says: "They became vain in *their own reasoning*; the 'dialogismoi' are the operations of their own reasoning. Their own reason, therefore, is posited over against the general revelation of God. There is, therefore, a conflict between their intuitive knowledge of God and their own reflection upon this."[15] Hence, Masselink places an emphasis on the unreliability of *reasoning* or *inference* with reference to theological truth.

This epistemological viewpoint forms the basis of one of Masselink's repeated criticisms of natural theology as the product of human reasoning.

> In general revelation we have the "testimonies" of the Holy Spirit in regard to God and morality. There is a wide difference between that and rational proof. The testimony of the Holy Spirit is infallible and objective. It comes to man directly as a witness of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, a proof is the product of man's own reasoning. For example, man arrives at mathematical proofs by means of syllogisms and reasoning. The knowledge of God which the natural man receives through the testimony of the Holy Spirit is intuitive and aprioristic, whereas rationalistic proof is the result of reflective or aposterioristic thinking. What is erroneously called "theistic proofs" is the result of the reflection of man upon the testimony of the Holy Spirit through the lens of his own depraved reason.[16]

---

[12]   Ibid., pp. 70–71. See also Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (1966; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1985), pp. 38–9, 45.

[13]   Ibid., pp. 133–9.

[14]   Ibid., p. 150.

[15]   Ibid., pp. 92–3; see also pp. 94–5, 117–20.

[16]   Ibid., pp. 94–5.

Masselink's suspicion about unregenerate inferential reasoning about God finds parallels elsewhere in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Dutch Calvinism. In the previous chapter we saw that Hoeksema, while he asserts a general revelation in creation and some remnants of knowledge of God, rejects all attempts at constructing a system of natural theology on the basis of human reasoning, for human reason will consistently lie about God. In contrast to the inability of human reason to know God by way of demonstrations and philosophical proofs, Hoeksema affirms—in connection with Romans 1:19–20—that there is "a testimony of God through the Spirit, binding the truth of God's eternal power and Godhead irrevocably upon the inmost consciousness of every man."[17] Hoeksema's disparagement of the reasoning powers of the unregenerate mind runs throughout his discussion on the knowability and being of God.[18]

Among the Reformers we see a similar skepticism about theological conclusions reached through the power of unregenerate human reasoning. While Luther affirmed that all people have a general knowledge of God and morality directly implanted by God, he was skeptical about inferences drawn from such knowledge.[19] Melanchthon's initial skepticism about the compatibility of fallen human nature and natural knowledge of God was alleviated only with the idea that all natural knowledge of God is rooted in knowledge that God Himself has implanted in all persons. "When I say that the laws of nature have been impressed on our minds by God, I mean that the knowledge of these laws consists in certain 'concreated attitudes.' This knowledge is not the product of our own mental powers, but it has been implanted in us by God."[20] Calvin, as noted earlier, emphasized human blindness to the various attributes of God that can be inferentially known from the cosmos. While humans retain a *sensus divinitatis*, God has "taken away from the human intellect the power of attaining to a knowledge of God by its own resources."[21] So these three Reformers sharply contrast the knowledge that God

---

[17]   Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 38.

[18]   Ibid., pp. 19, 26–34, 39–42, 43–50.

[19]   Luther expressed skepticism over conclusions of the practical syllogism. While the major premise involves some general truth naturally implanted by God, the minor premise depends on an insight of right reason. Unregenerate reason errs with respect to the latter and so infers falsehoods about God. Hence, while the knowledge that God is powerful, immortal, and good is innately known, reason errs when it concludes that Jupiter is God. This error in inference derives from reason mistakenly supposing that Jupiter has the qualities of divinity. So while Luther accepted a general knowledge of God and morality, he remained skeptical about inferences drawn from this knowledge. See John Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism: The Arguments for the Existence of God in Dutch Theology, 1575–1650* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1982), chapter 2.

[20]   Philip Melanchthon, *Opera quae Supersunt Omnia, Corpus Reformatorum*, ed. C.B. Bretschneider and E.H. Bindweil (28 vols, Brunswick, 1834–1860), vol. 21, col. 117. Quoted and translated by Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism*, p. 11.

[21]   John Calvin, *The Commentaries of John Calvin on the First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, trans. Rev. John Pringle, in *Calvin's Commentaries* (22 vols, Grand

gives of Himself and the understanding that humans may have of God by their own intellectual powers.

Modest Unreliability Thesis and Immediate Natural Knowledge of God

If we follow the suggestions of the above Reformed thinkers, we can postulate a somewhat more modest unreliability thesis. Instead of entailing [N], total depravity would actually entail:

> [N*] No natural *inferential* cognitive process in unregenerate persons reliably produces any true beliefs about God.

The difference between [N] and [N*] is that, while [N] affirms that all natural cognitive processes in the unregenerate are unreliable in delivering truths about God, [N*] attributes unreliability only to a subset of such processes, inferential processes. This leaves open the possibility of a reliable non-inferential process that produces *some* theistic beliefs, and this would be enough to entail [K]. This process could be the sort Masselink suggested, a process in which the Holy Spirit uses the media of creation to impress certain basic theological truths on the mind of humans. Alternatively, it could be more along the lines suggested by Plantinga: we have been designed with an internally efficacious disposition to form various theistic beliefs when confronted with the facts of general revelation. If either of these immediacy models is approximately true, then [K] and [N*] will be logically consistent.[22]

Grounding the Modest Unreliability Thesis

Why suppose, though, that [N*] is true? Reformed thinkers who suggest something like [N*] see it as an implication of total depravity. This raises the question as to why the noetic effects of sin should be more concentrated or potent in the case of inferences about God than in intuitive or immediate knowledge of God. Masselink maintains that sin actually corrupts *every* aspect of our noetic structure *equally*. Only common grace and the work of the Holy Spirit prevent a bad epistemic situation from being worse than it is. But it is not clear on Masselink's account how the knowledge of God in fallen, unregenerate persons is *natural* knowledge

---

Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), vol. 20/1, p. 110. See also *Institutes*, 1.4.1; 1.5.12.

[22]   Nothing here implies that natural non-inferential processes of theistic belief formation are wholly unaffected by sin. For example, the *sensus divinitatis* might be less reliable as the result of the noetic effects of sin, or its deliverances might be suppressed or impeded upon various occasions. It could still be a source of warranted theistic belief, even enough warrant for knowledge. See Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 213–16.

of God, for it is actually produced by the Holy Spirit.[23] As long as we attempt to distinguish between two *natural* cognitive processes (one intuitive and the other inferential), we need an answer other than the one Masselink provides.

If we turn to Dutch Calvinists such as Bavinck and Berkhof, we find a plausible suggestion: inferential natural knowledge of God is conditioned by the human *will*. On the one hand, there is some knowledge of God that is naturally implanted in all persons. This knowledge is innate in the sense that it arises spontaneously and is not the product of a laborious process of reasoning and argumentation. As Berkhof says: "It is a knowledge which man, constituted as he is, acquires of *necessity*, and as such is distinguished from all knowledge that is conditioned by the will of man."[24] On the other hand, there is also some knowledge of God that arises only after the study of and reflection on the revelation of God in creation. This acquired knowledge of God "does not arise spontaneously in the human mind, but results from the conscious and sustained pursuit of knowledge. It can be acquired only by the wearisome process of perception and reflection, reasoning and argumentation."[25] As Bavinck explains this, while humans are largely *passive* in relation to the innate knowledge of God, they are *active* in relation to the acquired knowledge of God. The acquired knowledge of God is, at least in part, the result of our intellectual efforts. [26]

According to Bavinck and Berkhof, then, it would seem that the will guides a practice of intellectual inquiry that, if rightly directed, produces an acquired knowledge of God. While this knowledge is the product of inference, the inferences depend on an antecedent and more complex process of inquiry, evidence gathering, and evidence evaluation. The sense in which the acquired knowledge of God is dependent on the will is thus *indirect*. To rephrase this in terms of beliefs: while we cannot directly choose what to believe, we can choose to investigate, gather evidence, take time to ponder the evidence, and so on—all practices that influence the sorts of beliefs we form and how existing beliefs are revised. [27] In this way, the will can indirectly influence what we know. Of course, the Reformed tradition has placed a special emphasis on the depravity of the human will. Depravity entails

---

[23]   Masselink refuses to speak of *natural* revelation and *natural* knowledge of God precisely because the knowledge of God in fallen, unregenerate persons is produced by a supernatural activity of the Holy Spirit. See Masselink, *General Revelation and Common Grace*, p. 69.

[24]   Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th edition (1939; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), p. 35.

[25]   Ibid., pp. 35–6.

[26]   See Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics,* trans. John Vriend and ed. John Bolt (2 vols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003–2004), vol. 2, pp. 72–7.

[27]   The idea that we can directly choose our belief states, so-called doxastic voluntarism, has been rejected for the most part by contemporary philosophers. See William Alston, "The Deontological Concept of Justification" in Alston, *Epistemic Justification* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

not only the inability to perform any work meritorious of salvation, but the will is regarded as in opposition to or in rebellion against God and His law. Consequently, humans fail to love God as they ought or offer the requisite obedience to God's law. Hence, to the extent that some knowledge of God depends on a rightly directed will, the doctrine of total depravity entails that this knowledge is particularly vulnerable. The reliability of the overall process that ultimately engenders inferentially grounded theistic beliefs would be jeopardized by a wrongly directed will.[28]

Now it is not clear that the observations of Bavinck and Berkhof entail that unregenerate persons have no inferential natural knowledge of God, only that the noetic effects of sin render this kind of knowledge of God more problematic than intuitive or immediate knowledge of God. I appeal to their observations simply to suggest a possible way of developing an argument for [N*]. However, even if [N*] is true, the central point here is that [N*] is logically consistent with [K]. So if we adopt [N*], the objection to natural theology β from the noetic effects of sin cannot proceed by way of some general denial of natural theology α. It must be specifically calibrated in terms of a denial of the epistemic efficacy of natural theology β, or more modestly calibrated in terms of a denial of some particular model of natural theology β. So we can now return to the larger motifs of the present work.

A Defense of Natural Theology β

Project Objections to Natural Theology β

In this chapter I have considered two possible, epistemically significant implications of the Reformed doctrine of sin for propositional natural knowledge of God, namely [N] and [N*]. While [N] and [N*] each challenge the idea that unregenerate persons can have a natural inferential knowledge of God, it should be clear that neither generates a project objection to natural theology β, a point I anticipated in the opening remarks of Chapter 6. There are two relevant considerations here.

First, following the pattern of many Reformed theologians, I have unpacked the noetic effects of sin in terms of the epistemic situation of the unregenerate, that is, fallen human persons who have not yet been redeemed by divine grace. However, the project of natural theology β does not entail that there is any

---

[28] It is of course possible in principle for the will to adversely affect even the intuitive knowledge of God. Calvin wrote: "Accordingly, we see that many, after they have become hardened in insolent and habitual sinning, furiously repel all remembrance of God, although this is freely suggested to them inwardly from the feeling of nature" (*Institutes*, 1.4.2; see also 1.4.4). The *Canons of Dort* states: "in various ways he completely distorts this light [of nature], whatever its precise character, and suppresses it in unrighteousness" (III & IV, article 4).

de facto natural knowledge of God in the unregenerate, much less any inferential natural knowledge of God. A successful project of natural theology β entails that (a) there are some truths about God that can in principle be known by inferences from the natural order and (b) such inferences are epistemically efficacious for *some* cognizers. For example, the dogmatic conception of natural theology β presupposes a *theologia naturalis regenitorum*, a natural theology of the regenerate. It presupposes that natural theology α is a reality in regenerate persons and that theistic inferences are epistemically efficacious for at least some Christians. Regeneration and the spectacles of Scripture ostensibly permit the recovery and reconstruction of the natural knowledge of God that all would have possessed if—as Calvin noted—Adam had remained upright. So natural theology β can coherently be taken as the formalization by the Christian of the content of general revelation, a content that would be subjectively appropriated by all human persons in the form of 'knowledge of God' if their relevant cognitive faculties were reliable and functioning properly.

Secondly, as I argued in Chapter 5, the fate of natural theology β hangs on a fairly modest epistemic principle:

> [MIP] Rational inference confers a degree of warrant less than N on some range of theistic beliefs, where the *Nth* degree of warrant is sufficient to transform true belief into knowledge.

Not only is [MIP] logically consistent with [N] and [N*], but [MIP] would be logically compatible with any attempt to extend the scope of [N] or [N*] to regenerate persons. So we would not have a project objection to natural theology β even if the strong or modest unreliability principle applied to the regenerate. To be sure, we would in that case have to deny the stronger epistemic principle I articulated in Chapter 5:

> [SIP] Rational inference confers a degree *N* of warrant on some range of theistic beliefs, where *N* is a degree of warrant sufficient to transform true belief into knowledge.

Some models of natural theology β entail [SIP]. In Chapter 5 I designated these 'strongly epistemically loaded' models of natural theology. However, in Chapter 5 I also defended the sufficiency of [MIP] for the project of natural theology β. Consequently, any project objection to natural theology β requires a denial of [MIP]. Unfortunately, it is exceedingly difficult to see how such a denial could validly follow from the claims of Reformed anthropology or its correlated doctrine of sin. Indeed, as I will argue in Chapter 8, the Reformed doctrine of regeneration entails a reversal of the noetic effects of sin. This restores the prospects for natural knowledge of God otherwise undermined by the noetic effects of sin in the unregenerate.

The Apologetic Function of Theistic Arguments

Nonetheless, one might suppose that [N] or [N*] at least provides an objection to the apologetic use of theistic arguments and thereby constitutes an objection to a fairly popular model of natural theology β. Perhaps, but only if the task of apologetics presupposes that rational inference is a *source* of knowledge of God in the unregenerate. But the apologetic presentation of theistic arguments need not involve this presupposition.

(i) Theistic arguments can rebut or refute atheological objections against theism. While this activity can confirm or strengthen the Christian's belief in God, it can also be epistemically relevant for the unbeliever. Theistic arguments could reduce the warrant of certain objections against theism for the unbeliever, even if they do not confer any significant degree of warrant on theistic beliefs, much less enough warrant for knowledge. In principle, it is possible to lose one's warrant for believing not p without thereby acquiring significant warrant for believing p.[29] G.H. Kersten, for example, recognized that theistic arguments "can be of service inasfar [sic] as they can entangle the atheist in his own statements, even though they do not prove the existence of God to him."[30] These arguments "are not without power to wash away his sandy foundation, and to show that faith in God is not an illusion."[31] Herman Bavinck concedes, "The arguments for the existence of God may be weak, but in any case they are stronger than those advanced for its denial."[32] William Masselink, who otherwise stressed the limits of natural reasoning about God, said, "By means of these 'theistic proofs' it is not difficult to show the atheist not only the weak points of his system but the hollow emptiness of his whole philosophy."[33] Kersten, Bavinck, and Masselink assign to theistic proofs a legitimate negative function of dismantling the denial of God's existence, even if theistic proofs do not provide a sufficient basis for believing in God.

(ii) It may be that losing one's warrant for the denial of theism removes important obstacles to believing (with warrant) that God exists. So the task of refuting objections may go along with theistic arguments being epistemically efficacious for the unregenerate, just not strongly so. [N] and [N*] are compatible

---

[29]   A person's warrant for believing not p can be lowered by reasons for supposing that the ground of the belief that not p is inadequate, as opposed to reasons for believing p. So lowering the warrant of atheological objections does not *require* arguments for the truth of theism. However, it is conceivable that the warrant for the denial of theism can be lowered by reasons for supposing that theism is true without the latter conferring much warrant on theism, as long as the reasons for the denial of theism are not very strong.

[30]   G.H. Kersten, *Reformed Dogmatics: A Systematic Treatment of Reformed Doctrine*, trans. J.R. Beeke (2 vols, 1980; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1981), vol. 1, pp. 41–2.

[31]   Ibid., p. 42.

[32]   Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, p. 59.

[33]   Masselink, *General Revelation and Common Grace*, p. 119.

with unregenerate persons naturally acquiring beliefs about God that have some degree of warrant, as well as with inference being the source of such warrant. Moreover, if we suppose that unregenerate persons have an intuitive knowledge of God, we can view theistic arguments as a way of adding warrant to antecedent religious convictions which have some warrant on grounds other than inference. This is particularly relevant if the noetic effects of sin have weakened the intuitive knowledge of God. And even if theistic arguments are not intrinsically efficacious, they may be made efficacious by the work of the Holy Spirit. Lecerf, for example, alerts us to the positive role of theistic arguments in the context of conversion:

> Apologetics does not endeavor to destroy the adversary's disposition to attack merely in order to comfort the believer; but, by the intellectual defence of religious truth which it presents, it seeks to become an instrument in God's hands, a means of grace, that shall produce in the opponent himself a deep and favorable impression of the truth of religious doctrine.[34]

(iii) If we accept [N*], we can view theistic arguments, not as the source of inferential knowledge of God, but as part of the circumstances involved in the spontaneous recognition of God, as a way of triggering or revivifying the intuitive, natural knowledge of God.

William Masselink recognized this value of theistic arguments.

> In the case of some the spiritual life is so declined that the voice of conscience is deadened, almost silenced. As a physician by means of artificial respiration revives the drowned man, or by means of a hypodermic revives a person, so also these "proofs" can be used as a stimulus to bring back God-consciousness to the natural man.[35]

I have intentionally quoted from Reformed theologians known for their emphasis on the noetic effects of sin and their critical attitude toward natural theology. This illustrates the prospects for an apologetic use of theistic arguments even given the noetic effects of sin. Bavinck, Lecerf, Kersten, and Masselink each denies that theistic arguments can prove the existence of God in a rationally compelling manner to the unbeliever. They cannot be a source of warrant in this strong sense. Nonetheless, these thinkers assign to theistic arguments a range of roles from refuting atheism to contributing to knowledge of God that is given in a more direct way in the religious consciousness of the unbeliever.

---

[34]   Auguste Lecerf, *An Introduction to Reformed Dogmatics* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1949), p. 208.

[35]   Masselink, *General Revelation and Common Grace*, p. 119.

Conclusions

Drawing largely on insights from contemporary epistemology, I have argued that the noetic effects of sin do not constitute a project objection to natural theology β, or even a sufficient reason for rejecting the apologetic use of theistic arguments. While the unreliability of human reason can be construed in a way that is incompatible with propositional natural knowledge of God in the unregenerate, the Reformed doctrine of sin more plausibly targets inferential natural knowledge of God. Even here, though, it is exceedingly difficult to argue that inference cannot be at least a source of warrant for the unregenerate person's beliefs about God. Finally, I have argued that the project of natural theology β need not presuppose that there is any actual natural knowledge of God in the unregenerate, much less that they have such knowledge by way of inference. It need not even presuppose that theistic inferences can be weakly epistemically efficacious for unregenerate persons. At the most, natural theology β presupposes that theistic arguments can be epistemically efficacious for some people. The Christian might have some natural knowledge of God and be capable of formalizing this knowledge by constructing cogent theistic arguments. And even here a fairly modest epistemic principle is sufficient, namely that theistic arguments can confer *some* warrant on theistic beliefs for the believer. So we must consider the prospects for natural theology β as the reflective activity of the Christian.

This page has been left blank intentionally

Chapter 8

The Dogmatic Model of Natural Theology

As explained in Chapters 1 and 2, early Protestant Scholasticism typically construed natural theology β as the product of the reflective activity of the Christian carried out within the context of the dogmatic exposition of the faith. Following earlier chapters, I will designate this view of natural theology the 'dogmatic' model of natural theology β. There are two features of this model that are relevant to the criticisms of natural theology β discussed in Chapters 6 and 7: (a) the reversal of the noetic effects of sin through regeneration and sanctification and (b) the influence of Scripture in justifying and reliably guiding the project of developing natural theistic arguments. In the present chapter I will explore and develop (a) and (b). My main goal is to clarify the dogmatic model of natural theology β and show how it is immune to the kind of objections to natural theology encountered in the previous two chapters.

Aspects of the Dogmatic Model of Natural Theology β

Spiritual Regeneration and Natural Theology

In Chapters 6 and 7 I examined objections to inferential natural knowledge of God based on alleged epistemic deficiencies of the unregenerate mind. However, the dogmatic model of natural theology β presupposes that natural theistic arguments are the product of human reason as it operates in the *regenerate* mind. While Reformed theology maintains that all humanity is subject to noetic effects of sin, it also affirms that regeneration initiates a reversal of these effects. By 'regeneration' I understand the immediate infusion of a new disposition or habit in the soul of a person, resulting in the exercise of repentance and saving faith.[1] Regeneration involves a restoration or renewal of the image of God. As such it involves an effect upon both the understanding and the will. The Holy Spirit illuminates the understanding and enables the will to respond positively to spiritual realities. While not free from error, the epistemic integrity of the mind is nonetheless restored and progressively refined through the process of sanctification. So reason as it operates

---

[1] See *Canons of Dort*, in *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (Grand Rapids, MI: CRC Publications, 1988), III & IV, articles 11–16. I employ the term 'regeneration' here in its widely adopted narrow sense. Regeneration in this sense is distinct from sanctification. The latter refers to the progressive moral and spiritual development of the person who has received the new principle of spiritual life.

in unregenerate persons must be distinguished from the operation of reason in regenerate persons, especially in relation to the acquisition of knowledge of God. Consequently, there is a plausible and highly relevant distinction between a natural theology of the unregenerate (*theologia naturalis irregenitorum*) and a natural theology of the regenerate (*theologia naturalis regenitorum*).

Calvin illustrates the distinction here. While Calvin emphasized the noetic effects of sin on the natural knowledge of God, he was careful to distinguish between unregenerate and regenerate reason.[2] Unregenerate reason is blind to God's revelation in the created order, but the regenerate mind, being illuminated by the Holy Spirit, can see this revelation and recognize the attributes of God displayed in the cosmos.

> Men's minds therefore are wholly blind, so that they see not the light of nature which shines forth in created things, until being irradiated by God's Spirit, they begin to understand by faith what otherwise they cannot comprehend. … the faithful, to whom he has given eyes, see the sparks of his glory, as it were, glittering in every created thing.[3]

The passage suggests that God directly grants a particular knowledge of himself, that such knowledge is a function of faith rather than redeemed reason. However, Calvin elsewhere makes it clear that redeemed reason reflects on the created order and derives conclusions about the attributes of God. In his commentary on Psalm 19 Calvin says, "David, with the view of encouraging the faithful to contemplate the glory of God, sets before them, in the first place, a mirror of it in the fabric of the heavens, and in the exquisite order of their workmanship which we behold."[4] In his commentary on Psalm 19 and 104 (see below) Calvin himself contemplates the manifestation of God in the universe and develops rational arguments for the various attributes of God. So Calvin had the conception of knowledge of God as something produced by reflecting on the created order by way of a rational faculty that was subject to supernatural influence.

Lecerf nicely puts Calvin's position:

> For him, reasonings are efficacious only when they follow faith and deliver it from rational difficulties. By themselves, they can only produce opinions without

---

[2]   See Edward Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (1952; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 73–7, 131–46; B.B. Warfield, "Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God" in *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield* (1932; reprint, 10 vols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2000), vol. 5, pp. 68–70.

[3]   John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews*, trans. and ed. Rev. John Owen, in *Calvin's Commentaries* (22 vols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), vol. 22, pp. 265–6.

[4]   Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. Rev. James Anderson, in *Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 4, part 1, p. 307.

certitude, consistency, or duration. … our Reformer regards natural revelation as capable of being understood only by a mind transformed by the grace of faith. No doubt God has written His name in the sky with the stars but still eyes are needed to see and intelligence to understand.[5]

Jonathan Edwards argued that divine grace enables the mind to see the force of theistic arguments.

It not only directly evidences the truth of religion to the mind … but it sanctifies the reasoning faculty and assists it to see the clear evidence there is of the truth of religion in rational arguments, and that [in] two ways, viz., as it removes prejudices and so lays the mind more open to the force of arguments, and also secondly, as it positively enlightens and assists it to see the force of rational arguments, not only by removing prejudices but by adding greater light, clearness, and strength to the judgment in this matter.[6]

Calvin and Edwards both suppose that the believer is in a superior epistemic situation vis-à-vis appropriating the revelation of God in the created order and—in Edwards at least—its codification in rational arguments. There are several ways we can develop and expand their insights within the framework of contemporary epistemology. I will outline a few salient points.

