The Open Secret

The Open Secret: A New Vision for Natural Theology Alister E. McGrath
 ISBN: 978-1-405-12692-2

Additional praise for *The Open Secret*

"For much of the twentieth century natural theology was regarded as intellectually moribund and theologically suspect. In this splendid new book, best-selling author and distinguished theologian Alister McGrath issues a vigorous challenge to the old prejudices. Building on the foundation of the classical triad of truth, beauty, and goodness, he constructs an impressive case for a new and revitalized natural theology. This is a well-conceived, timely, and thought-provoking volume."

Peter Harrison, Harris Manchester College, Oxford

The Open Secret

A New Vision for Natural Theology

Alister E. McGrath

Blackwell
Publishing

BLACKWELL PUBLISHING
350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA
9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK
550 Swanston Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia

First published 2008 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd

1 2008

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

McGrath, Alister E., 1953–
The open secret : a new vision for natural theology / Alister E. McGrath.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-4051-2692-2 (hardcover : alk. paper)—ISBN 978-1-4051-2691-5 (pbk. : alk. paper) 1. Theism. 2. Natural theology. 3. Nature—Religious aspects—Christianity. I. Title.

BL200.M35 2008
211′.3—dc22

2007041410

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Set in 10.5/12.5pt Sabon
by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong
Printed and bound in Singapore
by Markono Print Media Pte Ltd

The publisher's policy is to use permanent paper from mills that operate a sustainable forestry policy, and which has been manufactured from pulp processed using acid-free and elementary chlorine-free practices. Furthermore, the publisher ensures that the text paper and cover board used have met acceptable environmental accreditation standards.

For further information on
Blackwell Publishing, visit our website at
www.blackwellpublishing.com

Contents

Acknowledgments

It is a pleasure to be able to acknowledge those who have contributed to the writing of this volume. My greatest debt by far is to Joanna Collicutt, who was my research assistant on this project, and is now lecturer in the psychology of religion at Heythrop College, London University. Her research for this work focused on John Ruskin, John Dewey, and the biblical material, particularly the call of Samuel, the parables of Jesus, and the Johannine "I am" sayings. She provided expert advice on the psychology of religion, and authored chapter 5, dealing with the cognitive neuropsychology of perception, and some portions of other chapters. She also proposed the title of this work.

I also acknowledge financial support from the John Templeton Foundation, without which this work could never have been written. The argument and approach of this book have been shaped, in part, through significant conversations with Justin Barrett, John Barrow, John Hedley Brooke, Simon Conway Morris, Paul Davies, Daniel Dennett, Robert McCauley, and Thomas F. Torrance. While these scholars may not agree with the approach I have taken in this work, it is appropriate to acknowledge their kindness in discussing some key issues relating to natural theology, and the significance of their views in shaping my analysis of critical questions. I remain completely responsible for errors of fact or judgment in this work.

This work represents a substantially expanded version of the 2008 Riddell Memorial Lectures at Newcastle University, England. It also includes material originally delivered as the 2005 Mulligan Sermon at

Gray's Inn, and the 2006 Warburton Lecture at Lincoln's Inn. I am grateful to both these ancient London Inns of Court for their invitations to speak on the theme of theology and the law, and their kind hospitality. My thanks also to Michelle Edmonds, who suggested the cover illustration for the book; to Jenny Roberts, for her skill as a copyeditor; and to Rebecca Harkin of Blackwell Publishing, for her encouragement and patience as this work gradually took shape.

Alister McGrath
Oxford, June 2007

I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the sea-shore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.

Isaac Newton (1643–1727)

The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something, and tell what it saw in a plain way . . . To see clearly is poetry, prophecy, and religion – all in one.

John Ruskin (1819–1900)

CHAPTER 1

Natural Theology: Introducing an Approach

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
(Psalm 19: 1)

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?
(Psalm 8: 3–4)

For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.
(Isaiah 55: 9)

These familiar words from the Hebrew Scriptures characterize the entire enterprise of natural theology: they affirm its possibility, while pointing to the fundamental contradictions and tensions that this possibility creates. If the heavens really are "telling the glory of God,"[1] this implies

[1] The Hebrew term in Psalm 19: 1 here translated as "tell" can bear such meanings as "declare," "set forth," and "enumerate." See further James Barr, "Do We

The Open Secret: A New Vision for Natural Theology Alister E. McGrath
 ISBN: 978-1-405-12692-2

that something of God can be known through them, that the natural order is capable of disclosing something of the divine. But it does not automatically follow from this that *human beings*, situated as we are within nature, are capable unaided, or indeed capable under any conditions, of perceiving the divine through the natural order. What if the heavens are "telling the glory of God" in a language that we cannot understand? What if the glory of God really is there in nature, but we cannot discern it?

Natural theology can broadly be understood as the systematic exploration of a proposed link between the everyday world of our experience[2] and another asserted transcendent reality,[3] an ancient and pervasive idea that achieved significant elaboration in the thought of the early Christian fathers,[4] and continues to be the subject of much discussion today. Yet it is essential to appreciate that serious engagement with natural theology in the twenty-first century is hindered both by a definitional miasma, and the lingering memories of past controversies, which have created a climate of suspicion concerning this enterprise within many quarters. As Christoph Kock points out in his excellent recent study of the fortunes of natural theology within Protestantism, there almost seems

---

Perceive the Speech of the Heavens? A Question in Psalm 19," in Jack C. Knight and Lawrence A. Sinclair (eds), *The Psalms and Other Studies on the Old Testament*, pp. 11–17, Nashotah, WI: Nashotah House Seminary, 1990. Some medieval Christian writers interpreted this psalm allegorically, holding that Paul's citation of the psalm in Romans 10: 18 implied that the whole psalm was a prophecy of the apostolic preaching under the allegory or image of the created heavens. This view was rejected by Martin Bucer, who regarded this as exegetically implausible: see R. Gerald Hobbs, "How Firm a Foundation: Martin Bucer's Historical Exegesis of the Psalms," *Church History* 53 (1984): 477–91.

[2] Throughout this work, we shall assume – without presenting a detailed defense of – a realist worldview. For a defense of this assumption, see Alister E. McGrath, *A Scientific Theology: 2 – Reality*, London: T&T Clark, 2002, pp. 121–313.

[3] The existence of such a transcendent reality is not universally accepted: see, for example, the position set out by Bertrand Russell, "On Denoting," *Mind* 14 (1905): 479–93.

[4] See especially Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993.

to be a presumption in some circles that "natural theology" represents some kind of heresy.[5]

The lengthening shadows of half-forgotten historical debates and cultural circumstances have shaped preconceptions and forged situation-specific approaches to natural theology that have proved singularly ill-adapted to the contemporary theological situation. The notion of "natural theology" has proved so conceptually fluid, resistant to precise definition, that its critics can easily present it as a subversion of divine revelation, and its supporters, with equal ease, as its obvious outcome. Instead of perpetuating this unsatisfactory situation, there is much to be said for beginning all over again, in effect setting aside past definitions, preconceptions, judgments, and prejudices, in order to allow a fresh examination of this fascinating and significant notion.

This book sets out to develop a distinctively Christian approach to natural theology, which retrieves and reformulates older approaches that have been marginalized or regarded as outmoded in recent years, establishing them on more secure intellectual foundations. We argue that if nature is to disclose the transcendent, it must be "seen" or "read" in certain specific ways – ways that are not themselves necessarily mandated by nature itself. It is argued that Christian theology provides an interpretative framework by which nature may be "seen" in a way that connects with the transcendent. The enterprise of natural theology is thus one of discernment, of seeing nature in a certain way, of viewing it through a particular and specific set of spectacles.

