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Biblical Studies*

NATURAL THEOLOGY

A REASSESSMENT

Andrew Ter Ern Loke



“This is the best single-authored, one volume work available defining and defending natural theology against a host of philosophical and theological objections. Loke’s work is clear, systematic, fair-minded, and compelling.”

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With this work, Andrew Loke stands out as a leading contemporary defender of natural theology. He presents a remarkably comprehensive yet accessible case, engaging multiple disciplines while thoughtfully addressing biblical concerns and contemporary philosophical and theological objections with impressive depth and clarity.

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This book provides a welcome assessment of historical and contemporary efforts in natural theology. But it’s not just a well-wrought survey: the author also makes a thoughtful positive case for the ongoing viability of the project.

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In this accessible volume, Andrew Loke offers us a comprehensive account of the arguments of natural theology set in their historical contexts. Assessing the validity and limitations of these approaches, he provides a nuanced defense against internal and external critics of its vital role for Christian theology. His study should prove immensely valuable to a wide readership.

—David Fergusson, *Regius Professor of Divinity, University of Cambridge, UK*



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Natural Theology

Natural Theology: A Reassessment offers corrections to widespread misinterpretations of the authoritative sources of Christian theology and shows that these sources affirm a traditional view of natural theology that refers to what can be rationally believed about God without using religious doctrines as premises. Contrary to popular misconceptions, Hume and Kant did not successfully rebut the arguments of natural theology, which are still being defended today. This book develops a more rigorous deductively valid formulation of the Cosmological, Teleological, and Moral Arguments for the existence of God and shows how the truth of their premises can be defended, thus demonstrating the soundness of these arguments which show that God exists. Using a unique approach which engages with philosophical theology of both analytic and continental traditions, it offers new arguments to address long-standing problems in epistemology of theology concerning foundationalism, epistemic circularity, divine transcendence, the culturally variant notion of human reason, the lack of consensus among experts, and the accusation of anthropomorphism and ontotheology and provides a thorough response to theological objections, the god-of-the-gaps objection, and the objection that arguments are open to revisions. The author develops an interdisciplinary approach involving theology, philosophy, and science to move the discussion ahead in a new and significant way.

Andrew Ter Ern Loke is an associate professor in the Department of Religion and Philosophy and Research Fellow in the Centre for Sino Christian Studies at Hong Kong Baptist University, and an elected Fellow of the International Society for Science and Religion.

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Natural Theology

A Reassessment

Andrew Ter Ern Loke



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For Robert Lawrence Kuhn
May it lead us Closer to Truth



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Preface

My main motivation for writing this book is that despite the huge number of books which have been written on natural theology (including those derived from prestigious lectures such as Gifford, Boyle, Hulsean, and Bampton), none of them have provided a systematic coverage that comprehensively and rigorously addressed the wide range of philosophical and theological objections discussed in this book. To illustrate this point and the unique contributions of this book, I shall compare it with a number of recent books below.

The edited volume by James Dew and Ronnie Campbell (2024) titled *Natural Theology: Five Views* presents a variety of perspectives from some of their leading proponents—contemporary (Charles Taliaferro), Catholic (Andrew Pinsent), classical (Alister McGrath), deflationary (Paul Moser), and Barthian (John McDowell). While this volume has a broad scope, due to limited space, the discussions lack depth and each author left some key objections and counterarguments to his/her view unaddressed. This book argues for a particular view in much greater depth and responds to the outstanding objections and counterarguments.

Rodney Holder's *Ramified Natural Theology in Science and Religion* (Holder 2021) develops the valuable contribution by Richard Swinburne (see below) by applying Bayesian probability theory to the evidence for Christian theism to argue that Christian Theism has a similar form of rationality as scientific rationality, and thus if one accepts the latter (as many atheists too), one should accept the former. Nevertheless, the way Holder argues for this conclusion could have been more rigorous. For example, he mis-states the cosmological argument as saying that 'everything which exists has a cause for its existence. Therefore there is a cause for the universe's existence' (pp. 11–12; this mistake is explained in Section 9.6 of this book). His discussion on the Kalam Cosmological Argument (p. 38) does not consider the updated and more rigorous version of the philosophical arguments for a First Cause, such as those offered in Loke (2017a, 2022a, 2023), which avoids the objection raised by Linford (2022). Holder also does not consider the argument for the First Cause having libertarian freedom (see Section 3.2 of this book). His use of Bayesian reasoning for the argument for the existence of God faces the problem of unconsidered alternative explanations due to our current limited knowledge.

I resolve this problem with a new deductive formulation of the teleological argument defended in Loke (2022a) (see Chapter 3 of this book). Holder also does not respond to many of the objections to natural theology by Kant, Barth, Heidegger, McDowell, and Moser et al. but only to a few of those objections (his response to Barth in an earlier work was criticized by Barthian McDowell [2012] for various inaccuracies). This book offers a much more comprehensive response.

N.T. Wright's *History and Eschatology: Jesus and the Promise of Natural Theology* (Wright 2019) is a major publication by a highly influential scholar in contemporary Christianity, based on the Gifford Lectures which Wright delivered in 2018. There is a lot to appreciate in Wright's book. For example, his explanation of the rise of modern Epicureanism, his engagement with a wide range of cultural issues, and his emphasis on the importance of history for Christian theology. Nevertheless, Wright's treatment of natural theology neglects two important New Testament passages, viz. Acts 14:14–17 and Romans 1–2. This book argues that these passages imply that God has revealed himself by leaving 'witnesses' (Acts 14:17) in the natural order and that, contrary to Wright, people can start with the natural world apart from Christ and infer that God exists (see Chapter 4). I show that the Cosmological and Teleological Arguments are more rigorous than what Wright understands them to be, and I reply to Wright's objections to these arguments and the problem of suffering (see Chapter 10). In particular, I explain that the Kalam Cosmological Argument demonstrates the existence of a First Cause with libertarian freedom (i.e., a personal Creator) who is distinct from the universe, and that the Fine Tuning and Moral Arguments indicate that this First Cause is interested in us. This addresses Wright's concern about reasoning to Pantheism or an impersonal deity. Contrary to Wright, this book shows that some contemporary versions of the arguments of natural theology (if established) do not entail 'classical theism' as Wright understood it, but increase the plausibility of miracles and the Jesus of the Gospels. Finally, while Wright is concerned about the mission of the church, he has neglected the positive contributions that the arguments of natural theology have made to missiology; I discuss this issue in Chapter 5.

The work of a leading natural theologian Alister McGrath's *Re-imagining Nature: The Promise of a Christian Natural Theology* (McGrath 2016) helpfully shows how Christian Theology is able to offer a much richer vision of the natural world compared to atheism. Nevertheless, McGrath's book does not engage with recent objections against all kinds of natural theology offered by atheist philosophers such as Graham Oppy (2013). Moreover, McGrath's thick definition of natural theology risks

- (1) obscuring what the Christian Scripture and early theologians affirmed; that is, despite the groaning of creation (Rom 8:22), people can know some things about God on the basis of evidence in nature (Rom 1:20; Acts 14:17; see Chapter 4) and the laws of God written in the human

- conscience (Rom 1:32, 2:15), apart from specific religious (e.g., Christian) claims of special revelation, and
- (2) disrespecting and misrepresenting the efforts of other traditions (Ancient Greek, Islamic, Hindu, etc.) which have defended the Cosmological and Teleological Arguments.

I shall elaborate on these problems in Sections 1.3 to 1.7 and show how these problems can be avoided without contradicting McGrath's project. I shall also show (in Chapters 9 and 10) how McGrath's (2016, p. 26) four concerns regarding the viability of traditional natural theology can be answered.

The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology (Craig and Moreland eds. 2009) contains chapters on the various arguments of natural theology written by many of their leading contemporary proponents and provides a highly technical treatment of issues relevant to those arguments. Nevertheless, the book does not respond to many of the detailed theological objections to the use of arguments of natural theology, such as the objections by Karl Barth and more recent Barthians such as John Webster, as well as the epistemological objections by various postmodernist thinkers. This book avoids these deficits. Some of the discussions of key arguments do not respond to key objections. For example, (1) Collins' defense of the Teleological Argument faces the problem of unconsidered alternative explanations due to our current limited knowledge and is beset by the problem of assigning prior probability for Design. My previous publication (Loke 2022a) has addressed these problems by using an original deductive argument which demonstrates a logically exhaustive list of possible categories of hypotheses, showing that there are essential features of each category such that while the alternatives to design are unlikely, the Design hypothesis is not. Using this deductive argument, one can thus argue for Design by exclusion without having to first assign a prior probability for Design. This provides a response to the objection and other objections raised by prominent critics of the Teleological Argument, such as Sober and Grünbaum et al. I shall use the result of my previous publication in this book (see Chapter 3). (2) Craig's defense of the Causal Principle of the Kalam Cosmological Argument does not comprehensively address the sort of metaphysical theorizing engaged in Oppy (2015), and it presupposes the controversial dynamic theory of time. The modus tollens argument for the Causal Principle which I have formulated (see Section 6.5) thoroughly addresses such metaphysical theorizing, and it does not presuppose the dynamic theory of time. I shall use this modus tollens argument to address some epistemological issues related to natural theology in Chapter 6.

The *Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology* (Manning et al., 2013) provides a helpful survey of the breadth of natural theology from a variety of perspectives (historical, religious, philosophical, scientific, and aesthetic-cultural). However, it does not provide a coherent approach to the issues because the essays are written by different authors with different perspectives. Moreover, some of the discussions of theological arguments (e.g., Moore 2013) and

philosophical arguments (e.g., the Cosmological Argument) do not consider the important recent objections such as those which are considered in this book.

Richard Swinburne is a leading philosopher of religion who has made significant contributions to contemporary discussions on the arguments of natural theology, and his book *Revelation: From Analogy to Metaphor* (Swinburne 2007) attempts to connect these arguments with other areas of systematic theology such as the doctrine of divine revelation. Nevertheless, Swinburne's use of Bayesian reasoning for the argument for the existence of God faces the problem of unconsidered alternative explanations due to our current limited knowledge. I resolved this problem with a new deductive formulation of the teleological argument defended in Loke (2022a) (see Chapter 3 of this book). Swinburne's defense of the cosmological argument could also have been made more rigorous; see, for example, the deductive version defended in Loke (2022a) (see Chapter 3 of this book). Swinburne also does not respond to many of the detailed theological objections to the use of such arguments, such as the objections by Karl Barth and more recent Barthians such as John Webster. This book avoids the above deficits.

In contrast with the above publications, this book defends traditional natural theology using a unique approach which interacts with the philosophical theology of both the Anglo-American analytic tradition and the phenomenological and hermeneutical approach of the continental tradition. Contrary to popular misconceptions which are held by many theologians, David Hume and Immanuel Kant did not successfully rebut the arguments of natural theology. These arguments have been around for millennia and—even in our present scientific period—are still being defended today in journals and monographs published by world-leading academic publishers. Based on my previous publications (Loke 2017b, 2022a, 2022c, 2023), this book develops a more rigorous deductively valid formulation of the Cosmological, Teleological, and Moral Arguments and shows how the truth of their premises has been defended in recent literature and various chapters of this book, thus demonstrating the soundness of these arguments which guarantees the truth of the conclusion that God exists. It offers new arguments to address long-standing problems in the epistemology of theology, such as those concerning foundationalism, epistemic circularity, divine transcendence and human limitation, human situatedness, the culturally variant notion of human reason, the lack of consensus among experts, and the accusation of anthropomorphism and ontotheology. It also provides an original analysis of radical skeptical hypotheses to show that the conclusion of the Cosmological and Teleological Arguments cannot in fact be avoided by these hypotheses but can be used to argue against them. Finally, it provides a thorough response to theological objections such as those concerning the epistemic authority for the Christian faith, the noetic effects of sin, *Sola Gratia*, and the work of the Holy Spirit and demonstrates that these objections as formulated by their influential proponents (e.g., Barthian theologians) are inconsistent with Scripture to which these proponents often appeal.

The content of this book is divided into four parts.

Part I (Chapters 1 to 3) introduces six different understandings of the notion of natural theology in relation to the doctrine of revelation and evaluates them in light of Scriptural passages, Greco-Roman background, Christian tradition, and comparative religions and philosophies. These considerations indicate that the term ‘natural theology’ should be used to refer to what can be known, rationally believed, and/or demonstrated about God by observing and thinking about the natural world, without using the doctrines of a particular religion as premises (in distinction from ‘theology of nature’). I then introduce the contemporary challenges to the doctrine of revelation and natural theology, the classical and non-classical responses to the challenges, and the problems with non-classical approaches, and advocate the classical approach as the way forward. This is followed by an overview of some of the arguments of natural theology.

Part II (Chapters 4 and 5) considers the Biblical-Theological arguments which have been offered for and against natural theology. In particular, I examine the issues concerning the epistemic authority for the Christian faith, the noetic effects of sin and *Sola Gratia*, the work of the Holy Spirit, why the Scripture does not present arguments for the existence of God, and whether natural theology would lead to Deism/Atheism and the denial of special revelation.

In Part III (Chapters 6 to 9), I consider philosophical-theological objections which have been offered against natural theology. In Chapters 6 and 7, I shall discuss whether Christian theology should use philosophical tools and categories and consider the objections to epistemic foundationalism, the (apparent) problem of epistemic circularity, the challenge of scientism and verificationism, the implications of probabilistic reasoning for faith, and the relationship between faith and evidence. In Chapters 8 and 9, I shall consider philosophical-theological issues concerning divine transcendence and human limitation. In particular, I shall consider the issue of divine knowability/provability; the use of religious language and apophatic theology; the accusation of anthropomorphism and ontotheology; the Kantian distinction between phenomena and noumena; and the problems concerning situatedness and relativism, incommensurability, tolerance, and the lack of consensus among experts. I shall also address concerns regarding the culturally variant notion of human reason, the constructive activity of the human mind in the process of observation, and the importance of tradition-mediated rationalities (McGrath 2016).

Finally, Part IV (Chapter 10) brings together various elements of this book, highlights its distinctive arguments and original contributions, the viability of the arguments of natural theology for the existence of God, and discusses the significance and limitations of its conclusions for understanding the relationship between the natural world and theology.

This book is built upon my previous publications which have defended a number of arguments of natural theology, in particular *The Teleological and Kalam Cosmological Arguments Revisited* (Springer Nature 2022) and ‘A new moral argument for the existence of God,’ *International Journal for Philosophy*

of *Religion* 93:25–38. These publications are open access and easily accessible, and readers can refer to them for the details of these arguments. I have also offered a detailed response to the problem of evil in my book *Evil, Sin, and Christian Theism* (Routledge, 2022); readers can refer to this book for the details of my response.

I am grateful to the following publishers for permission to reproduce the contents of my articles in various parts of this monograph:

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Part I

Introduction



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1 Introduction to the doctrine of revelation and natural theology

1.1 The wonders of nature

The beauty and majesty of the natural world have never lost their power to evoke feelings of adoration toward the divine. This power is experienced not only by believers of God but also by unbelievers, as indicated by the following words which were written by one of the most well-known atheists of our time:

When I lie on my back and look up at the Milky Way on a clear night and see the vast distances of space and reflect that these are also vast differences of time as well, when I look at the Grand Canyon and see the strata going down, down, down, through periods of time when the human mind can't comprehend, I'm overwhelmingly filled with a sense of, almost worship ... it's a feeling of sort of an abstract gratitude that I am alive to appreciate these wonders. When I look down a microscope it's the same feeling: I am grateful to be alive to appreciate these wonders.

