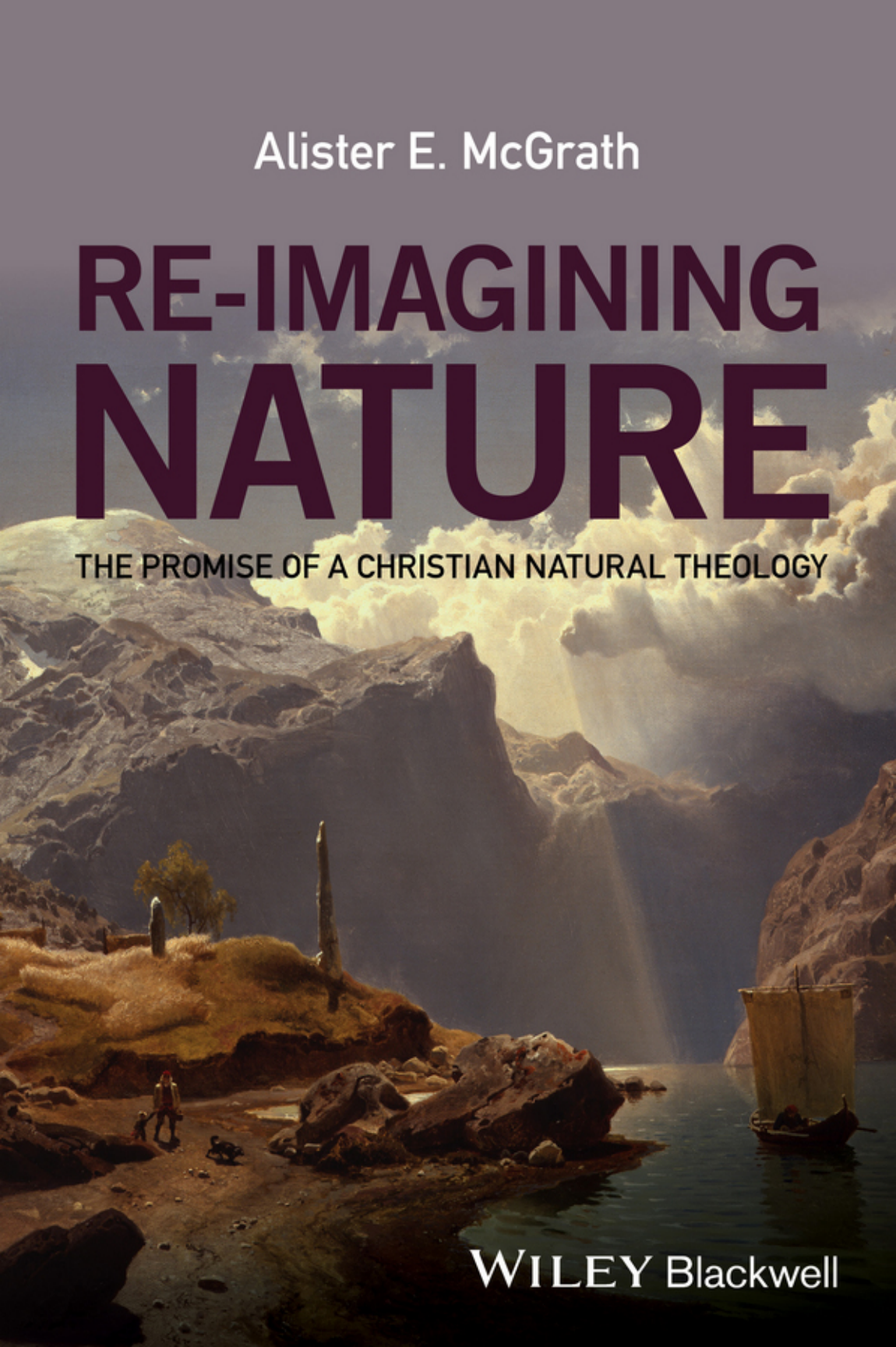
Alister E. McGrath

RE-IMAGINING NATURE

THE PROMISE OF A CHRISTIAN NATURAL THEOLOGY



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"Encounter this book with enormous respect. In this remarkable text, McGrath is judicious, audacious, and perceptive. Setting the entire project of natural theology in an historical context, he weaves together an account of natural theology that is innovative, powerful, and intriguing. Critics and advocates for natural theology alike will have their worldview changed as they encounter this remarkable argument."

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"In this game-changing book, Alister McGrath develops a thick theology of nature from a distinctly Christian point of view. He expertly tackles topics that are underexplored in traditional natural theology, such as the moral and aesthetic ambiguity of nature, emphasising the importance of both rational and imaginative ways of engaging with nature."