There are many styles of "natural theology," and the long history of Christian theological reflection bears witness to a rich diversity of approaches, with none achieving dominance – until the rise of the Enlightenment. As we shall see, the rise of the "Age of Reason" gave rise to a family of approaches to natural theology which asserted its capacity to demonstrate the existence of God without recourse to any religious beliefs or presuppositions. This development, which reflects the Enlightenment's emphasis upon the autonomy and sovereignty of unaided human reason, has had a highly significant impact on shaping Christian attitudes to

[5] Christoph Kock, *Natürliche Theologie: Ein evangelischer Streitbegriff*, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2001, pp. 392–5. Before any reconstruction of the discipline is possible, he suggests, there is a need to bring about "die Enthäretisierung natürlicher Theologie" (p. 392), a somewhat clumsy and artificial phrase which is probably best paraphrased as "the removal of the stigma of heresy from natural theology."

natural theology. Such has been its influence that, for many Christians, there is now an automatic presumption that "natural theology" designates the enterprise of arguing directly from the observation of nature to demonstrate the existence of God.

This work opposes this approach, arguing for a conceptual redefinition and methodological relocation of natural theology. Contrary to the Enlightenment's aspirations for a universal natural theology, based on common human reason and experience of nature, we hold that a Christian natural theology is grounded in and informed by a characteristic Christian theological foundation. A Christian understanding of nature is the intellectual prerequisite for a natural theology which discloses the Christian God.

Christianity brings about a redefinition of the "natural," with highly significant implications for a "natural theology." The definitive "Christ event" as interpreted by the distinctive and characteristic Christian doctrine of the incarnation can be said to redeem the category of the "natural," allowing it to be seen in a new way. In our sense, a viable "natural theology" is actually a "natural Christian theology," in that it is shaped and made possible by the normative ideas of the Christian faith. A properly Christian natural theology points to the God of the Christian faith, not some generalized notion of divinity detached from the life and witness of the church.[6]

The notion of Christian *discernment* – of seeing things in the light of Christ – is frequently encountered throughout the New Testament. Paul urges his readers not to "be conformed to this world," but rather to "be transformed by the renewing of your minds" (Romans 12: 2) – thus affirming the capacity of the Christian faith to bring about a radical change in the way in which we understand and inhabit the world.[7]

---

[6] This point was stressed by Stanley Hauerwas in his recent Gifford Lectures: Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology*, London: SCM Press, 2002, pp. 15–16: "Natural theology divorced from a full [Christian] doctrine of God cannot help but distort the character of God and, accordingly, of the world in which we find ourselves . . . I must maintain that the God who moves the sun and the stars is the same God who was *incarnate* in Jesus of Nazareth" (emphasis added).

[7] This is about more than cognitive or intellectual change. Thus John Chrysostom argues (in *Homilies on Romans*, 20) that Paul's meaning is not that Christians ought to see the world in a new manner, but that their transformation by grace leads to their seeing the world in such a manner. See the excellent analysis in Demetrios Trakatellis, "Being Transformed: Chrysostom's Exegesis of the Epistle to the Romans," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 36 (1991): 211–29.

The New Testament uses a wide range of images to describe this change, many of which suggest a change in the way in which we see things: our eyes are opened, and a veil is removed (Acts 9: 9–19; 2 Corinthians 3: 13–16). This "transformation through the renewing of the mind" makes it possible to see and interpret things in a new way. For example, the Hebrew Scriptures came to be understood as pointing beyond their immediate historical context to their ultimate fulfillment in Christ.[8] In a similar way the world comes to be seen as pointing beyond the sphere of everyday experience to Christ its ultimate creator.[9]

A Christian natural theology is thus about seeing nature in a specific manner, which enables the truth, beauty, and goodness of God to be discerned, and which acknowledges nature as a legitimate, authorized, and limited pointer to the divine. There is no question of such a natural theology "proving" the existence of God or a transcendent realm on the basis of pure reason, or seeing nature as a gateway to a fully orbed theistic system.[10] Rather, natural theology addresses fundamental questions about divine disclosure and human cognition and perception. In what way can human beings, reflecting on *nature* by means of *natural* processes, discern the transcendent?

This book represents an essay – in the classic French sense of *essai*, "an attempt" – to lay the ground for the renewal and revalidation of natural theology, fundamentally as a legitimate aspect of Christian theology, but also as a contribution to a wider cultural discussion. Natural theology

[8] See Gordon J. Hamilton, "Augustine's Methods of Biblical Interpretation," in H. A. Meynell (ed.), *Grace, Politics and Desire: Essays on Augustine*, pp. 103–19, Calgary, AB: University of Calgary Press, 1990; John Barton, "The Messiah in Old Testament Theology," in John Day (ed.), *King and Messiah in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, pp. 365–79, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998, especially pp. 371–2.

[9] John 1: 14–18; Colossians 1: 15–19; Hebrews 1: 1–8. There are important parallels here with the Renaissance quest for a "natural language," itself grounded in the natural order, capable of representing "that which is" rather than merely "that which is said." See Allison Coudert, "Some Theories of a Natural Language from the Renaissance to the Seventeenth Century," in Albert Heinekamp and Dieter Mettler (eds), *Magia Naturalis und die Entstehung der modernen Naturwissenschaften*, pp. 56–118, Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1978.

[10] See Barr's comments on the scope of biblical conceptions of natural theology: James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993, p. 138.

touches some of the great questions of philosophy, and hence of life. What can we know? What does what we know suggest about reality itself? How does this affect the way we behave and what we can become? These questions refuse to be restricted to the realms of academic inquiry, in that they are of relevance to culture as a whole.

The book thus sets out to re-examine the entire question of the intellectual foundations, spiritual utility, and conceptual limits of natural theology. Such a task entails a critical examination of the present state of the debate, but also rests on a historical analysis. Crucial to this is the observation that the definition of natural theology was modified in the eighteenth century in order to conform to the Enlightenment agenda. As a result, natural theology has come to be understood primarily as a somewhat unsuccessful attempt to prove the existence of God on the basis of nonreligious considerations, above all through an appeal to "nature."

The book is broken down into three major parts. It opens by considering the perennial human interest in the transcendent, illustrating its persistence in supposedly secular times, and describing the methods and techniques that have emerged as humanity has attempted to rise above its mundane existence, encountering something that is perceived to be of lasting significance and value. This is correlated with contemporary understandings of the psychology of perception.

The second part moves beyond the general human quest for the transcendent, and sets this in the context of an engagement with the natural realm that is sustained and informed by the specific ideas of the Christian tradition. Natural theology is here interpreted, not as a general search for divinity on terms of our own choosing, but as an engagement with nature that is conducted in the light of a Christian vision of reality, resting on a trinitarian, incarnational ontology. This part includes a detailed exploration of the historical origins and conceptual flaws of the family of natural theologies which arose in response to the Enlightenment, which dominated twentieth-century discussion of the matter.

The third and final part moves beyond the concept of natural theology as an enterprise of sense-making, offering a wider and richer vision of its tasks and possibilities. It is argued that rationalist approaches to natural theology represent an attenuation of its scope, reflecting the lingering influence of the agendas and concerns of the "Age of Reason." Natural theology is to be reconceived as involving every aspect of the human encounter with nature – rational, imaginative, and moral.

In that this volume offers a new approach which poses a challenge to many existing conceptions of the nature and possibilities of natural theology, in what follows we shall set out a brief account of its leading themes, which will be expanded and extended in subsequent chapters.

"Nature" is an Indeterminate Concept

The concept of natural theology that became dominant in the twentieth century is that of proving the existence of God by an appeal to the natural world, without any appeal to divine revelation. Natural theology has come to be understood, to use William Alston's helpful definition, as "the enterprise of providing support for religious beliefs by starting from premises that neither are nor presuppose any religious beliefs."[11] The story of how this specific understanding of natural theology achieved dominance, marginalizing older and potentially more productive approaches, is itself of no small interest.[12] One of the major pressures leading to this development was the growing influence of the Enlightenment, which placed Christian theology under increasing pressure to offer a demonstration of its core beliefs on the basis of publicly accepted and universally accessible criteria – such as an appeal to nature and reason.