(Dawkins 2009)

Meanwhile, in-depth scientific study of this world has revealed a stunning mathematical order and precision as indicated by the equations of physics which physicists have discovered, and which appear shot through with signs of a Mind (Polkinghorne 2005, p. 64). Consider the following observations by Nobel laureate in physics and former atheist Yang Chen Ning:

When that equation [$E = mc^2$] was written down in 1905 by Einstein, Dirac was three years old. Twenty-three years later, he wrote down the second equation, which incorporates the elements of Einstein's equation, E and mc^2 . Dirac added α and β , which are very simple mathematical structures, and it resulted in a miracle. It is a miracle because, given this ingenious idea, Dirac could predict that the fundamental particle electrons—each of us have billions and billions of them in our bodies—are spinning tops. And more than that. He could calculate from that simple equation how fast each of these electrons is spinning and how much magnetic field is created by that movement. Through subsequent

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development, that calculation resulted in a precise number for the magnetic strength of each electron, a result supported by subsequent experiments in laboratories all over the world. That calculation was confirmed to the accuracy of at least eleven decimal points. To appreciate the meaning of this, to appreciate how accurate it is, let us imagine that this hall is filled with marbles and you are required to count these marbles one by one. And there will be something like several hundred billion marbles. You are required to count them one by one, and tell us the precise number down to the last marble—a twelve-digit number, and you have to be correct for every digit. That is the degree of accuracy which that simple-looking Dirac equation was able to create. The beauty, the elegance, the grandeur of this deep penetration of the secrets of nature! For any scientist that deals with it, it is an absolutely awe-inspiring experience. Science students, in learning about the Dirac equation, have this experience ... I understand it as a deeply religious experience.

(Quoted in Shi 2024, p. 239)

Traditional Christian theology relates the above observations to natural theology, which historically has been considered to be based on the general revelation¹ of God through the natural world which he created (Pannenberg 1991, pp. 73–118). McGrath (2016, p. 112) observes that ‘implicit within a Christian natural theology is a semiotics of nature, in which nature is understood as a system of natural signs – such as a sense of wonder – intimating the existence of some transcendent reality.’

Nevertheless, in recent centuries, natural theology and the doctrine of revelation have been subjected to intense criticisms by many Modernist and Postmodernist scholars using sophisticated philosophical, scientific, and theological arguments. Instead of concluding that their experiences of the beauty, majesty, and order of nature point beyond itself to a transcendent divine reality, many atheists have sought to explain it naturalistically.

A number of recent books (e.g., Swinburne 2007; Fergusson 2009; Craig and Moreland eds. 2009; McGrath 2016; Wright 2019) have been written in response to these criticisms. However, they have not adequately addressed a number of recent critiques of natural theology offered by atheist scientists and philosophers (e.g., Oppy 2013, 2015), the epistemological objections concerning whether the question of God’s existence is answerable given divine transcendence and human limitation (see Chapters 8 to 9), and the detailed theological objections to the use of natural theology by Karl Barth and more recent Barthians such as John Webster and Andrew Moore. The latter, however, have not adequately answered why people should think that their Christian claim concerning Ultimate Reality is true while other contradictory claims are false (see Section 2.3.2).

¹ The frequent use of the term ‘revealed theology’ in contrast with natural theology is misleading, for it gives the false impression that natural theology is not related to divine revelation.

This book will move the discussion ahead in a new and significant way by offering an up-to-date reassessment of the debates concerning the Christian view of natural theology and the doctrine of general revelation, which has yet to receive adequate book-length treatment in recent literature (as explained in the preface of this book). The overall thesis is that

- (I) The authoritative sources of Christian theology (Scripture and tradition) affirm a traditional Christian view of natural theology which refers to what can be known, rationally believed, and/or demonstrated about God by observing and thinking about the natural world, without using the doctrines of a particular religion as premises (Chapters 1 and 4),
- (II) This view avoids the problems with alternative approaches (Chapter 2), and
- (III) Its project is viable and can be defended against various theological objections (Chapter 5) and epistemological objections (Chapters 6 to 7) including the problem of divine transcendence and human limitation (Chapters 8 and 9), as shown by a demonstration of the soundness of the arguments for the existence of God (Chapters 3 and 10).

I shall argue for the above thesis using an interdisciplinary approach, which I shall defend against theological and philosophical objections in subsequent chapters. (In my view, natural theology belongs to both theology and philosophy; both disciplines are involved in the study of Ultimate Reality as illustrated by their engagement with related ontological and epistemological issues, such as concerning the issue of epistemic and religious authority [see Chapter 5] and foundationalism [Chapter 6].) I shall offer new arguments derived from my recent publications across the disciplines of philosophy of religion (Loke 2017b, 2022a, 2022b), science and religion (Loke 2017b, 2022a), theology (Loke 2014), and historical-critical Biblical studies (Loke 2017a, 2020). I shall present a cutting-edge overview of some of the arguments of natural theology (the Cosmological and Teleological Arguments) in response to recent criticisms by skeptical philosophers and address long-standing problems in the epistemology of theology. This book will also advance the discussion on the contemporary debate concerning the relationship between faith and reason and the theological objections to natural theology by providing a thorough response to these objections and demonstrating that these objections are inconsistent with Scripture to which proponents of these objections often appeal. It will engage with the views of thinkers from a wide range of Christian traditions, such as Roman Catholic (e.g., O'Collins, First Vatican Council), Eastern Orthodox (e.g., Bradshaw and Swinburne eds. 2021), Neo-orthodox (Barth, Webster), and Mainline Protestant (Abraham), and a wide range of religious traditions such as Islam, Buddhism, Daoism, etc.

One of the unique features of this book is that its synthesis of the arguments from multiple disciplines helps the reader to see the big picture concerning natural theology, which is much needed in our age of narrow subspecializations. Indeed, as I shall show in the rest of this book, the failure

to see the big picture is one of the biggest problems facing contemporary discussions on natural theology. For example, even philosophers (who subspecialize in areas other than philosophy of religion) may not be aware of the recent revival of arguments of natural theology in philosophy of religion, let alone theologians, many of whom still hold to the outdated and misconceived view that the project of offering such arguments has been refuted by Hume and Kant (see Section 3.1).

In his survey of the forms of reasoning and criteria of rationality that have characterized the production of knowledge across culture and history, McGrath (2018) observes the emergence and significance of the notion of multiple situated rationalities, which affirms the intellectual legitimacy of multidisciplinary/transdisciplinary dialogue. Noting the notion of multiple levels of reality, McGrath observes that the natural sciences themselves adopt a plurality of methods and criteria of rationality, making use of a range of conceptual toolboxes that are adapted to specific tasks and situations, so as to give as complete an account as possible of our world (p. 2). For example, with regard to the scientific study of a frog jumping into a pond,

The physiologist explains that the frog's leg muscles were stimulated by impulses from its brain. The biochemist supplements this by pointing out that the frog jumps because of the properties of fibrous proteins, which enabled them to slide past each other, once stimulated by ATP. The developmental biologist locates the frog's capacity to jump in the first place in the ontogenetic process which gave rise to its nervous system and muscles. The animal behaviourist locates the explanation for the frog's jumping in its attempt to escape from a lurking predatory snake. The evolutionary biologist adds that the process of natural selection ensures that only those ancestors of frogs which could detect and evade snakes would be able to survive and breed.

McGrath concludes that 'all five explanations are part of a bigger picture. All of them are right; they are, however, different' (pp. 59–60). Just as science itself brings together different explanations to help us see the bigger picture, there is a need to bring together different disciplines that would complement one another in our attempt to gain a fuller understanding of reality.

David Christian, the pioneer of 'Big History,' a popular interdisciplinary course offered by universities internationally which studies the past across physics, astronomy, geology, biology, and human history, observes that there is 'a growing sense, across many scholarly disciplines, that we need to move beyond the fragmented account of reality that has dominated scholarship (and served it well) for a century' (Christian 2011, p. 3) and that

There is also a growing need for specialization to be supplemented by integration. The reason is that no complex, nonlinear system can be adequately described by dividing it up into subsystems or into various

aspects, defined beforehand. If those subsystems or those aspects, all in strong interaction with one another, are studied separately, even with great care, the results, when put together, do not give a useful picture of the whole. In that sense, there is profound truth in the old adage, ‘The whole is more than the sum of its parts.’

(pp. 3–4)

In this book, I aim to present a holistic account of natural theology by showing how recent developments across a variety of disciplines can be integrated to provide a response to the criticisms against natural theology (the reader can refer to the sources I cite for the details of the arguments). In the rest of this chapter, I shall first discuss the definitions of key terms such as general revelation, special revelation, and natural theology. In the next chapter, I shall introduce the modernist and postmodernist challenges to the doctrine of revelation and natural theology, and the classical and non-classical responses to these challenges. I shall discuss a number of problems with the non-classical approach and advocate a reassessment of the classical approach to natural theology. In Chapter 3, I shall illustrate the classical approach by providing an overview of some of the traditional arguments of natural theology.

1.2 Introducing the doctrine of revelation

Traditional Christian theology affirms that its doctrines are not fundamentally based on human efforts to discover the truths about Ultimate Reality, but are based on divine revelation.² Divine revelation takes precedence in the sense that, if God had not chosen to reveal himself, humans would not be able to know anything about him. Nevertheless, traditional Christian theology also affirms that the divine initiative in revealing himself through the works of creation and Scripture does not exclude human efforts to study his works (cf. Psalms 111:2³) and to interpret the Scripture so as to discover evidence of his existence and greatness. I shall elaborate on the above points in the rest of this section and the next (Section 1.3).

In the Christian Scripture, the terms for ‘revelation’ in Hebrew (*galah*, ‘to uncover’) and Greek (*apocalyptein*, ‘to unveil’) convey the idea of the removal of obstacles to perception; it is a divine *act* of uncovering or unveiling, rather than merely as a set of data for humans to discover (O’Collins 2016).

2 While Barth differentiated divine revelation from religion, describing the latter as an expression of the anxiety of those who are without the gospel, Pannenberg (2004, p. 178) objects that ‘we cannot separate revelation and religion as Barth did. Divine revelation may take priority over those who receive it, but it is manifest only where they do receive it, i.e., in the medium of religion.’ Interestingly, the notion of revelation is also of great importance in the phenomenology movement in philosophy (Mezei 2021).

3 ‘Great are the works of the Lord; *they are* studied by all who delight in them.’

Another related Greek term *phanerōō*⁴ (used in Rom. 1:19) conveys the idea of making clear, manifest, make known. The context ('For even though they knew God...' Rom. 1: 21) indicates that Paul is using these terms as success terms: revelation occurs only if something is shown (uncovered) *and* someone/some people acquire knowledge about the revealed object. Nevertheless, the truth which is known (earlier) can be suppressed (Rom. 1:18) and becomes 'unknown' (later) as people's thinking becomes darkened due to the suppression of truth (Rom. 1:21b). In addition to being used to refer to God's act of revealing something, the term 'revelation' has also been understood by theologians to refer to the thing revealed (e.g., nature, Scripture) (just as the term 'proclamation' may refer either to the act of proclaiming or to what is proclaimed), or to the subjective experience of something revealed by God (Craig 2025, pp. 78–79).

Following the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (1878–1965) who highlights the importance of an 'I/Thou'⁵ relationship with God, a number of theologians have emphasized a personal view of revelation over and against the propositional; arguing that God reveals *himself* rather than propositions or 'information' about Him (see the discussion in Wahlberg 2024). For example, citing Jesus' statement 'I am the Truth' as portrayed in the Gospel of John (14:6), Brunner (1946, p. 370) writes 'this is not an impersonal, objective "it" truth, but a "Thou" truth. In this Event of revelation, in the Person of Christ the divine Thou addresses me, in love. God imparts Himself to me in the life of Him who alone was able to say [this].' Likewise, others who had been influenced by the existentialist philosophy of Kierkegaard (1813–1855), such as Barth and Bultmann, have emphasized that Christian truth is not simply about God, but is an address from God which evokes obedience, not simply assent (Thiselton 2015, p. 2). Avis writes

Revelation must be an existential and personal matter. It is addressed to the person in their unique quest for the meaning and purpose of their existence in the world, their state of existential angst, and it concerns new life, or, as Bultmann puts it, 'authentic existence', which for him is another name for salvation. 'Authentic existence' points to the locating and embedding of salvation in our human being in the world with others. It connects that human-being-in-the-world-with-others to the transcendent ultimate reality, which is seen as the source and goal of such authentic existence.

(Avis 2021, pp. 176–177)

4 Moo (1996, p. 104n.57) notes that Paul often uses this term with fully as much emphasis on divine revelation as *apocalyptein*.

5 Originally, the word 'thou' was simply the singular counterpart to the plural pronoun 'ye,' derived from an ancient Indo-European root. <https://www.etymonline.com/word/thou>.

Some have even gone further in rejecting propositional revelation and emphasized other modalities, such as divine manifestation in the context of narrative-embedded relationships (Ricoeur 1977) or images (e.g., Haught 2009). However, such views obscure the affirmation that ‘the manifestation brought to speech in biblical discourse is God’s self-manifestation, as opposed to agentless manifestation’ (Wolterstorff 1995, p. 62). Moreover, they lead to a reductive vision of the Christian life, which neglects the ways in which God’s revelation transforms not only our hearts but also our minds through cognitive content (Levering 2014, pp. 13–14).

The emphasis on the need for a personal, existential encounter with God and obedience is appropriate and in line with the Biblical condemnation of an impersonal, dispassionate, formal religion (cf. Matt. 6:1–7; Luke 18:1–8). Indeed, ‘the aim of Scripture is not that we merely know more propositional truth but that we have an encounter with the Person who is the Truth (John 14:6)’ (Geisler 2011, p. 285). Nevertheless, a propositional and a personal view of revelation are not mutually exclusive. One can hold the view of ‘propositions *within* revelation (rather than revelation *as* propositions)’ (Avis 2021, p. 175).

There is, in principle, no incompatibility between a systematic presentation of propositions and what von Balthasar described as a ‘kneeling theology’ that is deeply connected to contemplative prayer. Indeed, the task of gaining a deeper understanding of theology is inseparable from the task of the purification of desire and the pursuit of holiness which is related to contemplative prayer (Coakley 2013, pp. 88–92). This can foster an attitude of humility, which is of fundamental importance for seeking the truth (see Section 9.7).

Nevertheless, contemplation and prayer are not a substitute for rigorous argumentation, which requires formulation in terms of propositions (although the premises of the argument may be grounded in experience, including religious experience), and argumentation can lead to an experience of the Transcendent and be a means of divine revelation as well (see below).

O’Collins (2016, pp. 6–7) observes that, while 1 Corinthians 15:3–5 embodies four propositions of revealed truth, these propositions derive from personal encounters with Jesus in his death and after his resurrection. ‘In addressing human beings, God says something that they can formulate and pass on. We may call revelation “propositionable”, since it can be expressed in true propositions derived from the divine dialogue with human beings’ (O’Collins 2016, p. 12). God’s revelation is ‘personal and propositional’ rather than ‘personal or propositional’ (Erickson 1998, pp. 219–221). While knowledge by acquaintance (and likewise knowledge of persons) is not reducible to propositional knowledge (*knowledge that*) and propositions may not be the *means* of revelation in certain cases (e.g., cases of direct manifestation), propositions do figure in the *contents* of revelation in all cases, such as knowing *that the person whom one is acquainted with exists* (Wahlberg 2024). Many people have also claimed to have heard God speaking to them through nature and thus affirm that God can use the natural world to communicate to people in a personal way. In this

sense, general revelation can also be characterized as both personal and propositional.

Pannenberg (2004, p. 6) argues that, although we cannot know God directly in his essentiality, we can know him as the source of his created works (Aquinas, ST 1.2 a2) and through his revelation in history. Traditional Christian theology affirms two types of divine revelation which correspond to these ways. General revelation refers to God's revelation of himself through his creation. Special revelation refers to God's revelation of himself in human history, such as by inspiring the writing of Scriptures, speaking through visions, dreams, or other experiences, doing miraculous acts such as raising someone from the dead, and manifesting himself through the Incarnation (Vatican II, *Dei Verbum* § 4; cf. Latourelle 1967).⁶ The distinction between general revelation and special revelation (and the viability of the former apart from the latter) is implied by Acts 14:17 and Romans 1:20, which (as I shall explain in Chapter 4) affirm that people can know about God based on the natural order which he has created, apart from his historical revelation through the Biblical authors and through Christ (I shall explain in Section 5.5 that this does not diminish the importance of special revelation). As this book is on natural theology which is more related to general revelation than special revelation (see Section 1.3), I shall elaborate more on the former in this book and leave a more detailed discussion on the latter in a subsequent volume.