First, suppose we think of the noetic effects of sin in terms of the malfunction, impairment, or impedance of cognitive processes aimed—by virtue of the human cognitive design plan—at the production of true theistic belief(s). We may have been designed with an innate disposition to form certain true theistic beliefs in some range of naturally occurring circumstances or by inferences from certain evidences. Sin might prevent this disposition from being consistently activated under the appropriate conditions, or it might prevent it from being activated at all. As suggested in the previous chapter, cognitive malfunction may also lead to cognitive unreliability. Alternatively, sin may simply prevent the formation of theistic beliefs with the degree of firmness needed for knowledge. All of these specific possibilities depict the unregenerate person as epistemically challenged. From this vantage point it is natural to suppose that the regenerate person has an epistemic advantage because regeneration restores the proper functioning and reliability of theistic belief-forming cognitive processes.

The matter can be illustrated a bit more precisely. The impedance or impairment of theistic belief producing cognitive processes may result from aspects of our passional nature (for example, self-will, pride, fear, hatred, hedonism), or from the

---

    5   Auguste Lecerf, *An Introduction to Reformed Dogmatics* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1949), p. 388.

    6   Jonathan Edwards, "Miscellanies," in *The Philosophy of Jonathan Edwards from His Private Notebooks*, ed. Harvey G. Townsend (Eugene: University of Oregon Monographs, 1955), Misc. 628, p. 251.

adoption of beliefs incompatible with theism (for example, belief in the existence of gratuitous evil, metaphysical naturalism, the incoherence of immaterial minds). Grace may repair this situation by modifying our passions and beliefs. It may remove passions and beliefs that impede the formation of various theistic beliefs. It may instill passions (for example, love of God, sense of beauty in the world) that may be preconditions for, or at least instrumental to, the positive assessment of natural evidences of God's being and nature.[7]

Although I have parsed the noetic effects of regeneration in terms of cognitive proper function and reliability of belief formation, the issues here are also relevant from the vantage point of internalist theories of knowledge. There are, of course, the indefeasibility theories designed to address the Gettier problem. In the previous chapter I argued that the strong unreliability thesis would prevent justified true beliefs about God from constituting knowledge since the *fact* of strong unreliability would violate most indefeasibility clauses. This is not a problem for the regenerate person because there is no corresponding fact of strong unreliability in the cognitive situation of the regenerate person vis-à-vis belief in God. But there are other internalist considerations. The set of beliefs we hold at any one time may prevent us from justifiably holding other beliefs at some later time. We may thereby be prevented from coming to justifiably believe the truth of some conclusion of an argument. Our antecedently held beliefs may render us unjustified in accepting the premises of an argument or they may neutralize the force of such premises. It is reasonable to suppose that regeneration brings with it a significant revision of a person's doxastic system. Among such revisions is the *removal* of beliefs that would otherwise function as defeaters for various theistic inferences. For example, the Christian does not believe in gratuitous evil, a belief that surely weakens theistic inferences. So the regenerate person's assessment of theistic inferences would not be entangled in the kinds of potentially defeating conditions that make up the doxastic system of the unregenerate.[8]

Scriptural Revelation and Natural Theology

The dogmatic model of natural theology β also presupposes the wider context of dogmatic theology where the Bible is regarded as the primary source of knowledge of God. Natural theology represents rational reflection on God's general revelation in the created order from the viewpoint of God's special revelation in sacred scripture.

Calvin and Melanchthon both illustrate this point of view. Calvin refers to Scripture as "another and better help" to guide the natural knowledge of God

---

[7]   See William J. Wainwright, *Reason and the Heart: A Prolegomenon to a Critique of Passional Reason* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

[8]   For the purposes of apologetics the Christian may of course need to address potential defeaters to theistic belief, but if her own epistemic situation is not entangled in such defeaters, theistic inferences are more likely to be epistemically efficacious for her.

(*Institutes*, 1.6.1). Calvin said that Scripture functions as a pair of spectacles, permitting a "more direct and certain" understanding of the God revealed in the natural order: "Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God" (*Institutes*, 1.6.1). We saw in Chapter 1 that Melanchthon's placement of the theistic proofs under the *locus de creatione* and his emphasis on their intra-faith function served as an early indication of the integration of natural and revealed theology. "After the mind has been confirmed in the true and right opinion of God and of creation by the Word of God itself," Melanchthon wrote, "it is then both useful and pleasant to seek out also the vestiges of God in nature and to collect the arguments that there is a God."[9] Secondly, the Christian has the Scriptures, which function like a pair of spectacles assisting those with weak eyesight to perceive more clearly the manifestation of God in his works: "For by the Scripture as our guide and teacher, he [God] not only makes those things plain which would otherwise escape our notice, but almost compels us to behold them; as if he had assisted our dull sight with spectacles."[10]

Subsequent Reformed theologians have emphasized the point raised by Calvin.

Dutch neo-Calvinist Bavinck wrote:

> The Reformers indeed assumed a revelation of God in nature. But the human mind was so darkened by sin that human beings could not rightly know or understand this revelation either. Needed, therefore, were two things: (1) that God again included in special revelation those truths which in themselves are knowable from nature; and (2) that human beings, in order to again perceive God in nature, first had to be illumined by the Spirit of God. Objectively needed by the human beings to understand the general revelation of God in nature was the special revelation of God in Holy Scripture, which, accordingly, was compared by Calvin to glasses. Subjectively needed by human beings was the eye of faith to see God also in the works of his hands.[11]

---

[9]   Philip Melanchthon, *Opera quae supersunt omnia*, *Corpus Reformatorum*, ed. C.B. Bretschneider and E.H. Bindweil (28 vols, Halle and Brunswick, 1834–1960), vol. 21, col. 369. Translation by John Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism: the Arguments for the Existence of God in Dutch Theology, 1575–1650* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1982), p. 20. See Chapter 1, p. 11. See also Calvin's comments on the usefulness of evidences for the inspiration of Scripture subsequent to faith, as confirmations for the believer; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, in *The Library of Christian Classics*, vols XX–XXI (2 vols, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), I.8.1.

[10]   Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, trans. Rev. John King, in *Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 1, p. 62. See also Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.6.1.

[11]   Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. John Vriend and ed. John Bolt (2 vols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003–2004), vol. 1, p. 304.

Similarly, Lecerf wrote:

> Having received the illumination of faith through contact with the Word of God, the believer can perceive and interpret in a theistic sense the revelation of the divine in the universe and in the destiny that governs the course of his life and the course of events. … In order that he may understand the teaching of nature concerning God as creator and preserver, man must first of all experience that partial or total restoration of the divine image which is regeneration. But even this is not enough. Many spiritually regenerate Christians understand the book of nature scarcely better than unbelievers. To recover the forgotten meaning of its language, two things are required: a grammar and a teacher: the Bible and the Spirit of God.[12]

This insistence on input from scriptural revelation also shows an important way that the dogmatic model of natural theology β differs from the pre-dogmatic foundations model. The pre-dogmatic foundations model of natural theology is compatible with supposing that theistic arguments are the product of Christian reflection and only epistemically efficacious for the regenerate. The crucial issue is the relationship between natural theistic arguments and revealed theology and hence the placement of natural theology β within the system of dogmatic theology. In the pre-dogmatic foundations model natural theology β does not presuppose the content of revealed theology. It is an autonomous system based solely on the resources of human reason and constituting a justificatory preface to the system of revealed theology.

Speaking of the various treatises on natural theology composed by Reformed thinkers under the influence of Cartesianism, Lecerf said, "Natural theology is considered in them as an autonomous discipline, constituted solely by the resources of the light of nature and leading to the living God, the author of positive revelation. The function of revelation begins, once this truth has been acquired."[13] Lecerf disapproves and adds, "Knowledge of God acquired by the spectacle of the universe, by the effect of reflection, if it is deprived of the help of positive revelation, is equally incapable of leading us to a correct theology."[14] Kersten wrote, "Those who separate the natural knowledge of God from the special revelation in Scripture are wrong when they see a separate entity in the 'theologia naturalis.'"[15]

Abraham Kuyper expressed concern about the separation of natural theology and the theology based on Scripture:

---

[12] Lecerf, *Introduction to Reformed Dogmatics*, pp. 243, 245.

[13] Ibid., p. 22.

[14] Ibid., p. 108.

[15] G.C. Kersten, *Reformed Dogmatics: A Systematic Treatment of Reformed Doctrine* (2 vols, 1980; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1981), vol. 1, p. 5.

> If at first the Reformation fostered more accurate ideas, soon the temptation appeared too strong, to place *natural* theology as a separate theology *alongside* of special theology (theologia specialis). … To natural theology we owed the knowledge of God's Being and of the Divine attributes, of His works, providence, moral law, the last judgment, etc., and although special theology made us know a great deal of *sin and grace*, in fact it enriched the real knowledge of God with a knowledge of His "Grace" and "Threefold Being" … . It is, therefore, of the greatest importance, to see clearly, that *special* theology may not be considered a moment without *natural* theology, and that on the other hand natural theology of itself is unable to supply *any* pure knowledge of God.[16]

Bavinck contrasts the enlightenment approach to natural theology and the genuine natural theology of the Reformers:

> Now the Reformation indeed adopted this natural theology along with its proofs but, instead of treating it prior the doctrine of faith, incorporated it in the doctrine of faith. … Soon, however, Protestant theology started taking the road of rationalism. Whereas natural theology was initially an account, in the light of Scripture, of what Christians can know concerning God from creation, it soon became an exposition of what nonbelieving rational persons could learn from nature by the power of their reasoning. … Natural theology became the real, the scientific, and demonstrable theology by which revealed theology was increasingly marginalized and driven from the field.[17]

We see at this juncture a certain confluence of thought between Dutch neo-Calvinists and Karl Barth, for one of Karl Barth's objections to natural theology stemmed from the allegedly distorted view of God that results from creating an autonomous sphere of knowledge of God as creator that is wholly uninformed by the contents of biblical revelation in which God is presented as redeemer.

> It is … hard to see how what is distinctive for this God can be made clear if, as has constantly happened in Roman Catholic and Protestant dogmatics both old and new, the question of who God is, which it is the business of the doctrine of the Trinity to answer, is held in reserve, and the first question to be treated is that of the That and the What of God, as though these could be defined otherwise than on the presupposition of the Who.[18]

---

[16] Abraham Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, trans. J. Hendrik De Vries (1898; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1980), pp. 372–3.

[17] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, p. 78.

[18] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F Torrance, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957), vol. I.1 pp. 300–301. See also T.F. Torrance, "The Distinctive Character of the Reformed Tradition," *Reformed Review* 54:1 (autumn 2000): 5–16, at pp. 5–6. Stanley Hauerwas has contended that Barth's critique of natural theology

The above thinkers share a concern over the separation of natural and special revelation and the consequent construction of independent theologies of God, one based on natural revelation and the other based on special revelation. What underlies the above critique of natural theology β, then, are suspicions about natural theology β as an autonomous theological system divorced from the content of special revelation and as carried out by those lacking the illumination of the Holy Spirit. As Louis Berkhof put it, the Reformers "did not believe in the ability of human reason to construct a *scientific system* of theology on the basis of natural revelation pure and simple" (emphasis mine).[19] But this kind of objection to natural theology β is clearly a model-specific objection that targets the pre-dogmatic model of natural theology β.

The Dogmatic Model of Natural Theology

We may combine both features of the dogmatic model of natural theology β

> [CNT] Reflective inquiry concerning natural revelation is systematically reliable only if it is dependent on scriptural revelation and carried out by regenerate reason.

By 'systematically reliable' I mean reliable with reference to the production of a systematic *doctrine* of God. It is important to observe that [CNT] is logically consistent with there being *some* natural propositional knowledge of God independent of regeneration and the influence of Scripture. It is also consistent with purely natural theistic inferences or arguments conferring warrant on theistic beliefs. Moreover, contrary to [N*] in the previous chapter [CNT] is also logically consistent with natural theistic inferences conferring enough warrant for knowledge on occasion, where such inferences are carried out by the unregenerate mind and independent of the data of Scripture. The concern expressed by the above Reformed thinkers does not require an endorsement of [N*]. [N*] overlooked an important distinction between all theistically relevant inferential cognitive processes being unreliable and the unreliability and inadequacy of a purported systematic account of the natural knowledge of God produced by such cognitive processes. [CNT] is designed to insulate natural theistic reasoning from distorting an emergent doctrine of God.

---

actually targeted something like the pre-dogmatic foundations model. See Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: the Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2001), pp. 17, 164–6, 206.

   [19]   Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th edition (1939; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), p. 38.

An Objection to the Dogmatic Model of Natural Theology

A potential objection to [CNT] emerges at this point. It concerns the scriptural dependency clause of [CNT]. While the Protestant scholastics consistently affirmed that reason is the *principium* of natural theology,[20] dependence on the data of Scripture would seem to be inconsistent with a natural *principium* and thus compromises the *natural* character of natural theology. It is one thing to suppose that regeneration effects a healing of reason, thereby allowing it to function properly and perceive the revelation of God in the created order. It is quite another to suppose that the Christian will also rely on Scripture in reasoning about God. If our theological inquiry into the existence and attributes of God relies on Scripture, it would appear to be a revealed theology, and if revealed, then not natural. If the spectacles of Scripture are necessary to see the manifestation of God in the created order, natural theology would appear simply to be a 'theology of nature' based on Scripture.

In *God in Modern Philosophy* (1959) James Collins focused on this problem in relation to Calvin.

> There can be a theology or religious knowledge about nature, but it remains intrinsically dependent upon faith in the word of God and cannot develop properly from the natural light of human intelligence and the natural order of inference. …
> Nor does the third mode of knowledge—that of supernatural faith—regenerate man in such a way that it permits him to work out a natural philosophy of God. Both in the original state of rectitude and in the regenerate state, the image of God in man is a supernatural light coming into our understanding from without. Faith is an illumination present *in* our mind, but even after its reception there is no natural light *of* the mind which can approach God through a philosophical method. The only use to which Calvin puts the instinctive knowledge and experiential intimations of God is a theological one: they have no further effect within his system than to render sinful men inexcusable in their idolatry and philosophical opinions.[21]

---

[20]   See Johann Alsted, *theologiae naturalis*, I.i; Maresius, *Collegium theologicum sive systema breve universae theologia comprehensum octodecim disputationibus* (Groningen, 1645; 1659), 1.23. Mastricht contends that natural theology can confirm revealed truth and Cloppenburg claims that the logic of natural theology consistently mirrors what Scripture declares about God. Both thereby imply that natural theology has something other than Scripture as its source or principle. Petrus van Mastricht, *Theoretico-practica theologia* (Amsterdam, 1682–1687; Utrecht, 1714, 1724), 1.1.18; Johannes Cloppenburg, *Exercitationes super locos communes theologicos* in Cloppenburg, *Opera theologica*, 2 vols (Amsterdam, 1684), 2.1.6–8. See Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 2nd edition (4 vols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), vol. 1, pp. 297–305.

[21]   James Collins, *God in Modern Philosophy* (Chicago: H. Regnery, 1959), pp. 18–19.

Collins may have misrepresented Calvin's position here to some extent. Within Calvin's system as a whole, the natural knowledge of God does not have the *sole* purpose of rendering humans without excuse. This overlooks the role of the natural knowledge of God for the Christian. Nor is Calvin's Christian appropriation of natural theology merely a description of natural revelation based on Scripture. In the *Institutes* Calvin begins his account of the knowledge of God as Creator revealed in Scripture by stating: "it is worthwhile to ponder whether the Lord represents himself to us in Scripture as we previously saw him delineated in his works."[22] Calvin's strategy of comparing the content of scriptural and natural revelation with each other makes little sense if the latter is derived from Scripture and not nature itself. Moreover, while there is illumination by faith, there is also a restored natural light that enables the Christian to provide a rational account of natural revelation. As Calvin said, the illumination of faith "does not prevent us from applying our senses to the consideration of heaven and earth, that we may thence seek confirmation in the true knowledge of God."[23]

Calvin aside though, Collins's point does seem to be applicable to the claims of other representatives of the tradition. Bavinck makes the following statement:

> The knowledge of God that is gathered up in so-called natural theology is not the product of human reason. … it is not humans who, by the natural light of reason, understand and know this revelation of God. … Even Christian believers would not be able to understand God's revelation in nature and reproduce it accurately had not God himself described in his Word how he revealed himself and what he revealed of himself in the universe as a whole. The natural knowledge of God is incorporated and set forth at length in Scripture itself.[24]

Bavinck here endorses a model of natural theology that appears to be little more than a theology of nature based on Scripture. Collins's charge against Calvin seems more applicable to Bavinck. At all events, it at least prompts the question as to whether natural theology can be appropriated in a Christian context without sacrificing the natural character of natural theology. How do we avoid reducing natural theology to a series of biblical claims about natural revelation?

The answer to these questions will depend on how precisely we understand the dependence of natural theology on Scripture. To develop this, we should begin by noting the relevant range of biblical data on which natural theology might plausibly depend.

---

[22]   Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.10.1. See also Dowey, *Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology*, p. 133.

[23]   Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, vol. 1, p. 64.

[24]   Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2*,* p. 74.

a. Scripture affirms that there is a natural knowledge of God based on the revelation of God in the created order, including the rational and moral constitution of the human person (for example, Romans 1:19–20; Psalm 19).
b. Scripture provides information that bears on the proper and effective use of natural theology (for example, Romans 1:18–19, 2:14–16; I Peter 3:15; I Corinthians 2:1–16).
c. Scripture provides examples of inferences from publicly observable phenomena to various truths about God (for example, Acts 14:8–18, 17:16–34; Psalm 104; Job 37–39).
d. Scripture provides a concept of God and truths about God as creator (for example, Genesis 1:1, 17:1; Exodus 34:6; Deuteronomy 4:15, 6:4; Job 11:7; Psalm 90:2, 116:68; John 4:24; Romans 11:56; I Titus 1:17).

How shall we think about the relationship between these claims and the development of philosophical arguments for the existence and nature of God?

The Meta-Level Dependence of Natural Theology β on Scripture

Justificatory Dependence

One way that natural theology β can depend on Scripture is by Scripture providing a *justification* for engaging in the project of developing theistic arguments. We saw in Chapter 3 how Reformed theologians have historically grounded theistic arguments in the biblical affirmation of natural knowledge of God. They did not first work out theistic arguments and conclude that because the arguments are good there must be a natural knowledge of God. They first believed on the basis of Scripture that there is a natural knowledge of God. Theistic arguments were designed to confirm, unpack, and develop this biblical datum on the basis of reason. But in that case passages like Romans 1:19–20 supplied a presupposition that helped justify, in an intra-faith context, the activity of developing theistic arguments. So, clearly enough, (a) above could function as part of the justification for developing theistic arguments.

The appeal to Scripture to justify the project of developing arguments for God's existence is distinct from the use of Scripture to prove the existence or nature of God. In the latter case, Scripture would supply the actual premises of theistic arguments. In the former case, Scripture is being used to show that 'there is a natural knowledge of God' or 'there is evidence for the existence and nature of God in the created order', and consequently that 'developing theistic arguments is biblically justified'.[25] This is entirely consistent with the reasoning of theistic arguments

---

[25]   Technically, the inference here requires the additional premise that it is permissible to render explicit and develop what is only implicit in Scripture, a fairly uncontroversial assumption for anyone who accepts the idea of systematic theology.

proceeding from premises drawn from sources other than Scripture. Detective Columbo may declare that there is sufficient evidence at the crime scene for the conclusion that Mr. Burrows murdered his ex-wife. Columbo's testimony does not provide the evidence, much less an argument from the evidence to the conclusion. Moreover, once someone gathers the evidence and develops the argument from the evidence to the conclusion that Mr. Burrows committed the crime, the content of the argumentation would not rely on the detective's testimony, even if his testimony motivated the uncovering of the evidence. Similarly, Scripture testifies that there is evidence in the created order from which conclusions about the existence and nature of God may be inferred. Scripture thus provides reasons for engaging in the project of developing theistic arguments, and arguably reasons for supposing that such arguments can be successfully constructed. This does not entail that Scripture provides the evidence *of* theistic arguments. So the justificatory dependence of natural theology on Scripture would be compatible with the natural character of the theistic arguments themselves.

Functional Guidance

Secondly, though, Scripture provides information that bears on the proper and effective *use* of theistic arguments.[26]

In the New Testament, Christ commands his disciples to love God with all their heart, soul, and mind (Mark 12:30, Luke 10:27). The Psalms provide important illustrations of one way in which believers can love God with their minds, namely by meditating on God's revelation of himself in the created order. In Psalm 104, for example, praise of God—his goodness, power, and wisdom—arises from a contemplation of the regularities that God has established in the universe, especially upon a consideration of how so many diverse features of the world work in harmony to produce not only beauty but manifold provisions for the various physical needs of animals and humans. The use of reason and natural theistic inferences in this context is epistemic (geared toward deepening and solidifying the believer's knowledge of God) and practical (aimed at the goals of engendering and sustaining the worship of God).[27]

Scripture also provides guidance concerning the apologetic use of theistic arguments. I Peter 3:15 states that believers should "always be ready to give a reason (logos) for the hope that is within them," an exhortation that has traditionally been taken to provide a general basis for the necessity of Christian apologetics. While this text does not specify what sort of reasons believers should appeal to, other biblical passages do provide guidance in this respect. In Acts 14 and 17 the Apostle Paul illustrates the apologetic use of theistic arguments. Here we find Paul reasoning with the Gentiles on the basis of observations from publicly observable

---

[26]   I am indebted to James Anderson for this point.

[27]   James Barr's discussion of the natural theology of Psalm 104 is helpful. See Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 81–5.

phenomena and citing passages from Greek literature. It is true that Paul does not in either case attempt to prove the *existence* of God. But this is not surprising since his audience did not deny the existence of God. The relevant point is that Paul uses natural arguments that were relevant given the presuppositions of his audience. Paul seeks to make points about the nature of God and the implications of the nature of God for worship, but he makes these points by appealing to truths accessible to his audience from reason and their cultural backgrounds.

Elsewhere Scripture provides data that is relevant to important details of apologetic methodology and its success. For example, Romans 1:18 informs us that the unregenerate person suppresses the truth in unrighteousness, a point underscored by I Corinthians 2:1–16, according to which the natural person does not welcome spiritual things since they are insipid or tasteless. Romans 1:19 and 2:14–15, though, affirm that God nonetheless reveals himself in the created order and in the moral consciousness of the human person, and that all people in some sense know God and his law. It is this knowledge that unregenerate people seek to suppress. So while the apologist should expect resistance from unregenerate people, the witness of God to himself in the human mind is in some sense prior to the presentation of theistic arguments. The purpose of such arguments in the apologetic encounter is not so much to persuade the unbeliever of what she does not know but to bring to consciousness what she implicitly already knows. The apologist does not attempt to help the unbeliever reach God by way of reason, but rather he attempts to bring clarity to how God has already reached the unbeliever in the unbeliever's own rational and moral constitution.

Negative Substantive Dependence

Thus far the role of Scripture in relation to natural theology β has been restricted to meta-level claims about natural theology (its justification and use), not the substantive formation of theistic arguments. But natural theology β can also depend on Scripture in substantial ways, negative and positive.

(d) suggests a relation of negative dependence of natural theology on Scripture. By providing a biblical concept of God, Scripture provides a background system of theological belief relevant to the derivation of defeaters to our natural theological reasoning, where this is appropriate. Here Scripture provides negative constraints on natural theological arguments, a kind of veto power to eliminate certain conclusions of natural theological reasoning. While such constraints may apply to either the premises or the conclusion of theistic arguments, they are most relevant in insulating the Christian from inferences to false conclusions about the nature of God that so often plague natural theology β outside the context of the Christian faith.[28]

---

[28]   Since an inference to a true conclusion from a false premise cannot constitute knowledge, the detection of false premises will be relevant for systematic reflection on

Consider just a few illustrations of how the biblical concept of God can act as a corrective. Aristotle reasoned to the existence of a single supreme being limited in knowledge and power, and wholly unconcerned with human affairs. Epicurean natural theology in ancient Greece and deistic natural theology in modern philosophy both arrived at conclusions inconsistent with the immanence of God and his providential control of the world. Stoic natural theology could justify the immanence and providence of God but only by adopting a principle of an organic continuum that entailed the identity of God and creation, that is, pantheism. A biblical theology of God leads us in a different direction. According to Scripture, God exercises providential care over the details of the Universe. Unlike Aristotle's unmoved mover or the many gods of Greek religion, the God of the Bible is not finite in knowledge and power. But neither does God's infinite perfection make him identical to the universe. Scripture presents us with a clear ontological distinction between the creator and creation. God's immanence is not purchased at the price of His transcendence. While natural theology β uncontrolled by biblical revelation has often resulted in a concept of God incompatible with the Christian concept of God, reason controlled by the deliverances of Scripture can more consistently arrive at claims about God that are compatible with the biblical doctrine of God.

