

The Impact of
Natural and Revealed Theology
Upon One's View of
Nature and God

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Outline

- Historical Overview of Development and Use of both Natural and Revealed Theology
- Challenges to English Natural Theology
- Case Study: Impact of Natural and Revealed Theology on Thinking of Charles Darwin and Asa Gray
- Final Thoughts

Historical Overview

Natural & Revealed Theology

- Natural Theology grew out of the rationalism of the Greeks
- Revealed Theology grew out of the holy books of the Hebrews
- Natural Theology starts with observations of nature and employs reason to provide proof for the existence of God.

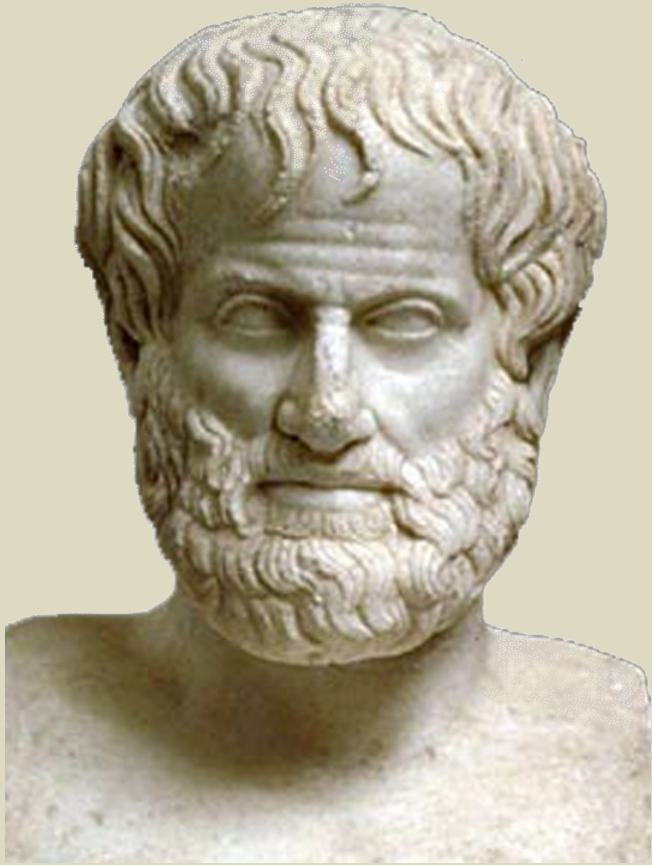
Greco-Roman Thought

Aristotle (384-322 BC)

Physics, Book VIII (350 BC) and

Metaphysics, Book XII (350 BC)

Argument of the Unmoved Mover. This Unmoved Mover produces motion by being loved, which produces all the order seen in the heavens and earth. This Unmoved Mover is God who “is a living being, eternal, most good.”



Greco-Roman Thought



Cicero (106-43 BC) in the *On the Nature of the Gods* (45 BC) compared the orrery mechanical device, which predicted the positions of planets, to the more amazing movement of the heavens

Revealed Theology

- Hebrews
- Nature declared "the glory of God" rather than a proof of God.
- Rather than focusing on the God of creation (Elohim),
- they focused on the Yahweh or the name too holy to pronounce.
 - This was the God of covenants, relationships, moral responsibility, and history (prophecy).