Concerning general revelation, the Old Testament psalmist writes, '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. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard. Yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world' (Ps. 19:1–4). O'Collins (2016, p. 188) observes that, 'even though the heavens cannot literally speak words, nevertheless, "their voice goes out through all the earth" to reveal the glory of God and his handiwork. In the Middle Ages and later, Christians would talk about "the book of nature," which was to be read alongside the Sacred Scriptures and which would also reveal God.'

The New Testament declares, 'For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse' (Romans 1:20). 'For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that

6 Wahlberg notes that a common distinction between *general* and *special* revelation is that 'the former refers to a revelation that is universally available, and the latter to a revelation made (directly or initially) to a limited group of people' (Wahlberg 2024). However, this alternative definition does not fit the Scriptural roots from which the traditional distinction arose. As I shall explain below, the Scriptural passages which have traditionally been cited as affirming general revelation emphasize God's revelation of himself through his creation, i.e., the natural world. Thus, for example, even though the Scripture affirms that every eye will see Christ when He comes again (Revelation 1:7), this does not count as general revelation even though it would be universally available. Rather, it should count as a revelation in history, i.e., special revelation.

they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus' (Romans 2:14–16). Here, 'Paul extends to the Gentiles some prophetic promises (Jer. 31:33; Ezek. 11:19–20; 36:26–27) about the divine law being written on the hearts of Israelites and enabling them to know, instinctively, what to do' (O'Collins 2016, p. 199).

Paul's claim that divine revelation has been communicated universally through the created universe and the witness of conscience may be compared with Kant's remark that 'Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and steadily we reflect upon them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me' (*Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:161.33–36). McGrath (2009, p. 11) observes that 'the idea that a transcendent reality can be known or at least intimated through the mundane has a long history and is not a specifically religious idea.'

1.3 Introducing six different understandings of the notion of natural theology

While divine revelation refers to God's act of making himself known, natural theology refers to our human attempt to understand or demonstrate what God has made known about himself in the natural world. McGrath (2016, pp. 18–21) identifies six different understandings of the notion of natural theology in the literature:

1. Natural theology as an attempt to demonstrate the existence of God on the basis of *a priori* ideas which might be considered 'natural,' as characterized by the use of the Ontological Argument.
2. Natural theology as an attempt to demonstrate the existence of God on the basis of *a posteriori* recognition of the existence, regularity, and/or complexity of the natural world, as characterized by the use of the Cosmological Argument and/or Teleological Argument.
3. Natural theology as 'the intellectual outcome of the natural tendency of the human mind to desire or be inclined toward God.'
4. Natural theology as 'the exploration of an analogy or intellectual resonance between the human experience of nature on the one hand, and of the Christian gospel on the other.'
5. Natural theology as an attempt to 'demonstrate that "naturalist" accounts of the natural world and the achievements of the natural sciences are intrinsically deficient, and that a theological approach is required to give a comprehensive and coherent interpretation of the natural order.'
6. Natural theology as a 'Theology of Nature'—'a specifically Christian understanding of the natural world, reflecting the core assumptions of the Christian faith.'

These six understandings or approaches can be classified under two broader and apparently divergent conceptions of natural theology: (1) as the demonstration of the rational plausibility of theism by exploring what human reason can discover about God, unaided by special revelation and without depending upon or expressing any specifically Christian ideas; (2) one that does involve grounding in and/or expressing core assumptions of the Christian faith (p. 56). Approaches 1–3 can be classified under (1), while Approaches 4–6 can be classified under (2).

Advocating natural theology as a ‘thick’ description in which the six approaches can be seen as an enactment of an aspect of natural theology in response to specific cultural opportunities or challenges, McGrath argues that (1) and (2) are two distinct yet interconnected aspects of the same meta-project (2016, pp. 22–25). He uses the analogy of classical mechanics as a special, limiting case of a more comprehensive and fundamental theory, viz., relativistic quantum mechanics, which ‘was able to account for both the successes and the failures of classical mechanics, by identifying its limited sphere of validity’ (p. 37). Likewise, (1) is a special, limiting case of (2), which offers an imaginative and cognitive framework that is able to accommodate and position (1), by showing that (1) can be seen ‘to be part of a greater vision of reality, and that by understanding its position within that vision, its distinct strengths and weaknesses may be appreciated’ (p. 36). McGrath explains that

A Christian approach offers a framework which enables the proposed ‘thick’ description of natural theology to be seen as a coherent intellectual option. It proposes a web of interconnected conceptualities – including specific notions of creation, human nature, and divine activity and presence – which allows the six broad approaches noted in this chapter to be seen as intrinsically coherent and interrelated.

(p. 40)

A concern which might be raised at this point is that McGrath’s ‘thick’ description of natural theology seems to be equivalent to what has been called—and what McGrath himself understands as—a ‘Theology of Nature,’ which he notes under Approach 6 as ‘a specifically Christian understanding of the natural world, reflecting the core assumptions of the Christian faith.’ In other words, McGrath seems to be taking ‘natural theology’ to be equivalent to ‘Theology of Nature.’ McGrath seems to confirm this when he states that ‘natural theology ... I take the view that it is an attempt to interpret and appreciate common human experience of the natural world – including ourselves as observers of nature and participants within nature – in the light of the received Christian tradition’ (p. 40), which is equivalent to Approach 6. McGrath’s approach is not limited to Approach 6; he has also emphasized other approaches, such as Approach 4, in his writings (e.g., McGrath 2008, 2009).

While I agree that McGrath’s favored approach provides a greater vision of reality, which incorporates the other approaches, I think it should be called

‘Theology of Nature’ rather than ‘natural theology’ and that the term ‘natural theology’ should be restricted to Approaches 1 to 3 in contrast with Approaches 4–6, which involve consideration of Special Revelation. I shall offer three arguments for my view in the next three sections.

1.4 Evaluating the different understandings of natural theology: Argument from Scriptural passages, Greco-Roman background, and Christian tradition

First, while McGrath appeals to ‘the received Christian tradition’ (McGrath 2016, p. 40) which is grounded in the Christian Scripture, various Christian Scriptural passages affirm that people can know some things about God on the basis of evidence and apart from specifically Christian special revelation (e.g., Acts 14:17; see Chapter 4). This affirmation was known as natural theology in the ancient Greco-Roman world within which the New Testament was written. The earliest known example of the expression ‘natural theology’ is found in Panaetius (185–110 B.C.E.), the founder of Middle Stoicism, who used the term for the philosophical doctrine of God as distinct from the mythical theology of the poets and the political theology of the cults which the states set up and supported (Pannenberg 2004, pp. 76–77). Pannenberg cites *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*, II, 1009, which speaks of human understanding of God based on reflections of the good world [καλὸς δὲ ὁ κόσμος] and the structures of the sun, the moon, and the stars, and refers to the ideas of Plato.⁷ While Plato himself embraced pagan religious commitments, he did not simply presume them in his argument. On the contrary, in Plato’s *The Laws*, chapter 10, which notes a challenge to prove the existence of God (885c–d), a reply is given in the form of an argument from motion, which can be expressed syllogistically as follows:

1. Some things are in motion.
2. There are two kinds of motion: communicated motion and self-motion.
3. Communicated motion implies self-motion because things in motion imply a self-mover as their source of motion (to avoid infinite regress).

⁷ When Pannenberg goes on to say that this ‘philosophical knowledge of God is not natural because it is in keeping with human nature or the principles or understanding of human reason ... but because it corresponds to the nature of the divine’ (p. 77), this does not mean that Pannenberg thinks that according to Panaetius ‘reason’ or ‘nature’ already presupposed ‘religious’ content or that Panaetius denies the use of arguments based on the natural world. Rather, what Pannenberg means is that, according to Panaetius, philosophical knowledge is able to arrive at truths about God that corresponds with who God truly is, and not merely our human way of thinking. This is clear from the context which says, ‘The meaning of the term is connected with the Sophist question as to what is true by nature, i.e., of itself, as opposed to that which owes its validity to human positing (*thesis*), whether by custom, tradition, or political establishment. Natural theology, then, is the talk about God that corresponds to the nature of the divine itself, unfalsified by the political interests related to the state cults or by the literary imaginings, or lies, of the poets’ (pp. 76–77).

4. Therefore, the source of all motion is self-motion, or the soul.
5. The soul is the source of astronomical motion because the heavens are in motion, and the soul is the source of all motion.
6. The soul that moves the universe is the best soul because the motions of the heavens are good, being regular and orderly like those of the mind.
(Summarized from Craig 1980, pp. 4–5)

Regardless of whether one agrees with the soundness of the above argument, from the premises of the argument laid out above, it can be seen that the argument does not rely on religious beliefs or commitments as its premise. Rather, the argument relies on premises such as those concerning ‘motion,’ which people who do not believe in gods (*The Laws*, 10, 885c) would also agree based on their observation. For example, they can observe for themselves and know that some things are in motion. This fits Alston’s definition of natural theology and is supported by other textual evidence cited by Keener (2014, pp. 2169–2170):

Stoics believed that the universe’s order and signs of benevolence indicate the divine mind that established and sustains it. One of the Cynic Epistles even employs the same language as here: night and day bear testimony (*μαρτυροῦσιν*) to God’s character, just as the seasons and the fruit-bearing (*καρποφοροῦσα*) earth as well as the moon’s cycle bear witness (*μαρτυρία*, Heracl. *Ep.* 4). A Hellenistic Jewish philosopher like Philo could also use such language.

(*Flight* 184)

Anaxagoras (5th century B.C.E.) and Socrates (469–399 B.C.E.) (according to Xenophon, *Mem.* 1.4.2ff) had earlier argued from the order of the natural world to the existence of a wise and friendly divine architect who has so admirably arranged all things (i.e., the Teleological Argument for the existence of God),⁸ while Plato and Aristotle developed the Cosmological Argument for the existence of God (Pannenberg 2004, p. 78). While neither used the term ‘Cosmological Argument’ (this term was used later by Kant), it is clear that they were reasoning from our observation of change/motion and our understanding of causality to an Ultimate Source/First Cause, and in this sense their argumentation is similar to modern versions of the Cosmological Argument (see Chapter 3).

The results of the natural theology of the philosophers (in particular, the use of the Cosmological and Teleological Arguments for the existence of God) were appropriated by Hellenistic Jewish apologists and early Christian theologians (Bradshaw and Swinburne eds. 2021; Pannenberg 2004, pp. 79–81). Augustine, for example, presents a Teleological Argument from the well-ordered changes and movements in the world (*City of God* 11.4) and regards all philosophers who, like the Platonists, teach the one true God as the (First)

8 Likewise, the Stoics, e.g., Epictetus [*Diatr.* 1].

cause of the universe, the light of truth, and the source of blessedness, to be in agreement with the Christian doctrine of God (*City of God* 8.10.2).

McGrath (2024, p. 107) objects that Augustine

did not consider the notion of natural theology, as Varro presented it, to be particularly helpful, and he made little use of it. Given the high regard in which Augustine was held during the theological Renaissance of the Middle Ages, this lack of interest in the notion of natural theology appears to have been carried over into the worlds of thought of his medieval successors. Although the Latin term *theologia naturalis* was used in late classical antiquity, it did not secure philosophical or theological traction in the West until the time of the Renaissance, largely through the influence of the fifteenth-century Catalan scholar Raimundo de Sebonde. (c. 1385–1436)

Two points may be said in response. First, while McGrath notes Roman scholar Marcus Varro's (116–27 B.C.E.) terminological distinction between political theology, natural theology, and mythical theology, which was adopted by Augustine, McGrath does not discuss the passage in Augustine's *City of God* 8.12. This important passage considers the question concerning natural theology (*naturali theologia*), 'namely, whether sacred rites are to be performed to one God, or to many, for the sake of the happiness which is to be after death.' In this passage, Augustine praises the Platonists for 'their juster thoughts concerning the one God who made heaven and earth, have made them illustrious among philosophers. This has given them such superiority to all others in the judgment of posterity.' Augustine says, 'Plato got his ideas from the works of earlier writers or, as seems more likely, in the way described in the words of the apostle: "because that which is known of God is manifest in them. For God hath manifest it unto them. For the invisible things of him, from the creation of the world, are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made: his eternal power also and divinity,"' i.e., citing Romans 1:19–20.

In other words, Augustine claims that philosophers such as Plato were able to know some things about God apart from Christian special revelation,⁹ and this

9 While Pannenberg (2004, p. 81) explains that the construction of the full two-story theory of natural and supernatural theology only happens later at Thomism, Baroque Scholasticism, and Neo-Scholasticism constructed (p. 81), this does not mean that the distinction between natural and supernatural theology or the distinction between 'general' and 'special' revelation was totally absent previously. On the contrary, in context, Pannenberg was discussing Augustine's doctrine of God, where he thinks that 'Platonists know their juster thoughts concerning the one God who made heaven and earth, even though what they say about the doctrine is not free from objection,' citing *City of God* (10.23, 29), and going on to note that 'the Incarnation alone is unknown to them (10.29)' (p. 80). In other words, in Augustine's mind, there is still a distinction between what the Platonists can know about God apart from (say) the Incarnation which is what would be classified under special revelation and supernatural theology (in distinction from the natural theology of the Platonists which is related to general revelation) on the definitions I used.

is in line with what the Christian Scripture says in Romans 1:20, which (in *City of God* 8.12) is understood literally (rather than as symbolic representations)¹⁰ by Augustine to be referring to the one God who made heaven and earth. Augustine's view fits the definition of natural theology, which I am arguing for, and Augustine himself used the term natural theology (*naturali theologia*) in this passage and spoke highly of Plato. This is contrary to the claim that Augustine shows a lack of enthusiasm for natural theology and contradicts Harrison's claim that 'Augustine thus equated natural theology with pagan thinking about the gods' (Harrison 2022, p. 118). Like McGrath, Harrison does not consider the passage in Augustine's *City of God* 8.12. By contrast, Pannenberg (2004, p. 80) considers it together with *City of God* 8.10.2 (quoted above) and rightly concludes that 'it is plain that for Augustine the Christian doctrine of God did not differ in principle from the natural theology of the philosophers in its Platonic form.'

Second, McGrath does not note that the church fathers used the cosmological and Teleological Arguments which had been formulated earlier by Plato and Aristotle. This usage illustrates the practice of traditional natural theology (in accordance with the definition I am arguing for), regardless of whether the Latin terminology that McGrath talks about was widely used or not. The popularization of the Latin terminology was contributed by Renaissance philosopher Michel de Montaigne's translation of Raimundo de Sebonde's book as *Theologia Naturalis sive Liber naturae creaturarum*. This book argues that nature could teach man 'every truth necessary ... concerning both Man and God' and includes the ontological, moral, cosmological, and Teleological Arguments for the existence of God (Woolford 2012, p. 152, citing Sebonde, *Theologia naturalis*, fol. a2r), which fits the definition of natural theology that I am arguing for. This definition is not denied by Sebonde's qualification that 'No one can see this wisdom, or read this said open Book [of Nature and Creatures] by themselves, unless they are enlightened by God and cleansed from original sin' (Sebonde, *Theologia naturalis*, fol. A3), for in context Sebonde is speaking of 'true wisdom which leads to eternal life,'¹¹ i.e., salvific knowledge, not knowledge of the existence of God per se.

10 Augustine claims elsewhere that the Platonists knew of The Trinity as the Father, the Father's mind, and something between these (*City of God*, 10.23, 29).

11 '...sed veram sapientia quae ducit ad vitam eternam quamvis fuerat in eo scripta legere non potuerant' ('but true wisdom which leads to eternal life they could not read what had been written on it'). McGrath (2016, p. 15n.48) states that 'the context indicates that Sebonde intends the term *scientia* to be understood here as *theologia naturalis*.' However, McGrath does not note Sebonde's earlier statement in fol. a2r that nature could teach man 'every truth necessary ... concerning both Man and God; and all things which are necessary ... for his salvation.' Taking this statement together with fol. A3, what Sebonde is claiming is that both salvific knowledge and the knowledge of the existence of God can be shown via natural theology, but because humans are blinded by sin, they cannot perceive salvific knowledge from nature without the help of divine grace. This does not deny that they can demonstrate God's existence from nature without Christian presuppositions, as philosophers such as Plato (whose cosmological and teleological arguments are used by Sebonde) had done. Unlike Sebonde, many other theologians (e.g., Alsted, discussed below) who think that the knowledge of the existence of God can be shown via natural theology do not affirm that salvific knowledge can be shown via natural theology.