The relation of negative dependence between natural theology β and Scripture does not undermine the natural character of natural theology. First, the fact that theological propositions are subtracted from a system of natural theology on the grounds of biblical revelation would not alter the rational grounds for the conclusions that are left standing. To be sure, the overall structure of such a system of natural theology will be guided by an eliminative procedure that appeals to Scripture, but the individual positive argumentation will be based on reason. Secondly, even if Scripture shows us that a particular theological conclusion of human reasoning is false, reason could still identify where the reasoning went awry. If, on the basis of Scripture, we know that a particular conclusion of a theological argument is false, it follows that the argument in question is unsound. One of the functions of reason would be to discover which if any of the premises is false or how the argument is logically fallacious.[29]

---

the natural knowledge of God. For example, if Scripture provides a defeater for aspects of evolutionary biology that have been used to reason to God's existence, then while such inferences could retain some *ad hominem* force against unbelievers who accept these putative facts of natural science, the inferences in question could not ground natural *knowledge* of God.

[29]   It might be objected that in some instances reason will not be able to make such a discovery, and in that case we will have rejected a putative deliverance of reason on the basis of special revelation. First, in cases where the relative degrees of warrant for the competing propositions are about equal, we might adopt an agnostic position on the matter. Secondly, there will be cases where a conclusion of reason *is* rejected on the grounds of revelation because the warrant for one proposition, p, on the grounds of revelation is greater than the warrant for some deliverance of reason, q, which is incompatible with p. It is possible that

This particular mode of dependence on Scripture is particularly relevant to the reliability problem that otherwise plagues reflective theological inquiry. The propensity toward deriving false theological conclusions is an implication of [N*] (from Chapter 7). The systematic development of the natural knowledge of God independent of Scripture is likely to involve a proliferation of theological falsehoods or at least a few substantial theological errors, as is exemplified in the systems of Platonist, Aristotelian, Epicurean, and Stoic natural theology. But this propensity toward theological error can be alleviated to a considerable degree if there are resources available to identify important theological errors when they arise under the limits or defects of natural reason. Scripture can play an important role here in providing a kind of theological 'checks and balances' system for the conclusions of natural theology β.

One caveat here. In practice a crucial issue will always be the degree of warrant for the respective theological propositions. The mere fact that we believe that Scripture teaches p, while reason leads us to the conclusion not p, is not in itself a sufficient reason to reject p. One must compare the degrees of warrant for the belief that 'Scripture teaches p' and the degree of warrant for the belief not p on the rational grounds in question. It is possible that reason provides greater warrant for believing not p than we have for believing that Scripture teaches p. On the other hand, there will be cases where the belief that 'Scripture teaches p' has a lot of warrant, or at least more warrant than there is for believing not p. Still yet, there will be instances where the degree of warrant for believing that p is the teaching of Scripture will be about the same as the degree of warrant for believing not p on the basis of reason. It may be necessary to withhold belief in such cases. As is the case with rational belief and knowledge in general, the extent to which one source of belief provides one with a defeater for a belief from another source of belief will depend on a variety of contextual factors.

Positive Substantial Dependence

While (c) may be regarded as a ground for the justification of natural theology β, (c) also implies a more substantive sort of contribution to natural theology β. (c) entails biblical descriptions of evidences utilized in theistic inferences. For example, in preaching to the pagans, the Apostle Paul declared, "Nevertheless he [God] left not himself without a witness, in that he did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness" (Acts 14:17). In this case, Scripture informs us, not merely that there is evidence available from which theistic conclusions can be drawn but it also informs us *what* the theistic evidence is, and perhaps also what truth about God is said to follow from the evidence. So (c) would seem to imply something about what is constitutive of theistic arguments

---

reason will not be able to detect where the inference to q went awry, but q should nonetheless be rejected because we have warrant for a proposition incompatible with q.

themselves, and this indicates a positive substantial dependence of natural theology on Scripture, as opposed to a mere meta-level justification of natural theology. This might strike some as considerably more problematic than negative dependence, for it now appears that Scripture will supply at least some of the premises of theistic arguments. In that event such arguments would not be based on human reasoning. The natural character of natural theology would be undermined.

The Role of Biblical Illustrations of Natural Theistic Inferences

According to (iii), what Scripture provides are *instances* or *examples* of natural theistic inferences. Since the biblical instances of natural theistic reasoning instantiate more general patterns of reasoning, the relevant biblical passages plausibly point in a *general* way to the kind of evidence that is sufficient for drawing certain theological conclusions from observations of the created order. Romans 1:19–20 suggests in a very general way that God's "eternal power and godhead" may be inferred from features of the physical world. Acts 14:17 presupposes that patterns of regularity in the world that provide physical and emotional benefits to humans imply the goodness of God. The same point is reasserted with different details in Psalm 104 and Job 37–39. In all these cases, the biblical authors appeal to naturally accessible facts about God's provisions for animals and humans, a provision that is taken to be evidence of God's goodness, power, and wisdom. In Acts 17, drawing on pagan sources and observations of Greek religious worship, Paul affirms that his audience (Stoic and Epicurean philosophers) should not think that God is like gold or silver or anything crafted by human artistic skills, seeing that—as his audience would agree—all humans are the offspring of God. The implied premises, of course, are that 'humans are not made of gold or silver' and 'humans resemble their maker'. Paul's reasoning presupposes that we can draw conclusions about the nature of God on the basis of truths about the nature of human persons, together perhaps with certain natural assumptions about the resemblance between causes and effects.

The guidance afforded to natural theology β by the above biblical data is substantial in the sense that Scripture informs us about the sort of evidence that can be used to infer truths about God from the natural order. What Scripture affirms will be inferential connections between certain features of the universe and the nature of God as good, powerful, or wise. The Christian could know antecedently to the construction of a theistic argument that 'there is a cogent inference from features F of universe to the goodness of God', and he would know this on the basis of Scripture. Perhaps the F slot can be filled, on the basis of Scripture, with features as specific as beauty, temporal regularity, and utility, which might imply the goodness, power, or wisdom of God. While this knowledge can guide the process of the selection of theistic evidences and the general architecture of theistic arguments, it would not follow that Scripture is supplying the premises of theistic arguments. After all, that the universe exhibits beauty or operates according to physical laws (as well specifying these laws) would still be known

independent of Scripture. Moreover, the development of theistic arguments would require developing the inference in question as an explicit philosophical argument, showing why the inference in question is cogent, and defending the inference against various logical objections. This would be the function of reason. So Scripture can inform us about the general content of theistic arguments and imply something about the structure of such arguments, even if it does not supply the actual premises of theistic arguments.[30]

Of course, Scripture can play this role more indirectly, even where the biblical data does not amount to an instance of a natural theistic inference. Take one of the basic biblical truths about God according to Reformed theology: the causal dependence of all things on God. If we know, on the basis of Scripture, that all things causally depend on God for their existence and operation, we have a basis or general framework for constructing a variety of theistic arguments on the basis of reason, for most theistic arguments trade on various relations of causal dependence between creation and God.[31] Moreover, to the extent that Scripture specifies the dependence of creation on God in some specific way, there is a basis for a corresponding theistic argument that develops this mode of causal dependence into an argument from effects to cause. Reason of course would have the task of unpacking and developing the causal connection, but Scripture would have provided data to inspire and direct reflective theological inquiry.

Bavinck and Calvin on Positive Dependence

I believe the preceding illuminates a central point raised by Bavinck in his attempt to ground natural theology in Scripture. Bavinck wrote:

> Thus, appealing to the whole created world as a witness to, and revelation of, God, Scripture contains germinally all that was later elaborated and dialectically unfolded in the proofs. There is truth in C.I. Nitzsch's comment that Scripture gives a beginning and analogy of the etiological [cosmological] proof in Romans 1:20, of the teleological proof in Psalm 8 and Acts 14:17, of the moral proof in Romans 2:14, and of the ontological proof in Acts 17:24 and Romans 1:19, 32.[32]

Rather than maintaining that Scripture is necessary to acquiring the actual premises of theistic arguments, Bavinck explains that the Scriptures contain in a general way the starting points and direction of traditional theistic arguments. Scripture, then, tells us in a general way about the sort of inferences that can be made from the created order to God, but it is reason's task to carry this out.

---

[30]　If Scripture did supply the premises of theistic arguments, it would not follow that such premises could not *in principle* be known by natural reason or that the Christian did not know them by way of reason.

[31]　I am indebted to James Anderson for bringing this point to my attention.

[32]　Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, p. 76.

Calvin's commentary on Psalm 104 provides a good illustration of this. At points Calvin's reasoning simply provides illustrations accessible to natural reason of the observable benefits that result from the temporal and spatial order that the Psalmist declares God has established. In other places Calvin goes further to outline natural arguments that have as their conclusion what is explicitly affirmed by Scripture itself. For example, in Psalm 104:5–9 the Psalmist affirms that by His power God has laid the foundations of the earth so that it remains stable, and God has fixed boundaries between the oceans and dry land so that each remains in its place. Calvin, however, reasons *to* this testimony of Scripture *from* observation and principles of natural philosophy. Calvin argues roughly as follows. It is evident to the senses that (1) the oceans do not overflow their banks and flood the entire earth. (2) If there is no God who by His power restrains the oceans, then the oceans would overflow their banks and flood the entire earth. We know (2) since it is a principle of natural philosophy that (3) the tendency of water—due to its unstable and fluid properties—is to flow over the boundaries set by dry land. Therefore, (4) there is a God who by His power restrains the oceans.[33] So Calvin reasons to the testimony of Scripture on the basis of observation and principles of natural philosophy. While Scripture affirms (4), and perhaps suggests that there is a cogent inference from (1) to (4), Scripture does not provide the argument from (1) to (4). Calvin attempts this.[34]

Starting Points and Confirmations

Although (d) can be used to eliminate false conclusions about God drawn by natural theological reasoning, it is equally true that a biblical concept of God can play a positive role in relation to natural theology. There are two ways that this can work.

First, to that extent that the conclusions of natural theology correspond to aspects of the biblical view of God, Scripture may *confirm* these conclusions of natural theological reasoning. As noted above, we find something like this in Calvin himself when he moves from a consideration of the knowledge of God the creator grounded in God's self-disclosure in the natural order to a consideration of the knowledge of God the creator grounded in the biblical presentation of God. Having discussed how it is that the created order reveals the wisdom, power, eternity, and goodness of God, Calvin goes on to show how Scripture reveals God in the same way. It is plausible to see Calvin as providing a kind of confirmation of the conclusions of the natural reasoning provided earlier in the *Institutes*. Of course, however Calvin intended to relate the two accounts, they *can* in point

---

[33]   See Calvin, *Commentaries upon the Psalms*, trans. Rev. James Anderson, in *Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 6, pp. 148–52; see also Calvin's comments on Psalm 136.

[34]   I am not suggesting that Calvin's argument is a good one. The principles of natural philosophy on which Calvin relies are dubious, and his support for (2) is based on antiquated physics. Also, I am not suggesting that Calvin first came to know (4) by way of (1)–(3).

of logic be so taken. Where we arrive at some proposition p from source A, p may be confirmed by being drawn from some other source B. The same holds for the relationship between theological truths arrived at through reason, which correspond to the biblical portrayal of God.

Secondly, though perhaps more controversially, suppose one began with the concept of God the creator provided in Scripture. That is, suppose one began with the biblical view of God as an almighty, eternal spirit, perfect in goodness and knowledge, and creator and sustainer of all things. Given this biblical concept of God, one could move on to consider the extent to which the *existence* of this being is a cogent conclusion from various *a posteriori* and *a priori* starting points of argumentation. In other words, one could begin natural theology with a clear concept of God derived from Scripture and seek from there to prove on rational grounds that such a being exists, rather than let the concept of God emerge as a consequence of the reasoning of the theistic proofs. This is one way in which the Christian construction of theistic arguments might presuppose the biblical view of God, while at the same time taking seriously the logical work of constructing cogent arguments for the existence of such a being. Nor does this proposal undermine the natural character of natural theology. In any argument for the existence of S, the evidential connection between the premises and conclusion is conceptually sensitive to what S is supposed to be. This logical relation is not undermined by the contingent fact that one actually begins with a description of God taken from Scripture.

Conclusions

In the present chapter I have attempted to clarify the notion of a dogmatic model of natural theology β, that is, natural reasoning about the existence and nature of God carried out by the Christian within the context of dogmatic theology. This naturally raises the issue of natural theology's dependence on scriptural revelation. I have argued that there is a way of thinking about the dependence of natural theology β on Scripture that is logically consistent with the former remaining a presentation and development of a natural knowledge of God. Nothing here implies that unregenerate people have no natural propositional knowledge of God. Indeed, the conclusion here is logically consistent with unregenerate people having *some* natural propositional knowledge of God by way of inference. We must distinguish between the acquisition of propositional natural knowledge of God and a systematic account of such knowledge in the form of a closely allied set of claims that form a *doctrine* of God. As the Reformed theologians examined in this chapter see matters, the attempt to work out a system of natural knowledge of God is hampered by both the epistemic effects of sin and the doctrinal implications of the separation of natural and revealed theology. Their protest is fundamentally not against natural theology β. It is a call for natural reason to come into a positive dialogue with the totality of God's revelation of Himself, in nature and in Scripture.

While not denying the potentially useful contributions of non-Christian thinkers at this juncture, the Christian stands in the best position to provide a rational reconstruction of the knowledge of God available from the created order.

PART IV
The Logic of Natural Theology

This page has been left blank intentionally

Chapter 9
The Logic of Theistic Arguments

There remains a significant Reformed objection to natural theology β that we have yet to consider. This objection targets the *logic* of theistic arguments. Roughly stated, the objection contends that theistic arguments are logically inadequate or deficient. They fail to prove, demonstrate, or provide sufficient rational support for the existence of God and claims about the nature of God. This has been the most prominent kind of objection to natural theology β in the western philosophical tradition since the eighteenth century. It has also been a frequent and widespread objection to natural theology β among Reformed critics of natural theology since the latter half of the nineteenth century. The objection is a significant one. Each of the models of natural theology β discussed in earlier chapters presupposes that theistic arguments can be epistemically efficacious, but the epistemic efficacy of theistic arguments is essentially tied to their success as pieces of logical argumentation. Bad arguments cannot confer positive epistemic status on beliefs. So if it can be shown that theistic arguments are logically defective, we would have a successful project objection to natural theology β. This would undermine the dogmatic model of natural theology β discussed in the previous chapter, as well as the other models discussed earlier in the book.

Reformed criticisms of the logic of theistic arguments often take the form of specific criticisms of the structure or content of individual theistic arguments. For example, since the first quarter of the twentieth century Reformed theologians have been particularly fond of drawing attention to alleged logical defects of certain forms of cosmological and design arguments.[1] It is possible, of course, to criticize individual theistic arguments, or even particular kinds of theistic arguments, without maintaining that no theistic argument is cogent. This would seem to be an important self-criticism of the project of natural theology β in its search for the best formulations of theistic arguments. Reformed critics of natural theology β, though, have often taken a stronger stance. They have claimed that *all*

---

[1]   For example, several Reformed authors criticize a version of the cosmological argument that depends on the premise that 'all things have a cause for their existence' or 'nothing exists without a cause for its existence.' They contend that if the cosmological argument is sound, then God Himself (who is supposed to be uncaused) must have a cause for His existence. See Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (1966; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1985), p. 44; G.H. Kersten, *Reformed Dogmatics: A Systematic Treatment of Reformed Doctrine* (2 vols, 1980; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1981), vol. 1, p. 38; Greg Bahnsen, *Van Til's Thought Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1998), pp. 617–18.

theistic arguments lack cogency, not simply because each argument suffers from some logical defect or another but rather because there is some particular logical defect shared by all theistic arguments. In the remaining chapters of the book I will examine some of these alleged general defects in the logic of theistic arguments.

The present chapter examines the fairly common allegation among Reformed critics of natural theology that theistic arguments do not constitute *logical demonstrations* or *proofs* of the existence and nature of God. I will argue that, as it stands, such a claim provides at best a very limited sort of criticism of natural theology β, something that even seems to be recognized by many of the proponents of this objection. If the failure of theistic arguments as logical demonstrations constitutes a project objection to natural theology β, some auxiliary assumptions must be introduced. I will show that these assumptions are philosophically implausible, and so it is difficult to sustain a project objection to natural theology β on these grounds.

The Failure of Theistic Arguments as Logical Demonstrations

Reformed Theologians on the Logical Deficiency of Theistic Arguments

In *On the Whole Doctrine of Final Causes* (1836)[2] William Josiah Irons provided one of the earliest and most detailed Reformed critiques of the logic of theistic arguments. Irons takes particular aim at Clarke's *a priori* cosmological argument and Paley's *a posteriori* design argument. Irons contends that neither argument, indeed no other sort of theistic argument that relies exclusively on natural reasoning, can "prove, with certainty, any single theological truth; even the unity or personality of God, or the reasonableness of worship."[3] Irons provides a detailed account of the criteria that an argument must satisfy to yield certainty regarding God's existence and nature.[4] The argument must be deductively valid so that we admit nothing in the conclusion that was not at least implicit in the premises. The premises must be self-evident, evident to the senses, or otherwise compelling to any fair-minded inquirer, for instance by being proved in some irrefutable manner. Irons argues that neither *a priori* nor *a posteriori* theistic arguments satisfy these criteria.

A similar assessment of theistic arguments is found in prominent nineteenth- and twentieth-century representatives of the Reformed tradition.

---

2   William Irons, *On the Whole Doctrine of Final Causes: A Dissertation in Three Parts, with an Introductory Chapter on the Character of Modern Deism* (London: J., G., & F. Rivington, St. Paul's Church-Yard and Waterloo-Place, 1836). William Irons (1812–1883) received his BA and Doctor of Divinity from Queen's College, Oxford and was a minister in the Church of England.

3   Ibid., p. 34.

4   Ibid., pp. 43–4, 111–14.

In his *Christian Dogmatics* (1874), Johannes Van Oosterzee denied that there is any proof of God's existence that renders God's existence absolutely certain.

> The existence of God *cannot* even be proved in such a way that henceforth all doubt remains absolutely impossible. … A proposition is proved so soon as it is incontestably apparent that it follows as an absolutely necessary consequence from another indisputable proposition. … A scientifically stringent demonstration such as is possible in a lower domain, and the kind of certainty which arises therefrom, is *here*, from the nature of the case impossible.[5]

Herman Bavinck objected to the idea that "the truths of 'natural religion' [are] demonstrable in the same way as those of mathematics or logic."[6] Bavinck takes this position in part because theistic arguments rest on "certain assumptions that are not self-evident and certain to everyone,"[7] and the arguments are also subject to various kinds of objections.[8] The term 'proof' is therefore inappropriate for such arguments.

> It is regrettable that in theology these arguments for the existence of God are called 'proofs.' … the term 'proofs' for these arguments is infelicitous. The reason is that the term transfers the arguments to a category in which they do not belong, the category, that is, of logical, mathematical, exact, compelling arguments.[9]

Auguste Lecerf:

> Experience proves that philosophers have not even been able to agree as to the value of the classical 'proofs' of the existence of God. … They are, or are not, conclusive according to the philosophical premises that one adopts. They cannot serve as solid foundations for the certainty of divine faith or positive religion.[10]

---

[5]   J.J. Van Oosterzee, *Christian Dogmatics*, 2nd edition, trans. John Watson Watson and Maurice J. Evans, and ed. Henry B. Smith and Philip Schaff (2 vols, New York: Scribner, Armstrong, & Co., 1874), vol. 1, pp. 239, 241.

[6]   Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt and trans. John Vriend (2 vols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003–2004), vol. 2, p. 77.

[7]   Ibid., p. 81.

[8]   Ibid., pp. 79, 86–7.

[9]   Ibid., pp. 89–90.

[10]   Auguste Lecerf, *Introduction to Reformed Dogmatics* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1949), pp. 28–9; see also pp. 111, 207, 237, 244–5.

Louis Berkhof:

> While Reformed theology regards the existence of God as an entirely reasonable assumption, it does not claim the ability to demonstrate this by rational argumentation … they [theistic arguments] do not prove the existence of God beyond the possibility of doubt, so as to compel assent.[11]

Herman Hoeksema:

> From all that has been said on the knowability and incomprehensibility of God, it must have become quite evident that it is absurd to speak of proofs for the existence of God, and that there is no need of them. No one is able to demonstrate with mathematical certainty that God exists, nor can reason reach out for Him by means of a syllogism.[12]

Gordon Clark:

> It is not possible to begin with sensory experience and proceed by the formal laws of logic to God's existence as a conclusion. The terms fallacy, formal laws of logic, invalidity, demonstration, and so on refer to those rules of thought which admit of no exception. They refer to necessary inference … . Now Thomas Aquinas intended, and natural theology demands, that the argument for God's existence should be a formally valid demonstration. The conclusion must follow necessarily from the premises. In this, I maintain, the argument fails.[13]

The "Demonstrative Argument Failure" Objection

According to the above Reformed authors, theistic arguments fail as logical demonstrations. As these authors see matters, a proposition that has been logically demonstrated has extremely high epistemic credentials: proven in an irrefutable manner (Irons), beyond all possible doubt (Berkhof), following necessarily from indisputable propositions (Van Oosterzee), possessing certainty analogous to mathematical proofs (Lecerf, Bavinck). One cannot help but notice the similarity between this criticism of natural theology and the well-known criticisms of natural theology articulated by philosophers David Hume (1711–1776) and Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), both of whom held that God's existence could not be established

---

[11]   Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th edition (1934; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1984), pp. 21, 29.

[12]   Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 43.

[13]   Gordon Clark, *Religion, Reason, and Revelation*, 2nd edition (Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation, 1986), pp. 35–6. See also Edward Carnell, *Introduction to Christian Apologetics*, 4th revised edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1952), pp. 126–34.

with demonstrative certainty.[14] Each of the above Reformed writers agrees with Hume and Kant that theistic arguments fail in this respect, and several of them appeal explicitly to Hume and Kant in this regard.[15]

Two factors determine the force of the conclusion of theistic arguments: the strength of the link between the premises and the conclusion of the argument, and the quality of the premises of the argument. A logically demonstrated proposition will be a valid deductive inference from premises that have strong epistemic credentials. An argument is valid just if it is impossible for its premises to all be true and its conclusion false. This must be qualified of course. A logical demonstration involves a valid and non-circular inference. Premises have strong epistemic credentials just if they are immune from doubt, error, or revision, or they are universally held by all rational cognizers who consider and understand the premises of the argument. I will refer to such premises as 'rationally compelling.'

So given that

> (1) A proposition p is logically demonstrated just if it is a valid, non-circular inference from true and rationally compelling premises,

and

> (2) No theistic argument can satisfy the conditions of demonstration stipulated in (1),

we can infer:

> (3) No theistic argument constitutes a logical demonstration of the existence of God.

I will refer to the argument expressed by (1), (2), and (3) as the DAF argument, DAF being short for 'demonstrative argument failure.' Does the DAF argument give us a good project objection to natural theology β?

---

[14]   Writing with reference to the design argument, Kant said, "we cannot approve of the claims which this argument advances to demonstrative certainty" (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. J.M.D Meiklejohn (1934, reprint; London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1986), p. 363). See also David Hume, "A Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh" in Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding…*, ed. Eric Steinberg (1977, reprint; Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), pp. 118–19.

[15]   Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 27–8; Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, p. 79; Gordon Clark, *Three Types of Religious Philosophy* (1973; reprint, Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation, 1989), p. 72.

Responding to the DAF Argument

In defense of natural theology β it might be tempting to try to rebut (2) by producing a theistic argument that satisfies the criteria of demonstration in (1), or to rebut (3) by otherwise demonstrating the existence of God. However, this is unnecessary. The DAF argument is not itself an objection to the *project* of natural theology β, unless we suppose that the project of natural theology β requires that its arguments be logical demonstrations. Quite a few philosophers and theologians have of course made such claims on behalf of theistic arguments, especially under the influence of modern foundationalism.[16] This includes theologians in the Reformed tradition (for example, Francis Turretin, John Howe, Stephen Charnock, Johann Stapfer, Daniel Wyttenbach, Salomon Van Til, and James Breckinridge). However, most contemporary advocates of natural theology in Anglo-American philosophy of religion deny that theistic arguments are logical demonstrations (in the sense specified above). There has been a growing tendency to regard theistic arguments as inductive arguments that confer some significant degree of probability on the proposition 'God exists.'[17] I will examine this view below. Moreover, it is worth noting that some Reformed theologians who present the DAF argument nonetheless believe that theistic arguments have some value. This is true of Bavinck and Berkhof, for example. So as it stands the DAF argument only targets a particular model of natural theology β. It is not a project objection to natural theology β.