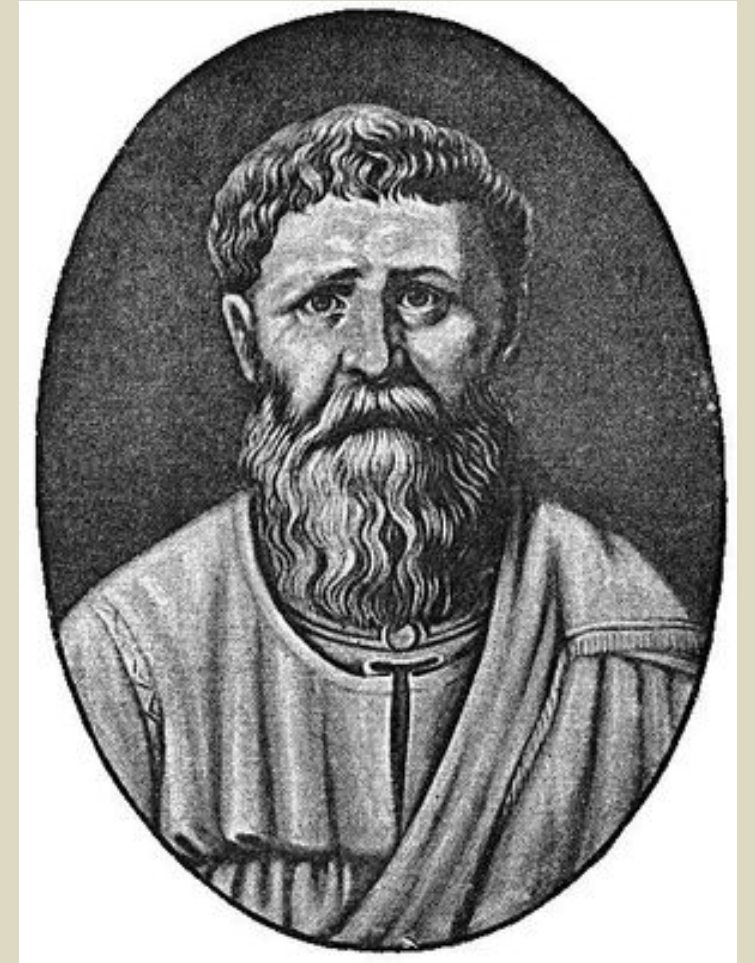
Early Church Fathers



- Christianity grew out of this revealed theology tradition.
- Justin Martyr (100-165 AD) in his *First Apology* (c156 AD) presented life of Jesus as foretold in books of Prophets as a way to confront the pagans.

Augustine (354-430 AD)

- By the time of Augustine, Christian theologians begin contrasting knowing by reason and knowing by faith.
- As Augustine stated in his *Confessions*, BK. 7, he choose to “give preference to the Catholic faith” because not all church teachings could be demonstrated and not all can understand the rational proofs.



From Augustine to Thomas

- The eighth to the twelfth centuries were dominated by the monasteries and their meditative practices.
- In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Europe saw the founding of the universities, the beginning of Scholasticism, and Latin translations of ancient Greek scholars, especially Aristotle.

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1276)

- Best known response to Aristotle
- Both natural and revealed theology
- Thomas' thoughts are recorded *The Summa Contra Gentiles* and *The Summa Theologiae* (around 1270).



Thomas Aquinas

3-Way Hierarchical Approach to God

- The *Summa Contra Gentiles* was written as manual to aid missionaries to those pagans who did not accept authority of Christian scripture.
- Job 26:14 – “Lo, these things are said in part of his **ways**: and seeing we have heard a little drop of his **word**, who shall be able to **behold** the thunder of his greatness?” (*Douay-Rheims translation of Vulgate*)

Thomas Aquinas

Summa Theologiae

- *The Quinque viae*, Five Ways, or Five Proofs, which are five arguments regarding the existence of God:
 - the argument of the unmoved mover,
 - the argument of the first cause,
 - the argument from contingency,
 - the argument from degree,
 - and argument from design.
- Once reach conclusion that there is a First Being (God), naturally to inquire into the conditions of His existence.

Thomas Aquinas

Natural Theology

- Four disadvantages of knowing God only by Natural Theology
 - Only a few would be able to do the serious study required.
 - Takes a long time.
 - “The infirmity of our judgement.”
 - Real truth about God comes by faith through revelation.

Natural Theology in English-Speaking Protestant World

- Success of Newtonian physics in mathematically explaining planetary motions within a mechanical model,
- Focused English natural theological arguments on contrivances (construction or design)

Boyle Lectures (1692-1965, 2004-Present)

- The British chemist Robert Boyle (1627-1691) not only gave us the phrase “clockwork universe” but he also endowed the Boyle Lectures.