After the Protestant Reformation, many influential scholars continued to use this terminology and definition. For example, the German Reformed minister and polymath Johann Alsted (1588–1638), regarded as the father of the encyclopedia, defined *theologiae naturalis* as ‘the wisdom of divine things able to be known by the natural light of the intellect ... The foundation of natural theology is twofold, reason and the experience of nature; that is, the knowledge of argumentation and experience, but not the knowledge of faith’ (Alsted 1634, pp. 46–48). This fits the definition of natural theology that I am arguing for. Even though Alsted thought that the knowledge of God obtained from natural theology is vague and imperfect, Alsted nevertheless acknowledged that ‘all human beings, just as they naturally know there is a God, so also know that there is some theology’ (Alsted 1634, pp. 46–48). ‘All human beings’ include those who have not come into contact with the Bible or with specifically Christian ‘revealed theology.’ In his *Theologica Naturalis* (1615), Alsted develops the proofs for the existence of God,¹² which, as noted earlier, were already offered earlier by Plato and the church fathers.

These arguments fit with what McGrath noted as the regnant, narrow, and traditional definition of natural theology as ‘the enterprise of providing support for religious beliefs by starting from premises that neither are nor presuppose any religious beliefs’ (Alston 1991, p. 289; this enterprise is illustrated by the arguments of natural theology, such as the cosmological and Teleological Arguments for the existence of God). It should be noted that this enterprise does not date from the early modern period but from ancient Greece prior to the Christian era, as noted previously. Thus, Alston’s definition does not merely reflect ‘modernist’ concerns, nor is it guilty of applying modern analytic categories to past practices. On the contrary, as noted above, what many people today would call ‘analytic’ natural theology, i.e., the application of analytic philosophy of religion to natural theology as characterized by the use of the arguments for the existence of God (e.g., the cosmological and Teleological Arguments), was in fact used by the church fathers, and hence it is a ‘traditional Christian view’ in that sense.

Dew and Campbell (2024, p. 9) raise an objection by claiming that the definition of natural theology by Alston is ‘at odds with the actual practice of some historical Christian philosophers like Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas. Given that these philosophers and theologians, and many others, reject the notion that natural theology starts from neutral premises but argue that it more properly starts from within the faith itself.’

The objection by Dew and Campbell is based on a misunderstanding. Consider, for example, the premises of Aquinas’ First Way (the argument from

12 McGrath’s statement that ‘the Reformed dogmatician Johann Heinrich Alsted’s influential *Theologia naturalis* (1615) seems to treat natural theology as a theology of nature’ (McGrath 2016, p. 17) does not take note of this point, nor what Alsted stated elsewhere in the quote from Alsted (1634) cited above.

motion, which is a form of Cosmological Argument) stated in *Summa Theologica* (Part 1 Q2 Art 3):

I answer that, the existence of God can be proved in five ways. The first and more manifest way is the argument from motion. It is certain, and evident to our senses, that in the world some things are in motion. Now whatever is in motion is put in motion by another, for nothing can be in motion except it is in potentiality to that towards which it is in motion; whereas a thing moves inasmuch as it is in act. For motion is nothing else than the reduction of something from potentiality to actuality. But nothing can be reduced from potentiality to actuality, except by something in a state of actuality. Thus that which is actually hot, as fire, makes wood, which is potentially hot, to be actually hot, and thereby moves and changes it. Now it is not possible that the same thing should be at once in actuality and potentiality in the same respect, but only in different respects. For what is actually hot cannot simultaneously be potentially hot; but it is simultaneously potentially cold. It is therefore impossible that in the same respect and in the same way a thing should be both mover and moved, i.e. that it should move itself. Therefore, whatever is in motion must be put in motion by another. If that by which it is put in motion be itself put in motion, then this also must be put in motion by another, and that by another again. But this cannot go on to infinity, because then there would be no first mover, and, consequently, no other mover; seeing that subsequent movers move only inasmuch as they are put in motion by the first mover; as the staff moves only because it is put in motion by the hand. Therefore it is necessary to arrive at a first mover, put in motion by no other; and this everyone understands to be God.

The argument can be expressed in syllogistic form as follows:

1. Some things are in motion.
2. Whatever is in motion is caused to do so by something other than that thing.
3. What moves something else is either moved or not moved.
4. An infinite regress of moved things, each moved by another, is impossible.
5. Therefore, there is an (unmoved) first cause of motion.

Again, regardless of whether one agrees with the soundness of the above argument, it can be seen from the premises listed above that none of the premises of the argument (1 to 4) starts from within the Christian faith, nor uses reasoning with religious or theological presuppositions. Rather, they start from premises such as those concerning 'motion' and 'cause,' which many non-Christian philosophers (e.g., Plato and Aristotle) who did not share Aquinas' Christian theological presuppositions would also agree (e.g., Plato also argued that motion does not happen without cause, as noted previously).

Harrison might object that Alston's definition of natural theology is virtually impossible to apply to pre-modern intellectual activities, since religious convictions were baked into the relevant starting assumptions, as indicated by the consensus of ancient writers that belief in the gods was natural and universal and Aquinas concluding each of his five ways with variations on the formula 'and this, everyone understands to be God.' Harrison (2022, pp. 120–121) claims that

the activity that Aquinas undertakes in the 'five ways' or the *Summa contra gentiles* is not that of attempting to reach God from nonreligious premises. Consistent with what has already been said about Plato and Ptolemy, Aquinas tells us that 'almost all philosophy is directed towards the knowledge of God' (*Summa contra gentiles*, I.4.3, vol. 1, p. 67). To begin with the shared premises of Jewish, Greek, and Islamic philosophers, then, are already to have a religious starting point. Accordingly, the aim of the exercise is not to establish the existence of God and some of his attributes on the basis of reason alone in order to provide a foundation for revealed theology. Rather, it is to show how Christianity succeeds in fulfilling the unrealized goals of Judaism and Islam, along with the inchoate religious aspirations of the philosophical schools.

The above objections are mistaken for the following reasons.

First, the objections fail to note the context of Plato's *The Laws*, chapter 10, where the Athenian remarked that 'some of us do not believe in gods at all' (885c) and that the argument from motion was formulated by Plato in the same chapter to address these people who did not share religious convictions or belief in the gods. Even though many ancient writers did think that belief in the gods was natural and widely held during their time, this does not deny that doubts and skepticism could sometimes arise and some people did succumb to these doubts and did not believe in gods, as Plato noted.

Second, the objections confuse the starting point of the person using an argument with the starting point of the argument, which is akin to the genetic fallacy. It is true that the arguments of natural theology were often used by ancient authors who already believed God(s) exist and believed that 'philosophy is directed towards the knowledge of God,' for various purposes, such as accounting for widespread religious convictions or showing how 'Christianity succeeds in fulfilling ... the religious aspirations of the philosophical schools' (Harrison). However, this does not imply that the premises of the arguments themselves assume religious convictions. On the contrary, as noted in previous paragraphs, none of the premises of Aquinas' or Plato's Cosmological Argument concerning 'motion' or 'cause' has religious convictions baked into them. They are not based on religious convictions but based on observation of motion, as Aquinas stated ('It is certain, and evident to our senses, that in the world some things are in motion'—*ST I Q2 Art 3*). The refrain from religious premises avoids the error of begging the question, a type of circular reasoning

which the ancients were well aware of. When Aquinas later says, *after* arriving at the conclusion of the argument from motion, ‘and this, everyone understands to be God,’ it does not mean that his argument begins from the ‘religious’ premise that there is a God. Rather, Aquinas is referring to the concept of God, which he claims was widely understood by others during his time. Referring to a concept of x in an argument does not imply that the argument presupposes the existence of x . The argument from motion used by Aquinas does not begin with the assumption that God exists, but (as noted earlier) with the premise that ‘some things are in motion.’

Harrison claims that ‘in any case, the “without recourse to divine revelation” condition is somewhat confounded by Aquinas’s assumption that it is *by faith* that we know that God’s existence can be demonstrated (i.e., on the basis of Rom. 1:18–20, *Summa theologiae* 1a. 2, 2)’ (Harrison 2022, p. 121).

Harrison’s claim confounds (i) using Scriptural data as the premises of an argument for the existence of God, with (ii) using Scriptural data (e.g., Aquinas’ citation of Rom. 1:18–20) to justify how Christians should think about whether God’s existence can be demonstrated. The ‘without recourse to divine (special) revelation’ condition refers to the denial of (i), not the denial of (ii). Aquinas may have believed on the basis of Scripture that the existence of God can be demonstrated, but this does not imply that his argument uses Scriptural data as a premise; to think otherwise is to confuse the starting point of the person using an argument with the starting point of the argument. Harrison’s discussion fails to note Aquinas’ Reply to Objection 1 that ‘the existence of God.... which can be known by natural reason, are not articles of faith, but are preambles to the articles (of faith).’ It is ‘something which in itself is capable of being scientifically known and demonstrated,’ as Aquinas states (in line with his conviction of the truth of Romans 1:20, which he cited),¹³ and he goes on to illustrate this using his argument from motion (First Way) and other arguments.

McGrath (2024, p. 107) asks ‘where in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* does Aquinas explicitly discuss “natural theology” by that name?’ Here, McGrath focuses on the *terminology* but does not consider the *practice* of what Alston calls natural theology in the mentioning of ‘the existence and unity of *God*, which philosophers have proved to a *demonstration* under the guidance of the light of *natural reason*’ in *Summa Contra Gentiles* 1.3 (see also the discussion on Aquinas’ First Way Cosmological Argument above).

Harrison might object that, for Aquinas, the ‘light of natural reason’ is reason as pertaining to our nature as beings oriented to God and through

13 Kerr (2022, p. 60) writes ‘From the start, the theistic proofs are the first lesson in a negative theology. Far from being an exercise in rationalistic apologetics, the purpose of arguing for God’s existence is to protect God’s transcendence’ (p. 58). It is true that Aquinas is not ‘rationalistic’ in claiming that everything about God can be rationally understood; rather, he affirms a form of negative theology as Kerr points out (see Chapter 8 of this book). Nevertheless, this does not deny the point that Aquinas did think that the existence of God can be demonstrated (Kerr acknowledges this is how Aquinas understood Romans 1:20 on p. 60, but points to different interpretations of Romans 1 in contemporary New Testament scholarship. This issue is discussed in Chapter 4 of this book).

participation in the divine reason (ST 1.12.11 ad 3), and thus this conception of reason itself rests upon theological premises. Concerning Plato, Harrison (2022, p. 120) argues that ‘in the *Timaeus*, Plato proposed that study of the heavens resonates with the internal divine principle, renews human nature, and contributes to the life that the gods intend for mankind ... The idea of neutral or nonreligious premises did not enter into it.’

Such an objection, however, confuses ontology with epistemology, or the order of being (*ordo essendi*) with the order of knowing (*ordo cognoscendi*). It is true that Aquinas believed that natural reason depends on divine reason. However, this is an ontological dependence where divine reason is ontologically prior, just as our ability to see things (e.g., a tree) by natural daylight depends on the light from the sun (‘for the light of natural reason itself is a participation of the divine light; as likewise we are said to see and judge of sensible things in the sun, i.e., by the sun’s light’—ST 1.12.11 ad 3). This does not imply that, in the order of knowing, we have to first assume that the sun-light exists as a premise before we can (say, for example) know that we are seeing a tree. Likewise, the ontological claim that human nature is oriented to God and natural reason participates in the divine reason (or resonates with divine principle) does not imply that, in the order of knowing, we have to first assume these claims as a premise before we can infer that God exists. On the contrary, the formulation of Aquinas’ First Way (and Plato’s argument from motion) does not rest upon such theological claims as premises but upon premises such as ‘motion,’ for example. The definition of natural theology which I am defending (which is illustrated by the argument from motion, Teleological Argument, etc.) concerns the order of knowing, not the order of being.

On the basis of the above errors of reasoning, Harrison ends up with a fallacious narrative of history:

If the secularization of reason begins in the seventeenth century, the naturalization of nature takes place in the nineteenth century when we see a new conception of nature understood as the object of a naturalistic science ... Clearly, this understanding of nature cannot be equated with “creation” and is arguably incompatible with it. But it is this assumption—nature as thoroughly detheologized—that also places the sciences in the frame as the most reliable source of facts about the natural world “which neither are nor presuppose any religious beliefs”—a core condition of “received” natural theology. And so scientific naturalism is implicated in the “established” conception of natural theology ... a natural theology that begins “from premises that neither are nor presuppose any religious belief” cannot have been established before the transitions described above.

(Harrison 2022, pp. 129–130)

Now, the secularization of reason and the naturalization of nature that Harrison talks about refer to the refrain from affirming the *ontological* claims concerning reason and nature mentioned earlier in the context of doing modern (naturalistic) science. However, this has no bearing on the *epistemological*

projects illustrated by the arguments of natural theology that were used by Plato, Aquinas, etc., because (as explained earlier) these arguments do not presuppose such ontological claims as their premises anyway.

Moreover, Harrison's historical narrative fails to consider the arguments of natural theology used by missionaries before the 19th century, such as the Jesuit Matteo Ricci (1552–1610). Ricci used the teleological and Cosmological Arguments for the existence of (First Cause Creator) God (see Ricci 1604/1985, I, 35–36) to help many Chinese scholars come to faith, including (former) Buddhists who (prior to their conversion) did not share the same religious beliefs concerning reason or nature that Harrison mentioned (see Loke forthcoming c).

Harrison's confusions concerning ontology and epistemology led him to pose a (false) dilemma for proponents of natural theology:

Either the relevant conceptions of nature and reason are given in (revealed) theology, in which case the “established” sense becomes a contradiction because of the “nonreligious premises” condition; or, we accept the late modern scientific understanding of nature as providing the model for an appropriately nonreligious neutrality, in which case we are again confronted with a contradiction since the presumed object of inquiry—God—has already been ruled out by the methodological approach said to guarantee the neutrality of the investigative process and the data that it relies upon.

(Harrison 2022, p. 130)

The dilemma is false because, on the one hand, the natural theologian can affirm the relevant (theological) conceptions of nature and reason, which do not contradict the ‘nonreligious premises’ condition since the former concerns the order of being while the latter concerns the order of knowing. On the other hand, the acceptance of appropriately nonreligious neutrality of the investigative process and the data that it relies upon does not imply that this process cannot (in principle) result in the discovery of evidence which can be used by philosophical arguments for the existence of God. This is illustrated, for example, by contemporary versions of the Teleological Argument, such as the fine-tuning argument which takes into account the modern scientific findings of Big Bang cosmology (Loke 2022a).

McGrath states that it is unthinkable for a specifically Christian natural theology to ‘avoid explicitly engaging Christological themes’ (McGrath 2016, p. 63). However, Christian natural theology should not ignore the most important source of its themes, viz., Scripture, which implies people can know some things about God apart from Christian theology (e.g., Acts 14:17; see Chapter 4). To define natural theology otherwise by stating that it uses specifically Christian ideas risks obscuring what the Christian Scripture affirms and missing the point which is expressed by Augustine (as explained above), and which represents a broad consensus among the church fathers who also used

arguments such as the cosmological and Teleological Arguments, as have been demonstrated in recent scholarship (e.g., Bradshaw and Swinburne eds. 2021).

Of course, many theologians throughout the centuries who have used the cosmological and Teleological Arguments have also argued that there is a resonance, coherence, or congruence between human experience of nature and Christian doctrines. This is in line with their motivation to argue (not merely for General Revelation but also) for the specific doctrines of Christian Special Revelation for the purposes of *Christian* apologetics (see also McGrath 2024, p. 113, who cites Joseph Butler, William Paley, and the Bridgewater Treatises). While ‘neither Plato nor Aristotle argues for the theistic God of Christianity’ (Dew and Campbell 2024, 11 note 1) in the sense that the ‘God’ whose existence they are trying to prove does not have all the properties of the ‘God’ affirmed by Christian theism, this does not deny the fact that, in arguing for a First Cause and Designer, there are important similarities, as Augustine et al. recognized. Thus, it is unsurprising that these theologians use this approach for Christian apologetics. Nevertheless, the usage of this approach (which involves claims of special revelation) does not deny my arguments in the preceding paragraphs (and the paragraphs below) for why this approach should not be called ‘natural theology,’ but should be called ‘Theology of Nature’ which is also part of Christian apologetics (Christian apologetics can include both ‘natural theology’ and ‘Theology of Nature’).