We can of course turn the DAF argument into a project objection. Suppose we adopt the additional claim that:

> (4) If an argument, A, for some proposition p is not a logical demonstration of p, then A is an epistemically deficient basis for believing p.

Now there are two ways in which an argument could be an epistemically deficient basis for believing p. It might be deficient in the sense that it fails to confer warrant or justification on the belief that p. Alternatively, although an argument might confer warrant on belief in its conclusion, it might not confer enough warrant for knowledge.

Logical Demonstration and the Desideratum of Propositional Knowledge

Let us begin by relating demonstration to inferential knowledge:

> (5) No inferentially derived proposition p constitutes *knowledge* for some person S who believes p unless p is the conclusion of an argument that satisfies the conditions of demonstration stipulated in (1).

---

[16]   Rene Descartes, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, and Samuel Clarke, to name just three.

[17]   Richard Swinburne, *Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979).

(5) has an initial attraction. It bypasses the Gettier problem[18] since someone who believes a proposition that has been logically demonstrated is maximally insulated from Gettier-type counter-examples to knowledge. Since it is stipulated that the premises in a demonstration must be true, there is no danger of there being an inference from a false but justified premise. Since a valid inference is truth preserving, it will not be a matter of luck that the person believes what is true on the basis of such an argument. Needless to say, there will also be no efficacious external-type defeaters, so the person's justification will be undefeated.

Despite this particular virtue, (5) is implausible.

First, (5) limits the scope of inferential knowledge in a way that cuts against many of our ordinary intuitions about the scope of everyday knowledge of the world, which in the case of inferential beliefs consists largely of beliefs that are not supported by rationally compelling premises, nor do they take the form of deductively valid inferences. Many of our everyday inferences are inductive or probabilistic in nature. Our evidence in these cases may be very strong, but not conclusive. Although the falsity of the conclusion is improbable given our evidence, it is nonetheless possible. I see a 'Beware of dog' sign on my neighbor's fence, I have heard the sound of barking coming from his backyard on several occasions, and I remember seeing my neighbor walk a dog. I infer from these facts that my neighbor owns a dog. If we suppose that I know the premises, see the connection between the premise and the conclusion, and the conclusion is true, it seems sensible to suppose that I *know* that my neighbor owns a dog. At least this will be the case as long as there is no defeating evidence.[19]

Secondly, it is worth noting that externalist and internalist theories of knowledge are each logically consistent with the denial of (5). Each can accommodate the intuition that the target belief above counts as a case of knowledge.[20] Externalist and internalist theories require that a person be in a strong position vis-à-vis the truth goal of believing. While this strong position is unpacked in different ways by externalists and internalists, in neither case does it require the satisfaction of the conditions of demonstration in (1) for a belief to count as an instance of

---

[18]   See Chapter 7.
[19]   Altering the example in crucial ways will change this of course. Suppose I see my neighbor Jack walking a dog, but it is really his cousin Eddie's dog, though I do not know this. The barking sound I recall hearing was electronically produced, a clever trick—along with the 'Beware of dog' sign—to detract burglars. But now suppose that shortly before seeing my neighbor walking his cousin's dog, my neighbor's wife purchases a large dog for his birthday. Jack owns a dog at the time I believe he owns one. It looks like I am justified in believing Jack owns a dog but the justification is defective since it is a matter of epistemic serendipity that I believe what is true given the evidence I have. See Chapter 7 for more on defeating evidence.
[20]   With the possible exception of some Cartesian-oriented versions of internalism that, due to affirming stringent criteria for knowledge in general, place very rigorous requirements on inferential knowledge in particular.

inferential knowledge. Externalist theories require actual truth-conducivity in the production of a belief, but inferences can be truth-conducive even if they are not truth guaranteeing.[21] Internalists require internally accessible truth-indicating evidence and the absence of certain defeating conditions. The evidences cited in the above case would count as the right sort of truth-indicating evidence. So as long as we further specify an absence of defeating conditions (for example, the barking coming from another backyard, the neighbor is walking his cousin's dog), the true belief will plausibly be viewed as a case of knowledge.

Thirdly—and this is a decisive criticism—as argued in Chapter 5 the project of natural theology β does not require that theistic arguments confer enough warrant for knowledge. While I have claimed that natural theology β is epistemically loaded, I have distinguished between natural theology β being weakly and strongly epistemically loaded.[22] If natural theology β is strongly epistemically loaded, then theistic arguments confer a very high degree of warrant on theistic beliefs, enough for knowledge. If natural theology β is only weakly epistemically loaded, then theistic arguments confer a small to modest degree of warrant on theistic beliefs. As I have argued, natural theology β need only be weakly epistemically loaded. One supporting consideration here concerns the relation of partial support. Like other kinds of beliefs, theistic beliefs may only be partly grounded in rational inferences. They may, for example, also be grounded in biblical revelation or religious experience. They may also simply confirm what is known through other sources. These possibilities were examined in Chapters 4 and 5. So the epistemic success of theistic arguments need not depend on such arguments being sufficient to produce knowledge of God.

Logical Demonstration and Warranted Inferential Belief

Clearly, then, if the DAF argument provides a project objection to natural theology β, we must adopt a more radical principle:

> (6) No inferentially derived proposition p has *warrant* for some person S who believes p unless p is the conclusion of an argument that satisfies the conditions of demonstration stipulated in (1).

There are two significant problems with (6) though.

First, (6) seems incompatible with paradigm cases of inferentially warranted beliefs. Suppose I believe with warrant that 'Jenny is a student in my Philosophy

---

[21]   Truth-conducivity is usually parsed in terms of *factual* probability. A belief that is held on truth-conducive grounds or produced by a truth-conducive process of belief formation produces a high proportion of true beliefs over false beliefs (or has this propensity). By contrast, what matters for internalists is *epistemic* probability, cognitively accessible relations of evidential support among believed propositions.

[22]   See Chapter 5.

502' course, and I also believe with warrant that '13 of the 15 students enrolled in Philosophy 502 are philosophy majors.' Intuitively, it would seem that my belief that 'Jenny is a philosophy major' is warranted. This belief has something going for it epistemically in a way that it would not if I held it on the basis of the warranted beliefs that 'Jenny is a student in the class' and 'only 3 of the 15 students enrolled are philosophy majors.' Or consider the evidences for Big Bang cosmology, for example, uniform background microwave radiation, Hubble expansion, conformity to Einstein's theory of general relativity, and the uniform abundance of hydrogen and helium in the cosmos. Or consider the guilty verdict reached by a jury after considering evidences presented by the prosecution in a criminal case, or simply humdrum everyday inferences like my neighbor owns a dog or my car needs a tune up. In these cases a belief is held on the basis of evidence, but the evidence is not itself rationally compelling nor does it deductively entail the target belief.

It may seem counter-intuitive to suppose that an invalid inference can transmit warrant, but it is crucial to keep in mind that 'invalidity' is a descriptive term that simply refers to the fact that a conclusion does not follow *by necessity* from its premises. A formally invalid argument is fallacious in this technical sense. But this *logical* description of an argument does not suffice to show that we could not be *warranted* to believe the conclusion on the basis of its premises. Inference is essentially an evidential relation between propositions, but this relation comes in degrees that can be rationally tracked. The fact that it would be logically consistent to affirm the premises and deny the conclusion of a logically invalid argument does not imply that affirming the premises and denying the conclusion is reasonable or warranted.

But there is a more serious problem with (6). It looks like (6) precludes our believing (6) with warrant. Consider. If we are warranted in believing (6), then our belief that (6) must be either immediately or inferentially warranted. It is implausible to suppose that one could be immediately warranted in believing (6). Even if some epistemic principles are known intuitively, a principle that links a certain kind of argument-type to warrant seems to be the sort of proposition that is inferred from something more fundamental. So it follows that if our belief that (6) is warranted, it is inferentially warranted. However, if (6) is true and our belief that (6) is inferentially warranted, then (6) would have to be the conclusion of a logical demonstration. But this seems highly dubious. Epistemological claims resist compelling proof in much the same way that other philosophical claims do. But then it follows that either (6) is not true or we cannot be warranted in supposing that (6) is true. Either way, an objection to natural theology β based on (6) is going to be unsuccessful.

The Value of Non-Demonstrative Theistic Arguments

Reformed Concession to the Weaker Value of Theistic Arguments

We must conclude that the DAF argument does not provide a good basis for any project objection to natural theology β, but it appears that some of the above Reformed thinkers would agree with this. Some Reformed advocates of the DAF argument have conceded that theistic arguments are nonetheless *useful* even if they do not constitute logical demonstrations.

Van Oosterzee, for example, says:

> the proofs we speak of—properly conducted and suitably combined—are powerful enough to offer a scientific defense for faith in God, to overcome honest doubts, and to brand as inexcusable sin, as well as deplorable folly, the obdurate unbelief which—in the presence of so much light—retains its own darkness.[23]

Similarly, Berkhof noted, "While they [theistic arguments] do not prove the existence of God beyond the possibility of doubt, so as to compel assent, they can be so construed as to establish a strong probability and thereby silence many unbelievers."[24] Like Oosterzee and Berkhof, Lecerf and Kersten both agree that theistic arguments can refute atheism and remove objections to belief in God.[25] Bavinck, Hoeksema, Masselink, and Lecerf each affirm the value of theistic arguments as 'testimonies' to divine revelation, primarily for the believer and as interpreted under the guidance of Scripture.[26] In this context, theistic arguments are confirmatory and operate with other grounds for theistic belief. These Reformed thinkers clearly took the DAF argument to be a qualified criticism of natural theology β.[27] Their so-called 'Reformed objection' to natural theology is an objection to a particular model of natural theology β which takes theistic arguments to be logical demonstrations.

The same may be said with respect to one of the criticisms of natural theology provided by leading contemporary Reformed philosopher of religion Alvin Plantinga. Plantinga is well known for providing a rigorous critique of traditional

---

[23]   Van Oosterzee, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 1, p. 241.

[24]   Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 28.

[25]   Kersten, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, pp. 41–2. Lecerf, *Introduction to Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 237. See also William Masselink, *General Revelation and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1953), pp. 119–20.

[26]   See Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics,* vol. 1, pp. 90–91; Lecerf, *Introduction to Reformed Dogmatics*, pp. 108–10, 237; Masselink, *General Revelation and Common Grace*, pp. 117–18.

[27]   Some Calvinist supporters of the DAF argument (for example, Gordon Clark, Robert Reymond, Greg Bahnsen) do *not* retain any positive function for theistic arguments.

theistic arguments in his *God and Other Minds* (1967). He concludes that "natural theology does not provide a satisfactory answer to the question … Is it rational to believe in God?"[28] However, despite Plantinga's objections to the logic of the traditional forms of the ontological, cosmological, and design arguments, Plantinga subsequently clarified that his critique assumed a fairly narrow conception of the logic of theistic arguments.

> I employed a traditional but improperly stringent standard; there maybe plenty of good arguments for theism even if there aren't any that start from propositions that compel assent from every honest and intelligent person and proceed majestically to their conclusion by way of forms of argument that can be rejected only on pain of irrationality. After all, no philosophical arguments of any consequence meet *that* standard, and the fact that theistic arguments do not is not as significant as I thought.[29]

Plantinga is the latest in a long line of Reformed thinkers who are doubtful about the logic of theistic arguments as purported demonstrations, but as Plantinga himself notes, such a position is compatible with believing that there are *good* theistic arguments. Plantinga has developed some of these arguments himself.[30]

Lastly, the DAF objection coincides with another objection to natural theology shared by most of the above thinkers. We saw in Chapter 8 that objections to natural theology β found in Kupyer, Bavinck, and Berkhof were specifically objections to the pre-dogmatic model of natural theology β. That model, which came into prominence during the heyday of modern classical foundationalism, typically construed theistic arguments as demonstrative arguments,[31] especially where dogmatics came under the influence of Cartesian and Wolffian rationalism. The contention that theistic arguments do not constitute logical demonstrations should be viewed as part of a package critique of the pre-dogmatic model of natural theology.

The Reformed Tradition and the Inductive Approach

Reformed theologians have often recognized that theistic arguments do not all carry the same force. This is suggested by the early distinction between demonstrative and rhetorical theistic arguments, but it is more overtly present from the middle

---

[28]   Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds* (1967; reprint, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 111.

[29]   Ibid., pp. ix–x.

[30]   Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), pp. 196–221; "Belief in God" in *Introduction to Philosophy*, ed. R. Boylan (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Jovanovich, 1992), pp. 390–96.

[31]   At least this was the case for the metaphysical type arguments, for example, cosmological and ontological arguments.

of the nineteenth century onward. Nineteenth-century Reformed theologians often distinguished between the probabilistic force of *a posteriori* theistic arguments and the demonstrative force of *a priori* arguments (for example, Chalmers, Dabney, Boyce).[32] Of course, some of these thinkers regard the complete theistic proof as cumulative, resting on both *a priori* and *a posteriori* elements. In that case, while such thinkers may admit a demonstrative proof of a First Cause, the proof that *God* exists is probable (for example, Chalmers). *Theism* is morally certain given the evidence, but it is not mathematically or demonstratively certain. Reflecting the trend exhibited in general philosophy of religion twentieth-century Reformed thinkers sympathetic to natural theology expanded the scope of probabilistic theistic arguments. We have already seen Berkhof's testimony at this juncture. Augustus Strong claimed, "These arguments are probable, not demonstrative."[33] James Oliver Buswell stated, "The theistic arguments are no exception to the rule that *all* inductive arguments about what exists are probability arguments."[34] Floyd Hamilton regarded the case for theism as the culmination of different lines of inferential evidence, though it falls short of a mathematical proof.

> When we say that we are attempting to *prove* the existence of God, we do not mean mathematical proof, such as the proof of a geometrical theorem. … The kind of proof we are discussing is *inferential proof*, the culmination of innumerable lines of evidence all pointing to what seems an *inescapable conclusion*.[35]

Warrant and Weak and Strong Inductive Support

Although recognizing the legitimacy of the inductive approach, Reformed theologians have not been adequately clear about the epistemic value of probabilistic theistic arguments, though their accounts at least suggest that these arguments have such a value. In providing evidential support for theism, probabilistic theistic arguments confer warrant on theistic belief. They are therefore relevant to the acquisition of knowledge of God. Of course Reformed theologians have

---

[32]   Thomas Chalmers, *On Natural Theology* in *The Works of Thomas Chalmers* (2 vols, New York: Thomas Carter, 1844), vol. 1, pp. 258–79, 284–93, and *On the Power Wisdom and Goodness of God…*(London: Henry G. Bohn, 1853), pp. 418–23; James P. Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology* (1887; reprint, Escondito, CA: den Dulk Christian Foundation, n.d.), pp. 24–5, 46. Dabney regards the argument from universal consent as "strong probable evidence." See Robert Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (1878; reprint; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), p. 17.

[33]   Augustus Strong, *Systematic Theology* (1907; reprint, Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1979), p, 71.

[34]   James Oliver Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion* (n.d.; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1963), vol. 1, chapter 2.

[35]   Floyd E. Hamilton, *The Basis of Christian Faith: a Modern Defense of the Christian Religion*, revised edition (1927; reprint, New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1964), p. 48.

also not been adequately clear about how inductive theistic arguments may offer different degrees of evidential support for their conclusions. We should distinguish between cases where premises merely add to the probability of the conclusion (weak inductive support) and cases where premises render the conclusion at least more likely than not (strong inductive support). Accordingly, we can distinguish between different degrees of warrant conferred by inductive arguments. The degree of warrant for a belief held on the basis of inductive reasoning is a function of the degree of warrant of our belief in the premises and the strength of the inferential link between the premises and the conclusion.

The best inductive arguments will be those whose premises we are strongly warranted in believing and whose premises offer strong inductive support for their conclusion, ideally that render the conclusion very probable. But the significance of weak inductive support should not be overlooked. First, a collection of individual arguments may only provide weak inductive support for each of their conclusions, but when combined the arguments may offer strong inductive support for a single conclusion. Secondly, a belief's degree of warrant may be increased by weak inductive support, a point that is particularly important when considering that knowledge requires a very high degree of warrant.[36] Weak inductive support for beliefs that are already warranted to some significant degree on other grounds may play an important role in transforming warranted true belief into knowledge.

The Reformed Case against Inductive Theistic Arguments

Despite the endorsement of probabilistic theistic arguments among many Reformed thinkers, in the twentieth century there has been substantial criticism of this approach to theistic arguments among some Reformed thinkers. So what precisely is wrong with the inductive approach to natural theology? The two most prominent criticisms concern the alleged inconsistency between such arguments and the certainty of Christian faith on the one hand and the clarity of general revelation on the other. One initial advantage of this approach is that it permits a project objection to natural theology β from the DAF objection without having to adopt either (5) or (6). Reformed thinkers critical of inductively formulated theistic arguments do not typically deny that probabilistic arguments can confer warrant on beliefs generally. Indeed, they need not even deny that such arguments can confer warrant on theistic belief. Their contention must be that the considerations noted above outweigh whatever epistemic value such arguments have.

---

[36] See Chapter 4.

The Certainty of Faith

Recall that Bavinck objected to the idea that belief in God is based entirely on arguments. Since the arguments cannot produce certainty, "they are by no means the final grounds on which our certainty regarding God's existence is ultimately based. This certainty is solely determined by faith."[37] Implicit here is a tension between the character of faith and the character of belief based entirely on the arguments of natural theology. J.I. Packer brings this tension into sharp focus: "The nature of faith is to be certain. Any measure of doubt or uncertainty is not a degree of faith, but an assault upon it. Faith, therefore, must rest on something more sure than an inference of probability."[38] In connection with Christian belief, Greg Bahnsen wrote:

> Basing our thinking on the apostolic word, we can "know assuredly (without doubt)" that God has made Jesus both Lord and Christ; we know this certainly, not just probably. … Our conviction does not rest on flesh and blood, but on God; therefore, we can have *full assurance* of the truth. The gospel comes not 'in word only, *but also* in power, and in the Holy Spirit, and *full assurance*'; this is not mere probability which must entertain some degree of doubt, but is "plarophoria" (Greek for full conviction, assurance, certainty, perfect faith limited by no doubts). … The Bible speaks of our "full assurance of understanding" and "full assurance of hope." With respect to faith Abraham is the father of us all, and he was not weak in faith but had full certainty with respect to God's word.[39]

On the surface at least, the claims of Bavinck, Packer, and Bahnsen reflect a fairly prominent theme in Reformed theology that identifies faith as a form of knowledge that is distinct from mere opinion. The 'certainty' of faith seems essential to maintaining this distinction. Calvin, for instance, said that faith is a "firm and certain knowledge" (*Institutes*, 3.2.7), which is "not content with a doubtful and changeable opinion" (*Institutes*, 3.2.15). In this way, we might suppose that probabilistic natural theology is in conflict with a fairly basic principle of Reformed theology.

---

[37]   Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, p. 90.

[38]   J.I. Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1958), p. 11. Robert Reymond, who also opposes probabilistic theistic arguments, provides this quote in his *Justification of Knowledge* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1976), p. 62.

[39]   Greg Bahnsen, "A Critique of Evidentialist Apologetical Method of John Warwick Montgomery," (1974), Covenant Media Foundation (870), 775–1170, section 6.C.1.b.i.aa. Published at Covenant Media Foundation <http://www.cmfnow.com/articles/PA016.htm>.

A Response to the 'Christian Certainty Argument'

By way of response, the first thing that strikes one about the arguments of Bavinck, Packer, and Bahnsen is that in each case the objection is focused on the idea of *basing* Christian belief on probabilistic reasoning. But even if this objection is plausible, it is not a very good argument against the propriety and utility of probabilistic theistic arguments, for a person who endorses probabilistic theistic arguments is not necessarily committed to the claim that the Christian's belief in God is *based* on such arguments.

First, even if the Christian or anyone else for that matter has some natural knowledge of God, this knowledge may not itself be based on any conscious process of probabilistic reasoning, even if the knowledge is in some sense inferential. We must distinguish between the genesis of belief in God and the means whereby this belief can be justified by a conscious or explicit appeal to evidence. Such evidences may, of course, take the form of probabilistic arguments when they are formally articulated, but it wouldn't follow that this is involved in the psychological origin or sustenance of theistic belief. The project of natural theology β involves codifying and systematizing more spontaneous modes of theistic belief formation.

Secondly, some Reformed theologians have held that theistic arguments, while not the source of a Christian's belief in God, do constitute a mode of reflective or scientific inquiry into the natural grounds of belief in God. Taken as modes of rational reflection on the grounds of theistic belief, such arguments can be taken to provide support for distinctly higher-level claims about belief in God, for example, that such beliefs are grounded in a particular way and that they are rational or warranted when grounded in this way. So even if probabilistic theistic arguments are not a source for the Christian's belief in *God*, they could nonetheless be a source for the Christian's beliefs about the *epistemic status* of natural belief in God.

Thirdly, Christian belief in God is actually not an exclusively *natural* knowledge of God. The Christian's knowledge of God is primarily based on Scripture, and in the Reformed tradition the Holy Spirit inwardly testifies to the veracity of Scripture. So probabilistic arguments, even if implicated in the genesis or sustenance of our natural knowledge of God, would not be the sole ground of the Christian's knowledge of God, which is largely a revealed knowledge of God grounded in Scripture. The only sensible objection here would be that the Christian shouldn't base his belief in God *solely* on probabilistic arguments. But this is an objection to the propriety of probabilistic arguments functioning in a particular way, not an objection to probabilistic arguments *per se*.

Finally, consider the apologetic use of theistic arguments. Evidence to which the Christian appeals in an apologetic context need not be the Christian's (partial much less complete) actual ground of belief in God, nor is this dialectically entailed by the fact that such evidences have been offered in support of theistic belief. Reasons *for* believing a proposition are not necessarily reasons *why* one believes. Hence, the Christian's use of probabilistic reasoning does not place the Christian

in the position of undermining his own faith by carrying an implicit concession that '*I* (or even *you*) can only have probability with respect to Christian belief.' Put otherwise, apologetics involves showing certain propositions to be true, but the conditions implicated in *showing* a proposition to be true are not necessarily the same conditions implicated in a person's *knowing* a proposition to be true. For instance, there is evidence that my wife exists (for example, birth record, marriage certificate, quit claim deed, Yale university I.D. card, her office at work, business card). There is also evidence that I went camping in California in the summer of 1990 (for example, photos, video footage, RV rental receipt, testimony of others who went with me). Now it is sensible to suppose that I can know the propositions in question even if my belief in the target propositions is not based on the cited evidence. If either of these beliefs were challenged, though, the cited evidence would be appropriate to offer as support of my beliefs. Since the conditions implicated in showing and knowing are not necessarily the same, if showing does no more than make a belief probable, it would not follow that the belief can *be* no more than probable. In that case, the Christian can admit that it is not possible to show that God's existence is anything more than probable on the relevant range of evidence without thereby committing himself to the stronger statement that this belief, all things considered, can be no more than probable.

The Clarity of General Revelation

Probabilistic reasoning has been viewed as in conflict not only with the certainty of faith but also with the clarity of general revelation. Cornelius Van Til maintained that if theistic argumentation were restricted to probabilistic reasoning, then this would entail some lack of clarity in general revelation. Since it is a Reformed commonplace to regard general revelation as the basis of human responsibility, the concern here is a sensible one.

As Van Til put it:

> It is an insult to the living God to say that his revelation of himself so lacks in clarity that man, himself through and through revelation of God, does justice by it when he says that God *probably* exists. … The traditional method [of apologetics] therefore compromises the clarity of God's revelation to man. … All the facts of nature and of man are said to indicate no more than that a god exists.[40]

Let us suppose, in the first place, that belief in God based solely on probabilistic reasoning would indicate a lack of clarity in general revelation. Why suppose that probabilistic reasoning is implicated in man's belief in God in this particular way? In Chapters 3 and 4, I argued that theistic belief can plausibly be the product of

---

[40] Cornelius Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 2nd edition, revised and abridged (Phillipsberg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1963), pp. 197, 258.

multiple sources of belief, inference (probabilistic and otherwise) being only one source. There is no need to suppose that probabilistic reasoning about God assumes no pre-existing natural knowledge of God. Moreover, if theistic belief is produced by a spontaneous process of inference from features of the created world, then probabilistic *arguments* are not the source of belief in God, but they are ways of codifying or formally articulating the natural grounds of theistic belief. The fact that our explicitly articulated inferential knowledge of God does no better than yield a probable conclusion does not entail that our knowledge of God, even our natural knowledge of God, is on the same level.