Boyle Lectures (1692-1965, 2004-Present)

- Beginning in 1692, the Boyle Lectures were to employ natural theology “to defend the Christian religion against those he considered ‘notorious infidels, namely atheists, deists, pagans, Jews and Muslims, not descending lower to any controversies that are among Christians themselves.’”
- Used findings of new science to formulate classical arguments from design leading to the designer (God)
 - Astronomy (Newtonian mechanics)
 - Anatomy (blood circulation)

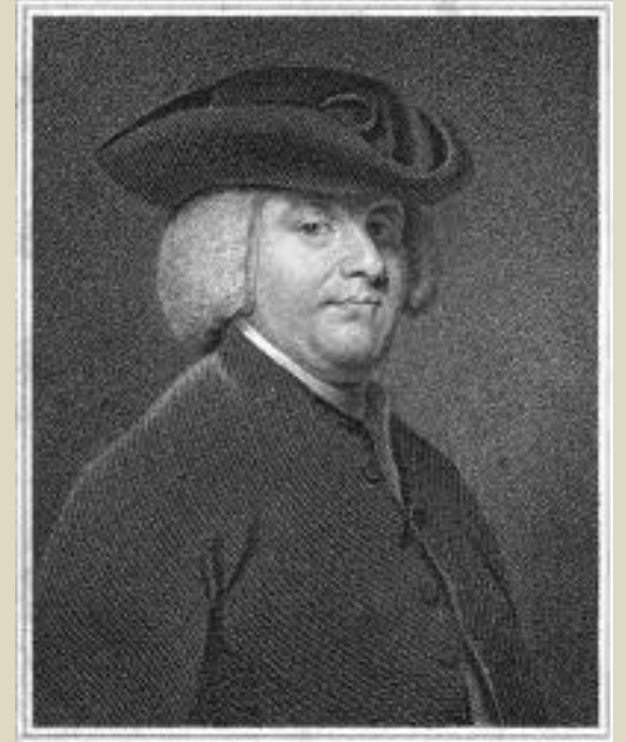
Early Boyle Lectures

New Applications

- What new science could not explain meant these areas showed the existence and providence of God.
- Very dangerous ground

Rev. William Paley (1743-1805)

- *Natural Theology; or Evidence of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, Collected from the Appearances of Nature* (1802).
- Brought up to date the science of the early Boyle Lectures
- Focused his arguments mostly on the contrivances of the biological world.



Rev. William Paley (1743-1805)

- *Natural Theology*
 - By beginning his work with finding a watch in a heath, Paley brought up to date the arguments of Cicero.
 - As Paley stated, “Every indication of contrivance, every magnification of design, which existed in the watch, exists in the works of nature, of being greater and more, and that in a degree which exceeds all computation.”

Paley and Young Charles Darwin

- Paley's *Natural Theology* soon became the standard text in British higher education.
- In fact, Charles Darwin studied it at Cambridge University. As Darwin stated in his *Autobiography*, "...I was charmed and convinced of the long line of argumentation."

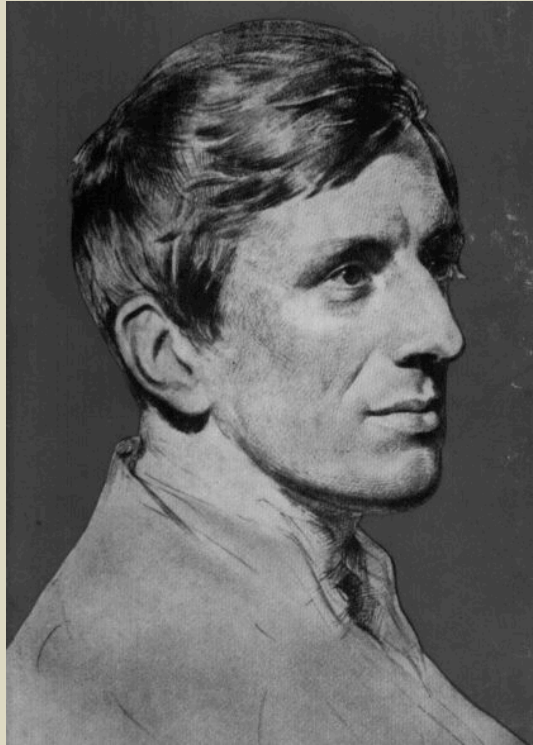
Problems in the Eden of English Natural Theology