It might be asked how my view avoids my own critique of McGrath’s conclusion that natural theology relies on specifically Christian ideas when I justify my definition of natural theology by appealing to Christian Scripture.

The answer is that there is a distinction between (i) using specifically Christian ideas as the premises of an argument of natural theology for Christian claims concerning God (which I reject) and (ii) using Christian (Scriptural) ideas to justify a particular definition of natural theology as what ought to represent a Christian view of natural theology (which I accept). Given this distinction, my own work is not susceptible to my critique of McGrath.

1.5 The argument concerning the efforts of other religious and philosophical traditions

Second, McGrath’s terminology concerning natural theology risks disrespecting and misrepresenting the efforts of non-Christian communities who have called similar efforts natural theology without using specifically Christian ideas. As noted earlier, ancient Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle offered Cosmological and Teleological Arguments for the existence of God prior to coming into contact with Christian ideas, and their efforts have been called natural theology. The entry on ‘natural theology’ in the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* notes that ‘philosophers and religious thinkers across almost every epoch and tradition (Near Eastern, African, Asian, and European) have engaged the project of natural theology, either as proponents or critics’ (Chignell and Pereboom 2025). If we use a thick definition of natural

theology which includes Christian ideas, it risks misrepresenting the arguments of Plato et al.

McGrath (2024, p. 148) replies by agreeing that natural theology ‘can be Deist, Jewish, Islamic, or Hindu, without a connection with “the Christian Bible,”’ but he insists that this is merely one of the many different legitimate interpretations of the term ‘natural theology,’ while his own conception ‘is rooted in the specifics of the Christian faith.’ This reply, however, merely repeats his view that there are different notions of natural theology (Approaches 1 to 6), without addressing the problems mentioned above (it also does not address Argument I). Perhaps recognizing this, McGrath adds that ‘this uncertainty about terminology is one of the reasons why I have now moved the framework of my more recent discussion away from “natural theology” to “natural philosophy,” which allows me to explore Christian, Jewish, Islamic, and Confucian approaches to natural philosophy’ (p. 148). However, calling it natural philosophy does not accurately characterize the efforts of Plato et al., for they were not merely doing philosophy but also theology when they formulated arguments that lead to theological conclusions (as Augustine realized; thus, Augustine rightly used the term natural theology in his discussion of Plato, as noted in Section 1.4). Thus, once again, McGrath’s terminology risks disrespecting their efforts.

1.6 Argument from clarity

Third, McGrath himself notes that some might object to his ‘thick’ definition that ‘this will lead to the same term being understood in quite different manners by different interpretive communities’ (McGrath 2016, p. 170). He replies to this objection by saying ‘this may be inconvenient, but it is normal practice within professional communities, including specialist subject groups within the natural sciences’ (p. 170).

In reply, on the one hand, what normal practice *is* does not imply that it *ought* to be the case (is-ought distinction). While it is true that “Natural theology” is not a “natural kind”, but is rather a contested notion, which has been formulated in a variety of ways’ (McGrath 2022, p. 4), this does not imply that any notion or formulation is as good as another or that there are no criteria for deciding which notion or formulation is better. On the other hand, given that clarity is a virtue, one *ought* to seek to minimize confusion and misunderstanding in one’s usage of technical terms.

McGrath (2024, p. 148) cites *The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology* (2013),

whose opening chapter emphasizes the diversity and pluriformity of “natural theology” and cautions against definitional foreclosures of how this is to be understood. Once more, we encounter the difficult question of determining what the term “natural theology” means, when there is little agreement about the criteria to be used in this judgment.

The problem with McGrath's argument is that the lack of agreement is merely a descriptive claim which states *what is the case*; it does not imply that this *ought to be the case* (is-ought distinction). I have offered three arguments for why a thinner definition (in contrast with McGrath's thicker definition) *ought* to be preferred.

The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology (2013) cited by McGrath goes on to explain that 'the lack of a fixed consensus on the definition of natural theology is due, in part, to its inherently interdisciplinary character and the inevitable limitations on definitions that belong firmly within particular disciplines' (p. 1). It notes 'a range of contexts—from historical and religious studies, constructive theology, philosophy of religion, science-and-religion research, cultural theories, and the arts,' and states 'the various approaches adopted by the contributors reflect the plurality of contexts within which the study of natural theology must be situated' (p. 1).

Now, the definition which I affirm (Approaches 1 to 3) is not affected by 'limitations on definitions that belong firmly within particular disciplines' (p. 1) nor by contexts, since it is broader than Approaches 4–6 (favored by McGrath) which *are* limited to Christian theological context and disciplines. Moreover, appealing to disciplines and contexts does not address the three arguments which I am offering here concerning why a thinner definition should be preferred.

McGrath also argues that 'natural theology' has no 'essential' meaning; rather, the understanding of its meaning is 'defined by communities of interest, having a specific meaning within those groups' (2016, p. 169). It is thus 'open to redescription by other theological stakeholders, who find the restricted meaning associated with other interpretive communities to be inadequate or misleading' (2016, p. 170). More recently, McGrath (2024, p. 109) argues that 'notions such as "nature," "science," and "religion" are historically situated social constructions' and claims that this 'suggests that there is unlikely to be any predetermined essential form of either "nature" or "natural theology"; these are, rather, open to cultural revision and ideological reconstruction, reflecting the social and cultural location in which they emerge, often in response to a perceived need.'

It is true that different communities can use different definitions. Nevertheless, one can still evaluate a particular definition based on its fittingness with what is regarded as authoritative in a particular community, its relationship with the definition used in other communities, and its clarity. I have argued that my definition of natural theology fits better with the passages concerning General Revelation in the Christian Scripture (which is regarded as authoritative in Christian communities), more respectful of other traditions, and avoids confusion. While the exact boundaries of the definitions of 'nature,' 'science,' and 'religion' may have changed over time as a result of historical circumstances, this does not affect my definition if some common properties across time can be identified and one can refer to entities having these properties. Consider Harrison's (2015) claim (cited in McGrath 2024) that science did not exist as the category the way we know it today until 'the nineteenth century,' when 'the assumption of universal applicability came to be built into the

fabric of the newly constructed “science” (Harrison 2015, p. 191). This, however, does not deny the fact that common properties that can be used to define continuous scientific practice—such as corroboration with observation—did exist way before the 19th century (e.g., Augustine’s rejection of Manichean astrology in *Confessions*, Book V, Chapter 3). Likewise, the usage of the cosmological, teleological, and Moral Arguments for religious and theological claims is a common property from ancient Greek philosophers to many contemporary philosophers of religion (e.g., Craig and Moreland eds. 2009).

1.7 Concerning the Theology of Nature approach

McGrath (2024, p. 111) acknowledges that

Limiting the scope of natural theology to one or more of these for the sake of intellectual neatness or argumentative precision has certain advantages. Yet this conceptual tidiness is achieved at the cost of excluding certain approaches that the Christian theological tradition has found to be legitimate and helpful; it needlessly impoverishes the range of resources we can bring to deploy on the complex question of how we explore and represent the relation of the natural world and God, and how we present this within the community of faith and in conversation with a wider culture.

I would like to clarify that my view does not exclude the approaches and resources mentioned by McGrath nor deny the value of McGrath’s project, which shows how Christian theology is able to offer a much richer vision of the natural world compared to atheism,¹⁴ although I have argued above that this project (as well as the alternative approaches and resources) should be called Theology of Nature rather than natural theology. In other words, the above disagreements between McGrath and myself are merely semantic in that sense. Nevertheless, it is important in light of the three arguments I have offered, as well as for understanding the choice of terminology used for the subsequent arguments in this book, and the nature of the project undertaken in the rest of this book.

My project should be regarded as complementary rather than contradictory to McGrath’s project.¹⁵ Claiming that the existence of God can be argued for without using the doctrines of a particular religion as premises does not deny that one can nevertheless also use the doctrines of a particular religion to argue

14 My above comments also do not deny the value of the ‘new natural theology’ project of Sarah Coakley (2012), which incorporates ideas of Christian theology such as the having of ‘spiritual senses’ and ‘ascetic capacity’ to see God in the world.

15 Harrison disagrees, claiming that ‘my suggestion would be that the putatively “established” conception of natural theology is actually incompatible with the version of natural theology that McGrath seeks to advance’ (Harrison 2022, p. 116). However, Harrison’s disagreement is based on multiple confusions which have been demonstrated earlier.

that ‘the Christian way of seeing things being affirmed to offer a robust degree of empirical fit with what is actually observed – the “best explanation” of a complex and multifaceted phenomenon’ (McGrath 2008, pp. 16–17). While McGrath’s natural theology does not begin as an attempt to prove Christian belief, but as ‘faith seeking understanding,’ he nevertheless argues that the positive outcome of this seeking is ‘itself evidencing faith’ and provides evidential support for the Christian faith (McGrath 2016, p. 176). Thus, his approach is not merely for Christian insiders, but ‘offers a comprehensive means by which theology may address the world, and engage in productive dialogue concerning the legitimation and consequences of belief systems’ (McGrath 2001–2003, p. 303). Faith seeking understanding does not imply that one has to believe first before he/she can understand. As noted in Chapter 2, there are some unbelievers who understand the evidences first before they believe.

I agree with McGrath that different approaches can be ‘deployed in different ways to different envisaged audiences’ (McGrath 2024, p. 114). For example, some people may be more receptive to the beauty of nature rather than abstract argumentation. Nevertheless, rigorous argumentation remains important for answering objections (e.g., the objection that the perception of beauty or consonance can be explained by psychological phenomena such as pareidolia) (I address this objection in Loke 2022a, chapter 4). McGrath’s (2024, p. 116) appeal to the imagination is vulnerable to Moser’s (2024, p. 131) objection that

imagination, as we know, often leaves us at odds with reality, or at least doubtful about reality. While half asleep recently, I imagined with due regret that I had contracted COVID-19, but I came to recognize, quickly and gladly, that my imagination had misled me. My imagination did not match reality: it went against my overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

Again, my approach complements McGrath’s project in the sense that the rigorous arguments of natural theology which I have offered can help to address Moser’s objection by demonstrating that the wonders of the natural world, which so often capture and invoke our imagination, are the work of God and that this conclusion is not a figment of our imagination.

Concerning McGrath’s point regarding envisaged audiences, in the UK the rise of religious ‘nones’ has been shown to be associated with widespread scientific education and a related agnostic way of thinking, which has led to a ‘crisis of beliefs’ that is of ‘epic proportions ... more than 70% of those aged 18–24 years ... now declare “no religion”’ (Henson 2023). Where addressing the philosophical objections raised by agnosticism is concerned, one disadvantage of the Theology of Nature approach is that it would require defending more premises and additional arguments, such as those concerning the compatibility between theology and scientific studies concerning evolution, and historical-critical studies concerning the sources of theology (e.g., the Book of Genesis). Addressing these complicated issues will require at least an additional monograph or more (see, for example, Loke 2022e; Swamidass 2018, 2020).

Whereas the natural theology approach adopted in this book is relatively simpler, defending one argument (the Cosmological Argument) alone is enough to show that the agnostic should abandon agnosticism and accept the conclusion that God exists. (For a more detailed explanation of my proposal for addressing the crisis of religious belief that is related to agnosticism, see Loke forthcoming-a.)

McGrath himself notes that the arguments of traditional natural theology such as those which appeal to nature's laws pointing to a lawgiver 'continue to play an important role in natural theology' (McGrath 2008, p. 204) and that he welcomes such an approach, while seeing it as part of a spectrum of possible approaches (McGrath 2024, p. 79). Nevertheless, he notes four concerns about the viability of traditional natural theology, arguing that:

- (1) It assumes a culturally invariant notion of human reason.
- (2) It fails to recognize the constructive activity of the human mind in the process of observation.
- (3) It fails to appreciate the importance of tradition-mediated rationalities.
- (4) It is inattentive to the aesthetic, moral, and intellectual ambiguity of nature (McGrath 2016, p. 26).

The concerns noted by McGrath are important. I shall address (1), (2), and (3) in Chapter 9 and (4) in Chapter 10.

As mentioned earlier, McGrath notes Alston's traditional definition of natural theology as 'the enterprise of providing support for religious beliefs by starting from premises that neither are nor presuppose any religious beliefs' (Alston 1991, p. 289). Should the 'religious beliefs' in question include those which are related to special revelation, such as the Resurrection of Jesus? The *Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology* (Craig and Moreland eds. 2009) discusses the historical evidence for Jesus' resurrection. Likewise, many proponents of the so-called Ramified natural theology (a natural theology supplanted with additional arguments to go beyond bare theism) would do so as well (e.g., Holder 2021). However, given the reasons explained in this chapter concerning the relationship between natural theology and general revelation, in this book I shall focus the discussion on those beliefs which are related to general revelation. Saying this does *not* deny the possibility that one can use the arguments of natural theology (as defined in this book) *together with* the historical argument for Jesus' resurrection as a two-stage, cumulative case for *Christian* Theism (see Chapter 5). Moreover, in this book I shall discuss the methods of reasoning (such as those which are based on laws of logic and experiences), which are used by these two stages, and illustrate with examples from Scripture concerning these two stages when discussing the relationship between faith and reason in what follows.

In his recent book on natural theology, New Testament scholar N.T. Wright (2019, p. xi) objects that our current understanding of 'natural theology' has been artificially shrunk. He argues that 'natural theology' should include the

Bible because the Bible was 'written and edited within the world of space and time, by a large number of individuals situated in "natural" communities and environments,' and which 'purports to ... describe events within the "natural" world' (p. xi). Moreover, Wright argues that 'natural theology' should include Jesus of Nazareth because Jesus was a fully human being and therefore part of the 'natural' world (pp. 3–4, 157).

One problem with Wright's view is that, while the Bible and Jesus are situated in the natural world, they are not accessible to people from various cultures who have not come into contact with Judeo-Christianity precisely because of its situatedness in history and geography. However, as explained above, natural theology is supposed to refer to what can be known to all cultures by people who never had the chance to encounter God's revelation in history but who can know some things about God on the basis of general revelation, as affirmed by Biblical passages such as Romans 1–2 and Acts 14:14–17. If we incorporate consideration of situated historical events as well as the Bible and Jesus into natural theology as Wright suggests, it will confound 'what we can know about God by observing and thinking about the natural world without using the doctrines of a particular religion as premises' (natural theology; see the exegesis of Acts 14 in Chapter 4) with 'the Biblical perspective about the natural world' (Theology of Nature). Moreover, it would obscure the distinction between 'natural theology' and 'Christian theology.' Concerning this distinction, while the upshot of my exegesis of Acts 14 and Romans 1 is that natural theology is properly part of Christian theology, there is nevertheless a distinction between the 'part' (natural theology) and the 'whole' (Christian theology). To elaborate, (1) natural theology is supposed to be based on general revelation, whereas 'Christian theology' is supposed to be based on general revelation and special revelation. (2) Unlike general revelation, special revelation involves situated historical events as well as the Bible and Jesus. (1) and (2) imply there is a distinction between 'natural theology' and 'Christian theology.'

Now I do agree with Wright that Christian theology can enrich our views concerning the natural world and God.¹⁶ I also agree with Wright that Jesus should be included in the overall cumulative case for Christianity. Additionally, I agree with Wright concerning the importance of 'the church's mission of bringing healing and justice to the world' which 'is one of the church's powerful ways of saying that the present creation matters and so it's worth putting it right' (p. 268). However, when we use the term 'natural theology,' we should not change what the term is supposed to refer to. To do otherwise is to risk confusion and to obscure the distinct and important purpose that it has, which I shall elaborate below.

16 By saying this, I am not implying that the Biblical perspective should be taken to be 'more true' than the truths that are universally accessible. On the contrary, 'all truths are God's truths' and are equally true; this is consistent with affirming that the Biblical perspective can provide clearer truths with more content.