!!

The "Age of Reason" tended to the view that the meaning of the term "nature" was self-evident. In part, the cultural triumph of the rationalist approach to natural theology in the eighteenth century rested on a general inherited consensus that "nature" designated a reasonably well-defined entity, capable of buttressing philosophical and theological reflection without being dependent on any preconceived or privileged religious ideas. The somewhat generic notions of "natural religion" or "religion of nature," which became significant around this time, are themselves grounded

NB. Maximus - no "pure nature"! (And probably not in Aquinas, either...)

[11] William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991, p. 289.

[12] For an introduction, see Alister E. McGrath, "Towards the Restatement and Renewal of a Natural Theology: A Dialogue with the Classic English Tradition," in Alister E. McGrath (ed.), *The Order of Things: Explorations in Scientific Theology*, pp. 63–96, Oxford: Blackwell, 2006.

in the notion of a universal, objective natural realm, open to public scrutiny and interpretation.[13]

It is easy to understand the basis of such a widespread appeal to nature in the eighteenth century. On the one hand, Enlightenment writers looking for a secure universal foundation of knowledge, free of political manipulation or ecclesiastical influence, regarded nature as a potentially pure and unsullied source of natural wisdom.[14] On the other, Christian apologists anxious to meet increasing public skepticism about the reliability of the Bible as a source of divine revelation were able to shore up traditional beliefs concerning God through an appeal to nature.[15]

Relatively recent developments, however, have undermined the foundations of this older approach. Critical historical scholarship has suggested that the Enlightenment is more variegated and heterogeneous than an earlier generation of scholars believed,[16] making it problematic to speak of "an Enlightenment natural theology," as if this designated a single, well-defined entity. It is increasingly clear that the Enlightenment itself

[13] There is a large literature, represented by works such as Charles E. Raven, *Natural Religion and Christian Theology*, 2 vols, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1953; Peter A. Byrne, *Natural Religion and the Nature of Religion: The Legacy of Deism*, London: Routledge, 1989; Nicholas Roe, *The Politics of Nature: Wordsworth and Some Contemporaries*, New York: St. Martins Press, 1992; David T. Morgan, "Benjamin Franklin: Champion of Generic Religion," *Historian* 62 (2000): 723–9.

[14] See the points made by Richard S. Westfall, "The Scientific Revolution of the Seventeenth Century: A New World View," in John Torrance (ed.), *The Concept of Nature*, pp. 63–93, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

[15] The celebrated "Boyle Lectures," delivered over the period 1692–1732, are an excellent example of this approach. For Boyle's own views on natural theology, see Jan W. Wojcik, *Robert Boyle and the Limits of Reason*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997. Note also the older study of Harold Fisch, "The Scientist as Priest: A Note on Robert Boyle's Natural Theology," *Isis* 44 (1953): 252–65. These difficulties were initially hermeneutical, relating to problems in interpreting the text; as time progressed, the rise of critical historical and textual studies raised further concerns about the public defensibility of the Christian revelation. For an excellent study, see Henning Graf Reventloh, *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World*, London: SCM Press, 1984.

[16] See the analysis in James Schmidt, "What Enlightenment Project?" *Political Theory* 28 (2000): 734–57.

CHAPTER 12

Natural Theology and Goodness

Humanity tries to make sense of the world, partly through a quest for a rational explanation of what may be observed, and partly through a search for significance, value, and meaning. Although these two quests are clearly related, they are not the same. Our understanding of the meaning of life has a profound influence on fundamental questions of existence, both ethical and spiritual. In this final chapter to deal with the Platonic triad of truth, beauty, and goodness, we shall use the category of "goodness" to explore the enactive aspects of natural theology. What difference does seeing the natural world, including ourselves, from within the perspective of the Christian faith make to our attitudes and actions?

A central theme of this work has been the need to see things as they really are. This extends beyond our desire to make rational sense of things and to appreciate them properly at the aesthetic level, embracing the essentially ethical question of how right action within the world depends upon rightly seeing that world in the first place. This point underlies Iris Murdoch's insistence, noted earlier (pp. 46–9), upon the permanent place of metaphysics, especially the notion of the transcendent, in any sustainable account of morality. Morality depends upon an acquired capacity to see things as they really are. (Indeed, one could make the related point that divine judgment can be understood as our being forced to see ourselves as we actually are, all illusions and pretences having finally been exposed and removed.) The way in which we "see" the world shapes the moral vision that informs how we act within the world. In what follows, we shall explore this point in greater detail.

The Open Secret: A New Vision for Natural Theology Alister E. McGrath
 ISBN: 978-1-405-12692-2

The Moral Vision of Reality

Goodness, Murdoch argued, is inextricably connected with knowledge of reality – not an impersonal "quasi-scientific" account of the world, but a deeper knowledge of the reality that we inhabit.[1] "As moral beings," Murdoch points out, "we are immersed in a reality which transcends us." The foundation of morality is a capacity to see this reality as it really is, so that "moral progress consists in awareness of this reality and submission to its purposes."[2] This point underlies a natural theology of goodness, which is seen to rest on discerning and acting upon a specific way of "seeing" the world.

For many writers, the concept of "goodness" is of critical importance to any account of human identity, or the basis of social existence. As Charles Taylor argued in his *Sources of the Self*, "selfhood and good, or in another way selfhood and morality, turn out to be inextricably intertwined themes."[3] And however the question of the nature and function of "goodness" is configured, an engagement with nature is inevitable, precisely because humanity exists within nature, possessing natural characteristics – even if these are to be transcended and overcome.[4]

For this reason, Terry Eagleton rightly points out that the universal basis of morality does not lie in some fictional "universal rationality," but in the universal biological nature of humanity, no matter how much this may be shaped by cultural constraints.[5] While Eagleton's analysis is not

---

[1] Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, London: Routledge, 1970, p. 37.

[2] Iris Murdoch, "Vision and Choice in Morality," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supplementary vol. 30 (1956): 32–58; quote at p. 56. For comment, see Lawrence Blum, "Iris Murdoch and the Domain of the Moral," *Philosophical Studies* 50 (1986): 343–67. On the general issue, see Michael DePaul, "Argument and Perception," *Journal of Philosophy* 85 (1988): 552–65.

[3] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 3.

[4] One of the best recent discussions of these issues is to be found in Robert Merrihew Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

[5] Terry Eagleton, *After Theory*, London: Allen Lane, 2003, pp. 115–16. The argument of Marc Hauser, to the effect that human evolution has created a universal moral grammar within our brains that enables us to make rapid decisions about ethical dilemmas, should also be noted here: Marc D. Hauser, *Moral Minds: How Nature Designed Our Universal Sense of Right and Wrong*, New York: Ecco, 2006.

without its difficulties, it indicates unequivocally the need to locate goodness within any account of natural theology. The notions of truth, beauty, and goodness are simply too tightly bound together to allow them to be disconnected, in theory or practice.[6]

Traditionally, any attempt to discern morality within the natural order has been categorized as "natural law." Although subject to all kinds of theoretical and practical criticisms, the notion that nature might be able to disclose an ethic independent of human *fiat* has proved remarkably resilient, for reasons we shall note later. Yet one of its most significant weaknesses is that it is ultimately dependent upon a theory of nature which nature itself cannot supply. What is "natural"?[7] How is this human perception of what is "natural" shaped by historical, cultural, and psychological factors?[8]

indeed!

A Christian natural theology appeals to an understanding of the economy of salvation which allows the foundations to be laid for a concept of natural law.[9] A viable natural theology of goodness is determined and undergirded by a Christian understanding of nature. For this reason, a natural theology of goodness – in common with its counterparts of truth and beauty – is shaped by the contours of the Christian theological tradition.[10]

So what aspects of the Christian vision of nature are of importance to such a natural theology of goodness? A fundamental theme of a Christian doctrine of creation is that the world is *ordered*. This ordering is not limited to the physical structures of the world, capable of being analyzed

Good! (And remember Anscombe)

[6] See the important argument of Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999, pp. 1–53.