David Hume (1711-1776)

- In *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), Hume presented
 - Philosophical attack on English natural theology
 - Little immediate impact on English Natural Theology

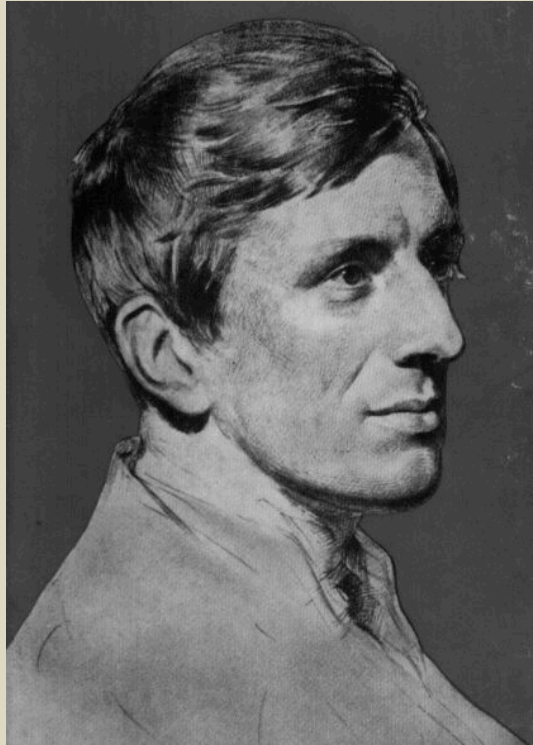
Problems in the Eden of English Natural Theology



John Henry Newman
(1801-1890)

- Newman was originally an academic and Anglican priest at Oxford University.
- In 1845, he converted to Catholicism
- In 1854 he became the founding rector of the Catholic University of Ireland.

Problems in the Eden of English Natural Theology



John Henry Newman
(1801-1890)

- Newman began his tenure at Catholic University by giving a series of lectures to the University community which were collected into *The Idea of a University Defined and Illustrated in Nine Discourses Delivered to the Catholics of Dublin in Occasional Lectures and Essays Addressed to the Members of the Catholic University*
- Two lectures, delivered in 1855, concerned faith and science.