In summary, while general revelation refers to God's revelation of himself through his creation of the natural world, in this book natural theology refers to what can be known, rationally believed,¹⁷ and/or demonstrated¹⁸ about God by observing and thinking about the natural world, without using the doctrines of a particular religion as premises. Natural theology should be distinguished from the Theology of Nature, which starts with the doctrines of a particular religion and interprets the natural world from that perspective.

1.8 Concerning the use of the terms 'prove' and 'evidence'

The above discussion on McGrath's view highlights another important semantic issue concerning the use of the term 'prove.' The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) defines it as 'demonstrate the truth or existence of (something) by evidence or argument.' The Cambridge English Dictionary defines it as 'to show that something is true' and illustrates the definition with the following example of usage: 'They suspected that she'd killed him but they could never actually prove that it was her.' This example indicates that the usage of 'prove' is not typically restricted to what is logically certain (e.g., ' $2 + 2 = 4$ '), although it can be used in this way. Rather, the term 'prove' is also used for cases of probabilistic reasoning, such as proving a murder, which always fall short of logical certainty due to the possibility (however improbable) of hallucinations, false memories, etc. (see Section 7.3).

Consider also the usage of the related term 'evidence,' which is defined by OED as 'the available body of facts or information indicating whether a belief or proposition is true or valid.' McGrath himself uses the term this way when he speaks of 'evidencing faith' and (in agreement with C.S. Lewis) states that 'the capacity of faith to contain or embrace reality is seen by Lewis as an indication of its truth' (McGrath 2016, pp. 176–177). The connection between 'evidence' and 'truth' and the broader usage of the term 'prove' for cases of probabilistic (i.e., less than logically certain) reasoning indicates that McGrath is seeking to prove Christian Theism (according to the broader usage of the term 'prove') when he speaks of the positive outcome of his natural theology,

17 Kojonen (2021) prefers Alston's definition's use of the term 'providing support' rather than demanding 'knowledge' which is too stringent. 'For example, Swinburne, one of the most prominent defenders of natural theology in contemporary philosophy of religion, argues in his book *The Existence of God* to the modest conclusion that the overall evidence raises the epistemic probability of the existence of God to at least more than 50%. While, says Swinburne (2004, 2), "reason can reach a fairly well-justified conclusion about the existence of God, it can reach only a probable conclusion, not an indubitable one"' (p. 19).

18 James Barr's definition of natural theology has been widely cited: 'that "by nature," that is, just by being human beings, men and women have a certain degree of knowledge of God and awareness of him, or at least a capacity for such awareness; and this knowledge or awareness exists anterior to the special revelation of God made through Jesus Christ, through the Church, through the Bible' (Barr 1993, p. 1). One problem with this definition is that the attempts of Plato et al. do not merely claim knowledge or awareness but also evidence and demonstration (e.g., using the Cosmological Argument).

even though his natural theology does not begin as an attempt to prove Christian belief and even though he does not use the term ‘prove’ in this way. In this book, in accordance with the dictionary definitions and the typical usage of the term, I shall use the term ‘prove’ (and the noun ‘proof’) in a broader way, i.e., for both logically certain demonstration and probabilistic reasoning.

1.9 Concerning *cognitio dei insita* and *cognitio dei acquisita*

There are two distinct types of natural theology: (1) natural theology as natural knowledge of God, which is immediate and intuitive, and (2) natural theology as a matter of logical inference, which can be formulated as rational proofs or arguments for the existence and nature of God (Sudduth 2009, p. 4). This distinction is found in the Reformed thinkers who have distinguished between a naturally implanted knowledge of God (*cognitio dei insita*) and an acquired knowledge of God (*cognitio dei acquisita*) (Sudduth 2009, p. 50; see, for example, Turretin 1992, 1.2.7, 1.3.4). According to some of its proponents, while *cognitio dei insita* may be mediated by creation in some way, it is not necessarily by way of argument or inference from other beliefs or items of knowledge, but can be spontaneously and noninferentially formed in a way analogous to widely held accounts of our sensory perceptual knowledge, knowledge of other minds, and knowledge of self-evident truths (Sudduth 2009, p. 59). Luther, Melancthon, and Calvin all affirmed the existence of natural knowledge implanted in all, while also to some extent affirmed the benefit of theistic arguments; this line of thought was inherited by the next generation of Reformed thinkers who organized their thoughts and formulated doctrines during the period of Reformed Scholasticism (Sudduth 2009, pp. 9–17).

The older Protestant theology did not distinguish between natural theology and Natural Religion, for based on their exegesis of Romans 1:18–20 and 2:14, they regarded knowledge of the divine law written in human hearts as necessarily carrying with it a knowledge of God and the duty of worshiping him (Pannenberg 2004, p. 95; see also Byrne 1989 for different understandings of the term ‘Natural Religion’).

Atheist philosopher Keith Parsons (2013, p. 538) objects that, if God’s reality and nature were as obvious as Paul claims, why would many philosophers of religion need to spend many hours devising arguments for God’s existence? ‘As for those unbelievers who persist in denying the obvious, they would seem much more in need of therapy than argument. Like flat-earthers, they would surely be impervious to logic, evidence, and argument’ (2013).

In reply, in Romans 1:20 ‘being understood [*nooumena*] and perceived [*kathoratai*],’ the first verb [*nooumena*] refers to a purely intellectual activity and the second verb [*kathoratai*] refers to physical sight (Bruce 1985, p. 80); this understanding is compatible with either *cognitio dei insita* or *cognitio dei acquisita*, or both. Thus, the ‘obviousness’ that Paul is referring to can be understood as *cognitio dei insita*, that is, ‘an innate disposition, present from birth, to form

belief in God in a spontaneous manner upon mental maturation and experience of the world' which is implanted by God in all people, such that no one can plead non-culpable ignorance of God, i.e., they are 'without excuse' (Romans 1:20) (Sudduth 2009, p. 57). This is consistent with the findings of contemporary cognitive scientists who have acknowledged that humans are 'hard-wired' to be religious; belief in God or gods is the result of the operation of a cognitive faculty (Evans 2010, p. 39; see Barrett ed. 2022). Against the claim that the omni-properties affirmed by Perfect Being Theism are detached from the belief of ordinary believers, Nagasawa (2017, p. 26) notes that 'some researchers in the emerging field of the cognitive science of religion have suggested that these omni-properties might not be unnatural artefacts after all. They maintain that people naturally form the concepts of these great-making properties in childhood.' While it is commonly assumed that children only begin to think about God as a result of cultural influence, studies done in diverse cultures such as the UK and Japan indicate that young children begin to construct their everyday metaphysical theories by relying on their own causal understanding, by which the majority infer that the world has a Divine First Cause (Petrovich 2018).

Many atheists, such as Dawkins (1986, p. 1), have openly acknowledged the impression of design (with its implication of a divine Designer) in nature. However, they have tried to explain away this impression via complicated objections. Those theist scholars who find the objections of Dawkins et al. unconvincing and regard the impression as veridical might consider their objections and their refusal to heed correction (see Giberson and Artigas 2007, pp. 55, 88) as an instance of 'suppressing the truth' (cf. Romans 1:18). While those theist scholars would regard these objections as refutable, to refute them would require detailed arguments which (as Parson observes) would take time to formulate (see further the discussion on Divine Hiddenness in Loke 2022b). Evans (2010, pp. 3–4) notes that while a natural sign can direct an individual to the reality of which it is a sign without any formal argument, it is also possible to use the sign as the basis for an inferential argument (e.g., the main theistic arguments; see Chapter 3 of this book). Many theologians have understood Romans 1:19–20 'to affirm the reality of natural knowledge of God, which may be confirmed, clarified, and developed by theistic proofs. Such a justification ... is, of course, strengthened by passages of Scripture that ostensibly illustrate natural theistic reasoning (for example, Acts 14; 17)' (Sudduth 2009, p. 52).¹⁹ I shall explain in Chapter 4 that this passage implies that people can start with the natural world apart from Christ and infer that God exists.

Concerning the claim that humans are 'hard-wired' to be religious (see Barrett ed. 2022), many naturalists regard this as a by-product ('spandrel') of

19 Compare Pannenberg (2004, pp. 117–118) who claims that 'there has not been a philosophical natural theology from the beginning of creation. But in the history of humanity there has always been in some form an explicit awareness of God which is linked to experience of the works of creation.'

a human propensity to interpret events in nature as the result of intentional actions. The reasoning behind this is grounded in the assumption that humans would have paid a heavy evolutionary price for a failure to detect threats from enemies, whether other humans or animals. The need to detect other agents in the environment, whether promising or threatening, eventually led to what some cognitive scientists have called a ‘hyper-sensitive agency detection device’ (HADD). It is not surprising that such a cognitive device would produce many false positives, since there is little price to be paid if someone thinks an enemy is near when there is not.

(Evans 2010, p. 40)

Evans (2010, pp. 40–41) replies that

Even if this explanation is correct, it does not have the reductive implications its proponents believe it has, nor does it imply that the God-faculty is unreliable in producing belief in God. We should remember at this point that, if humans are physical creatures who have evolved in a Darwinian way, then all our human cognitive capacities can in principle be explained as a result of the struggle for survival. If evolutionary explanations automatically discredit a cognitive faculty, then all of our cognitive faculties would be discredited, including those faculties that enable us to do science.

Thus, on the one hand, ‘the fact that there is a natural tendency to believe in God and that an evolutionary story can be told about the causal origins of such a tendency does not establish that the outputs of the cognitive process are delusory’ (p. 41). ‘The fact that a natural explanation can be given for the existence of the God-faculty does not show that this faculty is not the result of God’s creative intentions, since whatever natural explanation is given may simply be an account of the natural process God has chosen to realize his creative intentions’ (p. 41). On the other hand, it is consistent with the affirmation by many theologians that God has created humans with an in-built tendency to believe in God (e.g., Calvin’s *sensus divinitatis*) (p. 41).

Concerning *cognitio dei acquisita*, while some theologians of the Reformed tradition have appealed to *cognitio dei insita* as grounds for either rejecting it or regarding it as unnecessary, many others have argued for its complementarity with *cognitio dei insita*²⁰ and proposed various distinct and useful functions of the *cognitio dei acquisita*.²¹ (It should be noted, however, that those

20 See also Thomas Reid (1710–1796), who argues that belief in the design of the cosmos is based on a non-inferential capacity to detect design similar to how we perceive that other humans have minds, but acknowledges that design arguments can act to reinforce the reliability of this perception (On the Intellectual Powers of Man (1785), essay V).

21 Among Reformed theologians who have advocated *cognitio dei acquisita*, Sudduth cites Calvin, Turretin, Charnock, Jonathan Edwards, and the framers of the Westminster Confession.

who agree with (say) the dogmatic function may not agree with the pre-dogmatic function). These functions include

- Dogmatic function: confirming and explicating the natural knowledge of God as a biblical datum, assisting the systematic development of a biblically based doctrine of God, and strengthening and augmenting the Christian's knowledge of God (Sudduth 2009, p. 53).
- Pre-dogmatic function: theistic arguments are parts of a system of theology that is independent of dogmatic theology and serves as its rational foundation (Sudduth 2009, p. 53).
- Apologetic function: theistic arguments are used to defend theism against the objections of atheists and agnostics (Sudduth 2009, p. 53).
- Worldview formation: connecting religious beliefs with beliefs about the broader world, such as those acquired through science.
- Devotional function: motivating meditation, prayer, thanksgiving, and worship of the Creator.

According to the proponents of traditional natural theology, God in his sovereignty can choose to use this human reasoning to produce knowledge of God; 'divine sovereignty is compatible with the efficacy of secondary causes' (Sudduth 2009, p. 53, pp. 104–105). Nevertheless, as Jonathan Edwards observes, a person's sense of the force of such inferences or proofs depends on a properly disposed heart; one in which egoism, prejudice, and hostility toward god have been replaced by the appropriate virtues, for example, altruism, and love of God, which in turn requires the operation of divine grace (Edwards 1955, misc. p. 628, p. 251).

One may hold the view that God has taken the initiative to reveal himself through the provision of evidences in the natural world (and also in history), and He has created humans who have the capacity to discover these evidences and use them to formulate rational arguments for His existence. As Avis (2021, p. 180) notes,

the notions of revelation and of human discovery are not opposed ... but are related in a way that is mutually illuminating (Dulles 1980). Every moment of discovery—indeed every use of our reason—is a form of receptivity to reality, an openness to what is given, even as we reach out proactively towards it.

On this view, divine revelation and the arguments of natural theology can go together. On the one hand, God took the initiative to reveal himself by creating the cosmos and creating humans who can know God (Rom. 1:21) through understanding what has been created (Rom. 1:20). On the other hand, natural theology (*cognitio dei acquisita*) refers to human discovery and recognition of God's revelation in nature by inferring from the evidences which God has provided (see the exegesis on Acts 14 in Section 4.2). Thus, the evidences in the natural world can be understood as one of the ways by which God has revealed himself, while the rational arguments of natural theology (*cognitio dei acquisita*)

which use inferential reasoning from the evidences can be understood as one of the ways by which humans can recognize that God exists. A number of philosophical and theological objections have been raised against this view, which I shall address in the rest of this book.

1.10 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have introduced the doctrine of revelation and natural theology, and defended a traditional definition of natural theology as referring to what can be known, rationally believed, and/or demonstrated about God by observing and thinking about the natural world, without using the doctrines of a particular religion as premises.

I have offered three arguments against McGrath's thick definition of natural theology. (1) It obscures what various Christian Scriptural passages and early church fathers affirmed, namely, that people can know some things about God, apart from specific religious (e.g., Christian) claims of special revelation (e.g., concerning the Scripture or the Incarnation). (2) It risks disrespecting the efforts of other traditions (Ancient Greek, Hindu, etc.) which have defended the cosmological and Teleological Arguments, without presupposing Christian claims. (3) It leads to confusions and misunderstandings.²² Along the way, I have offered corrections to the misreadings of important primary sources (e.g., the writings of Augustine, Aquinas, Sebonde, and Alsted) in recent literature. I have also offered corrections to the errors of reasoning in Harrison (2022), which has resulted in a fallacious historical narrative that has the potential to mislead other theologians. These errors include confusing the starting point of the person using an argument with the starting point of the argument, confusing the order of being with the order of knowing, false dilemma, and the failure to consider how the arguments of natural theology (such as the argument from motion offered by Plato and Aquinas) can be expressed in syllogistic format, which makes clear what the premises of the argument truly are. As shown in earlier sections, contrary to Harrison, none of the premises is a religious premise (note that the affirmation that God exists is the conclusion, not the premise, of the argument). While the purposes for offering the argument have changed over time due to changing circumstances (e.g., there were hardly any atheists challenging the existence of God during Aquinas' time, compared to the present era), the syllogistic form and the premises of the argument remain similar in the sense that they avoid begging the question; i.e., they avoid using a religious premise to argue for a religious conclusion. Additionally, Harrison's narrative is too Eurocentric and fails to consider how the arguments of natural theology have been effectively used by earlier missionaries such as Matteo Ricci in engagement with people of other (e.g., Asian Buddhist) worldviews who do not share similar background religious convictions.

²² Note that none of the above objections is guilty of assuming a particular understanding of what natural theology really is and judging McGrath's understanding by that standard.

Harrison might object by claiming that my definition of natural theology seems to presume a homogeneous sense of reason and argumentation that flattens the historical development of what we call natural theology into a singular definition that reflects modernist concerns.

Two points may be said in response.

First, in this chapter (see Sections 1.3 and 3.2), I have laid out the premises of the Cosmological Arguments offered by Plato (Ancient Greece), Aquinas (Medieval), and myself (Modern) to illustrate the following point. Namely, despite the developments of natural theology over time resulting in the arguments being formulated slightly differently, all of these arguments use deductive inference from premises that involve observing and thinking about the natural world and none of the premises is based on the doctrine of any particular religion. The definition of natural theology I offered fits the use of these arguments across different eras, rather than merely reflecting modernist concerns.

