LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

Eleutheria: John W. Rawlings School of Divinity Academic Journal

Volume 8
Issue 1 *Sacred and Civic Interplay*

Article 22

July 2024

Review of Natural Theology: Five Views by James K. Dew Jr. and Ronnie P. Campbell Jr.

Dennis Nicholson
Liberty University, djnicholson@liberty.edu

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Abstract

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Cover Page Footnote

M.Div. Christian Thought at Liberty University (2026 expected)

Dew, James K., Jr. and Ronnie P. Campbell Jr., eds. *Natural Theology: Five Views*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2024. 304 pp. $18.89.

Just as the term *apologetics* has become a horror and a byword to serious academics of all persuasions, so also the discipline of natural theology tends to attract intense scrutiny, skepticism, and ridicule. On the one hand, naïve natural theologians leverage the conclusions of the discipline as a battering ram that, in their view, demolishes skepticism. On the other hand, philosophers eschew it for lacking rigorous argumentation and theologians for its reliance on lofty human reason. As the dust settles on the battered landscape, one wonders what the point of all this conflict was. What is natural theology and why is it so important? How should theologians and philosophers approach the discipline, or should they? If so, what methods should they follow? In *Natural Theology: Five Views*, editors James K. Dew Jr. and Ronnie P. Campbell Jr. survey the scarred battlefield through the perspectives of five contributors of varying persuasions. What emerges is a comprehensive and scintillating work, one that offers a much-needed primer to the discipline of natural theology and a substantive contribution to current conversations in the field.

Charles Taliaferro takes up the task of defending a contemporary view of natural theology, which he defines as "philosophical reflection on God based on reasoning that does not rely on revelation" (15). On this view, natural theologians are ambassadors representing the Christian faith to its detractors. They point skeptics towards features of reality that demand explanation and invite them to consider whether Christianity provides "greater explanatory power" for these features than the other worldviews on offer. In particular, Taliaferro highlights the features of causation, contingency, and consciousness as lacking a compelling account on naturalism. He then summarizes three lines of argumentation—the cosmological and teleological arguments along with the argument from consciousness—which together provide an abductive case for at least some form of theism (16-17). Taliaferro presents his argument persuasively with nuance and sensitivity, though one might wonder, as Alister McGrath notes, whether Taliaferro's stated goal of defending Christian faith runs against his commitment not to rely on revelation (34).

Batting for the Catholic view, Fr. Andrew Pinsent situates natural theology as reasoning about God that "lacks special sources" such as Scripture and the tradition of the church (58). Unlike revealed theology, natural theology involves "unaided reason" rather than "reason illuminated by faith" and focuses its study on creation and God as creator rather than salvation and God as Triune Savior (59). In short, it is study about nature rather than supernature, although these categories are not so clean (60-61). Pinsent argues that supernature is a kind of life that objectively shares in the divine nature through a special work of God and

subjectively finds its roots in divine Love. Nature, on the other hand, lacks both the objective and subjective aspects of this special work (65-68). Nonetheless, natural subjects cannot help but declare the glory of the God who created them, and natural objects likewise proclaim his handiwork. Natural theology therefore can be divided into three categories: (1) a subjective natural understanding of objectively natural things, (2) a subjective natural understanding of objectively supernatural things, and (3) a subjective supernatural understanding of objectively natural things (68). Pinsent concludes the chapter by providing some illuminating reflections about how each of these categories can undergird a robust natural theology (68-72). Yet his position does face the serious challenge, as articulated particularly by McGrath and Paul K. Moser, of the implausibility on non-Catholic ontologies of a "state of pure nature," somehow nestled "between sin and grace" (97).

McGrath seeks to retrieve a classical view of natural theology, which "offers us both a rational account" of theology as well as "a theological re-imagining of nature" (104). This definition contrasts with contemporary formulations of the discipline, which assume a "neutral account of human nature." These approaches, McGrath argues, are situated in "the late seventeenth century and [...] the cultural and intellectual context of that period." (107) In some sense, one is better served by speaking of multiple natural theologies, each "reflecting the social and cultural location in which they emerge" and arising out of particular contextual concerns, sometimes Christian, sometimes not (109). Still, these various theologies arise out of a central, "bidirectional process" between talk about nature and talk about God (111). In particular, contemporary discussions surrounding science and religion, especially in the works of John Polkinghorne, provide resources for a robust natural theology that affirms the legitimacy of science and brings it into conversation with the resources of the Christian tradition. Though some, including Moser and John McDowell, rightly critique the lack of engagement with the limits of rationality in his account, McGrath helpfully cracks open the windows to let the fresh winds of imagination sweep through what can otherwise be a stifling, esoteric field.