Moreover, suppose that human belief in God did arise by way of or depend on probabilistic inferences. Surely this is no basis on which to conclude that human beings are not accountable before God. It is a mistake to connect, as Van Til does, probabilistic reasoning with a lack of clarity in general revelation and a consequent lack of human accountability. For one, we are accountable or morally responsible, though not exclusively so, on the basis of what we know. Such is the testimony of Romans chapters 1–2. Only by assuming that probabilistic reasoning is incompatible with knowledge do we get a case against probabilistic reasoning in connection with human accountability. But this assumption is mistaken for reasons noted earlier. Similarly, why should a *clear* revelation from God be conflated with *certainty*? The content of the first five pages of Richard Schickel's 1996 biography of Clint Eastwood is very clear, but no one would be so bold as to suggest that we can have epistemic certainty of the claims found therein. Moreover, many things are clear and clear enough for moral responsibility, even if they are not maximally clear. In a criminal case, while one must prove the guilt of the accused beyond all reasonable doubt, one's case need not be so clear and convincing as to withstand the skeptical arguments found in book one of Descartes's *Meditations*. Moral certainty may be necessary, but moral certainty is sufficiently based on what is probable.

John Frame has drawn attention to the deficiencies in Van Til's position at this juncture.[41] Frame, however, proposes to resolve some of the deficiencies in Van Til's position here by suggesting that we distinguish between *evidence* that is certain and *arguments* that are certain. According to Frame, Van Til was correct that the evidence for God's existence is certain, but the human formulation, organization, and presentation of such evidence in explicit arguments is not certain. Now while it is plausible to distinguish between evidence and argument, it is not entirely clear what it means to ascribe certainty to the evidence for God's existence while denying this of arguments that present the evidence. Frame suggests that the latter will always lack completion. Indeed, this is true for any finite cognizer. In that case, it sounds like Frame, and Van Til suitably modified, are committed only to the idea that the existence of God would be epistemically certain to a person who knew all the facts,

---

41   See John Frame, *Apologetics and the Glory of God: an Introduction* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1994), pp. 77–82, 85–8, and *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1995), pp. 275–9.

all their deductive implications, and used all and only correct standards of inductive and deductive reasoning—in short a logically omniscient being sufficiently apprised of all the relevant contingent facts. We may concede this. But this seems little more than an assertion that God's revelation possesses an objective clarity that renders His existence epistemically certain to Himself. Alternatively, we might suppose that God's revelation in the created order is such that fully rational human beings would be warranted to believe firmly in his existence on the basis of this evidence. As we have seen in relation to Plantinga, this is a plausible view, except that many people are not *fully* rational with respect to theistic belief. What both scenarios show is that God's revelation of Himself is at least objectively maximally clear, but its subjective appropriation in the human epistemic situation is not. But as I have argued, it is a mistake to suppose that it need be.

Conclusions

In this chapter I have examined the prospects for a project objection to natural theology β based on the claim that theistic arguments fail as logical demonstrations. This claim however, even if true, does not in itself amount to a project objection to natural theology β unless additional assumptions are introduced. I have considered two sets of such assumptions. The first I argued involves very implausible general epistemological claims that link the epistemic efficacy of inferences to stringent criteria of logical demonstration. The second I argued involves equally implausible claims about how probabilistic theistic arguments relate to the certainty of Christian faith and the clarity of general revelation. There is no good objection to the use of inductive theistic arguments from such considerations, and these considerations certainly do not outweigh the value of inductive theistic arguments as sources of warrant for theistic belief. Indeed, given that theistic arguments fail as logical demonstrations, in the absence of inductively formulated theistic arguments there would be no way to provide a reflective account of the natural knowledge of God at all. We could *affirm* the existence of such knowledge, but we could not rationally explicate it and thereby unpack the contents of general revelation. We could affirm it as a matter of faith, but the inability of reason to give an account of it would give the lie to our confession of a truly *general* revelation accessible to reason.

Chapter 10
God of the Philosophers

The seventeenth-century philosopher Blaise Pascal is well known for contrasting the God of the philosophers and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the God of biblical revelation. Pascal's contrast is frequently encountered in twentieth-century Reformed criticisms of the logic of natural theology β. Some Reformed critics of natural theology are willing to concede that at least some theistic arguments might constitute proofs, cogent arguments, or even logical demonstrations of the existence of some sort of deity or Supreme Being. Their objection to natural theology β is that none of its arguments can prove the existence of the *true* God or the God *of Scripture*. The 'God' of the philosophers, the God arrived at through reason, is not the same God as the God revealed in Scripture and worshipped by Christians. Even Reformed critics of natural theology β who think that theistic arguments suffer from a variety of other logical inadequacies regard this particular objection as the most decisive criticism of natural theology β. I will refer to this particular logical objection as the God-of-the-philosophers objection (henceforth, the GOP objection).

In his *Summa theologiae* Thomas Aquinas presented five arguments for the existence of God: from change, efficient causality, possibility and necessity, degrees of perfection in things, and the governance of the world. The general structure of each of the arguments is more or less the same. Each proof begins with an empirical observation that requires an explanation that ultimately requires the postulation of an extra-mundane reality, which Aquinas thinks is appropriately called *deus* (God). In three of the Five Ways, Aquinas arrives at this conclusion by denying that the series of postulated explanations can go on to infinity. There must be a termination of the chain of explanation in some first term Existent that Aquinas designates *deus*.

Reformed theologians often raise the GOP objection in connection with Aquinas's Five Ways. Is the *deus* of Aquinas's Five Ways the God of *Scripture*, the God in whom *Christians* believe? Some prominent twentieth-century Reformed theologians such as Karl Barth, G.C. Berkouwer, Cornelius Van Til, Gordon Clark, and Edward Carnell have responded with an emphatic "no" at this juncture.[1] The

---

[1]   Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, trans. T.H.L. Parker, W.B. Johnston, Harold Knight, and J.L.M Haire (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957), vol. II.1, pp. 79–84, 107; see also vol. I:1; G.C. Berkouwer, *General Revelation* (1955; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), pp. 66–74; Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1969), chapters 6 and 10; Gordon Clark, *Three Types of Religious*

specific complaint here varies. Some argue that while Aquinas succeeds in proving the existence of some sort of deity, it is in fact the god of Aristotelian philosophy, the description of which is incompatible with the God of Scripture. Call this the *incompatibilist* GOP objection. Others contend that Aquinas's Five Ways simply fail to prove the existence of a being the description of which adequately resembles the God of the Bible. Call this the *descriptive inadequacy* GOP objection.

Now arguably these Reformed critics of Aquinas unfairly isolate Aquinas's Five Ways from their larger theological context. First, Aquinas presupposes the Christian revelation (*ST*, 1a.1.1–10), and secondly, Aquinas provides a lengthy argument that God is a wholly simple being, one who lacks any sort of metaphysical composition (*ST*, Ia.3.1–8). He also provides arguments for the perfection of the first cause (*ST*, 1a.4.1–3).[2] When Aquinas adds, "And this everyone understands to be God," he is not drawing a *conclusion*, but rather providing an addendum to the proofs that will be clarified and ratified by his subsequent discussion in the *Summa*. The Reformed criticisms of Aquinas also fail to consider how Aquinas's arguments do not merely repeat Aristotle's arguments but chart new conceptual territory. For example, Aquinas reworks the concept of being as *esse* and consequently has a more radical understanding of the potency/act distinction.[3] Aquinas's principled deviations from Aristotle provide a rational basis for arguing to the existence of a being unlimited in power, knowledge, and goodness, and who is the creator and providential governor of the world.

However, the fate of natural theology β does not rest on the cogency of Aquinas's project of natural theology. But the GOP objections to Aquinas are nonetheless instructive, for these objections may be offered at a greater level of generality in the effort to question the efficacy of the project natural theology β, not simply Aquinas's version of that project. I will focus here specifically on the descriptive inadequacy objection. First, it strikes me as *prima facie* the more interesting and plausible sort of objection. Secondly, the incompatibilist objection loses its initial bite once we turn away from Aristotelian-based arguments and examine modern and contemporary theistic arguments, many of which have been developed under the influence of Christian theism. In granting veto power to Scripture, the dogmatic model of natural theology β (discussed in Chapter 8) is at least in principle insulated from the incompatibilist scenario. So I will be

---

Philosophy (1973, reprint; Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation, 1989), pp. 59–64; Edward Carnell, *An Introduction to Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1952), pp. 130–33; Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, revised edition (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1996), pp. 135–6.

2   See Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 26–7; Frederick Copleston, *Aquinas* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), p. 130.

3   See Joseph Owens, "Aristotle and Aquinas" in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, ed. Norman Kretzmann and Eleonore Stump (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 38–59.

interested in determining whether the descriptive inadequacy objection constitutes a project objection to natural theology β.

Reformed 'Descriptive Inadequacy' Objections

Bavinck expressed doubts about what theistic arguments can prove, as purely rational arguments, lacking illumination from Scripture, about the nature of the being affirmed in their conclusions. Speaking of the best form of the cosmological argument, Bavinck conceded: "the cosmological argument takes us to an important conclusion, namely, to a self-existent, hence infinite, eternal, and absolute Cause of the world. But whether this cause is transcendent or merely immanent, personal or impersonal, conscious or unconscious, has not in any way been settled by this argument."[4] He added: "the cosmological argument does not yield any information about the inner nature of such a first cause … and that we therefore cannot say anything specific about it."[5] Bavinck expressed a similar caution against the teleological argument which while cogently establishing cosmic intelligence leaves open "the possibility of the existence of many divine beings who jointly produced the world."[6]

A more radical criticism of the cosmological argument comes from Hoeksema:

> Suppose that the conclusion as to an ultimate Cause of the whole universe were correct, that Cause would certainly belong to the world of our experience, and could never be the absolute: for there is a relation of necessity between cause and effect. There is an infinite difference between Cause and Creator. For the latter's relation to the Universe is that of freedom and sovereignty, while that of a cause is one of necessity and dependency. A cause is never self-existent; but self-existence is one of the chief attributes of God, Who is GOD. A cause would not be cause without its effect; but God is God eternally, and remains God though all the world sink into nothingness. Even, then, if it could be granted that the above argumentation leads us to a final or ultimate cause, the conclusion that this final cause is God is quite arbitrary, and wholly unwarranted.[7]

The argument from design suffers a similar fate according to Hoeksema:

---

[4]   Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (2 vols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003–2004), vol. 2, p. 82.

[5]   Ibid.

[6]   Ibid., p. 84.

[7]   Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (1966; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1985), pp. 43–4.

As far as pure, or unbelieving, reason is concerned, let us note that also this so-called proof proves exactly nothing as to the existence of an intelligent Being outside of the world, Who is infinite in power and wisdom and the designer of all things. It may as well be employed by pantheistic evolutionism to demonstrate that "nature" itself is intelligent, and that God is the world, and the world is God, reaching His highest consciousness in man.[8]

Kersten provides a similar critique of natural theology:

The truth from which teleology proceeds is unable to deliver the proof of the existence of the one true God. Although men may agree on the purpose of the universe, yet many do not escape from Pantheism. The teleological argument is insufficient to prove the existence of that God, Who says in His Word: "Remember the former things of old: for I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me" (Isaiah 46:9).[9]

Lecerf wrote:

The cosmological proof from the contingency of the world suggests a cause adequate to the explanation of the existence of the world and of cosmic facts in general. Reason is incapable of demonstrating that this eternal and immutable cause is God in the sense of the first chapter of Genesis. … The teleological proof leaves undecided the question whether "the Great Architect" is transcendent to the world or whether He is merely the "life force" groping its way tentatively in order to produce more and more perfect forms … or "life" manifesting itself when and as it can, at random, under conditions which enable it to organize itself and the general similarity of which gives the impression of a single plan.[10]

In his well-known *General Revelation*, Berkouwer contended that the knowledge of God allegedly produced in natural theology at best procures knowledge of only one side of God, the formal aspect of his being. "By means of natural knowledge one knows only that part or 'aspect' of God which is mediated through creation and relates especially to his being."[11] So, for example, one does not naturally know that God is a Trinity or that Jesus Christ is the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity. For this reason, the natural knowledge of God is both partial and inadequate. Indeed, following Karl Barth and Friedrich Heiler, Berkouwer doubts that any such knowledge can properly be said to be knowledge *of God* at all. The

---

[8]   Ibid., p. 46.

[9]   G.H. Kersten, *Reformed Dogmatics: A Systematic Treatment of Reformed Doctrine* (2 vols, 1980; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1981), vol., 1, pp. 39–40.

[10]   Auguste Lecerf, *An Introduction to Reformed Dogmatics* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1949)*,* pp. 243–4.

[11]   Berkouwer, *General Revelation*, p. 69.

'formal' and 'empty' God-concept of natural theology has nothing to do with the God of Scripture and the knowledge associated with eternal life. While Berkouwer raises this criticism specifically in connection with his critique of the natural theology of Roman Catholicism, he draws attention to descriptive limitations that would seemingly be applicable to natural theology in general.

> It is almost inconceivable that the Roman Catholic Church has not been repeatedly shocked by this *empty*, *abstract*, and *formal* God-concept of her natural theology. What is the significance of this *true* knowledge of God who is here known as the Being "which exists in and of itself," as "the Prime Mover, first cause, necessary being, the uncaused being, the true and the good, the rational designer, who is his own goal." How is it possible that such considerations derived from the natural light of reason can be connected with the name, which God himself revealed to Moses when he said: 'I am that I am.'[12]

Drawing on insights from philosopher David Hume, Gordon Clark wrote:

> if it is valid to conclude the existence of a cause from observation of its effects, it is nevertheless a violation of reason to ascribe to that cause any properties beyond those necessary to account for the effect. For example, if we see the score and hear the music of Beethoven, and if all our knowledge of Beethoven depends on this observation, we may perhaps conclude that there existed a man with a great degree of musical ability; but it would be irrational to conclude that this musician was also the star quarter-back of Bonn University. Similarly, the cosmological argument, if otherwise sound, might give us a God sufficiently powerful to be the cause of what we have observed; but no more.[13]

Similarly, Edward Carnell contended:

> The Trinity is infinite; therefore it is eliminated as that Being which may be proved by empiricism. The reason for this is that the world is finite—so say our senses—and to account for a finite effect one need introduce but a cause equivalent to produce the known effect. … The conclusion of Hume is too evident to labor over. The Christian God is infinite; while all one needs to explain a finite universe is a finite god. Therefore one cannot *empirically* introduce the Christian God as that cause which demonstrably follows from an examination of a flow of sensory impressions.[14]

---

[12] Ibid., pp. 72–3. Berkouwer is here referring, by way of direct quotes, to the characterization of God in traditional natural theology, specifically as articulated by Catholic theologian Brocardus Meyer.

[13] Gordon Clark, *Religion, Reason, and Revelation* 2nd edition (Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation, 1986), pp. 39–40.

[14] Carnell, *Introduction to Christian Apologetics*, p. 130.

Formulation and Preliminary Analysis of the Objection

As a first approximation, the shared objection of the above thinkers may be summarized as follows:

> [DI] The arguments of natural theology β do not sanction descriptions of 'God' that adequately resemble God as described in the Bible.

The formulation provides the basic elements for a preliminary analysis of the broad DI-objection. Of course, we must also suppose that any proof of the existence of the true God must involve a proof of His existence under a description that corresponds to the description of God in the Bible. The DI-objection then yields the conclusion that the arguments of natural theology β do not prove the existence of the true God.

Descriptive Inadequacy and the Conditions of Proof

One crucial element in [DI] is the idea of descriptive inadequacy itself. A description of God may be inadequate from a variety of different vantage points. A particular description of God may be inadequate, for example, from the vantage point of developing a biblical or systematic theology, or of developing and articulating a distinctly Christian concept of God. Descriptions of God may also be inadequate from the vantage point of securing the knowledge of God necessary for salvation. Similarly, we might suppose that a description of God may be inadequate from the vantage point of providing a concept of God that is necessary for the proper worship of God.[15] So descriptive adequacy and inadequacy are context relative, and it is quite possible for a description of God to be adequate in one context but inadequate in another context.

In the case of the DI-objection against natural theology β, the relevant context concerns the descriptive constraints on proving the existence of the Being who is revealed as God in Scripture. If nothing can be proved to exist except under some description, the crucial question becomes what descriptive conditions are necessary and jointly sufficient for proving the existence of the God of Scripture. Thus, the criteria of descriptive adequacy must be formulated with reference to the descriptive constraints on proof. Since this goal is conceptually distinct from the other desiderata mentioned above, it is reasonable to suppose that the arguments

---

[15]   Calvin, for instance, affirms the "practical" inadequacy of the knowledge of God as Creator for salvation and proper worship. These desiderata require that God be known under the description of Redeemer, a knowledge that cannot be derived from either the *sensus divinitatis* or general revelation. See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, in *The Library of Christian Classics*, vols XX–XXI (2 vols, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1.6.1, 1.11.1–16, 1.12.1, 2.2.1–2, 2.2.6–7, 2.2.12, 2.6.1, 3.2.6.

of natural theology β could succeed in satisfying descriptive criteria essential for proving the existence of the God of the Bible, even if the descriptions involved in such proofs fail to be adequate for other purposes such as worshipping God, constructing a biblical or systematic theology, or securing the kind of knowledge of God necessary for salvation.

The conclusion of theistic arguments is usually 'God exists.' Descriptive constraints can enter into the picture here in at least two ways depending on how the term 'God' functions in this context. The term 'God' may be shorthand for some title or, more technically, *definite description*. Definite descriptions represent one way in which individuals are picked out, specifically by means of descriptions that are uniquely true of the individual in question. 'The President of the United States' is a definite description that picks out the individual Barack Obama, at least as long as Obama has the property indicated in the description. If, in the context of theistic arguments, 'God' is shorthand for some definite description or cluster of descriptions, then the DI-objection amounts to the claim that *natural theology does not sanction any definite descriptions that pick out the same divine being picked out by the descriptions of God supplied in Scripture*. Of course, individuals are also picked out by proper names, and the word 'God' often functions as a proper name. If the term 'God' is being used as a proper name, the DI-objection pretty clearly presupposes a descriptivist theory of proper names according to which the referent or meaning of a proper name is fixed by one or more definite descriptions.[16] In this case, the DI-objection amounts to the claim that *natural theology does not sanction any definite descriptions that fix reference to the same being named 'God' in Scripture*.[17]

---

[16]   There is a difference between descriptivist theories in which definite descriptions *fix the reference* of proper names and those in which definite descriptions give the *meaning* of proper names. See S. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 31–4, 53–70. In what follows the descriptivist theory of proper names will be about fixing the reference of proper names, not giving their meaning. I will assume that reference may be fixed either by a single definite description or a cluster of such descriptions. In the latter case, the referent of a name is fixed just if *most* of the descriptions are uniquely true of the bearer of the name. See John Searle, "Proper Names," *Mind* 67 (1958): 166–73.

[17]   Reformed thinkers have typically taken 'Yahweh' not 'God' as the proper name of the true God (Exodus 6:4, Isaiah 42:8, Amos 5:8, 9:6). See Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th edition (1939; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), p. 48. For a detailed historical account, see Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: the Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 2nd edition (4 vols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), vol. 3, pp. 246–73. The reader may substitute 'Yahweh' for 'God' where 'God' is taken as a proper name. The relevant point is that the true God is *named* in Scripture, and the DI-objection can be taken as the claim that no theistic description in natural theology suffices to fix reference to the same being so named in Scripture, whether this name be *Elohim*, *Theos*, *Kurios*, or *Yahweh*.

So parsing the relevant sort of descriptive inadequacy at issue, we can restate [DI] more precisely as:

> [DI*] The arguments of natural theology β do not sanction any definite descriptions that *either* (i) pick out the same divine being picked out by descriptions of God in Scripture *or* (ii) fix reference to the same being named 'God' in Scripture.

Sanction Principles

[DI*] also contains an implicit reference to a sanction principle, roughly, a principle that states the conditions under which an inference is warranted. Different versions of [DI*] emerge here depending on the strength of the sanction principle assumed by [DI*]. If we limit sanction to 'logical demonstration' (as understood in Chapter 9), then we get a strong formulation of [DI*]:

> [DIS] The arguments of natural theology β do not logically demonstrate the existence of any being under any definite descriptions that *either* (i) pick out the same divine being picked out by the descriptions of God in Scripture *or* (ii) fix reference to the same being named 'God' in Scripture.

In Chapter 9 we saw that several of the above thinkers assumed that theistic arguments are supposed to be or must be logical demonstrations. In that case, the DI-objection takes the form of [DIS] and entails that no theistic argument provides a logical demonstration of the existence of the true God. The problem with casting the DI-objection in this form, though, is that it assumes that we are only warranted in affirming theistic descriptions that deductively follow from rationally compelling premises. But the objection then falls prey to the various criticisms of the DAF objection introduced in Chapter 9. So to the extent that the above thinkers construed the DI-objection as [DIS], their objection is subject to a fairly decisive criticism.

We can, however, reformulate the DI-objection in more modest terms, so that it circumvents criticisms associated with DAF.

> [DIM] The arguments of natural theology β do not provide adequate inductive support for the existence of a being under any definite descriptions that *either* (i) pick out the same divine being picked out by the descriptions of God in Scripture *or* (ii) fix reference to the same being named 'God' in Scripture.

As suggested in Chapter 9, *adequate* inductive support is a somewhat flexible category since the adequacy of evidential support for a proposition or belief depends largely on the context and function of theistic arguments. Ordinarily we would want to cast 'adequacy' in terms of premises rendering their conclusion at least more probable than its negation. Arguments that satisfied this condition could be useful apologetically and could confer a significant degree of warrant

on belief in their conclusion. However, if there are other sources of warrant for belief in the conclusion of a theistic argument, then it is plausible to suppose that a theistic argument could make a positive epistemic contribution toward belief in its conclusion if the argument simply increased the degree of warrant for belief in its conclusion by adding to the probability of the conclusion. An argument can of course add to the probability of its conclusion even if it fails to render that conclusion more probable than its negation. On the other hand, if theistic arguments are the sole source of warrant for their conclusions, then whether we *know* the conclusions of such arguments will depend on those arguments having a very high degree of warrant. This will require that the arguments make their conclusions very probable. 'Epistemic adequacy' is thus ambiguous between 'adequate for increasing the degree of warrant,' 'adequate for conferring significant warrant,' and 'adequate for conferring a degree of warrant sufficient—along with truth—for knowledge.'

Cumulative Case Theistic Argument

While [DIM] avoids the criticisms against the DAF objection, its initial plausibility depends on resolving a basic ambiguity. We can read [DIM] as claiming

> [DIM-A] No *individual* traditional theistic argument provides adequate inductive support for the existence of a being under any definite descriptions that *either* (i) pick out the same divine being picked out by descriptions of God in Scripture *or* (ii) fix reference to the same being named 'God' in Scripture.

or

> [DIM-B] The traditional theistic arguments *taken together* do not provide adequate inductive support for the existence of a being under any definite descriptions that *either* (i) pick out the same divine being picked out by the descriptions of God in Scripture *or* (ii) fix reference to the same being named 'God' in Scripture.

We might concede that there are good grounds for [DIM-A], but this would not necessarily provide us with good reasons for [DIM-B]. This is important because the fate of natural theology β depends on the truth of [DIM-B], not [DIM-A]. The failure to make this distinction vitiates many of the Reformed DI-objections. As developed by Reformed thinkers, the DI-objection typically proceeds by taking traditional theistic arguments in isolation from each other and not considering the consequences of cumulative case reasoning that unifies the individual arguments. As indicated by some of the quotes above, the cosmological argument is faulted for not proving the existence of a personal first cause, the design argument is criticized for not proving a single personal creator-designer, and so on. Such objections easily neglect the possibility and viability of a cumulative case theistic argument

in which the theistic conclusion is inferred from a broad range of evidence that includes data from all the theistic arguments. What the proofs fail to achieve in isolation from each other, they might achieve if combined.