Second, I am not assuming there is a monolithic notion of natural theology that stretches back to the ancient Greco-Roman era. On the contrary, I agree that there have been different notions, as indicated by the six different approaches McGrath stated (which I cited in Section 1.3). Nevertheless, the claim that there have been different notions is merely a *descriptive* claim; I have defended three arguments in Section 1.3 for the *normative* claim that the definition I stated above is the best definition of natural theology. It should be noted, however, that the main conclusions of this book do not depend on my definition of natural theology; rather, they depend on whether the project that is associated with this definition is defensible against objections, which I shall discuss in the following chapters.

The project associated with this definition of natural theology is not merely a protestant, evangelical, or Anglophone rational project; rather, it can be found within different Christian denominations around the world.

For example, within the Roman Catholic tradition, which represents more than 1 billion individuals globally, the First Vatican Council (1869–1870) declares that God ‘can be known with certainty from the consideration of created things in the natural light of human reason’ (*Dei Filius*, citing Romans 1:20). This was interpreted by subsequent Popes as affirming traditional natural theology. In particular, the 1879 encyclical *Aeterni Patris* by Pope Leo XIII states that ‘certain truths which ... were discovered by pagan sages with nothing but their natural reason to guide them, were demonstrated and proved by becoming arguments.’ The 1950 encyclical *Humani Generis* by Pope Pius XII reads, ‘It is well known how much the Church values human reason, in what is concerned with definitely demonstrating the existence of one personal God.’²³

23 Kerr (2010) claims that Vatican I dogma does not entail that knowledge of God’s existence God could be proved by rational argument and mentions other non-inferential ways of knowing such as ‘Cartesian innate ideas; Augustine’s illumination doctrine ... the theory that we know God non-inferentially and immediately through the “interior mirror of the soul”’ (p. 223; this corresponds with *cognitio dei insita* discussed in Section 1.9). However, Kerr does not give

While it may appear unfashionable to some theologians nowadays to claim that one can prove that God exists, in actuality this claim is in line with the papal interpretative tradition of Vatican I as mediated by the papal encyclicals which are considered authoritative for Roman Catholicism,²⁴ the largest Christian denomination in the world (see further, the discussion in Section 9.6).

It is true that some Eastern Orthodox theologians, such as Bulgakov, Lossky, Zizioulas, and Yannaras, have raised objections to natural theology (e.g., claiming that it detracts from an experiential knowledge of God and can be religiously counterproductive). Nevertheless, other Eastern Orthodox theologians have replied to these objections by arguing that theistic arguments can aid the experiential path and have sought to demonstrate ‘the rich history and contemporary relevance of natural theology in Eastern Orthodoxy’ (Bradshaw and Swinburne eds. 2021, ix). See in particular the essays by Dumsday, Bradshaw, and Fokin in Bradshaw and Swinburne ed. (2021), which explain the use of theistic arguments in the works of Aristides, Justin Martyr, Athenagoras, Nemesius, Athanasius, Basil, Gregory Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom, Maximus the Confessor, and John of Damascus. This conclusion is highly significant given that the patristic tradition is regarded as normative for Eastern Orthodoxy.

In the rest of this book, I shall defend the viability of the project of natural theology. I shall begin by introducing the objections which have been raised against this project.

adequate consideration of the very early reception history exemplified by the papal interpretative tradition of Vatican I as mediated by the papal encyclicals stemming from Leo XIII, who participated as the Bishop of Perugia in the First Vatican Council convoked by Pope Pius IX and succeeded Pius IX as the Pope in 1878.

- 24 While what is taught in papal encyclicals does not necessarily entail that they are to be regarded by Roman Catholics as infallible dogmas, in this case the papal interpretative tradition of Vatican I belongs to the category of teachings that is to be regarded as ‘an authentic expression of the ordinary Magisterium of the Roman Pontiff ... and therefore require *religious submission of will and intellect*,’ even if they are not defined as infallible dogmas https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_1998_professio-fidei_en.html.

2 Introduction to objections and responses

2.1 Introducing Modernist and Postmodernist challenges to the doctrine of revelation and natural theology

The doctrine of general revelation (as well as special revelation) and natural theology have been challenged by many throughout history, especially since the Enlightenment, the period in the history of Western thought and culture, stretching roughly from the mid-decades of the 17th century through the 18th century, culminating historically in the political upheaval of the French Revolution. This period was characterized by dramatic revolutions in science, philosophy, society, and politics, which swept away the medieval worldview and ushered in the modern Western worldview (Bristow 2017). Amidst the variations and complexities, the common features of the movement include the following:

1. Emphasizes reason as human's central capacity ('*Sapere aude!* Have the courage to use one's own reason!'—Kant, 'What is Enlightenment?' [1784]).
2. Contrasts with the darkness of irrationality and superstition that supposedly characterized the Middle Ages.
3. Beliefs are to be accepted only on the basis of reason, not on the authority of priests, sacred texts, or tradition.
4. Devalues local prejudices and customs, which owe their development to historical peculiarities rather than to the exercise of reason.
5. The brotherhood of all men: should be granted equality before the law and individual liberty.
6. Tolerance is to be extended to other creeds and ways of life.
7. Both an individual and humanity as a whole can progress to perfection ('Enlightenment,' in Edmund ed. 2000; Inwood 2005).

While there were scholars during the Enlightenment who used reason to defend traditional Christianity, there were others who used reason to attack it (see, for example, the arguments of David Hume, some of which are discussed in the rest of this book).

Postmodernist philosophy and theology emerged after the Second World War as a reaction against certain aspects of Modernism, such as the fundamental Modernist assumptions about human knowledge and progress (Connor ed. 2004, p. 136), although its intellectual roots can be found earlier in the writings of philosophers Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). Postmodernist thinkers have helpfully highlighted the need to consider the views of different cultures and traditions, especially those of the oppressed and marginalized, to be more aware of how cultures, traditions, and bias influence people's views, as well as the non-rational aspects of human existence such as the emotions, imagination, relationships, and communities. However, leading *radical* postmodernist philosophers such as Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Richard Rorty have gone further and argued for skepticism concerning any claim to absolute or universal standards of reasoning and ethical codes, such as those which are based on the claims of divine revelation in traditional Christianity. While Radical Postmodernism is not a unified movement and not all of its proponents would agree with all of the following arguments or viewpoints, the following arguments or viewpoints (which are briefly introduced below and will be elaborated in the following chapters) can be found among their writings (Vanhoozer 2003):

1. Many radical postmodernists regard all theories/rationalities/ethical codes/historical narratives to be relative to and *situated*¹ within particular narratives, traditions, institutions, and practices. They therefore doubt that humans can demonstrate any system of beliefs to be true on the basis of limited human reason. They favor emphases on differences, plurality, fragmentation, complexity, and tolerance.
2. Many of them argue that what each of us claims to know about reality is linguistically, culturally, and socially constructed and known through a peculiar and limited perspective (Perspectivism). Following Nietzsche, they argue that it is interpretation 'all the way down' (Nietzsche 1967; Wicks 2013) and that all interpretations are uncertain, undecidable, and unfinalizable. Derrida thinks that all systems of meaning are deconstructible and can be reinterpreted. 'Deconstruction' is Derrida's (1976) catchword; it refers to the process of finding out the conflict, silences, and fissures within a text as evidence of how a text undermines its own meaning.² Moreover, Lyotard

1 The emphasis on the situatedness of the being-in-the-world is prominent in Heidegger's influential book *Being and Time* (1927/1962); although Heidegger resisted a relativistic implication, others question whether he did so successfully; for discussion, see Wheeler (2020) and Chapter 9 of this book.

2 See, for example, Derrida's explanation in his *Of Grammatology* for 'why there is no true writing' and his claim that 'there is no thing itself. If we suppose that writing had a primitive and pictorial stage, it would emphasize this absence, this evil, or this resource which forever shapes and undermines the truth of the phenomenon' (Derrida 1976, p. 292). For the deconstructionists, their bigger project is not undermining the world but demanding responsibility and recognition of the dynamics within (I thank Levi Checketts for this point).

(1988) holds to the idea of the incommensurability between two language games, claiming that neither language game can express the point of difference without reducing it, repressing it, or distorting it. ‘Incommensurability’ means ‘literally, a relation of non-measurability. Things that are incommensurable cannot be measured against each other because no common scale or measure is available for the purpose’ (Connor 2004b, p. 67). The arguments which Kuhn uses in support of incommensurability of scientific theories are often used by radical postmodernists to argue that ‘we cannot decide which view is true or false.’³ In particular, with respect to the disciplines of philosophy, religious studies, and theology, they would claim that this seems to be the case given that there is no consensus about what Ultimate Reality is.

3. There is no neutrality, and everyone has his/her own bias. Radical Postmodernists think that histories reveal more about the people who wrote them than they do about the way things actually were and that we need to be suspicious of the motives of the author (hermeneutics of suspicion). In his writings, Foucault (1977a, 1977b) argues that universal truth claims are simply masks for ideology and the will to power, and he emphasizes how this ‘will to power’ influences what one thinks he/she knows and the so-called truths that one proclaims. In his influential book *Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James (1902, pp. 428–429) claims that the traditional arguments of natural theology ‘prove nothing rigorously. They only corroborate our pre-existent partialities.’ Speaking of those who pursue legitimacy behind arguments for God’s existence, McDowell (2024, p. 41, citing Norman Malcolm) claims that they ‘make up the rules as they go along, in accordance with their inclinations. Since there are different inclinations, there is no agreed-upon right or wrong in this kind of reasoning.’ McDowell (2024, p. 252) argues that ‘reason’s perspective can be regulated by interests, desires, and partiality ... In this regard, it is important to ask in what ways, if any, “natural theology” can succumb to a circumvention of our historicity, our conditionedness ... Barth, for his part, was noticeably wary of self-projective appeals to the “natural orders of creation.”’

3 Kuhn (1996). Kuhn himself does not endorse this view, but his arguments seem to imply it. As Rauser (2009, p. 135) explains, ‘According to Kuhn, scientific theories are accepted or rejected relative to an entire paradigm. Kuhn runs into trouble by insisting that while each paradigm is internally rational, there are no externally rational criteria to guide the abandonment of one paradigm and the adoption of another. Consequently, his view of science constitutes a form of ‘non-rational non-realism,’ because he denies that the putative entities of scientific theory exist apart from the theory, while he only recognizes the rationality of the process as internal to each particular theory. As a result, Kuhn rejects the notion that we can speak of one particular theory as more closely approximating reality than another (e.g., as if Newtonian cosmology were truer than Ptolemaic). Understandably, this view raises the spectre of relativism.’

Kojonen (2017) has helpfully classified the Modernist and Postmodernist objections to natural theology under the following categories:

1. The philosophical critique of the concept of God as incoherent.
2. The epistemological critique of the possibility of natural theology: arguing that the question of the existence or non-existence of God is, in principle, unanswerable by humans.
3. A full-blown non-realist understanding of theological language: arguing that religious language is not meant to refer to any mind-independent reality.
4. The argument that belief does not have to be supported by the kind of evidence presented in natural theology.
5. The critique of the arguments of natural theology.
6. The critique of the relationship between natural theology and confessional theology.

Concerning Critique (1), Kojonen (2017) notes that the mainstream of Western theology holds that the concept of God is not incoherent. Because of the limitation of space, I shall not discuss this critique here but in a future volume on the Doctrine of God. I shall elaborate on and discuss the other critiques in the rest of this book.

2.2 Introducing classical and non-classical responses to the challenges

Many Christian scholars throughout history have responded to the challenges to the doctrine of divine revelation (both general revelation and special revelation) by offering arguments from external evidences for the doctrines (in particular, the foundational doctrines) of traditional Christianity. Here, the term ‘evidence’ is defined as an indicator of truth (understood as that which corresponds with the way things are),⁴ while the term ‘external’ is used in contrast with the internal criterion of Barth et al., which I shall discuss below. The arguments from external evidences often involve the arguments of natural theology (but not always so, for some of these scholars focus only on the arguments for special revelation).

Such an approach to challenges has been used by many Christian scholars throughout history, including those prior to the Enlightenment, and hence it is commonly referred to as classical apologetics (Cowan ed. 2000). Scholars who have used this approach include Justin Martyr, Athenagoras, Aristides,

4 Against Marshall’s (2000) objections to the correspondence theory of truth, Rauser (2009, chapter 8) argues that the key is to recognize that ontological parsimony is relative to background beliefs, and a Christian need not (indeed, ought not to) accept Donald Davidson’s minimalistic ontology which Marshall cites.

Irenaeus,⁵ Origen, Athanasius,⁶ Eusebius, Augustine, Philoponus, Anselm, Aquinas, Duns Scotus, Locke, Leibniz, Butler, Paley, Edwards, Warfield, and, in the 20–21st century, Richard Swinburne, William Lane Craig, Alexander Pruss, Robert Koons, Josh Rasmussen, Robin Collins, among others.

It is true that some of the Church Fathers listed above (e.g., Justin, Origen) had differing understandings of some of the foundational doctrines of Christianity (e.g., the Incarnation). It is also true that they did not regard the arguments for natural theology as necessary for proper faith (see Chapter 7); rather, the Scripture was often regarded as having the power to non-inferentially justify Christian beliefs (Wahlberg 2024). Moreover, the Church Fathers and Medieval theologians listed above had different views of the world compared with modern thinkers, and the kinds of challenges they faced were different. (The earlier theologians did not have to face the epistemological objections of Hume and Kant, for example.) Nevertheless, all of them offered arguments from external evidence (contrast these with the approach of Barth et al. discussed below) for at least some of the foundational doctrines of traditional Christianity, and many of them used the arguments of natural theology. (To think that the modern theologian should use a different approach given the objections of Hume and Kant would be to assume that their objections are insurmountable for the classical approach, but this assumption is false, given that their objections are based on flawed reasoning, as shown in the rest of this book.)

I shall illustrate the use of the classical approach to natural theology in the Christian tradition with a few examples. Augustine used the Teleological Argument by arguing that ‘the world itself, by its well-ordered changes and movements, and by the fair appearance of all visible things, bears a testimony

5 While Irenaeus (*Against Heresies*, 4.6.4) states ‘the Lord taught us that no man is capable of knowing God, unless he be taught of God; that is, that God cannot be known without God,’ his point does not exclude God teaching humans about himself using evidences. In fact, Irenaeus appealed to historical evidence by arguing that his views about God and Christ were passed down from the apostles. For example, he claimed to have spoken with Polycarp when he (i.e., Irenaeus) was young, and that Polycarp was ‘instructed’ and ‘appointed’ by the apostles, having ‘conversed with many who had seen Christ’ and ‘always taught the things which he had learned from the apostles’ (Irenaeus, 3.3.4).

6 While Athanasius states that ‘knowledge of religion and of the truth about the universe does not so much need instruction from men as it can be acquired by itself’ (*Contra Gentes*, 1), saying that it does not need instruction from men does not mean there is no evidence for men to understand. On the contrary, he goes on to claim, ‘For well-nigh every day it has cried out in events, and reveals itself more clearly than the sun through the teaching of Christ’ (*Contra Gentes*, 1), which implies the presence of evidence. Athanasius (*On the Incarnation* 4.23) also offered a historical argument for Jesus’ resurrection: ‘And how could His disciples have had boldness in speaking of the resurrection unless they could state it as a fact that He had first died? Or how could their hearers be expected to believe their assertion, unless they themselves also had witnessed His death? For if the Pharisees at the time refused to believe and forced others to deny also, though the things had happened before their very eyes, how many excuses for unbelief would they have contrived, if it had taken place secretly? Or how could the end of death and the victory over it have been declared, had not the Lord thus challenged it before the sight of all, and by the incorruption of His body proved that henceforward it was annulled and void?’

of its own, both that it has been created, and also that it could not have been created save by God, whose greatness and beauty are unutterable and invisible' (*City of God*, 9.4). John Philoponus defended on philosophical grounds the viability of the idea of *creatio ex nihilo* (*Against Proclus On the Eternity of the World*, Books VIII and IX) and offered philosophical arguments against the possibility of an actual infinite past (*Against Aristotle on the Eternity of the World*, frag. 132). Aquinas famously presented his five proofs for the existence of God. As explained in Chapter 1, the formulations of the above-mentioned arguments do not start with the premise that God exists, which would beg the question. Contrast this with Karkkainen's (2014, p. 113) claim that natural theology should 'simply posits the existence of God' as 'ground belief.' Citing Thomas Torrance, Karkkainen (2014, p. 119) argues that Christian theology should be the presupposition of natural theology, because many people do not think that nature's witness to God is there. However, the fact that many people do not think so might be due to the noetic effects of sin and/or various psychological and social factors (see Chapter 5 and the discussion on the lack of consensus in Chapter 9). It does not imply that nature's witness to God cannot be demonstrated without presupposing Christian theology (I have argued that the contrary is the case; see Chapters 3 and 6). In addition to his work in natural theology, Aquinas (*Summa Theologica* 3. 53.1) also emphasized the importance of eyewitness testimony concerning the empty tomb and Jesus' resurrection appearances. Duns Scotus (*Ordinatio*, Prologus 2. 100–119) offered multiple evidential arguments (including fulfilled prophecies and testimonies to miracles) for the divine origins of Scripture, in addition to defending the Cosmological Argument.