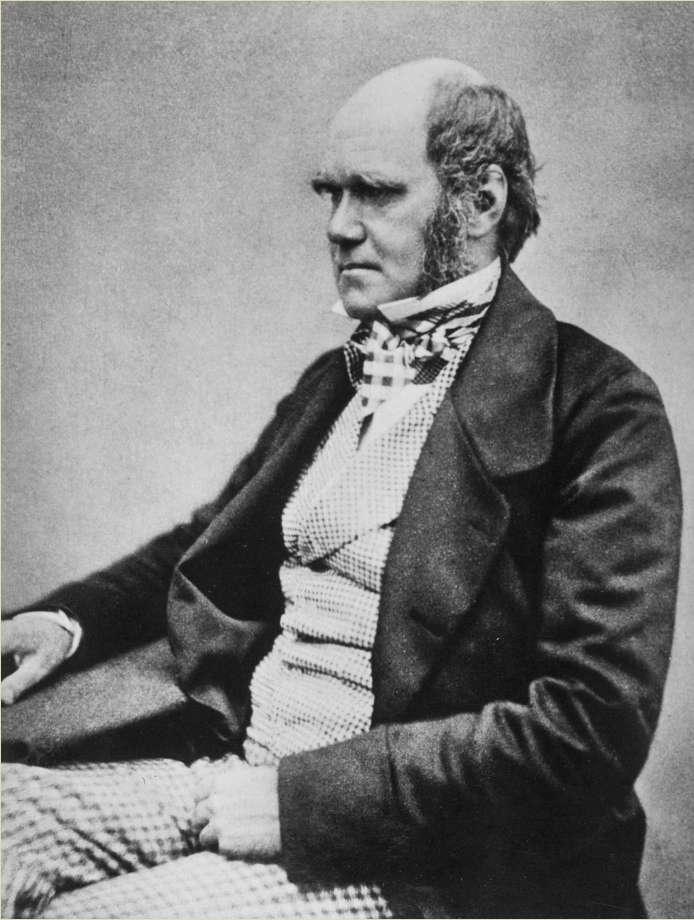
Newman on Natural Theology

- Criticized natural theology because natural theology taught only the power, wisdom, and goodness of God.
- But "What does Physical Theology tell us of duty and conscience?...what does it teach us of even of the four last things, death, judgment, heaven, and hell, the mere elements of Christianity?..."

Newman on Natural Theology

- “I say Physical Theology cannot, from the nature of the case, tell us one word about Christianity proper; it **cannot be Christian**, in any true sense, at all....”
- As Newman said in The Tamworth Reading Room letters, "I believe that study of Nature, **when religious feelings is away**, leads in mind, rightly or wrongly, to acquiesce in the atheistic theory, as the simplest and easiest."

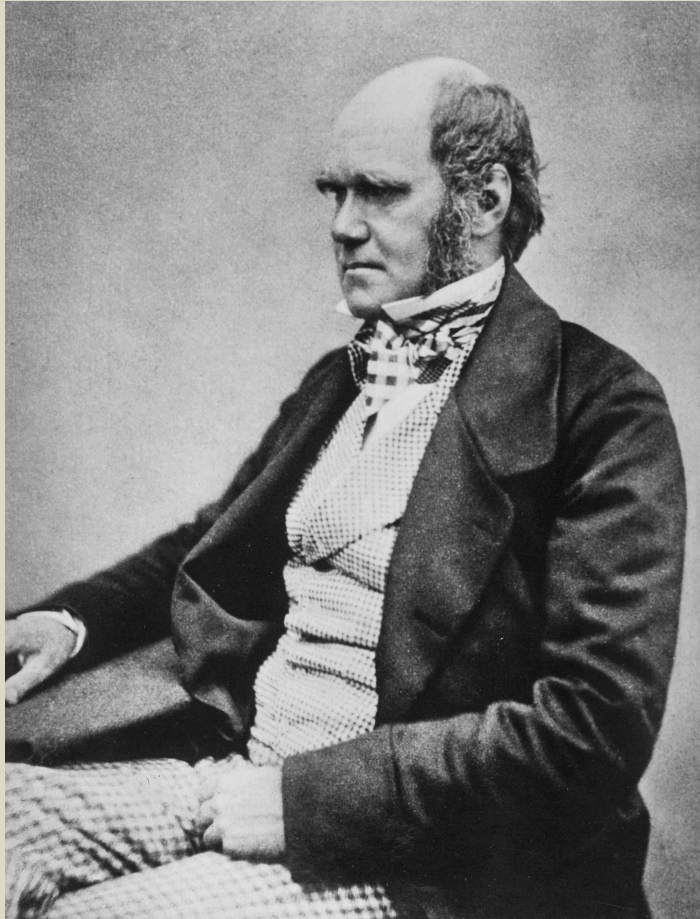
Problems in the Eden of English Natural Theology



- *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life.*(1859)
- Challenged the natural theology of Paley in several ways.
 - A natural mechanism for the apparent design in nature.
 - It challenged the idea that every aspect of nature was perfectly designed

Charles Darwin (1809-1882)

Case Study: Darwin and Gray Argue Teleology



Charles Darwin (1809-1882)



Asa Gray (1810-1888)

Charles Darwin (1809-1882)

- Graduated from Cambridge in 1831
- Selected to be the intellectual companion of Captain Robert FitzRoy on the HMS Beagle (1831-1836)
 - While the Beagle surveyed the coastlines, Darwin explored on land making extensive collections.
- At the end of the voyage, Darwin spent the next 20-some years having experts analyze his collections.