[7] Yves R. Simon, *The Tradition of Natural Law: A Philosopher's Reflections*, New York: Fordham University Press, 1992, pp. 41–54. Note especially Simon's comments (pp. 53–4) on the distinction between "native" and "natural," found in the writings of Louis de Bonald (1754–1840).

[8] See the discussion of Philip E. Devine, *Natural Law Ethics*, Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2000, pp. 49–65.

[9] Similar ideas are found in the important study of Jean Porter, *Natural and Divine Law: Reclaiming the Tradition for Christian Ethics*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999, who stresses that Scripture itself provides the means for determining which concept of nature is to be considered as normative.

[10] Rufus Black, *Christian Moral Realism: Natural Law, Narrative, Virtue, and the Gospel*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. (Find out!)

and represented by the natural sciences,[11] in that the notion of the "ordering of reality" clearly possesses both aesthetic and moral dimensions. As medieval theologians regularly pointed out, beauty was partly defined in terms of symmetry and proportionality.[12] Similarly, the concept of ordering has strong moral and legal overtones. Has the world been created with certain norms – a "natural law" – built into its very fabric? This brings us to the intensely controversial question of natural law, which is an integral element of our vision for a renewed natural theology.

Natural Theology and Natural Law

The notion of "natural law" has captivated the imagination of humanity since the dawn of civilization. An integral aspect of pre-Socratic philosophy was the notion that the world embodied certain values, which the wise could identify and use as the basis for living out the good life. The Sophists, for example, tended to treat nature (*physis*) as the ultimate basis of morality, as opposed to human convention (*homologia* or *symbola*). Similarly, Aristotle makes an appeal to the order of nature in determining what forms of human laws and constitutions are to be followed.[13]

The Old Testament shows particular interest in this idea, with the notion of "conformity to a norm" playing a highly significant role in Israel's reflections on the nature of righteousness (Hebrew: *sdq*).[14] The

[11] For the immense importance of this idea, especially in relation to the rise of the natural sciences in a Christian context, see Francis Oakley, *Omnipotence, Covenant and Order: An Excursion in the History of Ideas from Abelard to Leibniz*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984; Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Frame of Mind: Reason, Order, and Openness in Theology and Natural Science*, 2nd edn, Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1989; Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

[12] Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002, pp. 28–42.

[13] Fred D. Miller, *Nature, Justice and Rights in Aristotle's Politics*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, pp. 27–66.

[14] See, e.g., Otto Kaiser, "Dike und Sedaqa. Zur Frage nach der sittlichen Weltordnung. Ein theologische Präludium," *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 7 (1965): 251–75; Heinrich H. Schmid, *Gerechtigkeit als Weltordnung. Hintergrund und Geschichte des alttestamentlichen Gerechtigkeitsbegriffes*, Tübingen: Mohr, 1968.

world is understood to be ordered in a certain way as a result of its divine creation; to act "rightly" is thus to act in accordance with this patterning of structures and events. Emphasis has often been placed on the idea that the divine act of creation involves the imposition of order upon chaos; such ideas can be found throughout the wisdom literature of the ancient Near East.[15] The "ordering of the world," established by God in creation, acts as a theological bridge between natural righteousness and the "righteousness of the law."[16]

The idea that human morality might ultimately be grounded in something built into the fabric of the universe itself has obstinately refused to die out. It possesses a certain intuitive plausibility, even if its conceptual clarification has proved to be immensely difficult. Anselm of Canterbury, for example, saw a fundamental relationship between truth and justice: both, he argued, were grounded in the fundamental notion of rectitude, which was itself grounded in the divinely ordained structures of reality.[17] On this reading, truth could be regarded as metaphysical rectitude, and justice as volitional rectitude. John Calvin held that, despite sin, the human conscience was able to discern the fundamental structures of natural law. "The law of God," he wrote, "is nothing else than that natural law and that conscience which God has engraved within the human mind."[18] The role of natural law in shaping the Christian ethics of the

NB - here again, no patristic history...

[15] See Heinrich H. Schmid, "Jahweglaube und altorientalisches Weltordnungsgedanken," in *Altorientalische Welt in der alttestamentlichen Theologie*, pp. 31–63, Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1974; Stefan M. Maul, "Der assyrische König: Hüter der Weltordnung," in Kazuko Watanabe (ed.), *Priests and Officials in the Ancient Near East*, pp. 201–14. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1999; Michaela Bauks, "'Chaos' als Metapher für die Gefärdung der Weltordnung," in Bernd Janowski, Beate Ego, and Annette Krüger (eds), *Das biblische Weltbild und seine altorientalischen Kontexte*, pp. 431–64. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001.

[16] An important issue explored in David Novak, *Natural Law in Judaism*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

[17] Gottlieb Söhngen, "Rectitudo bei Anselm von Canterbury als Oberbegriff von Wahrheit und Gerechtigkeit," in H. Kohlenberger (ed.), *Sola Ratione*, pp. 71–7, Stuttgart: Friedrich Frommann Verlag, 1970.

[18] Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xx.16. For detailed discussion of this important affirmation of natural law, discerned through the conscience rather than through the reason, see Susan E. Schreiner, "Calvin's Use of Natural Law," in Michael Cromartie (ed.), *A Preserving Grace: Protestants, Catholics, and Natural Law*, pp. 51–76, Grand

(There are some really interesting references here! - 8.1.24)

England:

Caroline Divines – widely regarded as representing a "Golden Age" of Anglican moral theology – has often been noted.[19]

Yet the concept of natural law was at its most potent when used as a weapon against the exaggerated power of human institutions, and particularly tyrannous monarchs. Francisco Suárez (1548–1617) developed a sophisticated theory of natural law, which he applied to issues of political consent and conformity, the question of just wars, and the right of the people to revolt against unjust political systems.

CRITICISM: By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the utility of the notion of natural law was being questioned. In 1897, Oliver Wendell Holmes argued that the real issue was to understand how the courts administered law; there was nothing to be gained from philosophical or metaphysical speculation of any kind. Law could be defined rather neatly as "the prediction of what the courts will do." In 1918, he went further. In his essay "Natural Law," he argued that those jurists who "believe in natural law" existed in a rather "naïve state of mind that accepts what has been familiar and accepted by them and their neighbors as something that must be accepted by all men everywhere."[20] Holmes's views were typical of his age. Natural law was to be regarded as an outmoded intellectual abstraction from an outdated, static notion of nature, called into question by Darwin's theory of evolution. No longer could nature be seen as a permanent entity, embodying values; rather, it was in a state of flux, within

---

Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997. Older studies remain valuable: see, e.g., Gunter Gloede, *Theologia naturalis bei Calvin*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1935, pp. 103–34; Jürgen Baur, *Gott, Recht und weltliches Regiment im Werke Calvins*, Bonn: Bouvier, 1965, pp. 46–9.

[19] See especially Iain M. MacKenzie, *God's Order and Natural Law: The Works of the Laudian Divines*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002. Nevertheless, the period also witnessed increasing secularization of the notion in England: Linda Kirk, *Richard Cumberland and Natural Law: Secularisation of Thought in Seventeenth-Century England*, Cambridge. UK: James Clarke & Co., 1987. For the wider picture of the fortunes of natural law in the early Enlightenment, see T. J. Hochstrasser, *Natural Law Theories in the Early Enlightenment*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 1–37.

[20] Oliver Wendell Holmes, *Collected Legal Papers*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Howe, 1920, p. 312.

which humanity was free to make its own creative (and fundamentally pragmatic) adjustments.[21]

Good point! - Fuller, Rommen

Yet the rise of Nazism in Germany changed all of this – partly by demonstrating the need for a ground of moral judgment that lay beyond arbitrary human convention, and partly by forcing many leading German legal theorists to leave Germany, and settle elsewhere, above all in the United States of America, where they helped forge new approaches to traditional questions. With these developments, a new interest in natural law emerged, which is still a living force today. We shall consider this development in what follows.