In contrast to these largely optimistic accounts of natural theology, Moser "aim[s] to deflate the pretensions" of the discipline insofar as it claims to lay purchase on the God of Christianity (153). Like a seasoned appraiser wary of imitation jewels, Moser scans various arguments for the existence of God, including the ontological, teleological, and cosmological arguments, and identifies chinks in their supposedly pristine surfaces. This discussion paves the way for Moser's central question: "*Which* god is in view when one offers an argument of natural theology?" (161) The various theistic arguments offer know-*that* knowledge of "God's reality" rather than the know-*who* knowledge of "God as a

personal agent of direct acquaintance" (162).[1] In contrast, Moser argues that a Scriptural approach to asserting God's existence centers around the I-Thou relationship between humanity and a transcendent God and thus on "morally relevant evidence wherein one meets God in interpersonal experience" (164). Such arguments will not have "universal rational cogency," but will succeed in drawing hearers to a true love of God (171). Thus, natural theology is valuable only in "conceptual and "intellectual" terms—persisting in it can save neither theologians nor their hearers. Yet, for McDowell specifically, the question remains whether or not Moser's alternative is profitable, given that specific religious experiences "differ substantively" and it is unclear why Christian ontology should be preferred as an explanation for these phenomena (191).

Rounding off the range of perspectives on natural theology, McDowell argues for the Barthian view, asserting that natural "theologizing learns its discursive language in deeply theologically problematic ways" (209). In some sense, for Barth natural theology is not *bad theology*; rather, it is not theology at all (212)! Theology draws from God's self-revelation in Christ, which is his commitment "to be God *for* the creature" (214, emphasis mine). Those who attempt to theologize autonomously from this self-revelation are therefore simply not doing Christian theology. This conclusion does not undercut the presence of God in the world; instead, it acknowledges the "historically and materially situated" nature of all theological knowledge and ensures that the Church's reflection on general revelation does not focus on each natural "phenomenon in and of itself" but rather on God's self-mediation in and through those phenomena (219). McDowell sheds much-needed light on the murky conversation surrounding Barth's view of natural theology, though it is crucial to note that what Barth addresses is only one swatch of the possibilities of natural theology rather than the whole palette (238). Perhaps a dogmatic "no!" towards natural theology leaves us more vulnerable to its misuses than a reflective rejection of contemporary approaches would.

Ultimately, *Natural Theology* manages to tread the careful balance between depth and nuance in its coverage of the major happenings in the field of natural theology. Students of theology and philosophy will appreciate the clear structure of the book, the summative introduction and insightful conclusion, and the clarity and sensitivity with which each of the authors write, while theologians in the field will no doubt appreciate the novel contributions provided by each chapter, as well as the interaction between the positions. Moreover, while many so-called "five views" books tend to gloss over interdisciplinary engagement owing to considerations of space, this work addresses a number of salient points of contact between natural theology and other fields, while remaining focused on

[1] I am indebted to Jacob Haley, a close friend, for the distinction between know-*that* and know-*who* in this context.

the topic at hand. Alister McGrath's chapter, for example, contains an illuminating section about how natural theology can contribute to conversations in philosophy of science (117-120). Such interactions between disciplines provide a crucial, holistic view of the questions under study, and they serve Christian thinkers and the church at large.

Two minor criticisms of the volume are as follows. First, though the responses to each perspective provide an opportunity to trace the contours of disagreement in the field, these responses are often quite lengthy and arduous to follow. Perhaps this observation only stands in contrast to the lucidity of the main chapters; nonetheless, the book could have benefited greatly had the responses been slightly shorter. Second, the book is primarily addressed to Christian readers, and its arguments are situated within Christian ontology and ethics (262). Taliaferro, for instance, couches his argument within a larger apologetic for theism rather than addressing larger conversations with unbelievers in the field (20). This point is perhaps more of a suggestion than a criticism, but a higher degree of inter-religious dialogue could sharpen the disputes within natural theology and heighten the discipline's impact. Perhaps each perspective could have addressed how their view interacts with other faith traditions and their appropriation of natural theology.

Notwithstanding these concerns, Dew and Campbell's work provides a detailed map of the discipline of natural theology for students and scholars alike. *Natural Theology: Five Views* is an indispensable guide which will shape scholarship and the academy for years to come.