The idea of a cumulative case theistic argument was suggested to a certain degree by Reformers like Melanchthon and scholastics like Edward Leigh, each of whom maintained that different theistic arguments establish different attributes of God. But the idea achieved the status of orthodoxy in mid-nineteenth-century Protestant philosophical theology[18] and extended into various streams of the Reformed tradition. Thomas Chalmers, for example, maintained that while arguments from the physical universe produce knowledge of God's existence and natural attributes, only the evidences of mental phenomena provide proof for God's moral attributes.[19] Charles Hodge noted that criticisms of theistic arguments in his day were often based on the mistaken assumption that each theistic argument had to prove the complete doctrine of theism. Hodge responded:

> It is often assumed that each argument must prove the whole doctrine of Theism; whereas one argument may prove one element of that doctrine, and other arguments different elements. The cosmological argument may prove the existence of a necessary and eternal Being; the teleological argument, that that Being is intelligent; the moral argument that He is a person possessing moral attributes.[20]

A.A. Hodge, Robert Dabney, Henry Thornwell, and John Girardeau also explicitly affirmed the cumulative force of theistic arguments. At the dawn of the twentieth century, A.H. Strong emphasized the limitations of each of the theistic arguments taken individually but argued that these limitations can be compensated for by what is established by other theistic arguments. Hence the theistic conclusion is only properly attributed to a conclusion derived from all of the arguments taken together.

I think we must conclude that the [DIM-B] objection is the more relevant and potentially damaging criticism against the logic of theistic arguments. The ultimate question is not whether traditional or other sorts of theistic arguments individually

---

[18]   See Robert Anchor Thompson, *Christian Theism: the Testimony of Reason and Revelation to the Existence and Character of the Supreme Being* (2 vols, London: Rivingtons, Waterloo Place, 1855), vol. 1 pp. 292–4; Robert Flint, *Theism*, 7th edition (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1893), pp. 59–75; M. Valentine, *Natural Theology, or Rational Theism*, 2nd edition (Chicago: John C. Buckbee & Co., Publishers,1885), pp. 217–22; Alfred Barry, *What is Natural Theology? An Attempt to Estimate the Cumulative Evidence of Many Witnesses to God* (New York: E&J.B. Young & Co., 1876).

[19]   Thomas Chalmers, *Natural Theology* (2 vols, New York: Robert Carter, 1844), vol. 1, pp. 288–91.

[20]   Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols, n.d.; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), vol. 1, p. 203.

fail to prove the existence of the true God, but whether natural theology β as such is unable to prove the existence of the true God. Hence, the relevant question is the description under which God is proved in natural theology *as a whole*. So the DI-objection must be formulated in terms of an inductive cumulative case for theism.

Natural Theology and Trinitarian Descriptivism

While the Reformed authors previously discussed do not say exactly what sort of description would constitute an *adequate* description of the true God for the purposes of proving the existence of the true God, they do provide us with some sufficient conditions for supposing that traditional theistic arguments are descriptively *inadequate*. In this way, they point to necessary conditions of an adequate description of the true God that theistic arguments allegedly fail to satisfy.

Several of the theologians examined earlier connect the descriptive inadequacy of theistic arguments to their failure to deliver a conception of God as Redeemer, where this is concretely expressed through the Trinitarian relations of the Godhead. Karl Barth and G.C. Berkouwer, for example, each doubted whether knowledge of God merely as creator, and not redeemer, could be knowledge of the true God at all. Successful reference to the true God required reference to God in terms of the totality of his being as revealed in Scripture.[21] John Calvin also suggested that the true God is identified only under a Trinitarian description:

> But God also designates himself by another special mark to distinguish himself more precisely from idols. For he so proclaims himself the sole God as to offer himself to be contemplated clearly in three persons. Unless we grasp these, only the bare and empty name of God flits about in our brains, to the exclusion of the true God.[22]

Lurking here is what we might call *Trinitarian descriptivism*, the view that reference to the true God requires a description of God as one God in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Trinitarian descriptivism lays down a necessary constraint on reference to God. Once we add the premise that natural theology β fails to secure the conditions of theistic reference stipulated by Trinitarian descriptivism, the DI-objection follows: natural theology cannot prove the existence of the true God.

By way of response, two things should be noted here. First, even if natural theology β cannot logically *demonstrate* the doctrine of the Trinity, it might

---

[21] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. II:1, pp. 68, 80–84, 107; see also I:1, pp. 300–301; and Berkouwer, *General Revelation*, pp. 69–74.

[22] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.13.2.

nonetheless have probabilistic grounds for affirming that God is three persons.[23] Secondly, and more importantly, it is unclear why the failure to prove *that* God is three persons entails that we cannot prove the existence of a being who *is* three persons, even where 'proof' is taken in a more modest sense than logical demonstration. Why should the inability to prove that God exists under one description (a Trinitarian description) entail the failure of proving the existence of a being who is a Trinity and who is thus identical to the God of Scripture? I believe this is a crucial point in response to the DI-objection in general and Trinitarian descriptivism in particular. The point is worth developing further.

Sense and Reference

There is a fairly obvious truism lurking in Trinitarian descriptivism. If natural theology β cannot prove that God is a Trinity of persons, then the *concept* of God in natural theology β will differ in at least one important respect from the traditional biblical *concept* of God. But this truism does not entail that a proof of the existence of God, described as φ in natural theology, is not a proof of the existence of the God of Scripture, who is described as χ in Scripture, for different descriptions may *refer* to the same being. The *sense* of a name or expression and its *referent* are distinct. Take the well-known names 'Batman' and 'Bruce Wayne.' If they had the same sense, the statement 'Bruce Wayne is Batman' would be an uninformative tautology. But this is not so. The expressions 'Bruce Wayne' and 'Batman' are co-referring, but they do not share the same sense. It follows that the same God can be referred to under different names or descriptions. So we cannot infer that the referent of 'God' in the conclusion of a theistic argument is not the same referent as 'God' in the Bible simply because different sets of descriptions are used to pick out God or the individual named 'God' in each case. But then we cannot properly conclude that natural theology β does not prove the God of the Bible simply because it does not prove the existence of God under one particular description found in Scripture.

Of course, while different descriptions can refer to the same individual, when the descriptions vary too much, it becomes less plausible to suppose that the descriptions refer to the same individual, even if the same proper name is used to pick out a person. The name 'Michael Jackson' does not always refer to the same individual, and under a descriptivist theory of proper names this can be explained by sufficient discontinuity in the descriptions believed to apply to 'Michael Jackson.' Jake and Mark both employ the descriptions 'pop entertainer, subject of multiple facial plastic surgeries, former member of the Jackson Five pop group, and

---

[23]   Richard Swinburne, for instance, has argued that the rational considerations that make it probable that God exists also support the tri-personality of God. According to Swinburne, the case for a tri-personal God is strengthened further by evidence that supports Scripture as a divine revelation from God. See Richard Swinburne, *The Christian God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), esp. pp. 191, 237–8.

former husband of Lisa Marie Presley.' When Jake and Mark state that 'Michael Jackson owns a house in California,' it is sensible to suppose that they refer to the same person, the person of whom the conjunction of these properties is uniquely true, even if the complete set of their respective descriptions differ in many other respects. By contrast, Mary will not refer to the same individual as Jake and Mark if she employs the following descriptions: 28-year-old white male, who manages a chain of computer stores in California. When Mary affirms 'Michael Jackson owns a house in California,' she will not be referring to the same person as Jake and Mark. A proof of the existence of Michael Jackson carried out by Mary, Jake, and Mark, would not, if successful, prove the existence of the same Michael Jackson.

So if descriptions of God vary too much, it becomes less reasonable to suppose that the same being is in view, even if the term 'God' is used in both cases. Suppose that Jake thinks of God as a being possessing properties A, B, C, and D, Mark thinks of "God" as possessing properties B, C, D, and E, and Mary thinks of God as a being possessing properties E, F, G, and H. Suppose that Jake, Mark, and Mary each conclude that 'God exists,' where 'God' is taken as a proper name. There would be greater doubt as to whether Mary is referring to the same being as Mark and Jake, than there would be concerning whether Mark and Jake are referring to the same being.[24] Indeed, it seems at least intuitively consistent with a descriptivist theory of proper names to suppose, *ceteris paribus*, that Mark and Jake are referring to the same being as God. In natural theology β God is described in a way that at least *overlaps* with the biblical description of God, for traditionally natural theology describes God as an immaterial person with unlimited power, knowledge, and goodness, and who is the independent, eternal, and unchanging creator of the universe. If natural theology proves the existence of a being under this set of descriptions, call the set φ, it is not thereby proving the existence of a being wholly unlike the being named God in Scripture. While Scripture describes God in Trinitarian terms, call this description χ, its descriptions of God also include descriptions that are the same as the descriptions given in traditional natural theology. So the biblical description of God includes both φ and χ. Even if natural theology does not provide a proof for the existence of a being under the description of Trinity, neither is the denial of this description intrinsic to the project of natural theology. So it is hard to see why there must be sufficient degree of descriptive discontinuity between the biblical descriptions of God and the descriptions of God in principle sanctioned by traditional natural theology.

Further Examination of Trinitarian Descriptivism

So I think it is fairly clear that if the descriptions of God in natural theology β did not include a Trinitarian description of God, this would not in itself provide a

---

[24]   For a further discussion on how degree of descriptive divergence affects reference, see James Ross, *Philosophical Theology* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), chapter 2. Ross's discussion is an informative account of reference and the use of the term 'God.'

sufficient reason for supposing that 'God,' as this word occurs in the conclusion of theistic arguments, designates, picks out, or refers to a being different from the being called or described as 'God' in the Bible. It is possible, of course, for one to distinguish between sense and reference, and nonetheless contend that reference to the true God requires a Trinitarian description. After all, even if it is possible for different descriptions of God to refer to the same being, it remains to be seen what descriptions actually accomplish this and whether it can be accomplished in the absence of a Trinitarian description. It is a well-known problem for descriptivist theories of reference to explain what sort of descriptions are sufficient to fix reference to an object, and this problem potentially emerges with reference to talk about God. Unfortunately, none of the Reformed thinkers above sufficiently clarifies this. Indeed, they seem rather uncritically to adopt some form of descriptivism, but they provide no philosophical basis for or development of their contentions. But we can ask what possible grounds they might have for their position.

First, it is implausible to suppose that we must employ a set of descriptions that are exhaustively complete in order to pick out an individual. One need not prove the existence of x under *every* description in order to prove x's existence. To think otherwise would render reference to or proof of anything impossible. In the case of definite descriptions, many things will be uniquely true of an individual. We need not employ all of them in order to refer successfully to the individual in question. The definite description 'President of the United States' presumably fixes reference to the individual named Barack Obama, even if the speaker does not have on hand any number of other descriptions uniquely true of Barack Obama. Or take the definite description 'fourth-child of Lisa and Al Fowler' or 'fiancée of Michael Sudduth.' Both of these are uniquely true of my fiancée, the individual Sandy Fowler. Many other descriptions are uniquely true of my fiancée as well, but someone who lacked these other definite descriptions, or some other cluster of descriptions, could still refer to or pick out the individual named 'Sandy Fowler.' So one could argue that 'Sandy Fowler exists' without having on hand, much less employing, an exhaustively complete set of descriptions. So the necessity of a Trinitarian description for proving the existence of the true God cannot derive from a more general requirement for complete or exhaustive description.[25]

What is it about the particular description of God as a Trinity that would require this description? One might suppose that the description of God as Trinity is of great redemptive importance. While this is no doubt true, it is also not obviously relevant for the sort of adequacy under discussion. There are certainly many descriptions of my fiancée that are crucial for various practical purposes. For instance, the description 'fiancée of Michael Sudduth' is of great practical significance, at least

---

[25]   Not even if one restricted oneself to descriptions the content of which were *essential* properties of the thing in question. If God is a logically necessary being, it is an essential property of the planet Jupiter that it was created by God, but surely I do not need to prove the existence of Jupiter under the description 'created by God' in order to prove that the planet Jupiter exists.

to me. The description of my fiancée as 'fourth daughter of Lisa and Al Fowler' is of great importance for doing my fiancée's family genealogy. But these descriptions are not on account of their practical utility and importance essential to proving my fiancée's *existence*. Only by conflating the sort of descriptive constraints on proof with descriptive constraints on other desiderata can we fall into this trap. I suspect that this error explains the DI-objections raised by Barth and Berkouwer, both of whom raise concerns about referring to God under a set of descriptions that isolate 'one side' of God, namely God as creator not redeemer and hence not as Trinity. Both thinkers are interested in non-propositional knowledge of God. They are interested in what Reformed orthodoxy usually labels 'true knowledge of God.' This signifies a kind of experiential knowledge or knowledge with an existential or affective dimension, including piety, worship of God, and salvation. It is crucial that we not conflate *true knowledge* of God (in this existential sense) and knowledge of the *true God* (in the propositional sense).[26]

Barth and Berkouwer both argued that successful reference to the true God depends on descriptions of God that derive from his own self-disclosure. Since this self-disclosure only comes by way of God's work and actions in the human realm, reference to the true God is both concrete and Trinitarian in nature. Without this, the unity of God's works and actions is undermined. Hence, we cannot, even in a provisional way, speak of the true God if we speak only of one aspect of God, for example, only as creator of the Universe.[27] On the Reformed view, though, natural theology concerns what can be known of God by his self-disclosure in the works of creation and providence. It does not stand in contrast to God's own self-disclosure but is rooted in a mode of that self-disclosure, namely general revelation.

More importantly, though, there is a decisive case against Trinitarian descriptivism. It is logically inconsistent with the Reformed thesis of natural knowledge of God. Reformed theologians have all agreed that the knowledge of God as redeemer or Trinity of persons is not part of the content of the natural knowledge of God. So none of the descriptions of God that fall under the category of the natural knowledge of God includes a Trinitarian description of God. So how can there be natural knowledge of the true God absent such a description? It

---

[26] The practical aspect of true knowledge of God in Reformed orthodoxy has been well documented by Richard Muller. See Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, pp. 131, 166–70, 230.

[27] Barth poses the following rhetorical questions: "Are we really speaking of the one true God if even provisionally we think only of one side of God—in this instance of God the Lord and Creator? Are we really speaking of the real Lord and Creator? On what ground do we think can we speak about his knowability in this abstraction, in the light of only one side of God?" Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. II:1, p. 80. Barth is in this context critiquing the Roman Catholic conception of natural theology, which as he sees it cannot acknowledge God as "engaged in a work and activity with man" (p. 81). It thus undermines the concreteness of God and the unity of His being, which results in replacing the true God with a false god, the god of natural theology. See also Berkouwer, *General Revelation*, pp. 69–73.

looks like a clear double standard to demand that the project of developing theistic arguments produce a Trinitarian description of God in order to claim that it has *proven* the true God, while permitting people to *know* the true God without any Trinitarian descriptions. Why should natural theology β be subject to Trinitarian descriptivism and natural theology α not? In both cases, we are confronted with the same generic question of whether certain propositions refer to the true God, for example, there exists an eternal, personal being who is the creator of the universe. If the descriptions under which the true God is known are not Trinitarian, it is hard to see how the descriptions under which the true God's existence is proven must be Trinitarian. Trinitarian descriptivism proves too much for a Reformed theologian who wishes to remain faithful to the tradition's acceptance of natural knowledge of God. He cannot use it to undermine theistic arguments without at the same time undermining natural knowledge of God.

Robust Theistic Descriptivism

I think the prospects are pretty grim for supposing that natural theology β fails to prove the existence of the true God simply because it fails to prove that God is a Trinity. A more plausible position, though, is found in another point raised by several of the Reformed authors examined earlier. Most of them point to the alleged failure of natural theology to prove a kind of robust theism that avoids the errors of a finite god, deism, and pantheism: the existence of an independent, eternal, unchanging, immaterial, personal being, infinite in power, knowledge, and goodness, who is wholly distinct from the universe and the free creator and sustainer of all things. *Robust theistic descriptivism* maintains that unless natural theology β can prove the existence of a being under a robust theistic description, it fails to prove the existence of God.

Robust theistic descriptivism seems more consistent with the Reformed doctrine of God than Trinitarian descriptivism. The Reformed tradition recognizes something very similar to robust theism as a description of the true God or a description that picks out the being named 'God' in Scripture. With reference to the One God, the *Belgic Confession* states: "We all believe in our hearts and confess with our mouths that there is a single and simple spiritual being, whom we call God—eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, unchangeable, infinite, almighty; completely wise, just, and good, and the overflowing source of all good."[28] Ursinus distinguished between a philosophical description of God (given by the light of nature) and a theological description (given by the church on the basis of Scripture). These are two different descriptions of the true God. "God is philosophically described as an eternal mind or intelligence, sufficient in himself to all felicity, the best of

---

[28]   *The Belgic Confession* in *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (Grand Rapids, MI: CRC Publications, 1988), p. 78. Guido De Bres first composed the Belgic Confession in 1561.

beings, and the cause of good in nature."[29] While Ursinus's theological description includes a description of God as a Trinity of persons, it also includes several of the properties of robust theism (or their entailments): immateriality, immutability, immense power, wisdom, and goodness, different from all creatures. According to Ursinus, the inadequacy of the philosophical description of God relates to its being an *incomplete* description of God and a description of God that is non-saving and cannot engender holiness, love, or fear of God.[30] He nowhere suggests that robust theism does not describe the true God in a way adequate for referring to Him or proving His existence. In fact, Ursinus's proofs of the existence of God show that he did not think a Trinitarian description was necessary to prove the existence of the true God. Indeed, the prominence of theistic arguments in the Reformed tradition implies that mainstream Reformed theology has never maintained Trinitarian descriptivism. To think otherwise would entail that they intentionally embarked upon the project of proving the existence of a false god.[31]

Finally, Reformed theologians have typically agreed that 'Yahweh' is the most fitting name for the true God because of the attributes it signifies: eternity, self-existence, independence, the causal source of all things, and immutability.[32] While the Reformed orthodox approached their doctrine of God within the framework of biblical revelation, with its emphasis on the attributes of God as revealed through God's names and the works of creation, providence, and redemption, the relevant point here is that these thinkers believed that Yahweh referred to the true God because of a descriptive association that marks an important point of contact with robust theistic descriptivism, not Trinitarian descriptivism. In fact, as developed by Reformed orthodoxy, robust theism is a thoroughly *biblical* concept of God. Trinitarian descriptivism marginalizes this fact and thus the Scriptural witness to the essential properties of God.

---

[29]   Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. Rev. G.W. Williard, 4th American edition (Cincinnati: Elm Street Publishing Company, 1888), Question 25, I.

[30]   Ursinus notes that as a consequence of this difference, "The knowledge of God, which his word reveals to the church, is also *different* from that which the heathen have obtained from the light of nature" (emphasis mine, Ursinus, *Commentary*, Question 25, II). *Different*, but it is still knowledge of the true God.

[31]   For a more thorough historical examination of the Reformed doctrine of God in connection with what I am labeling 'robust theism,' see Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, pp. 227–589.

[32]   See Heinrich Bullinger, *The Decades of Henry Bullinger*, ed. Rev. Thomas Harding (5 vols, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1849), IV.iii; John Calvin, *Commentary on Exodus*, 3:14; Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Commonplaces*, I.xii.2; Ursinus, *Commentary*, Question 25.II; Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger and ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (3 vols, Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1992), III.iv.5; Benedict Pictet, *Christian Theology*, II.ii.3; Theophilus Gale, *Court of the Gentiles*, part 4, II.iii.1. A detailed discussion of divine names in Reformed dogmatics is found in Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, pp. 246–70.

It remains to be seen, though, whether robust theistic descriptivism can be used to mount a good DI-objection argument against natural theology β. To this I now turn.

Chapter 11
The 'Robust Theistic Descriptivist' Objection Evaluated

Can natural theology β prove that there exists an independent, eternal, unchanging, immaterial, personal being, infinite in power, knowledge, and goodness, who is wholly distinct from the universe and the free creator and sustainer of all things? The robust theistic descriptivist objector says, "no," and concludes that natural theology cannot prove the existence of the true God. We must now consider how much force this sort of objection actually carries. I will assume the truth of robust theistic descriptivism and focus on the objector's other premise, namely that natural theology β cannot prove the existence of a being under the robust theistic description. Historically, Reformed thinkers have relied largely on the philosophers Hume and Kant in their effort to undermine natural theology β at this juncture. In particular, they have appealed to two principles concerning causation and causal inferences: (i) the restriction of causation to experience and (ii) the necessity of proportioning causes to their effects. In this chapter, I will critically examine (i) and (ii) and their bearing on the project of proving robust theism.

The Restriction of Causation to Experience

When we examine the grounds for the robust theistic DI-objection, it becomes apparent that the primary streams of argumentation flow from philosophical assumptions derived from the philosophers David Hume and Immanuel Kant. The first of these assumptions is the restriction of causation to experience.

Hume, Kant, and Causation

Hume is well known for reducing causation to patterns of regular succession between similar events, as opposed to real relations between things. According to Hume, we have no sense impression of any connection between events. We see the impact of the cue ball and the subsequent motion of the eight ball. We experience a conjunction of events, with one being the temporal antecedent of the other. But we do not see the cue ball imparting motion to the eight ball. Hume's empiricism requires, though, that all ideas be appropriately grounded in sense experience. Since the idea of a necessary connection between events cannot be so grounded, any theory of causation that incorporates this will be unjustified. Nevertheless, we *feel* that there *is* a real connection between the impact of the cue ball and the

motion of the eight ball. According to Hume, this feeling arises because we have observed several past instances in which the impact of the cue ball was followed by the motion of the eight ball. We expect one event to be followed by another because the events have been repeatedly conjoined in our past experience.

According to Hume, the mind is a passive receiver of information from the world and must conform to what is given to it through sense impressions. Kant reversed this fundamental assumption and maintained that the world to which we have epistemic access is one that must conform to the operations of the mind, which imposes an intelligible structure on what is given to us in sense experience. So, unlike Hume, Kant affirms the element of necessary connection between events in causation, but this connection must be imposed on things by the mind. The idea of necessary connection is not something that comes into our mind from the world, either as a real relation between things as they exist independent of our minds or as a mental habit arising from the observation of the repeated conjunction of events. Causal relations are, therefore, restricted to experience, the realm of appearances. Kant's position on causation is part of his broader epistemology according to which we do not know things in themselves but only as they appear to us, as filtered and structured by the subjective conditions of cognition.

The negative consequences of the Humean/Kantian position for traditional natural theology are well known. First, God is an unobservable entity and does not belong to the world of objects conditioned by the human mind. If causation is restricted to experience we could not be justified in reaching any conclusions about God being the cause of the existence of the cosmos or its order. Such a proof presupposes that causal chains can be extended beyond what is given to us by our immediate sense impressions. Secondly, Hume would grant that our past experiences of seeing human agents building houses provides some justification for our extrapolating a human agent as the cause of the house we currently observe. However, since we have never seen universes being made by deities we cannot properly form any justified beliefs about God being the cause of the universe and its order. Not surprisingly, Hume and Kant each rely on the restriction of causation to experience to dismantle the project of traditional natural theology.

The dependence on Hume and Kant is one of the striking features of the criticisms of the logic of theistic arguments by Reformed thinkers. Reliance on Hume is explicit and extensive in Edward Carnell and Gordon Clark, both of whom favorably cite Hume's well-known criticisms of natural theology.[1] Reliance on Kant is apparent in Hoeksema who explicitly restricts causation to the realm of appearances. As Hoeksema says, if the cosmological argument were to lead us to some first cause, this "cause would certainly belong to the world of our

---

[1]   Gordon Clark, *Three Types of Religious Philosophy* (1973; reprint, Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation, 1989), pp. 64–70; Edward Carnell, *An Introduction to Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1952), pp. 129–39.

experience."[2] Bavinck's critique of natural theology also rests heavily on Kant. Bavinck goes as far as to say, "For Kant is perfectly correct when he says that our knowledge does not extend farther than our experience."[3] Kersten and Berkouwer also reference Kant's critique of natural theology in a sympathetic tone.[4] Even Reformed writers sympathetic to theistic arguments, such as Louis Berkhof, maintain that Kant refuted the proofs.[5] This dependence on Hume and Kant is also reflected in more recent Calvinist critics of natural theology such as Robert Reymond and Greg Bahnsen.[6]

Responding to the Humean/Kantian Critique of Natural Theology

The Humean/Kantian restriction of causation to experience seems incompatible with Christian theism in general and the Reformed tradition in particular.