The Eternal Return of Natural Law

In 1933, the Nazis seized power in Germany, and promptly set about using the law to impose totalitarian rule. The story of how this happened is of enormous interest, demonstrating how laws established for an essentially democratic purpose could be subverted to other ends, given the necessary political will.[22] As Ernst Wolf remarks in his study of German Protestant attitudes towards these developments, the traditional Protestant notion that law was somehow grounded in objective realities of the world or in social consensus was utterly incapable of responding to the arbitrary enforcement of power by the Third Reich.[23] What could be done? What intellectual opposition could be offered to these developments? Those positivists who defined justice in terms of predicting the judgments of the courts found themselves unable to challenge their legality, precisely because they had lost interest in the moral foundations and goals of positive law.

---

[21] For the development of such criticisms, see Pauline Westerman, *The Disintegration of Natural Law Theory: Aquinas to Finnis*, Leiden: Brill, 1998.

[22] For an outstanding analysis of the issues, see Peter L. Lindseth, "The Paradox of Parliamentary Supremacy: Delegation, Democracy, and Dictatorship in Germany and France, 1920s–1950s," *Yale Law Journal* 113 (2004): 1341–1417.

[23] Ernst Wolf, "Zum protestantischen Rechtsdenken," in *Peregrinatio II: Studien zur reformatorischen Theologie, zum Kirchenrecht, und zur Sozialethik*, pp. 191–206, Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1965.

In 1936, a professional lawyer published a criticism of this trend. Heinrich Rommen (1897–1967) published *Die ewige Wiederkehr des Naturrechts* ("The eternal return of natural law").[24] Rommen, who had been imprisoned briefly by the Nazis for his work with a Roman Catholic social action group, pointed out that Germany's modern dictators were "masters of legality," able to use the legal and judicial systems to pursue their own political agendas. Germany's legal professionals, he argued, were so used to thinking about law in purely positivist terms that they were left intellectually defenseless in the face of the National Socialist threat. In this dire situation, one needed to appeal to a higher authority than the state. Natural law offered precisely the intellectual lifeline that was so badly needed.

It may, not unreasonably, be pointed out that Nazi Germany represents a somewhat extreme situation, which cannot be used to justify the renewal of what, to its critics, is an essentially outmoded theory of law. While there is merit in this observation, the situation in Germany at this time merely highlights an issue which cannot be ignored – namely, whether there are transcendent grounds for concepts of justice and due process, which are not merely the product of human convention. Nor is the relevance of the Nazi situation limited to legal developments of the 1930s; related issues emerged when the Allies sought retribution for those events in the postwar era. The desire to prosecute war criminals at Nuremberg for "crimes against humanity" gave rise to a new interest in natural law. As Anthony Lisska points out, if the notion of crimes against humanity was to have a theoretical foundation, it required a "radically different account of the nature of law from that proposed by the then reigning theory, legal positivism."[25]

Yet the disturbing questions raised by the rise of the Third Reich and its aftermath have not gone away. They are raised again by a "pragmatic" approach to morality, such as that associated with Richard Rorty. On this reading of things, humanity creates its own values and ideas, and is not accountable to any external objectivity (natural law) or internal subjectivity (conscience) for the outcome of this creative process. "We figure out what practices to adopt first, and then expect our philosophers

[24] Heinrich Rommen, *Die ewige Wiederkehr des Naturrechts*, Leipzig: Hegner, 1936.

[25] Anthony J. Lisska, *Aquinas's Theory of Natural Law: An Analytic Reconstruction*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996, pp. 8–9.

(It's interesting to see which sources he has studied...)

to adjust the definition of 'human' or 'rational' to suit."[26] Rorty argues that a consequence of this communitarian or pragmatic approach to truth must be the recognition that

> . . . there is nothing deep down inside us except what we have put there ourselves, no criterion that we have not created in the course of creating a practice, no standard of rationality that is not an appeal to such a criterion, no rigorous argumentation that is not obedience to our own conventions.[27]

Truth and morality are thus matters of social convention, created by human communities. Yet if Rorty is right, what justification could be given for opposing Nazism? Rorty finds himself unable to offer a persuasive justification for the moral or political rejection of totalitarianism. If this is indeed the case, Rorty admits, then it has to be acknowledged that:

> When the secret police come, when the torturers violate the innocent, there is nothing to be said to them of the form "There is something within you which you are betraying. Though you embody the practices of a totalitarian society, which will endure forever, there is something beyond those practices which condemns you."[28]

For Rorty, the truth of moral values depends simply upon their existence and acceptance within society. This view has been severely criticized as adopting an uncritical approach concerning prevailing social conventions. As Richard Bernstein points out, Rorty appears to have done little more than reify social practices, and treat these as being synonymous with "truth," "goodness," or "justice."[29] Or, as Philip Devine notes, Rorty seems incapable of offering a criterion that stands *above* human practice, by which the latter can be judged.[30]

---

[26] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Cambridge. UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989, 194–5, n. 6.

[27] Richard Rorty, *The Consequences of Pragmatism*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minneapolis Press, 1982, p. xlii.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Richard J. Bernstein, *Philosophical Profiles: Essays in a Pragmatic Mode*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986, pp. 53–4.

[30] Philip E. Devine, *Natural Law Ethics*, Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2000, pp. 32–4.

Natural law faces a host of intellectual difficulties, which at times seem overwhelming.[31] Yet Rommen's arguments suggest that it will never cease to appeal to the human imagination, above all in situations of manifest legal corruption, political violence, or cultural manipulation. The idea that there exist standards of justice and goodness which are above those determined, and often invented, by human beings and human institutions represents far more than "metaphysical comfort" (Nietzsche): it constitutes the basis for criticism and reform of otherwise potentially arbitrary or self-serving notions of "the good."

So can those values be identified by direct observation of nature? Although some such vision has always been perceived as attractive, it encounters considerable difficulties, as we shall see in the next section.

The Moral Ambivalence of Nature

The casual reader of William Paley's *Natural Theology* encounters a paean of praise for the goodness of the natural order, deftly – though somewhat selectively – illustrated by luminous examples of the wisdom of God in establishing such an excellent creation. The darker side of nature is conspicuously absent. To be fair to Paley, this was the wisdom of his age. Many writers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century were enthralled by the notion of the moral purity of nature, and hailed its potential to instruct and inspire.[32] The discovery of Tahiti had a profound influence on this debate, with the islands of the South Pacific being widely depicted as a naturalist paradise, perhaps reflecting a golden age in the history of humanity which could be recovered even in an increasingly industrialized England.[33]

!!!

(haha - well, it's clear McG is only dipping into this... But also true that there are big debates!)

[31] For example, consider the intractable question, much debated among contemporary Thomists, as to whether we apprehend the human good by theoretical or practical reason. On this debate, see Patrick Lee, "Is Thomas's Natural Law Theory Naturalist?" *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 71 (1997): 567–87.

[32] Niels Bugge Hansen, *That Pleasant Place: The Representation of Ideal Landscape in English Literature from the 14th to the 17th Century*, Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1973.

[33] Bernard Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific, 1768–1850*, London: Oxford University Press, 1960.

Yet the darker side of nature could not be ignored. Where Wordsworth and other Romantics saw nature as a moral educator, Tennyson argued that the only ethic evident within nature was that of the struggle for survival. The familiar lines from Canto 5 of his *In Memoriam* make this point powerfully:

> Man . . .
> Who trusted God was love indeed
> And love Creation's final law –
> Though Nature, red in tooth and claw
> With ravine, shrieked against his creed.