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"Being informed about natural theology is essential to any substantive understanding of the relationship of science and theology. The present book nicely sums up and carries further his indispensable contributions to the topic."

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Re-Imagining Nature

The Promise of a Christian Natural Theology

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WILEY Blackwell

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Introduction

Natural theology has never lost its deep appeal to the human imagination. Might the beauty and wonder of the natural world point to a deeper order of things, even if this is only partially glimpsed rather than fully grasped? Does nature point us toward – to use the imagery of Dante – a "hidden path" leading to a "shining world"?[1] Does the idea of God continue to provide a "repository for our awestruck wonderment"[2] at life itself, or the natural world around us? A natural theology is both a response to and an expression of a real experience of the world of nature, which seems to call for further exploration.

This book sets out to explore what a properly Christian approach to natural theology might look like, and how this relates to alternative interpretations of our experience of the natural world. Although I interact with contemporary theological debates about the nature and scope of natural theology, my more fundamental concern is to demonstrate the potential of natural theology in enabling a productive and significant interaction between Christianity and a wider culture, including the natural sciences.[3]

Re-Imagining Nature opens by offering a genealogical account of the six main divergent senses in which the term *theologia naturalis* has been understood in the western intellectual tradition since late classical antiquity. Does such a plurality of construals point to the incoherence of natural theology? Or is there some grander vision of natural theology which is able to accommodate and colligate these six approaches? Exploring the genealogy of

[1] Dante, *Inferno*, 34, 133–5.

[2] Rushdie, *Is Nothing Sacred?*, 8. See also Mancini, *Filosofia della religione*, 41–2, 129–30; Tallis, *In Defence of Wonder*, 1–22.

[3] As I have already dealt recently at some length with the interaction between natural theology and recent theoretical developments in the physical and biological sciences, including an engagement with the substantial research literature in these fields, only minimal reference will be made to these matters in this work: see A. E. McGrath, *A Fine-Tuned Universe*, 111–216; A. E. McGrath, *Darwinism and the Divine*, 185–276.

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natural theology discloses its rich and complex history on the one hand, and subverts narrow and inadequate conceptions of the project on the other.

The recognition of the social construction of such notions as "nature," "science," and "religion," particularly during the early modern period,[4] indicates that there is no predetermined essential form of nature or natural theology; it is rather open to cultural revision and ideological reconstruction, reflecting the social and cultural location of its practice.[5] As C. S. Lewis often remarked, the latest is not always the best; furthermore, "a genuinely new perspective often means embracing and developing an old insight."[6] I argue that a "Christian natural theology project" may be developed which holds together a variety of understandings of the notion as aspects or elements of a coherent greater whole. Such a "thick understanding" of natural theology resonates with some of the fundamental themes of Christianity, allowing a retrieval of forgotten or suppressed approaches to these issues.

Given the impossibility of articulating a natural theology "from nowhere," this work makes a case for developing a specifically Christian approach to natural theology, and exploring how this correlates and connects with its alternatives. The modernist dogma of a single way of understanding the world has, largely due to its lack of evidential warrant, given way to the recognition of multiple perspectives of reality – including an important family of perspectives which are grounded and shaped by the Christian faith. I argue that a "Christian natural theology project" may be developed which holds together these six historical articulations of natural theology *as aspects of a single coherent project*. The form that natural theology takes is critically dependent on its context; my approach allows the marked phenomenological diversity of natural theology to be accommodated within a distinctively Christian theological vision of its grounds and possibilities.

I then turn to consider the critically important issue of the interplay of the imagination and reason in a Christian natural theology. Many writers use the term *sensorium* to designate the amalgam of natural human cognitive capacities, cultural webs of meaning, and accessible evidence which shapes human concepts of rationality in any given situation. Although this notion is important in criticizing naïve notions of a "universal rationality," it lacks the capacity for imaginative engagement that is of critical importance for theology in general, and natural theology in particular. I thus introduce the critical concept of an *imaginarium*, which provides a conceptual

[4] See Demeritt, "What Is the 'Social Construction of Nature'?"; Evernden, *The Social Creation of Nature*, 37–104; P. Harrison, *The Territories of Science and Religion*, 1–19; Gerber, "Beyond Dualism"; A. E. McGrath, *A Scientific Theology*: vol. 1, *Nature*, 81–133.

[5] See Greider and Garkovich, "Landscapes"; Escobar, "After Nature"; C. M. Harrison and Burgess, "Social Constructions of Nature."