First, fundamental to the Christian theism is the claim that God is creator of the universe, and the orthodox Reformed position is that God is the cause of *all* things. Causal language is an essential part of the Christian theology and the Reformed doctrine of God. Bavinck and Hoeksema, however, adopt the Kantian position in the effort to lend credibility to their criticisms of natural theology. In Hoeksema this leads to the bold contention that God is *not* a cause. This term is inappropriately applied to God since a cause necessarily belongs to the world of our experience. But how exactly can we meaningfully talk about God as creator except by employing causal language? Granted, saying that 'God causes the universe to exist' might involve analogical predication, but a flat out denial of the application of causation seems to undercut the notion of divine action altogether. Hoeksema's attempt to sharply distinguish between Creator and cause seems like a poorly crafted attempt to underscore the Creator/creature distinction.[7] Moreover,

---

[2]   Kant himself said, "If the empirical law of causality is to conduct us to a Supreme Being, this Being must belong to the chain of empirical objects—in which case it would be, like all phenomena, itself conditioned" (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. J.M.D. Meiklejohn (1934; reprint, London: Everyman's Library, 1986) p. 370).

[3]   Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt and trans. John Vriend (2 vols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003–2004), vol. 2, p. 50.

[4]   G.C. Berkouwer, *General Revelation* (1955; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 68; G.H. Kersten, *Reformed Dogmatics: A Systematic Treatment of Reformed Doctrine* (2 vols, 1980; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1981), vol. 1, pp. 38–9.

[5]   Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th edition (1939; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), pp. 27–8.

[6]   Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, revised edition (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1996), pp. 135–42; Greg Bahnsen, "A Critique of the Evidentialist Apologetical Method of John Warwick Montgomery" (1974), Covenant Media Foundation (870), 775–1170, published at Covenant Media Foundation <http://www.cmfnow.com/articles/PA016.htm>.

[7]   The similarity between Hoeksema and Barth is worth noting. One of Barth's arguments against natural theology is based on the premise that the term "cause" cannot

if Hoeksema only intended to deny that God is a cause like finite causes, then the project of natural theology remains intact for neither cosmological nor design arguments require that God be a cause just like finite causes.

The Reformed critics of natural theology who endorse the Humean/Kantian restriction of causation to sense impressions and the world of phenomena play into the hands of a theological skepticism that easily undermines theological discourse and knowledge. For Hume and Kant the limits on causation and our knowledge obtained by causal chains is simply a special case of a more general limitation on human knowledge that precludes knowing anything beyond phenomena. But this radical empiricism is incompatible with humans having any knowledge of God, a being outside the realm of experience. The very Kantian principles that Reformed theologians utilize to attack natural theology have been used to deny that any human concepts apply to God. So we can say nothing that is literally true of God.[8] Reformed theologians must reject the philosophical principles that lead to such conclusions, but then one cannot rely on these principles to refute natural theology.

The restriction of causes of observable events to observable causes is unappealing for another serious reason. The evolution of modern science and scientific methodology has made such a crude empiricism no longer sensible. Neither Hume nor Kant envisioned the success of scientific reasoning from observable states of affairs to unobservable entities and causal processes on the grounds of the explanatory power of the latter. Extra-solar planetary science infers the existence, estimated mass, size, and orbital paths of unobservable planets from observable wobbles in the planet's parent star. In the late nineteenth century, Mendel postulated very small, unobservable entities, which he called 'elements' (later called genes) to explain the traits observed in the offspring of pea plants that were crossed. Dalton appealed to unobservable particles to explain laws of chemical combination and thereby made an important contribution to the modern development of atomic theory. Boltzmann utilized the atomic model to explain the behavior of gases and liquids. Eventually, the existence and behavior of atoms was explained in terms of yet smaller particles—protons, neutrons, and electrons. In physics today, quarks are regarded as an even more basic constituent of protons and neutrons. Contemporary cosmology maintains that the entire cosmos originated from an ultra microscopic quantum world of sub-atomic particles. None of these

---

apply to God or must be equivocal in meaning if applied to God and created or finite things. This of course yields a distinctly Barthian variation of the DI-objection. If terms like 'cause' do not describe God at all, then a proof that there is a First cause, does not involve a description of God. For a critical discussion of this Barthian DI-objection, see Brian Leftow, "Can Philosophy Argue the Existence of God?" in *the Rationality of Belief and Plurality of Faith*, ed. Tom Senor (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), pp. 40–70.

[8]   For a helpful discussion on the impact of Kant's philosophy on theological discourse and knowledge, see Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), chapters 1 and 2.

entities belongs to the realm of experience, as things that can be directly observed. Most of them are not even observable in principle, but they are postulated as the causes of observable phenomena and the more fundamental explanation of the empirical laws inferred from procedures of inductive generalization.

It is likely that the Reformed attraction to the Kantian viewpoint is partly engendered by the theological idea that rationality is part of created reality and so limited to the realm of finite, conditioned objects. This idea is prominent in Dutch neo-Calvinists such as Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd, both of whom take the Creator/creature distinction to entail the creaturely nature of the laws of thought and rationality. As far as I can see, though, such a position entails a fairly devastating theological skepticism that is ultimately self-defeating. It leads to a general theological skepticism because all theology involves human rationality in some mode, whether in the interpretation of or inferences from textual material in the form of creeds, confessions, or Scripture. Biblical theology, no less than natural theology, must rely on human rationality if we are to have epistemic access to truths about God given by way of sentences in Scripture, for these sentences must be interpreted using our cognitive faculties. In fact, the claim that human rationality is limited in its application to the created realm is itself an alleged inference using human rationality from premises that purport to know something about the nature of God. But this presupposes the application of human rationality beyond human experience. So the position is self-defeating.

The Principle of Proportionality

A second general line of attack against the inferences of natural theology stems from Hume's so-called 'principle of proportionality' (hereafter POP), also endorsed by Kant. This is roughly the idea that we must not ascribe to a cause anything beyond what is minimally required to account for the effect. If a peanut is outweighed on a scale and I cannot see the other side of the scale, I am not justified in inferring that an elephant is on the other side. I can only infer that the cause of the peanut's being outweighed is something that weighs more than the peanut, a peanut-outweighing-cause. The implication for natural theology should be apparent: even if we could reach rationally justified conclusions about an unobservable cause of the universe and its order, we would not be justified in ascribing to it the properties of omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence, since—so the argument goes—only a finite cause is needed to explain a finite effect.[9] If 'order' is an effect, it only requires an 'order-producing-cause.'

---

[9]   "If the cause be known only by the effect, we never ought to ascribe to it any qualities, beyond what are precisely requisite to produce the effect. … The cause must be proportioned to the effect. … Allowing, therefore, the gods to be the authors of the existence or order of the universe; it follows, that they possess that precise degree of power, intelligence, and benevolence, which appears in their workmanship but nothing farther

Robert Reymond wrote:

> Granting, for the sake of argument, the validity of the cause and effect relationship, if it is valid to conclude from observed effects the existence of their cause(s), it is not valid to ascribe to their cause(s) any properties beyond those necessary to produce them. All the existence of a finite world would demand is the existence of a finite cause sufficiently powerful to cause it, a far cry from the omnipotent Creator of the Bible.[10]

Although Reymond here refers to the cosmological argument, Hume applied POP to both the cosmological and the design argument. It is usually discussed with reference to the latter. But POP would be applicable in principle to any causal-type argument that reasons to God from aspects or features of the physical world, for such inferences will be inferences from a finite effect to an infinite cause. So POP is surely relevant and significant for general assessments of the plausibility of theistic inferences.[11] POP places a constraint on causal inferences that would appear to make it impossible to prove robust theism by virtue of the latter's entailing a being with *unlimited* power, knowledge, and goodness. Indeed, we might suppose that POP rules out the need for postulating any *agent* or *person* as the cause of the universe and its order if these phenomena can be sufficiently explained by postulating some non-personal explanation, for example in terms of other physical states and physical laws.

There are three responses to this criticism.

First, it might be argued that while *a posteriori* theistic arguments do not warrant a necessary inference to a being with infinite power, knowledge, and goodness, they do warrant a necessary inference to a being who has *immense* power, knowledge, and goodness, indeed arguably an inconceivable degree of power and knowledge given the vastness and complexity of the universe. While robust theism strictly speaking entails the existence of an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good being, one might suppose that no great injury is done to robust theism by replacing omnipotence with almightiness, omniscience with supreme wisdom, and omnibenevolence with supreme goodness. [12]

---

can ever be proved" (Hume, *Enquiries*, ed. Eric Steinberg, second edition (1977; reprint, Indianapolis: Hacket, 1993), XI, p. 94.

[10]   Reymond, *Systematic Theology*, p. 136.

[11]   The ontological argument would be an exception since it is not an argument to God's existence from the universe or any particular features thereof. POP will also be unsuccessful in the case of the cosmological argument if the universe is infinite (or there are an infinite number of universes), for in that case the effect is infinite and would require an infinite cause.

[12]   'Almightiness' implies power over all things, whereas 'omnipotence' implies the ability to do or bring about any logically possible states of affairs. See Peter Geach, "Omnipotence," *Philosophy* 48 (1973): 7–20. The general issue here is whether the

Secondly, quite a few post-Humean defenders of the cosmological and design arguments within and outside the Reformed tradition have contended that the knowledge of an infinite being is not a matter of inference at all, but a truth known by intuition. In that case, the cosmological and design arguments are more properly construed as a means of developing or extending our intuitive knowledge of the nature of the infinite being who is first known by a rational intuition. POP assumes that the knowledge of the being whose existence is affirmed in the conclusion of theistic arguments rests *solely* on inference. But if the knowledge of infinite being is an intuitive truth or otherwise grasped immediately, inference simply does not have the burden of proving an infinite cause, only of linking our intuitive conception of infinite being with the being revealed in the cosmos. What this shows, to underscore a point made earlier in the book, is that the so-called immediate knowledge of God can supplement theistic proofs. Here we see how a synthesis of our intuitive conceptions and *a posteriori* evidence can provide a basis for answering a standard Humean critique of natural theology.[13]

Thirdly, even if robust theism is not logically entailed by any one theistic argument, it might be rendered more probable than not by an inductive cumulative case argument that draws on the data of several different theistic arguments. This might provide us with good grounds for supposing that the cause of the universe, its order, and whatever other finite features of the universe we have selected, is a cause with unlimited knowledge, power, and goodness. The use of POP against theistic arguments is essentially tied to the assumption that theistic proofs are intended as independent logical demonstrations. Indeed, it is likely that the success of the Humean/Kantian critique of natural theology is due in part to the widely held assumption that particular theistic proofs are supposed to be conclusive or carry apodeictic certainty. Not surprisingly, there is a confluence of Reformed reliance on the criticisms of Hume and Kant and the Reformed assumption that the proofs are supposed to satisfy fairly stringent criteria of proof. But we have already seen that this sort of assumption must be rejected, and any critique of natural theology committed to this assumption is fatally flawed.

---

power, knowledge, and goodness of the creator-designer must be *infinitely* great or simply *incomprehensibly* great. Interestingly enough, Charles Hodge suggested that "incomprehensible greatness" is practically equivalent to "infinite greatness" and so Hume's objection fails to undermine natural theology. See Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols, n.d.; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), vol. 1, p. 229.

[13]   J. Lewis Diman, *The Theistic Argument as Affected by Recent Theories* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1881), Lecture 10; Samuel Harris, *Self Revelation of God*, 2nd edition (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1887), pp. 241–2; Robert Flint, *Theism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1877), Lecture III; Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology,* vol. 1, pp. 202–3; A.A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (Chicago: Bible Institute Colportage Association, 1879), pp. 32, 45–6; Augustus Strong, *Systematic Theology* (1907; reprint, Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1979), pp. 87–9.

Cumulative Case Arguments and Robust Theism

How plausible, though, would an inductive, cumulative case approach to robust theism be? While there is not space here for a full development of such a case, an outline of this approach can at least help show its plausibility against Hume's POP. Robust theism entails the unity, personality, and perfection of the creator-designer, so it is essential for an inductive cumulative case for theism to account for these basic elements of robust theism. I will limit the data here primarily to the existence of the universe, its order and beauty, and the diversity of its life forms.

In looking for the causal explanation of some phenomenon, we should postulate a cause not that minimally accounts for the phenomenon in question but which *best* accounts for it. Several factors are relevant here. The hypothesis must lead us to expect our observational evidence, and we should not observe what we would not expect if the hypothesis were true. Of course, there will be an indefinite number of hypotheses that lead us to expect our observational evidence. If we were left only with Hume's POP, we would either have to settle for a fairly empty hypothesis that told us little about the nature of the cause of some phenomenon or we would have no basis for selecting among competing hypotheses that equally account for our observational evidence. After all, many hypotheses will have predictive power. We need principles other than "what (minimally) accounts for the effect." Hence we must draw on principles such as simplicity, fit with background information, and the non *ad hoc* nature of a hypothesis, to narrow down the range of relevant competing hypotheses to the *best* explanation of the data.[14]

The Unity of the Creator-Designer

One of Hume's criticisms of the design argument was that a committee of gods could have been responsible for the order the universe exhibits. So why postulate a single creator-designer rather than multiple ones?

First, the unity of order throughout the cosmos is evidence for a single cause of this order. If we postulate a single designer, then we would expect to find the same fundamental physical laws governing the behavior of objects over vast distances of space and time in the cosmos. We would also expect to find different particular physical laws explicable in terms of these fundamental physical laws. By contrast, a plurality of designers, unless qualified in some way (see below) would lead us to expect different basic laws governing objects in different parts of the cosmos, in much the same way that cars or guitars produced by different human manufacturers exhibit fundamental differences in design. But what we find is an underlying unity in the spatial and temporal regularities of the cosmos. Moreover, the fine-tuning of the universe entails that the emergence of life in the cosmos depends on the boundary conditions and constants of the laws of physics being highly calibrated

---

[14]   Richard Swinburne argues this in *The Existence of God*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), especially chapter 5.

to each other. It is not just that we find the same fundamental laws, but these laws are adjusted to each other in highly specific ways that are necessary for life. We would expect this from a single designer.

Why suppose, though, that this single designer is also the creator? One might suppose that one being created the universe (the builder) and another designed the universe (the architect), or that one being brought the universe into existence and another brought about its order.[15] This objection seems sensible I think in part because theologians and philosophers have often focused on spatial regularities in the universe that are apparently independent of the basic structure of matter itself and which are located at some temporal distance from the beginning of the universe. From this vantage point, it is possible and perhaps somewhat plausible to suppose that a particular being (a creator) made the stuff of the universe, and later some other being (designer) organized the universe into star systems and galaxies and eventually fashioned animal and human bodies using already existing matter. However, if the universe had a beginning, then temporal regularities and the fine-tuning of the universe characterized the universe at the inception of its existence. Large scale spatial regularities exhibited by galaxies and galactic clusters and small scale spatial regularities exhibited by animal and human bodies may have emerged later in the universe's history, but they only emerged because there were very basic regularities present at the beginning of the universe's existence. Moreover, order in the universe extends to the very structure of matter-energy present at the beginning of the universe's history, for fine-tuning depends on a highly specified calibration not only between the constants of the basic physical laws but also in reference to the variables of the initial conditions, for example, the average density of all forms of matter, the rate of cosmic expansion, and degree of isotropy. These considerations make it at least awkward to assign the act of creation to one being and design to another.

Secondly, though, the unity of the creator-designer follows from considerations of simplicity.[16] Postulating multiple deities or principles to explain cosmic order is less simple than postulating a single one. This is so not simply because many gods is quantitatively greater than one God, but because some additional explanation would be needed to account for how it is that many different gods co-operate to produce *identical* patterns of temporal and spatial order over vast distances and periods of time throughout the cosmos. The same holds true if we appeal to impersonal causes. It follows, then, that considerations of simplicity, unless

---

[15]   Following Kant, Berkhof claimed that a weakness of the teleological (or design) argument is that it does not show that the designer was creator. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 26–7.

[16]   Kant agreed that the unity of various patterns of order in the universe is evidence for the unity of the cause that produced the order. For some good discussion on the unity of cosmic order, see Robin Collins, "Design and the Many-Worlds Hypothesis" in *Philosophy of Religion: a Reader and Guide*, ed. William Lane Craig (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), pp. 130–48.

outweighed by significant gains in predictive power, rule out postulating one cause for the universe's existence and another cause for the order in the cosmos, much less postulating multiple causes or designers. We should postulate a single first cause that is also the cause of the universe's order.

A Single Personal Creator-Designer

Why should this single creator-designer be personal?

If the universe and its order have a single cause, this cause must either be a person or not a person. There are really only two kinds of possible causes that could be non-personal, an abstract entity or some physical state. The first is not a very plausible candidate for being a creator-designer because it seems fairly unlikely, if not impossible, that abstract entities could provide a sufficient causal explanation for logically contingent phenomena.[17] So the only genuine candidate for a non-personal creator-designer of the contingent universe would be some physical state of affairs. We can refer to explanation in terms of physical state(s) and the appropriate physical laws as 'scientific explanation,' where this is contrasted with 'personal explanation,' that is, explanation in terms of the beliefs, powers, and intentions of some person.[18] Why prefer a personal explanation?

First, it seems doubtful that there can be an ultimate scientific explanation of the existence of the universe. A scientific explanation of the universe's existence today must appeal to some prior physical state and physical law that determines the state of the universe today. While this is possible, either this sequence continues infinitely into the past or it halts at some temporally first physical state. If there was a first physical state, then this state could not *in principle* have a scientific explanation, since scientific explanation attempts to provide physical explanations of phenomena. If past physical states have no beginning but continue *ad infinitum*, we must ask whether an explanation of each state of the universe in terms of some prior state and physical law explains the existence of the universe as such. Does this tell us why anything exists at all? While such explanations appear to tell us why, given that the universe exists, it *continues* to exist, it does not tell us why there is such a series. So we must either accept a personal explanation of the universe's existence or regard it as an inexplicable brute fact.

Secondly, it seems doubtful that there can be an ultimate scientific explanation of the universe's order and some of the physical conditions responsible for the

_____

[17]   This might be for at least one of two reasons. Abstract entities do not possess any causal powers, and so they cannot be causes. Alternatively, one might argue that while abstract entities can possess causal powers, since abstract entities are logically necessary, they could not be the cause of any contingent things. So the attempt to derive the physical universe from a realm of timeless, mathematical equations is going to result in a logically necessary universe or require intelligence to breath fire into the equations.

[18]   For an account of this distinction, see Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, chapter 3.

presence of life in the cosmos. The most basic physical laws responsible for the universe's continued existence through time would themselves be scientifically inexplicable.[19] So even if we supposed that proposed mechanisms of biological evolution, which appeal to various initial conditions and biological laws, could explain the origin of complex living organisms from more simple organisms, and even if the laws that govern evolution could be explained in terms of yet wider laws, the existence of the most basic physical laws (or law) would be scientifically inexplicable. Something similar holds for the so-called fine-tuning of the universe, according to which the boundary conditions of the universe and the constants of the laws of physics must be specially calibrated with each other and lie within a very narrow *a priori* unlikely range to make the universe a life permitting system. Attempts to provide a scientific explanation for this odd phenomenon (whether through inflationary cosmology, string theory, or a cyclic universe theory) appeal to more basic physical states of affairs and physical mechanisms that are either exceedingly complex and thus *a priori* improbable or must themselves be fine-tuned to produce a fine-tuned universe and thus simply relocate the problem of fine-tuning.[20]

So if we take scientific explanation seriously, we must at some point arrive at a stopping point of scientific explanation in some initial or basic physical state of affairs and physical law(s) (and possibly basic fine-tuning) that must be accepted as a brute fact or otherwise explained by supposing that there is an appropriate personal explanation, an explanation in terms of the beliefs and intentions of a person. What we know of the size and evolution of the universe, its fundamental laws, and the prerequisites for life entails that if the cause of the universe and its order is a person, then this person would need vast power and knowledge. Moreover, within the universe there are at least some good states of affairs. These will include the existence of order itself, beauty, and the presence of living beings, especially human persons, living beings endowed with consciousness and who possess beliefs and intentional powers. People will of course have different opinions about what good states of affairs are instantiated in the cosmos, but it

---

[19]   See Alan Guth, *The Inflationary Universe* (Reading, MA: Perseus, 1997), p. 276.

[20]   For example, the so-called 'many-universes' hypothesis postulates a very large number of universes, perhaps an infinite number of them, to explain the fine-tuning of our universe. The more universes there are and the more they vary from each other in their physical parameters, the more likely it is that chance will throw up some fine-tuned universe in which life eventually evolves. But the gain in predictive power here comes at the cost of less simplicity. In postulating so many universes to explain the fine-tuning of one universe we adopt a fairly complex hypothesis, one that is *prima facie* less simple than robust theism. Moreover, like bread-makers making large quantities of bread, attempts to generate many universes from a single physical mechanism or process such as the quantum vacuum ultimately require an appeal to what is complex or relatively simple but itself fine-tuned. See Swinburne, *Existence of God*, pp. 160–64, 181–8; Collins, "Design and the Many Worlds Hypothesis," pp. 130–48.

seems absurd to suppose that the universe exhibits none. So a personal cause of the universe will be responsible for creating a universe that includes good states of affairs, and a creator-designer would have intended at least some of these good states of affairs. So we can plausibly infer the goodness of the creator-designer from prominent features of the universe. Postulating a single personal creator-designer with immense power, knowledge, and goodness would lead us to expect many of the features of the universe that seem otherwise inexplicable.

Another way of looking at this is to come to the question of personality through the design argument. Suppose the cosmological argument by itself at best provides evidence that there is some first cause of the universe, but leaves the issue of the personality of the first cause undetermined. To the extent that the design argument is cogent, it provides us with a reason for supposing that there is an intelligent designer who is responsible for the order the universe exhibits. If there are grounds for identifying the cause of the universe with the designer (and I have indicated as much above), it will follow that the cause of the existence of the universe is intelligent. Moreover, whereas the design argument might leave the relation between the intelligent designer and the universe undetermined, if the first cause and designer are the same being, then the cosmological argument implies that the designer must not belong to the furniture of the universe. In this way, the cosmological and design arguments mutually reinforce important aspects of robust theism that underscore both the intelligence and the transcendence of the creator-designer.[21]

Infinite Power, Knowledge, and Goodness

Why should we suppose, though, that this personal creator-designer is infinite or unlimited with respect to the properties of power, knowledge, and goodness? Such a hypothesis of course has predictive power. A being with infinite power would have the ability to produce a universe with the features noted above. A being with infinite knowledge would know how to produce such a universe. A being with infinite goodness would have overriding reasons for creating a universe with the sort of order, beauty, and fine-tuning that characterizes our universe given that these are good states of affairs. Hume's position, though, is that there would be at least equal predictive power in an alternate hypothesis that postulated a being with less power, knowledge, and goodness.

According to the principle of simplicity, all other things being equal we should prefer the simpler of competing explanations. The simpler explanation will postulate the fewest number and kinds of entities, as well as the fewest number

---

[21] The case here would be strengthened if we broadened our range of evidence to include the evidence utilized in the moral argument and the argument from religious experience, for in both cases if the arguments are cogent they lead us to a person as the cause of the phenomena.

and kinds of laws governing their interaction.[22] The robust theist can contend that postulating a single deity with finite power, knowledge, and goodness is less simple than postulating a single deity with infinite degrees of power, knowledge, and goodness. In postulating a being with finite power, knowledge, and goodness, an additional postulate is needed to account for why the being is limited in these ways. For instance, what keeps the being from having more knowledge or power? So the hypothesis takes on greater complexity by presupposing additional entities and laws of interaction that result in the being having limits on power, knowledge, and goodness. Simplicity provides a criterion for supporting robust theism over other sorts of personal explanations, as well as for preferring a personal explanation to a non-personal explanation.[23] Stopping with the universe seems like terminating explanation in something fairly complex and thus something *a priori* unlikely. In this way an otherwise complex and mysterious stopping point of explanation can be made intelligible by postulating a personal designer-creator with unlimited power, knowledge, and goodness.[24]

The existence of a single being with infinite power, knowledge, and goodness also seems less *ad hoc* as an explanation than Hume's suggestion that an infant deity or committee of finite gods is responsible for the existence of the universe and its order. Not only do Hume's proposals fail the test of simplicity but they are at the end of the day *Hume's* inventions. They have no attraction other than their ability to provide a possible alternative to a long-standing, antecedent theistic explanation of the cosmos and its order. Robust theism, while it potentially solves a variety of philosophical problems, was not invented for this purpose. Nor have most people come to accept robust theism because they see that theism accomplishes philosophical work.[25] Robust theism is a concept of God deeply entrenched in the western religious traditions, in which its emergence and acceptance has not been

---

[22] For a more detailed account of simplicity, see Richard Swinburne, *Simplicity as Evidence of Truth: the Aquinas Lecture, 1997* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1997).