Tennyson's point was simple: those who spoke naively and sentimentally of God's love being expressed in nature had to offer a convincing explanation of its vicious cycles of violence, pain, and suffering. The so-called "naturalist" tradition in modern American fiction also reflects this recognition of a deep moral ambivalence within nature itself; nature is represented as a destructive, mechanistic Darwinian world within which it was assumed that most modern Americans struggled to prosper and survive.[34]

The changing views of John Ruskin on the beauty and moral goodness of nature are an especially important testimony to this growing awareness of the moral ambiguity of nature.[35] In the 10 years intervening between the publication of the second volume of his *Modern Painters* (1846) and the third (1856), Ruskin began to be troubled by the darker side of nature. In his earlier period, he expressed a Wordsworthian optimism towards nature, quoting the famous lines from *Tintern Abbey*: "Nature never did betray/The heart that loved her." Yet as he looked at nature, Ruskin began to see different things. Where once he had seen glory, now he saw gloom – a presaging of the dark, pessimistic, brooding, tone of his *Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century*. The "great cathedrals of the earth" have become a wasteland, a symbol of doubt and metaphysical terror. As John Rosenberg points out, it is clear that a major shift has taken place in how nature was "seen":

[34] V. L. Partington, *The Beginnings of Critical Realism in America*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1930, p. 327.

[35] The best account of this is found in John D. Rosenberg, *The Darkening Glass: A Portrait of Ruskin's Genius*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, pp. 22–45.

> The tone of the first two volumes is pious and lyrical; that of the later volumes is humanistic and tragic. In *Modern Painters* I and II, Ruskin looked at the peaks of mountains and saw God; in *Modern Painters* III, IV, and V he looks at their bases and sees shattered rocks and impoverished villages. The face of the Creator withdraws from the creation, and in its place man emerges as a tragic figure in the foreground of a still potent, but flawed, nature.[36]

Ruskin's concerns cannot be dismissed at this point. His own changing attitude to the natural order merely reinforces the importance of his own emphasis on the importance of "seeing" nature – a nature which turns out to be highly ambiguous, open to multiple interpretations. This is evident in the final volume of his *Modern Painters*, in which Ruskin mounts a deft yet decisive criticism of Paley's natural theology – perhaps one of the most powerful ever to have been penned. Ruskin invites his readers to reflect on the goodness of God, as seen from a landscape in the Scottish highlands:

> It is a little valley of soft turf, enclosed in its narrow oval by jutting rocks and broad flakes of nodding fern. From one side of it to the other winds, serpentine, a clear brown stream, drooping into quicker ripple as it reaches the end of the oval field, and then, first islanding a purple and white rock with an amber pool, it dashes away into a narrow fall of foam under a thicket of mountain-ash and alder. The autumn sun, low but clear, shines on the scarlet ash-berries and on the golden birch-leaves, which, fallen here and there, when the breeze has not caught them, rest quiet in the crannies of the purple rock.

Thus far, Ruskin might be taken to expound a little simplistically, if elegantly, the capacity of nature to witness to God's goodness. Although the style may be Ruskin's, the ideas are Paley's. Yet abruptly, the passage breaks into a more somber reflection on the less attractive aspects of that same rural scene:

> Beside the rock, in the hollow under the thicket, the carcase of a ewe, drowned in the last flood, lies nearly bare to the bone, its white ribs protruding through the skin, raven-torn; and the rags of its wool still flickering from the branches that first stayed it as the stream swept it down.[37]

---

[36] Rosenberg, *The Darkening Glass*, p. 22.

[37] John Ruskin, *Works*, ed. E. T. Cook and A. Wedderburn, 39 vols, London: Allen, 1903–12, vol. 7, p. 268.

The dead sheep is a potent symbol of the darker side of nature, the seeming irrationality, ugliness, and wastefulness of life, glossed over by Paley – yet demanding to be accommodated convincingly by any viable natural theology.[38]

The tensions caused by the apparent moral ambivalence of nature was exacerbated by the rise of Darwinism. Darwin himself found the existence of pain and suffering in the world to be an unbearable intellectual and moral burden, particularly in the light of his own protracted (and still unexplained) illness.[39] The death of his daughter Annie at the tender age of 10 unquestionably deepened his feeling of moral outrage over this issue.[40]

In 1961, Donald Fleming put forward the important thesis that Darwin's experience of suffering was an integral element of his own loss of faith. Fleming held that Darwin came to believe that "modern man would rather have senseless suffering than suffering warranted to be intelligible because willed from on high."[41] Pain and suffering were to be accepted as the meaningless outcome of the evolutionary process; this, however disagreeable, seemed preferable to the alternative – namely, that God either inflicted suffering himself, or permitted it to be inflicted by others.

The idea that evolution took place according to certain general principles or laws, with the precise details left to chance, never entirely satisfied Darwin, seeming to leave many intellectual loose ends and open up difficult moral issues – not least, the immense wastage of life attending the process of natural selection. But it seemed to Darwin to be less troubling than the alternative – that "a beneficent and omnipotent God would

[38] The issues raised by the problem of evil for the Victorian era are well summarized by James Moore, "Theodicy and Society: The Crisis of the Intelligentsia," in Richard J. Helmstadter and Bernard Lightman (eds), *Victorian Faith in Crisis: Essays in Continuity and Change in Nineteenth-Century Religious Belief*, pp. 153–86, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990.

[39] For a study of the causes of Darwin's illness, characterized by intermittent "excitement, violent shivering and vomiting attacks," see Ralph E. Colp, *To Be an Invalid: The Illness of Charles Darwin*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977.

[40] This has been beautifully documented by Randal Keynes, *Annie's Box: Charles Darwin, His Daughter and Human Evolution*, London: Fourth Estate, 2001.

[41] Donald Fleming, "Charles Darwin, the Anaesthetic Man," *Victorian Studies* 4 (1961): 219–36.

have designedly created the *Ichneumonidae* with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars."[42] At least this could be put down to an accident of nature, rather than purposeful divine design.

Responses may, of course, be made to these concerns. John Haught, for example, offers a response to the moral dilemmas emerging from a Darwinian view of life, appealing to a "self-emptying God" who "participates fully in the world's struggle and pain."

> The picture of an incarnate God who suffers along with creation [affirms] that the agony of living beings is not undergone in isolation from the divine eternity, but is taken up everlastingly and redemptively into the very "life-story" of God.[43]

It is a thoroughly incarnational, trinitarian vision of God,[44] which offers Christians a framework by which they may view and even make limited sense of the complex Darwinian picture of an emergent, suffering world.

The eschatological aspects of the Christian tradition also provide at least a modicum of illumination of the situation. As noted earlier (pp. 198–209), the concept of the "economy of salvation" challenges the implicit assumption that we may directly map the empirical world, observed around us, onto the idea of "God's good creation." Nature must be observed through "significance spectacles," which allow us to see the natural world as decayed and ambivalent – not as immoral, but as a morally variegated entity whose goodness is often opaque and hidden, at times overshadowed by darker and less comfortable insights, yet illuminated by the hope of transformation.

---

[42] Letter to Asa Gray (1860): *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, 3 vols, London: John Murray, 1887, vol. 2, pp. 310–12.

[43] John Haught, *God After Darwin: A Theology of Evolution*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001, pp. 49–50.

[44] Marilyn McCord Adams points out the conceptual richness of such an approach to evil, noting its "pedagogical advantage of displaying the nuance and texture of Christianity's theological resources, as well as exhibiting its explanatory power": Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999, especially pp. 155–202; quote at pp. 205–6.

This theme is perhaps best explored liturgically, rather than theologically or philosophically.[45] The liturgy of Advent weaves together the great themes of Christology, soteriology, and eschatology, by focusing on Christ's double "advent" to deliver the world from its bondage to sin and decay. At Advent the church celebrates Christ's first coming and awaits his second, affirming God's justice and presence in spite of the apparent absence of justice and divine presence in the world. The Old Testament prophets clearly recognized the natural consequences of sin, and looked forward to the Messianic Age as an era of both ecological and social purity. This expectation was subsequently expanded into Christian eschatology, which affirmed that Christ's ministry was marked by signs of his coming victory over natural decay and corruption (Luke 7: 18–23, John 11: 17–27).