[6] Antognazza, "The Benefit to Philosophy of the Study of Its History," 165.

framework for exploring the interplay of the reason and imagination within a Christian natural theology, offering a way of looking at things in which "a creative imagination is wedded to an acute intellect."[7] A purely rational or ideational construal of natural theology – such as that found in many works of systematic theology – will inevitably fail to do justice to the richness of the notion.[8] Vestiges of the modernist suppression of the imagination still haunt the practice of systematic theology, and impoverish our conception of *theologia naturalis*.

Particular attention is paid in this important chapter to the concept of *metanoia* – traditionally translated as "repentance," but more fundamentally designating a graceful re-orientation of the mind, through which the self and the world are seen in a new and more satisfying manner. Natural theology is one of the outcomes of this process of mental renewal and imaginative transformation, in that we come to imagine the natural world in a new manner.

So how does a Christian natural theology cope with the ambiguity and complexity of the natural world? The third chapter notes the difficulties for a natural theology arising from the moral and aesthetic ambiguity of nature, and explores three interpretative strategies that are based on conceiving nature as a book to be read, a picture to be appreciated, and a sign to be understood. Each of these has a long history of use within the Christian tradition, but is capable of further development in dialogue with recent explorations of their potential.

I then move on to deal with questions of motivation and context, noting how the context within which natural theology is undertaken shapes its forms and construals. Among the themes to be considered are the role of industrialization in creating a desire to reconnect with the natural world, the role of a sense of wonder at the beauty and majesty of nature as a gateway to understanding it, and the human quest for an existentially satisfying "big picture" of life, which embraces the world of nature.

The fifth chapter addresses six major concerns about natural theology, identified in conversation and dialogue with critics, including both fundamental protests about the theological legitimacy of the approach (such as that famously articulated by Karl Barth), and wider concerns about the intellectual and cultural viability of the notion in general, and the particular approach that I develop in this study. In each case, I try to give a fair summary of the concern, before offering a response to the issues being raised. This chapter is placed late in this book, thus allowing some of these concerns to be engaged during the exposition of my approach to a Christian natural theology.

[7] Barfield, *Poetic Diction*, 178.

[8] Cf. Barfield, *Poetic Diction*, 28: "Only by imagination therefore can the world be known."

The final chapter explores the promise of a Christian natural theology, and sets out how this "re-imagination of nature" offers the promise of an enhanced and enriched vision of theology itself, as well as enabling a principled and productive dialogue with other intellectual and cultural stakeholders.

This work builds on three earlier interventions in contemporary discussions about the nature and scope of natural theology, based on major academic lecture series in the United Kingdom: the 2008 Richardson Memorial Lectures at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne; the 2009 Gifford Lectures at the University of Aberdeen; and the 2009–10 Hulsean lectures at the University of Cambridge. These were published as *The Open Secret: A New Vision for Natural Theology* (2008); *A Fine-Tuned Universe: The Quest for God in Science and Theology* (2009); and *Darwinism and the Divine: Evolutionary Thought and Natural Theology* (2011). These three volumes laid the deep foundations for this new study, which is essentially a free-standing essay exploring the promise, potential, and problems of a Christian natural theology. Given my substantial level of engagement with the natural sciences in *A Fine-Tuned Universe* and *Darwinism and the Divine*, the present volume focusses on other themes, while noting the importance of a Christian natural theology in challenging the inadequacies of "scientism."

In those three earlier works, I suggested that Christian discussion about natural theology required retrieval of older understandings of the notion needlessly neglected as a result of controversy. There is a clear need for a reconceptualization of the identity and strategy of a Christian natural theology, and for it to be emancipated from polemical agendas which cast a long shadow over any serious discussion of its nature and scope. In particular, I identified four areas in which a refocussing of the concept of natural theology was appropriate for Christian theology:

1 A dogmatic relocation of the concept of natural theology from the domain of "the natural" to that of "the revealed";
2 A replacement of the fundamentally Deistic concept of God associated with the approaches to natural theology which developed in England during the long eighteenth century (1688–1815)[9] with a distinctively Christian vision of God;
3 A fuller recognition of the theological and philosophical significance of the basic psychological truth that the human observer is an active interpreter of the natural world, not its passive spectator;

[9] Black, "Britain and the 'Long' Eighteenth Century, 1688–1815"; O'Gorman, *The Long Eighteenth Century*.

4 An acknowledgment of the importance of the imagination in any Christian encounter with the natural world, particularly in relation to its beauty. John Keats's notion of the "truth of the imagination"[10] may be an imperfect realization of this insight, but it articulates the potential of the human imagination as a truth-bearer.