Charles Darwin (1809-1882)

- As Darwin received feedback on his collections, he began formulating the origin of new species through natural selection.
- He shared his developing ideas with four scientists who became his dear friends:
 - British botanist and explorer Joseph Dalton Hooker (1817-1911)
 - British geologist Charles Lyell (1797-1875)
 - English comparative anatomist Thomas Henry Huxley (1825-1895)
 - American botanist Asa Gray (1810-1888)

Asa Gray (1810-1888)

- Most important American botanist of the 19th century.
- In 1831, he received his MD from Fairfield Medical School, Connecticut.
- From 1842-1873, he served as Fisher Professor of Natural History at Harvard University.
- He was the only American that Darwin brought into his inner circle.

Asa Gray (1810-1888)

- Gray arranged for the publication of the first American edition of *On the Origin of Species* and remained a staunch supporter of Darwin in America.
- Gray collected his reviews and articles about Darwin and his theory into *Darwiniana: Essays and Reviews Pertaining to Darwinism* (1876).

Gray on Evolution and Teleology

- In *Darwiniana*, Gray not only defended evolution but argued that “natural selection not inconsistent with natural theology” and that there was even an “evolutionary teleology.” [chapter titles in *Darwiniana*].
- When Gray looked at nature he saw design and the work of God: “...we think that a theistic view of Nature is implied in his book....gradatory, orderly, and adapted forms in Nature argue design....variation has been led along certain beneficial lines.”

Darwin on Evolution and Teleology

- When Darwin saw nature, Darwin was repelled by what he saw:
- “There seems to me too much misery in the world. I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent & omnipotent God would have designedly created the Ichneumonidae with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars, or that a cat should play with mice.” Charles Darwin, *The Correspondence of Charles Darwin* 8, 1860 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 224.

Why Such Radically Different Views of Nature?

- Darwin
 - Began with Paley
 - he was seeing the characteristics of God from the characteristics of nature. Darwin was repelled by the type of God implied by nature “red in tooth and claw.”
 - saw the either/or proposition of either God has done everything or God has done nothing beyond setting the laws of nature in motion

Why Such Radically Different Views of Nature?

- Gray did not begin with Paley.
- Gray described himself as “one who is scientifically, and in his own fashion, a Darwinian, philosophically a convinced theist, and religiously an acceptor of the ‘creed commonly called the Nicene,’ as the exponent of the Christian faith”.

Why Such Radically Different Views of Nature?

- Gray knew the attributes of God from scripture and could see them reflected in nature even with its waste and suffering just as he could see God in the joys and suffering of humans.
- Gray took a more global approach to all of nature by seeing design in an overall plan with some specific details the result of contingency or chance.

Final Thoughts

- As Thomas realized, natural theology is a difficult undertaking requiring a lot of time and study in classical philosophy as well as science. It helps to have a guide.
- As Newman realized, the use of natural arguments in a mechanical model of the universe has a tendency to lead to a physical way of thinking that can lead to Deism and Atheism.
- As Darwin showed, natural theological arguments must give a realistic picture of nature, showing the design as well as the suffering.

Final Thoughts

- As Gray realized, natural theological arguments may point to God but to know true characteristics of God you need revealed theology (scripture).
- As Gray showed, combining scripture and natural theology can lead to seeing God's involvement in nature.
- In conclusion, natural theology does not appear to be a "silver bullet" that always leads to God. Without revealed theology, a distorted view of God's nature can result.

Thank You