At Advent, the church thus looks backward to Christ's earthly ministry, undertaken in this morally ambivalent world, while also looking forward to the full renewal of heaven and earth, to the making of all things new, and to the coming divine presence that will finally bring about the restoration of goodness and the ending of suffering and pain (Revelation 21: 1–5).

Yet the issue here is not so much about the intellectual difficulties raised by the moral ambivalence of nature. It is about how we may "see" nature in a way that expands and enhances our moral vision, enabling us to act correctly both in relation to nature, and within the natural order. Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) elevated alleged biological facts (such as the struggle for existence, natural selection, and the survival of the fittest) to prescriptions for human moral conduct.[46] The outcome was Social Darwinism, now regarded, despite its early popularity, as intellectually indefensible and ethically unacceptable.[47] Spencer believed that nature disclosed the "good" by moving towards it, so that, in a certain sense, it might be said that "evolution is a process which, in itself, generates

[45] For what follows, see the study of Telford Work, "Advent's Answer to the Problem of Evil," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 2 (2000): 100–11.

[46] Michael Ruse, *Evolutionary Naturalism*, London: Routledge, 1995, pp. 225–31.

[47] Peter G. Woolcock, "The Case Against Evolutionary Ethics Today," in Jane Maienschein and Michael Ruse (eds), *Biology and the Foundation of Ethics*, pp. 276–306, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

value."[48] Similarly, Julian Huxley (1887–1975) tried to develop an ethical system based on what he regarded as Darwinian evolution's more progressive aspects.[49] Neither Spencer nor Huxley managed to evade the trap of G. E. Moore's "naturalistic fallacy," which argues that moral values cannot be held to rest upon natural observables.[50]

The point here is that we cannot trace a straight and narrow trajectory, proceeding directly from the present empirical reality that we call "nature" and the ideal that we call "the good," identifying observation of natural patterns and processes with explicit moral values or norms.[51] In order to function as a moral resource, nature therefore needs to be "seen" and interpreted in a certain way, which is disclosed by and enacted within the Christian faith. As we have emphasized, the Christian "sees" nature through a lens which is shaped by the fundamental themes of the Christian faith.

The optimism of earlier thinkers, who believed that nature disclosed patterns of excellence and morality that exceeded any devised by human lawmakers, has now been left behind. The question is no longer "How may we imitate natural patterns?" but "How may we transcend them?" We shall consider this further in the next section.

The Knowability of Goodness in Nature

Earlier, we noted how the idea of a transcendent good plays a significant role in providing stability and authorization for human ethics. Instead of being bound to concepts of justice or goodness that had achieved tem-

[48] Ruse, *Evolutionary Naturalism*, p. 231.

[49] See here Paul L. Farber, *The Temptations of Evolutionary Ethics*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994, p. 136. Farber comments that Huxley's "ethics was a projection of his values onto the history of man," so that his "naturalism assumed the vision he pretended to discover."

[50] For a more comprehensive discussion, see R. J. McShea and D. W. McShea, "Biology and Value Theory," in Jane Maienschein and Michael Ruse (eds), *Biology and the Foundation of Ethics*, pp. 307–27, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

[51] See, e.g., the approach in Hugh Rice, *God and Goodness*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 48–63.

porary cultural predominance, or were being enforced by those in power, an ethic could be articulated which, at least in principle, resonated with the deeper structures of the universe.

This, however, raises the question that has pervaded the present work: how may the natural order be interpreted, in order to disclose the identity of the good? Nature is open to multiple interpretations at the moral, as well as at the intellectual and aesthetic, level.[52] Any attempt to construct or develop a concept of good by the mere observation of nature will yield a perplexingly inconsistent variety of notions. This is especially evident from the ultimately abortive attempts to construct ethics on the basis of Darwinism, in the belief that this somehow represents an authentically natural moral system.[53] Nature can be "read" in ways that appear to endorse such morally questionable notions as oppression, violence, and eugenics.[54]

Yet unless there is an alternative, coherent way of "reading" nature, humanity will simply end up by imitating its patterns. For this reason, it is important to return to a central theme of this work: that the Christian tradition offers a way of seeing nature, which allows its goodness to be discerned. It offers a way of making sense of the apparent moral diversity within nature, by insisting that we view it through the interpretative framework of the economy of salvation. As Oliver O'Donovan argues, if morality is about the human "participation in the created order," then Christian morality is about humanity's "glad response to the deed of God

[52] George C. Williams, "Mother Nature Is a Wicked Old Witch!" in Matthew H. Nitecki and Doris V. Nitecki (eds), *Evolutionary Ethics*, pp. 217–31, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995.

[53] See Farber, *The Temptations of Evolutionary Ethics*, p. 136. Farber comments that Huxley's "ethics was a projection of his values onto the history of man," so that his "naturalism assumed the vision he pretended to discover." For further comment, see Michael Ruse, "Is Rape Wrong on Andromeda?" in *The Darwinian Paradigm: Essays on Its History, Philosophy, and Religious Implications*, pp. 209–46, London: Routledge, 1989.

[54] The emergence of "social Darwinism" is especially significant in this connection: see Robert C. Bannister, *Social Darwinism: Science and Myth in Anglo-American Social Thought*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979. For the suggestion that such ideas can be found in Darwin himself, see Richard Weikart, "A Recently Discovered Darwin Letter on Social Darwinism," *Isis* 86 (1995): 609–11.

which has restored, proved and fulfilled that order."[55] Yet that process of restoration is ongoing, not complete. Nature is not perfect, but it in the process of being transformed – a transformation which may be discerned by the eye of faith.

The Christian tradition insists that all that is true, beautiful, and good finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. O'Donovan rightly points out that the incarnation of the Word is presented as "creation restored and renewed,"[56] thus offering a means of "seeing" nature in a certain moral way. This is not an alien or external way of seeing things, forced upon nature; it is about allowing nature to be viewed and understood from the standpoint of its *Urbild*, "through whom all things were made."

This is a point that will be familiar to the readers of Stanley Hauerwas. Even as early as 1971, Hauerwas had come to appreciate the importance of acting within a world which was accessible to the senses – a world that could be seen. In an important critique of "situation ethics," Hauerwas appropriated Iris Murdoch's observation that we can act only in a world that we can see.[57] Hauerwas thus argues that we need a framework or lens through which we may "see" the world of human behavior.[58] This, he insists, is provided by sustained, detailed, extended reflection on the Christian narrative:

> The primary task of Christian ethics involves an attempt to help us see. For we can only act within the world we can see, and we can only see the world rightly by being trained to see. We do not come to see just by looking, but by disciplined skills developed through initiation into a narrative.[59]

---

[55] Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986, p. 76.

[56] Ibid., p. 143.

[57] Iris Murdoch, "Vision and Choice in Morality."

[58] See Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection*, Notre Dame, IN: Fides Publishers, 1974. For Hauerwas on this point, see Arne Rasmusson, *The Church as Polis: From Political Theology to Theological Politics as Exemplified by Jürgen Moltmann and Stanley Hauerwas*, Lund: Lund University Press, 1994, especially pp. 190–351.

[59] Stanley Hauerwas, "The Demands of a Truthful Story: Ethics and the Pastoral Task," *Chicago Studies* 21 (1982): 59–71; quote at pp. 65–6.

As a result of exercising this discipline of "seeing" things as they really are, Hauerwas argues, "the church serves the world by giving the world the means to see itself truthfully."[60] Once more, we discern the pattern of thought that we have argued to be fundamental to a renewed natural theology: the Christian tradition, focusing and culminating in Jesus Christ, as the lens through which nature is to be seen.