[23] The advocate of robust theism must contend that robust theism postulates the simplest sort of being. This will involve the conception of a being with more properties than power, knowledge, and goodness. Swinburne argues that the various divine attributes can be derived from the simple property of pure, limitless intentional power. See below (in text) for arguments involving the derivation of various divine attributes.

[24] There are two ways in which evidence, e, can make some hypothesis, h, probable. First, the likelihood of e could be very high if h were true, that is, h would lead us to expect e. The robust theist can argue that if God creates a universe, then we should expect a universe with the order and beauty we observe, as well as the fine-tuning necessary for life. Secondly, it might be that the likelihood of e is very low unless h is true. Given God's absolute freedom, we would not expect God to create any universe, but the existence of the universe—because of its complexity—is very unlikely unless God creates it.

[25] For further discussion on this point, see James Sennett, "Hume's Stopper and the Natural Theology Project" in *In Defense of Natural Theology: a Post-Humean Assessment*, ed. James Sennett and Douglas Groothuis (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005).

tied to the theoretical work it can accomplish in philosophy. The fact that it can do such work shows us that an existing religious viewpoint, grounded in a variety of other ways, also has a contribution to make in philosophy.

Various Divine Attributes

What about the other attributes of the creator-designer?

In sketching the above cumulative case theistic argument, I have not supposed that the creator-designer is a temporal first cause that merely creates the universe and then lets it operate according to its own laws. Robust theism entails that God is *creator* and *sustainer*. One of the reasons that Reformed theologians have doubted whether natural theology can prove robust theism is because they doubt whether it can prove anything more than a temporal first cause, that is, some cause in the remote past that simply brings the universe into existence. Hence, natural theology can do no better than a deistic conception of God. But this objection carries no force against cosmological arguments that seek a purported ultimate explanation for states of affairs and mundane causal processes in the "here and now." If the universe has a beginning—as the kalam cosmological argument maintains—then the creator-designer is the cause of that beginning and whatever order is present in the cosmos at that time. But regardless of whether the universe has a beginning or not, the creator-designer envisioned by the above argumentation is responsible for keeping the universe in existence.

The creator-designer described above must at least be a *metaphysically necessary being*, a being who does not depend on anything for his existence.[26] First, the creator-designer is postulated as the creator of our entire universe and any other universes that exist. Given that there is no causation in a circle, the creator-designer could not depend on any universe or on any physical being or state of affairs. The decisive issue, though, is really the omnipotence and perfect freedom of the creator-designer. A being with infinite power and who is perfectly free cannot depend on *anything* for its existence. If the creator-designer depended on some other thing X for its existence, then X could not—given the impossibility of circular causation—depend on the creator-designer for its existence. In this case the creator-designer would not be able to determine whether or not X exists, but a perfectly free or omnipotent being would have this power. Hence, the creator-designer must be metaphysically necessary. So we do arrive here at a being that must be wholly independent of and distinct from the universe.

The creator-designer must also be a *spirit* or *immaterial substance*. A being that provides the ultimate explanation for the universe and its physical laws could not be embodied since all embodied beings would belong to the furniture of the universe or some other more basic physical state of affairs regulated by various physical

---

26   I say "at least" because some robust theists maintain that God's existence is also *logically* necessary. On this view, God is the sort of being who *could not* not-exist because his non-existence is logically incoherent or contradictory.

laws. Hence, the immateriality of the creator-designer is a logical entailment of His being the cause of all physical states and the physical laws that govern the interaction of all physical substances. Of course, since a metaphysically necessary being is not dependent on anything for its existence, *a fortiori* it wouldn't be dependent on a body. Related, an essentially embodied being will be dependent on a body to acquire its knowledge and exercise its powers. But the knowledge and powers of such a being are necessarily limited. Infinite power and knowledge entail that the creator-designer is essentially bodiless. Moreover, the creator-designer must be an *omnipresent* immaterial substance. An omnipotent being must be able to control in a direct way at any moment anything anywhere in the universe. An omniscient being must be able to know directly what is happening at any place in the cosmos at any moment. Such a being must be present everywhere in order to have this power and knowledge. Since an omnipresent spirit cannot be identified with the universe itself, we have another reason why the creator-designer must be wholly distinct from the universe.

The creator-designer must also be *eternal*. If we suppose that the creator-designer created space and time, then the first cause must be outside time. Hence, the first cause would be eternal in the sense of being timeless.[27] However, if we suppose that timeless causation is incoherent, then the eternity of the creator-designer must be construed as its having always existed in the past and its always existing in the future. It would be everlastingly eternal. If the creator-designer exists in time, then it must be everlastingly eternal. To suppose otherwise would be to suppose that the creator-designer either came into existence at some time or will cease to exist at some time. Two sorts of considerations are relevant here. First, the metaphysical necessity of the creator-designer would be incompatible with its coming into existence or ceasing to exist if either of these states of affairs entailed that the creator-designer is dependent on something else.[28] Secondly, and perhaps more decisively, if the creator-designer either came into existence or ceased to exist, there would be states of affairs over which it had no control. It would not be the case that everything depended on the creator-designer.

---

[27]   The idea of a being "creating time" is ambiguous between (i) a being creating *topological* time, in consequence of which there are truths about one event being "before" or "after" another event and (ii) a being creating *metrical* time, in consequence of which there are truths about how long one event happened before or after another, where this measured time is determined by some cosmic clock set by physical laws. God's timelessness has typically been interpreted as entailing an absence of succession in the mind of God. In that case, God's creating time would entail God's timelessness only if creating time was taken as the creation of topological time.

[28]   Arguably the creator-designer ceasing to exist could depend on something internal to itself, for example, the choice to end its existence, but the same cannot be said for its coming into existence, which must either be a brute fact or causally dependent on some other agent or state of affairs. We might also suppose that an eternal creator-designer is simpler than one that had a beginning to its existence or that will cease to exist at some later time.

The creator-designer would also be *immutable*. If the creator-designer is timelessly eternal, then it must be immutable in a very strong sense. It must not change in any respect, for change of any sort requires time. However, an everlastingly eternal creator-designer could also be immutable in a somewhat weaker but still significant sense. A metaphysically necessary being could not be changed by anything external to itself since this would entail a relation of causal dependence. A perfectly good being will not change in its character. Hence we may conclude that the creator-designer, being perfectly good, will be immutable in character.

Conclusions

Some Reformed thinkers contend that natural theology β cannot prove the existence of God under a description that adequately resembles the God of Scripture. This is not, in the final analysis, a very plausible sort of objection to natural theology β. The most reasonable version of this objection rests on robust theistic descriptivism, but the reasons offered by Reformed theologians for supposing that natural theology β cannot prove robust theism are fairly weak. They rely on largely antiquated and philosophically questionable criticisms leveled against theistic arguments by Hume and Kant.[29] Moreover, we have seen that considerations from inductively based, cumulative case theistic argumentation lend support to the prospects for the arguments of natural theology β generating a robust concept of God and providing rational grounds for the truth of robust theism.

Basic to each of the Reformed models of natural theology outlined in Chapter 2 is the contention that the existence of the true God can be inferred or proved by rational argument. In epistemological terms, reason can arrive at some range of warranted beliefs about the nature of the true God. (As I have emphasized, the project of natural theology β does not require that theistic arguments confer a high degree of warrant on theistic beliefs). In this chapter I have provided a defense of this claim and also suggested how a detailed positive case for robust theism can be developed in a way that circumvents standard Reformed objections. While natural theology β may not be able to deliver the complete Christian concept of God—with its Trinitarian and Christological elements—it does not follow that the concept of God in natural theology β is empty, formal, and abstract as Berkouwer has contended, much less a construction of a false god, as Barth has contended. Nor is natural theology β impaled on the horns of a dilemma between deism and pantheism.

Indeed, what needs to be emphasized is that robust theism involves a fundamentally biblical concept of God, to which God gives witness in the created

---

[29]   For a detailed evaluation of Hume's criticisms of natural theology in the light of the contemporary formulations of theistic arguments, see *In Defense of Natural Theology*, ed. Sennett and Groothuis.

order and rational constitution of human persons. Hence, any proof of robust theism is a confirmation and elaboration of a fundamentally biblical notion. This vindicates a claim we have had occasion to note throughout, namely that natural theology β is not an alternative to divine revelation, but it is grounded in divine revelation, specifically the revelation that God has given of himself in the book of nature. Natural theology β, then, is the reflective product of the human confrontation with the self-revelation of God. The Reformed contention that natural theology β is necessarily defective in its representation of God is without warrant.

This page has been left blank intentionally

Epilogue

In the present work I have examined the place of natural theology in the Reformed or Calvinistic streams of the Protestant theological tradition. The title of the work suggests that the attitude of the tradition has been one of disapproval. There is no doubt that the Reformed tradition exhibits an interesting confluence of theological and philosophical objections to natural theology, especially when Reformed thought is viewed in its more recent historical development from the late nineteenth century to the present day. There have surely been objections to natural theology *in* the Reformed tradition. These objections have sometimes been portrayed as intrinsic to the logic of Reformed theology itself, thereby suggesting a stronger thesis, namely a *Reformed* objection to natural theology. But is there a Reformed objection to natural theology? And if so, how good is it? These have been the central questions of the present study.

The Reformed Endorsement of the Duplex Conception of Natural Theology

I began the present study with a fairly detailed historical survey of the evolution of natural theology in the Reformed tradition. This was designed in part to rebut two popular twentieth-century misconceptions about the Reformed tradition's stance on natural theology. Contrary to the common viewpoint among contemporary Anglo-American philosophers of religion, I argued that there has been a widespread persistent endorsement of the development of theistic arguments within the Reformed tradition, an endorsement rooted in the tradition's acceptance of natural knowledge of God. Contrary to the alternate view among certain Protestant historians and theologians, this endorsement stretches back to the Reformation period. The Reformed endorsement of natural theology among Reformed scholastics represents the development of ideas already present among many of the Protestant Reformers. The popular misconceptions of the Reformed tradition's stance on natural theology have obscured the genuine nature of Reformed concerns over natural theology where they do arise in the tradition.

The historical thesis was also designed to provide an important conceptual framework for the more distinctly philosophical aspect of the work, namely the evaluation of the nature and force of objections to natural theology in the Reformed tradition, as well as their relation to the internal logic of Reformed theology. Behind the Reformed endorsement of theistic arguments lies what I have called the 'duplex conception' of natural theology. Reformed theologians have typically used the phrase 'natural theology' in two distinct but related ways. On the one hand, they have used this phrase to refer to the natural knowledge of God, what I have

labeled natural theology α. This is typically an actual knowledge of God possessed by at least some fallen, unregenerate persons, though this knowledge has been adversely affected to varying degrees by the effects of sin. Natural theology in this sense presupposes and is sometimes equated with natural or general revelation— the manifestation of God in the natural order, including the moral and intellectual constitution of the human person. On the other hand, Reformed theologians use the phrase 'natural theology' to refer to the project of developing rational theistic arguments. I have labeled this natural theology β. Natural theology in this latter sense is of course the sense in which natural theology has dominated discussions in western philosophical theology. In speaking of the Reformed endorsement of natural theology, I have made it clear that representative theologians of the tradition have typically endorsed natural theology in both senses.

The relationship between natural theology α and natural theology β has played an important role in my discussion, as it bears on both the Reformed justification for natural theology β and the interpretation of objections to natural theology β.

As argued in Chapter 2, Reformed theologians typically ground theistic arguments in the natural knowledge of God, rather than view the natural knowledge of God as the product of philosophical argumentation. Of course, this is not to say that theistic arguments are not a source of knowledge of God. Indeed they are so regarded in the tradition. The point is to emphasize that theistic arguments represent the reflective development of an antecedent, more spontaneous natural knowledge of God. Argument is not the sole source of knowledge of God, and our knowledge of God does not begin with the reflective operation of the mind expressed and developed by way of theistic proofs. We begin with a pre-reflective knowledge of God and then proceed to give a rational account of this knowledge by way of theistic proofs. Natural theology β codifies or formalizes natural theology α. As Charles Hodge explained: "The arguments are not designed so much to prove the existence of an unknown being, as to demonstrate that the Being who reveals himself to man in the very constitution of his nature must be all that Theism declares him to be."[1]

This relationship between natural theology α and natural theology β also explains the Reformed appeal to Romans 1:19–20 to provide a biblical justification of the project of natural theology β. The Reformed argument here has usually been indirect. Romans 1:19–20 explicitly affirms natural theology α grounded in a general revelation. Natural theology β is the reflective and systematic development of this biblical datum. Since Scripture affirms both general revelation and the natural knowledge of God, there is a scriptural justification for the project of natural theology β, even though the project is carried out according to a natural *principium*.

---

[1]   Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols, n.d.; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), vol. 1, p. 203.

Understanding Reformed Objections to Natural Theology

The historical account of the Reformed endorsement of natural theology has also played a crucial role in my evaluation of the nature and force of objections to natural theology in the Reformed tradition. In addition to the duplex conception of natural theology, the historical axis of the work revealed an important distinction between the project of developing theistic arguments and the function assigned to such arguments. While the tradition has exhibited consensus on the former, it has exhibited a diversity of viewpoints on the latter. It is this diversity of viewpoints concerning the function of natural theology β that is typically at the heart of the tradition's debate concerning the propriety of theistic arguments. From that vantage point two models are particularly relevant. According to the 'dogmatic model' of natural theology, natural theology β is a project situated within the theological framework of the Christian faith. It presupposes the content of scriptural revelation and the subjective condition of regeneration. According to the 'pre-dogmatic foundations model' natural theology β is an autonomous system of theology functioning largely as a philosophical preamble to and rational basis for dogmatic theology.

Once we distinguish between the *project* of natural theology β and the *function* of natural theology β, we must distinguish between objections that imply a rejection of only some particular model(s) of natural theology β (model-specific objections) and objections that imply a rejection of the project of natural theology β itself (project objections). The failure to recognize or take this distinction seriously has hampered many of the prior attempts at examining the place of natural theology in the Reformed tradition. I suspect that this has been partly due to the ubiquity of the pre-dogmatic foundations model in the western philosophical tradition since the Enlightenment. My aim has been to expose the genuine pluralism regarding natural theology β within the Reformed tradition. From this vantage point, much of the Reformed discontent with natural theology β has been directed to the pre-dogmatic foundations model.

However, the possibility of a project objection to natural theology β is significant. Not all objections are model-specific objections, and clearly the more devastating kind of objection would be a good project objection. So this has been the focus of the book.

The project of natural theology β aims at producing rationally justified or warranted beliefs about God on the basis of human reason. In this way, natural theology β is an *epistemically loaded* project. Its success depends on the epistemic efficacy of theistic arguments. Not surprisingly, all the models of natural theology β outlined in Chapter 2 entail that theistic arguments are epistemically efficacious, that they are or can be a source of justified beliefs or knowledge about God. In looking for a way to think about a project objection, the most straightforward way is to construe a project objection as an objection that directly or indirectly challenges the epistemic efficacy of theistic arguments. Is there a good Reformed project objection to natural theology β?

I examined three major objections to natural theology β. In Chapters 3–5 I examined epistemological considerations from the alleged innate or immediate nature of the natural knowledge of God. The objections that emerge here attempt to sever the connection between natural theology α and natural theology β. This has been an area of on-going discussion in contemporary philosophy of religion in connection with the so-called 'Reformed epistemology' movement spearheaded by Alvin Plantinga beginning in the early 1980s. In Chapters 6–8 I explored objections to natural theology β from the Reformed doctrine of the noetic effects of sin. These represent attempts to attack natural theology β by rejecting or substantially qualifying natural theology α. In Chapters 9–11 I looked at the most direct attack on natural theology β, namely objections to the logic of theistic arguments. Here I examined the contention that theistic arguments fail to demonstrate the existence of the true God and that inductive reformulations of the arguments are unacceptable for theological reasons. Since these three objections are also frequently used to oppose the apologetic deployment of theistic arguments, I have also considered this particular model-specific objection.

Responding to Reformed Objections

In response to each of the three main objections above I have constructed a similar set of critical arguments. In each case I have concluded that the objection does not constitute a project objection to natural theology β unless certain implausible auxiliary assumptions are introduced. Frequently these assumptions are not adequately motivated by the internal logic of Reformed thought. For example, in the case of immediate knowledge of God, one only gets a project objection by adopting a fairly radical thesis about immediacy, namely that immediacy is the sole source of warrant for beliefs about God. The objection that theistic arguments fail as logical demonstrations only constitutes a project objection to natural theology β if we operate with an implausibly high standard for inferential warrant or reject inductively formulated theistic arguments. The appeal to the noetic effects of sin (in its more radical form) only constitutes a project objection if we exclude from view the possibility that natural theology β is a project carried out by the Christian in the context of dogmatic theology. The implausibility of these auxiliary assumptions makes it exceedingly difficult to regard the objections in question as *good* project objections, and their distance from Reformed orthodoxy makes them poor candidates for distinctly *Reformed* objections to natural theology β.

As for the apologetic use of theistic arguments, I have found no good objection to this particular use of natural theology β from considerations related to the innate idea of God, the noetic effects of sin, or the logic of theistic arguments. Some of these objections place constraints on the apologetic use of theistic arguments, but they do not provide sufficient reason to abandon their apologetic use. The nearly exclusive focus on the apologetic propriety of theistic arguments is a perspicuous feature of twentieth-century Reformed criticisms of natural theology

β, but criticisms at this juncture are among the least impressive arguments against natural theology β. They are not project objections, and they are weak as model-specific objections. Arguments at this juncture only gain their plausibility when the apologetic use of theistic arguments presupposes the broader framework of the pre-dogmatic foundations model of natural theology β. Again we see a convergence of Reformed objections to natural theology β and the pre-dogmatic foundations model.

The developed responses in each part of the book have involved several key tiers of argument. I highlight the more substantial insights here by way of brief review.

Response to Objections from the Immediate Knowledge of God

In Part II of the book I argued with considerable detail that theistic beliefs could be based on multiple grounds: inferences (of varying degrees of sophistication), intuition, religious experience, testimony, and Scripture. Much of the discussion concerned different ways in which immediate sources of knowledge of God could interact with inferential knowledge. The possibility of immediate knowledge of God does not create an *either*/*or* dilemma—theistic belief is either immediate knowledge or inferential knowledge—but rather a *both/and* opportunity. Some theistic beliefs might be based on both immediate and inferential sources, where the total degree of warrant for the belief is the sum of the degrees of warrant conferred by each source individually. In other cases, perhaps there are theistic beliefs that derive wholly from immediate sources, whereas others derive exclusively from rational inference. In this way, natural theology β may contribute to a body of knowledge of God by simply adding weight to, confirming, or filling out what we know about God from other sources.

An important consequence should be noted. If theistic beliefs can be based on multiple grounds, which interact in roughly the ways I have just described, then the task of natural theology β is more modest than many have believed. Not carrying the entire epistemic burden, it will suffice for natural theology β if its arguments confer *some* degree of warrant on theistic belief. Strictly speaking, it will not be necessary for such arguments to confer a *high degree* of warrant on theistic belief. Arguments that confer some degree of warrant on theistic belief may combine with other grounds that confer their own degree of warrant on theistic beliefs. The additive effect may boost the overall degree of warrant to what is needed for knowledge. So given the plurality of grounds of theistic belief the project of natural theology β need only be 'weakly epistemically loaded.'

Response to Objections from the Noetic Effects of Sin

The denials of natural knowledge of God associated with Calvin and participants in subsequent discussions on the *imago dei* I found to be inadequate as a basis for thinking that the noetic effects of sin entail the complete absence of all natural

propositional knowledge of God in unregenerate people. I went on to explore the prospects for such a view drawing on insights from contemporary epistemology. I was ultimately unsuccessful in providing the Reformed doctrine of sin with an epistemological construal that entailed that unregenerate persons have absolutely no knowledge of God. However, the main factor here was that—contrary to appearances—the project of natural theology β need not presuppose that unregenerate people actually have any natural knowledge of God. A successful project of natural theology β entails that (a) there are some truths about God that can in principle be known by inferences from the natural order and (b) such inferences are epistemically efficacious for *some* cognizers.

Enter the dogmatic model of natural theology developed in Chapter 8. According to the dogmatic model of natural theology β, theistic arguments represent the reconstruction and systematic development by the Christian, under the guidance of special revelation, of the truths that can in principle be known from general revelation. On this model, natural theology is not a pre-dogmatic foundation to revealed theology, wholly segmented off from the internal dynamics of revealed theology. It is an integral part of the very unfolding of the dogmatic system of theology, as reason is employed in an instrumental manner in the service of faith. Theistic arguments here confirm and develop the biblical testimony to the natural knowledge of God, bring greater clarity and systematization to the doctrine of God, and fortify believers against doubts. The important thing to see here is that contrary to what Barth and others have claimed the Christian who takes up natural theology does not take up a stance of unbelief. He can rightly be viewed as someone who is engaged in the activity of rationally reflecting on his Christian presuppositions.

Response to Objections from the Logic of Theistic Arguments

The objection examined in Part IV of the book suggests that the project of developing theistic arguments cannot produce cogent arguments for the existence of the true God. Upon closer examination the objection turns out to be the charge that theistic arguments fail to logically demonstrate their conclusions in some rationally compelling manner. Of course my argumentation in Part II of the book established that theistic arguments need only be weakly epistemically efficacious to be epistemically relevant, largely because of the potential of rational inference positively interacting with other grounds of theistic belief. Moreover, from the vantage point of the dogmatic model of natural theology, it is not necessary for theistic arguments to generate the kind of certainty ostensibly needed for such proofs if they were to serve as a foundation to revealed theology. Finally, the Reformed reliance on Hume and Kant to dismantle the project of natural theology β is philosophically unpersuasive, as well as incompatible with various features of Reformed theology. Arguments drawn from Hume and Kant are unsuccessful in showing that theistic arguments cannot prove the existence of God under a robust theistic description. I attempted to show that we could indeed arrive at a full-blown

theistic conception once different strands of evidence have been incorporated into a single cumulative case theistic argument.

Conclusions

My primary goal in this work has been a *defense* of the project of natural theology β against Reformed criticisms of that project. However, given the Reformed endorsement of natural theology β outlined in Chapter 1, this defense of natural theology β turns out to be a defense of a particular impulse within the Reformed tradition itself. At the heart of Reformed theology lies the belief that the idea of God and religious orientation is natural to the human mind. The natural knowledge of God is itself ignited by God's general revelation of Himself in the world. If there is a central epistemological insight in the tradition, it is found here, and it is from this vantage point that natural theology receives its basic sanction within the doctrinal framework of the tradition. On the Reformed view, the project of developing theistic arguments is best understood as a multi-tiered rational exploration and reflective elaboration of God's general revelation of Himself in both the Universe and the intellectual and moral constitution of the human person. Such a project is driven by the same goals as dogmatic theology: clarity, systematicity, and completeness. If we take seriously the biblical idea that there is a general revelation in the natural order, one of the tasks of the Christian is to provide a rational account of this revelation. An account of general revelation that is developed within the order of nature itself both confirms the confession of the biblical data concerning general revelation and translates it into understanding.

Clearly I do not take myself to have provided a substantial positive case—biblical or philosophical—for natural theology, though I have provided suggestions as to where fruitful lines of argument might be found. But this has by no means been *just* a defense. The defense has been carried out on the basis of an historical thesis that refutes some popular misunderstandings concerning natural theology in the Reformed tradition, while at the same time providing important conceptual distinctions for assessing the nature of natural theology. The conceptual dimension to the work has addressed a pressing need within Reformed theology to clarify the dynamics of its own debate concerning the status of natural theology and the epistemic efficacy of human reason. But it has equally addressed two often-neglected themes in general philosophy of religion: theological objections to natural theology and the importance of the distinction between the project and functional specification of natural theological arguments. So I take my second goal to have been to clarify the nature of natural theology itself.

So is there a good Reformed project objection to natural theology? No; at least not from among the objections examined in this book. To be sure, there are plausible objections to particular models of natural theology within the tradition. As we have seen, some of these objections converge on the pre-dogmatic model of natural theology. But the project of natural theology, suitably reconstructed

on Christian presuppositions and carried out as part of the dialogue of dogmatic theology, is altogether another matter. I cannot see that any of the objections examined in the book provide a good objection to this approach to the project of developing rational arguments for the existence and nature of God.

Index of Subjects

This page has been left blank intentionally

Index of Persons