These four motifs remain embedded within the vision of natural theology which is set out in this volume. Yet my conversations with my critics, subsequently expanded through detailed historical research, has persuaded me of the importance of a fifth theme, hinted at but not fully developed in these three earlier works, which needs to incorporated into an informed discussion of the project of a natural theology:

5 Natural theology is situationally embedded, so that a theology of *nature* exists in an interactive relationship with a theology of *place*.[11] The theory and practice of natural theology in any given historical and cultural context are shaped by its present preoccupations and presuppositions, and its memories of the past.

My study of the perspectives from which nature has been "read" during the last two millennia has made it clear that different cultural locations have developed different "protocols of reading" nature,[12] making it impossible to reflect on the changing shape of natural theology without a sustained engagement with the cultural location of the reader of the "book of nature." Although this work is rich in historical analysis, its ultimate object is not the exploration of how natural theology has developed in various cultural places in the past, but how such past developments might illuminate and inform its theory and practice in the present.

It remains for me to thank my many colleagues at Oxford and beyond who have helped me develop my ideas on natural theology over many years, often by challenging the integrity and propriety of the notion in the first place. Theology is always at its best when undertaken in critical and respectful dialogue, and I owe more to my critics than I can adequately express.

Alister McGrath
Oxford, December 2015

[10] See his letter to Benjamin Bailey, dated November 22, 1817: "I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination." Keats, *Letters*, 67. For comment, see Sallis, *Force of Imagination*, 15–21.

[11] For the basic themes of such a "theology of place," see Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred*; J. Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place*, 59–122.

[12] For this important notion, see Scholes, *Protocols of Reading*.

1

Natural Theology

Questions of Definition and Scope

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

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

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

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

[1] Hesse, *"Mit dem Erstaunen fängt es an,"* 7–10; Falardeau, "Le sens du merveilleux." Evans uses the term "cosmic wonder" to refer to a range of such experiences: Evans, *Why Believe?*, 32.
[2] See Gadamer, *Werke*, vol. 4, 37–42; quote at p. 41: *Curiositas* "ist von *cura*, der Sorge und rühmlichen Sorgfalt, abgeleitet."
[3] H. Miller, *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*, 25.
[4] Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, 22.
[5] Haralambous and Nielsen, "Wonder as a Gateway Experience"; Crowther-Heyck, "Wonderful Secrets of Nature"; Dawkins, *An Appetite for Wonder*; Tallis, *In Defence of Wonder*, 1–22. These are not necessary *outcomes*, in that some are led to one, some to both, and some to neither.

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

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

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

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

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

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

[8] J. J. Collins, "Natural Theology and Biblical Tradition," 3.

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

[10] Antognazza, "The Benefit to Philosophy of the Study of Its History," 165.

The Aim of This Work

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

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

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

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

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

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

[14] Kavanagh, "The Limits of Visualization," 70.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[21] Kapper, "'Natürliche Theologie' als innerprotestantisches und ökumenisches Problem"; Kock, *Natürliche Theologie*, 1–16; 391–5; Jüngel, "Das Dilemma der natürlichen Theologie und die Wahrheit ihres Problems."

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

[23] Jüngel, "Unterbrechung des Weltlebens," 135.

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

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

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

A Brief Genealogy of Natural Theology

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

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

[25] Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 44.

[26] Hutchinson, "The Uses of Natural Theology."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[32] Gerson, "Metaphysics in Search of Theology," 1–2.

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

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

[35] Klauck, "Nature, Art, and Thought."

[36] Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, vii.

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

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

[37] See Augustine, *de Civitate Dei*, VI.V.12.

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

[39] Dihle, "Die *Theologia Tripertita* bei Augustin." More generally, see Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, 22–39; 184–230.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[46] Guy, "La *Theologia Naturalis* en son temps."

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

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

Many today assume that *theologia naturalis* means something like "the enterprise of providing support for religious beliefs by starting from premises that neither are nor presuppose any religious beliefs."[49] Some scholars thus suggest that Sebonde develops an idiosyncratic or unorthodox notion of natural theology[50] which is out of line with modern thinking on the matter. Yet this judgment results from allowing an understanding of natural theology that became prevalent in a later cultural context to determine what is normative for the notion in earlier periods. A more realistic approach might be to see Sebonde's broader understanding of natural theology as normative, with later formulations of the notion representing a restriction or narrowing of its scope.

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

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

[49] Alston, *Perceiving God*, 289.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[55] Lohr, "Metaphysics and Natural Philosophy as Sciences," 290–3.

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

[57] For the problems of such an approach, see H. C. Barrett, "On the Functional Origins of Essentialism."

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

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

[60] Boyer, *The Fracture of an Illusion*, 96. For Boyer, the idea that there exists "some special domain of thought and action that is 'religion'" is a modern delusion.

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

Natural Theology: Six Approaches

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

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

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

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

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

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

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