The outcomes of such ways of looking at nature can be illustrated from the ministry of Francis of Assisi (1181–1226), widely regarded as the most popular of Catholic saints. Although it would be an exaggeration to suggest that Francis's attitude to nature was informed by a well-developed theology, there is no doubt that certain controlling insights governed his thought, especially in relation to the created order. Francis's celebrated love for flowers and animals must never be confused with an infantile sentimentality, but is to be seen as an expression of a theology of creation that affirms both the goodness of creation, and the interconnectedness of the entire created order.[61] Each aspect of nature is affirmed, and its value to humanity noted:

> Be praised, my Lord, by brother fire
> By him we are lightened at night
> And he is fair and cheerful and sturdy and strong.
>
> Be praised, my Lord, by our sister, mother earth
> She sustains and governs us
> And brings forth many fruits and colored flowers and plants.[62]

[60] Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983, pp. 101–2.

[61] Francis here reacts against contemporary forms of dualism that held that matter was intrinsically evil, and was thus to be shunned by those pursuing the spiritual life. See Claire Taylor, *Heresy in Medieval France: Dualism in Aquitaine and the Agenais, 1000–1249*, London: Royal Historical Society, 2005. See further Thomas B. Stratman, "St. Francis of Assisi: Brother to All Creatures," *Spirituality Today* 34 (1982): 222–32; Per Binde, "Nature in Roman Catholic Tradition," *Anthropological Quarterly* 74 (2001): 15–27.

[62] Francis of Assisi, "Canticum fratris solis vel Laudes creaturarum," in Kajetan Esser, OFM., *Die opuskula des hl. Franziskus von Assisi*, Neue textkritische edn, Rome: Editiones Collegii S. Bonaventurae ad Claras aquas, 1976, pp. 128–9; my translation.

The use of the language of "brother" and "sister" to refer to aspects of nature expresses an understanding of value and interdependence, grounded in a unitary vision of reality.

Thus far, we have explored how the Christian faith allows us to retrieve a meaningful account of the goodness of nature. Yet in closing, it is also important to note how this allows us to blunt the force of one of the challenges often brought against a theistic ethics – the so-called "Euthyprho Dilemma."

The Discernment of Goodness: The Euthyphro Dilemma

As we have already stressed, a Christian natural theology allows the trans-traditional human quest for goodness to be understood, and its limits identified.[63] The general human quest for truth, beauty, and goodness is easily accommodated within such a natural theology, which is able to offer an account of its origins, and a prescription for how it might find its goal. The generalized category of "nature" itself is incapable of bearing the metaphysical weight that is required if it is to be the foundation of a notion of "goodness." However, if nature is "seen" as creation, the situation is somewhat different. This recognition entails the acceptance of a new ontology, which holds that things in general, and above all human beings, possess a *telos* or purpose other than one which they conceptually set for themselves.

The importance of a Christian natural theology for an engagement with the notion of goodness can be illustrated from the resolution which it enables of the so-called "Euthyphro dilemma."[64] This is formulated and explored in Plato's dialogue of that same name, which explores the basis of morality and sanctity. The dialogue tells of Socrates meeting Euthyphro, a young theologian, at the entrance to the law courts. It turns out that Euthyphro – like Socrates himself – has been charged with "impiety" on account of a case that he is bringing against his father, who he alleged to have murdered a laborer on their estate at Naxos. A discussion ensues about what is "good" or "sacred." Euthyphro suggests a criterion:

[63] See Alister E. McGrath, *A Scientific Theology: 2 – Reality*, London: T&T Clark, 2002, pp. 92–7.

[64] Alister E. McGrath, *A Scientific Theology: 1 – Nature*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001, pp. 214–18.

"what is pleasing to the gods is holy, and what is not pleasing to them is unholy." Socrates responds that the gods might differ about what they consider right and wrong, so that what will be pleasing to one god might be displeasing to others. This point, of course, reflects the polytheism of the era, and cannot be transferred with conviction to a monotheist context.

Euthyphro then offers a new definition: "holiness is what the gods all love, and its opposite, unholiness, is what the gods all hate." Socrates then responds with the famous question: "Is that which is holy loved by the gods because it is holy, or is it holy because it is loved by the gods?"[65] In other words, do the gods endorse a standard of morality that already exists, and is independent of their will; or do the gods create those standards of morality? The usual formulation of this dilemma takes a slightly different form, as follows:[66]

> *Either*: a right action is right because God approves (or commands) it;
> *Or*: God approves (or commands) a right action because it is right.

If the "dilemma" is to have any force, the alternatives presented here are clearly intended to exhaust the options. The first approach asserts the dependence of a moral action on God, the second its independence.

Yet the dilemma gains its force precisely because we are asked to consider the relationship between two allegedly independent entities: what *human beings* recognize as good, and what *God* recognizes as good. The dilemma forces us, through the terms in which it is posited, to choose between human and divine conceptions of goodness or justice. But if these can be shown to be related to each other in any way, the force of the dilemma is lost. The choice we are forced to make is then seen as false. As we have seen in our exploration of the Christian reflection on the

[65] Plato, *Euthyphro*, 10a. For the text, see John C. Hall, "Plato: *Euthyphro* 10a1–11a10'," *Philosophical Quarterly*, 18 (1968): 1–11; Richard Sharvy, "Euthyphro 9b–11b: Analysis and Definition in Plato and Others," *Noûs*, 6 (1972), 119–37.

[66] See Paul Faber, "The *Euthyphro* Objection to Divine Normative Theories: A Response," *Religious Studies* 21 (1985): 559–72; Peter Geach, "Plato's *Euthyphro*: An Analysis and Commentary," *Monist*, 50 (1966): 369–82; Mark McPherran, "Socratic Piety in the 'Euthyphro'," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 23 (1985): 283–310.

implications of creation in relation to the *imago Dei* (pp. 190–7), there is a congruence between divine notions of truth, beauty, and goodness and proper human notions of the same on account of the creaturely status of humanity.[67]

(Ok, but this discussion ends too soon...)

Conclusion to Part III

In this chapter, we have laid an emphasis upon "seeing" good, linking this with our overall vision of natural theology as seeing things as they actually are. Nature may seem mysterious, even unknowable; the natural theology we have developed in this work declares that nature, though ultimately unknowable, is still capable of being known to be good. The fundamental argument of this work is that the Christian tradition makes it possible to "see" or "behold" nature in such a way that its otherwise opaque or ambiguous truth, beauty, and goodness may be perceived.

Natural theology is fundamentally the specific human perception of nature that is enabled and elicited by the Christian theological vision. This act of tradition-informed "seeing" cannot be limited to a rational explanation of what is observed, but extends beyond this to include its impact upon the human imagination and emotion. Our rational, aesthetic, and moral visions are all shaped by the Christian tradition, and brought into contact with the world of the here and now, which is to be observed and appreciated, and within which we are called to act.

Iris Murdoch once spoke of "the calming, whole-making tendencies of human thought," which, while respecting singularities, is able to transcend these through generating a comprehensive vision of the world.[68] A renewed Christian natural theology provides us with such a conceptual net to throw over our experience of the world – whether rational, moral, or aesthetic – in order that we may at least live with its seeming contradictions, and yearn for its future transfiguration. It enables us to affirm and value the singularities of nature, while at the same time disclosing the

[67] For some interesting Jewish responses to the dilemma, see Michael J. Harris, *Divine Command Ethics: Jewish and Christian Perspectives*, London: Routledge, 2003, pp. 3–25.

[68] Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, London: Penguin, 1992, p. 7. On the importance of such singularities, see Alister E. McGrath, *A Scientific Theology: 3 – Theory*, London: T&T Clark, 2003, pp. 34–43.

deeper patterns of truth and reality that lie beneath its surface. To use Isaac Newton's engaging image, which serves as an epigraph for this work: we should indeed examine and appreciate the beauty of individual pebbles and shells on the shoreline, while realizing that a great ocean of truth lies beyond.[69]

[69] David Brewster, *Life of Sir Isaac Newton*, new edn, revised W. T. Lynn, London: Tegg, 1875, p. 303.