Prior to the Enlightenment, hardly any Christian scholar would reject the classical approach. (An exception is William of Ockham [1287–1347], who tried to argue that the arguments of natural theology offered by his predecessors [e.g., Anselm, Scotus] are defective without attempting to repair these arguments or offer new arguments, but held that theological truths are to be accessed by faith. See his *Quodlibeta Septem* I, ques. 1; II, ques. 1; III, ques. 1; IV, ques. 1–2; and VII, ques. 11–18.)

While Tertullian is often regarded as asserting *credo quia absurdum* ('I believe because it is absurd'), this is a misrepresentation of what he wrote in *De Carne Christi* 5.4. Harrison (2017, p. 341) notes that what Tertullian actually said was '*et mortuus est dei filius: [prorsus] credibile est, quia ineptum est. et sepultus resurrexit: certum est, quia impossibile*' ('and the Son of God died, it is [utterly] credible, because it is unfitting; and he was buried and rose again; it is certain, because it is impossible'). In context, Tertullian was responding to Marcion, who regarded the idea that *God* should be born and crucified as foolishness. Harrison explains:

Drawing upon 1 Corinthians 1:17–31, Tertullian rehearses the idea that while to human minds Christ's crucifixion may seem to be folly, God's "foolishness" is higher than human wisdom. So the likely connotations

of *ineptus*, given Tertullian's preceding discussion, lie more in the direction of putative unworthiness and an ironic sense of "foolishness," than logical absurdity. And, again, Tertullian had the Latin *absurdus* available to him, but chose not to use it.

(Harrison 2017, pp. 342–343)

Harrison goes on to document how later Enlightenment thinkers took Tertullian's words out of context for their polemical purposes. Those who classify Tertullian as a fideist ignore his emphasis on the rationality of faith, which is carefully framed to avoid cultural accommodationism (McGrath 2018, p. 52). While warning against the errors of pagan philosophers ('what has Jerusalem to do with Athens'), like many of those philosophers Tertullian argued that a well-ordered cosmos cannot have made itself. He called this 'the proof from the works of His hands, so numerous and so great, which both contain you and sustain you' (Tertullian, *Apology* 17, see the discussion in Levering 2016, p. 30).

Nevertheless, since the Enlightenment, a significant number of theologians and philosophers have discarded the classical approach together with (at least some of) the foundational doctrines of traditional Christianity and embraced Liberal Theology (e.g., Schleiermacher).⁷ Many others have retained these foundational doctrines but embraced Radical Fideism. The word Fideism has a variety of meanings; I am using Radical Fideism to refer to the view which regards the use of arguments from external evidence to be inappropriate for the consideration of the truth of religious belief. This is different from more moderate forms of Fideism, such as that defended in Bishop (2007). Bishop affirms that when a person thinks that the evidences for atheism and theism are equally strong and under appropriate conditions similar to those comprising what William James had famously called a 'genuine option,' it is morally permissible for him/her to believe in God even though he/she thinks this conclusion goes beyond what is warranted on purely evidential grounds. (As an analogy, James invites us to imagine ourselves 'standing on a mountain pass in the midst of whirling snow and blinding mist.'⁸ You cannot see the way ahead clearly, but you know that if you do nothing, you will surely be frozen to death. In this situation, it would be rational to take the leap of faith and forge ahead, for there is at least a chance of survival if you do. Likewise, given that we know that we will eventually die one day, it would be rational to take the leap of faith and embrace a religion that is a genuine option, for there is at least a chance of survival beyond death if you do, and risk of damnation if you don't.) This kind of 'supra-evidential' fideism does not in principle reject the use of arguments

⁷ Some of these have adopted an anti-realist approach to theology, using the word 'God' as an interpretation of experience without referring to an entity that can exist apart from human experience (see Chapter 8).

⁸ William James, *The Will to Believe* (1896). <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/26659/26659-h/26659-h.htm>.

from external evidence. Moreover, the claim that ‘under appropriate conditions it is morally permissible for a person to believe what he/she thinks goes beyond what is warranted by the evidence’ is consistent with the claim that ‘there are in fact evidences (which perhaps the person is unaware of and) which indicates that the case for theism is stronger than atheism.’ Thus, this moderate Fideism (which I regard as reasonable) is compatible with the arguments defended in this book. In what follows, I shall target my criticisms at more radical versions of Fideism.

The views of Kierkegaard have been highly influential in downplaying the importance of offering a rational defense for Christian doctrines, claiming that such a defense has no bearing on faith (Kierkegaard 1846/1992, pp. 29–31). Barth claims that the warrant for the specific claims of theology is purely internal to God’s Word, which cannot let itself be questioned as to its agreement with the demands of human structures of knowing (Barth 1956, pp. 72, 196). John Webster argues that what makes Christology critical is its object: Jesus Christ, who as judge is other than any contingent representation (Webster 2004). Webster also warns of the prideful assumption of subjecting Christ to the dictates of reason (Webster 2005, p. 22).

I shall briefly introduce two other approaches: presuppositionalism and reformed epistemology.

Presuppositionalism is popular among certain groups of Reformed Christians today. Claiming that there is no neutral starting point,⁹ Presuppositionalists assume the truth of the Christian Scripture as their starting point in their assessment of the truth-claims of Christianity. The main proponents of Presuppositionalism, such as Cornelius Van Til, Gordon Clark, Greg Bahnsen, Scott Oliphint, and John Frame, differ among themselves with regard to the finer points of their method (Frame 1994, pp. 9–17). For example, Frame notes that Van Til has argued that Theism provides a satisfactory explanation for the conditions that make human rationality possible, while other worldviews do not. However, Frame objects that this Transcendental Argument for God (TAG) by itself requires premises that in the end make the formulation of the argument similar to the arguments of natural theology used by classical apologists (Frame 1994, pp. 71–88). On the other hand, Frame acknowledges his use of circular argument; that is, a form of argument which presupposes the conclusion of what is to be proved. He distinguishes between two types of circular argument. The narrow circular argument presupposes the Bible as the word of God to prove that the Bible is the word of God. The broader circular argument uses the Bible to determine what external evidence and methods of reasoning are in accordance with the Bible and then uses these to prove the Bible. Frame’s use of external evidence distinguishes him from Radical Fideists. Nevertheless, the broader circular argument is still circular in a sense, because the proponent chooses, evaluates, and formulates these evidences in ways controlled by the Bible, which is presupposed as the word of

9 The issue of the starting point is discussed in detail in Chapter 6.

God (Frame 1994, pp. 9–17). Frame thinks that God speaks with absolute authority throughout the Scripture, and his words cannot be subjected to proof and disproof (Frame 1994, p. 135). Frame thus concludes that ‘in the final analysis we must believe Scripture on its own say-so’ (Frame 1994, pp. 12–14).

If the Presuppositionalist’s argument is understood merely as TAG, then this can be understood as a version of classical apologetics, for some classical apologists have also appealed to the superior explanatory power of Theism for the existence of human rationality, given which human rationality should be regarded as evidence for Theism (Reppert 2009). In this case, the evidence is still the foundational premise against which different worldviews are tested (Theism passes the test while other worldviews are reduced to absurdity).¹⁰ Frame’s circular argument is distinct from the arguments of classical apologetics. However, Frame’s argument leads to absurdity (see below) and commits the fallacy of begging the question (see Chapter 6) (for a more detailed assessment, see Loke 2018b).

Reformed epistemology is advocated by philosophers Alvin Plantinga (2000), William Alston, Kelly James Clark, Andrew Moon (2016), Tyler McNabb (2019), and others. In distinction from Frame, reformed epistemologists do not use Frame’s type of circular argument for the Bible. In distinction from Radical Fideism, they do not necessarily reject external evidence; they just do not think that Christians require these evidences in order to be warranted in their Christian beliefs. Rather, they affirm that a believer’s faith in God is warranted and properly basic as long as it is formed in a proper way (i.e., by the work of the Holy Spirit).

The view of reformed epistemology is related to the internalism-externalism debate in epistemology. Internalism affirms that for a belief to be justified, one must be aware of the reasons that support it, while externalists affirm that not all justified beliefs require this. The rise in popularity of externalism in recent decades is partly due to Gettier’s objection to the traditional understanding of knowledge as Justified True Belief. An example of the so-called Gettier cases is as follows (Chisholm 1989): imagine someone is standing outside a field looking at something that looks like a sheep (although in fact it is a dog disguised as a sheep). They believe there is a sheep in the field, and in fact they are right because there is a sheep behind the hill in the middle of the field. Gettier’s cases attempt to illustrate that having justified true beliefs is not enough for knowledge; rather, the beliefs must also be formed in the right way. While some philosophers have argued that knowledge requires an appropriate causal connection between the knower and that which is known and healthy cognitive functioning, Plantinga has argued that the missing criterion is the concept of proper function designed by God.

Plantinga (2000) distinguishes between two kinds of objections to Christian belief: those that claim that Christian belief is false (*de facto* objections) and those

10 Van Til’s disagreement with other apologetic methods rests on his ‘concrete-universal argument for intelligibility’ (Van Til 1963, pp. 48–49), but more work needs to be done to show how the conclusion follows from the premises of the argument.

that claim that Christian belief, whether or not true, is rationally unjustified or irrational (de jure objections). Plantinga argues that there is no good de jure objection against Christian theism unless there is a good de facto objection. For if Christianity is true, then Christian beliefs are probably acquired via their *sensus divinitatis* or the work of the Holy Spirit. By *sensus divinitatis* Plantinga is referring to a natural cognitive human faculty which ‘in a wide variety of circumstances produces in us beliefs about God,’ such as by the sight of a mountain range or a beautiful sunset. Plantinga argues that these beliefs are not arrived at inferentially but could have positive epistemic status if the cognitive faculty that produces them is ‘functioning properly in a congenial epistemic environment according to a design plan successfully aimed at truth’ (Plantinga 2000, pp. 172, 175, 178). Thus, even if they have no good arguments for their Christian beliefs, their beliefs can still be non-inferentially warranted and as rational as other properly basic beliefs acquired via other cognitive faculties (e.g., perception), as long as they are undefeated. Plantinga’s emphasis is on answering de facto objections (e.g., the problem of evil) rather than offering positive reasons for the Christian faith, such as offering an argument for the resurrection of Jesus (Plantinga 2000). Plantinga (2006) himself has offered objections against such arguments while affirming Jesus resurrected (for a response to Plantinga, see McGrew and McGrew 2009).

In the following sections, I shall explain the inadequacies of the non-classical approaches.

2.3 Problems with non-classical approaches

2.3.1 *Radical Fideism and Frame’s Presuppositionalism are inconsistent with Scriptural passages which imply a classical approach*

I shall begin by assessing the consistency of Radical (Barthian) Fideism and Frame’s version of Presuppositionalism with the Christian Scripture. This is a particularly important consideration for Frame’s approach, given that one of its main motivations is to uphold the authority and complete inerrancy of Scripture. While Barth and ‘Barthians’ (e.g., Webster) do not subscribe to this view of inerrancy, they nevertheless would agree that, given the centrality of Christ to Christianity, the Old Testament to which Christ referred and the New Testament which bears witness to him cannot be ignored for the task of Systematic Theology, and they themselves would often cite Scriptural passages to support their theological views. From the perspective of global Christianity,

It is theologically significant that while the Bible seldom plays a crucial role in the liberal Protestant Christianity of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, in many ‘contextual’ and ‘global’ theologies, the opposite is the case. For example, several African American and African theologians have spoken to the central role of Scripture for all theology, Systematic Theology included.

(Karkkainen 2014, p. 10)

Thus, in what follows, I shall consider whether Barthian Fideism and Frame's Presuppositionalism are consistent with the Scripture which they often appeal to.

To begin, it should be noted that, contrary to the views of Frame and Barth, the method of judging claims of divine revelation by external evidence is actually implied in various Scriptural passages. (While the following examples concern special revelation, I shall show below and in Chapter 6 that the methodology of using logical inferences from experiences is implicit and common to various Scriptural passages relevant to both general and special revelation. Here, I am discussing some evidential principles affirmed by various Scriptural passages which are relevant to the relationship between faith and reason in general, and which are contrary to the theological methodology of Frame and Barth).

To cite a few examples, in the Old Testament, potential prophets are to be tested according to their own predictions. An important passage is Deuteronomy 18:21–22, which provides instructions to the Israelites concerning how to discern whether someone is truly speaking the words from God:

You may say in your heart, 'How will we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?' When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him.

Here, the key criterion that is mentioned is not an internal criterion such as whether what the prophet said conforms to some doctrinal standard. Rather, the key criterion is a commonsensical and realistic one which even non-Israelites and people living in the 21st century would recognize, viz., whether what the prophet predicted comes true (compare with the discussion on the falsification of scientific theories discussed in Chapter 7). This is something which the Israelites are expected to be able to discern based on evidences that are external to the message or doctrinal standard, i.e., based on their observation of the world to see whether it fits with what the purported prophetic message predicted. This passage indicates that claims of divine revelation are falsifiable; they are falsified if they are contradicted by truths established by external evidences.

Additionally, according to Scripture, God is said to have challenged other gods to predict the future the way he could (Isa. 41:21–29; 44:7, 24–28; 46:10; 48:5, 14). These passages portray a God who allows himself to be tested and who passes the tests, such that Israel is called to be his witness of these mighty historical acts of confirmation (Isa. 44:6–8; 52:6) (Habermas 2000, pp. 245–246). Likewise, 1 Kings 18:20–45 portrays Elijah challenging the people to view an awesome miracle as God's vindication of his prophet and message. The New Testament portrays Jesus doing miracles which can be examined by the culture within which he confesses his identity, so as to reassure John the Baptist that he is the Messiah (Luke 7:18–23). Both Peter (Acts 2:22–24) and Paul

(Acts 16:30–31) proclaim Jesus' resurrection as the validation of his teachings. These passages affirm that both believers and unbelievers are told to examine history using their reason and their senses in order to ascertain God's truth. But there is no hint in these passages that such evidential challenges displease God. On the contrary, God is said to have made the challenge himself (Habermas 2000, pp. 245–246). According to the Scripture, the Judge of the universe willingly subjected himself to examination. (Compare this with Moore's claim that 'sanctified judicial rationality' with respect to God is 'an oxymoron' (Moore 2013, pp. 241–242). The God of Barth, Moore and Webster seems rather different from the God of Scripture who is willing and able to subject himself to examination and to pass the test; this illustrates the principle that truth can withstand scrutiny, or as the Chinese proverb says, '*True gold does not fear the refiner's fire*').

Barthians might distinguish between God subjecting himself to examination (as when God reveals himself in special revelation), God subjecting himself to examination indirectly, through his creation (i.e., the general revelation), and theological thesis being subject to examination by criteria external to Christian theology (such as philosophical criteria).¹¹ McDowell (2024, p. 212) claims that God 'is not the name of a thing that can be spoken of, examined, affirmed, or rejected in the way that those interrogative practices relate to things in the world,' citing Rowan Williams' statement that God 'is not an object among others or a definable substance that can be "isolated" and examined.' The above distinction however does not help the Barthian case here, for Barth's claim that the warrant for the specific claims of theology is purely *internal* to God's Word which cannot let itself be questioned as to its agreement with the demands of human structures of knowing (Barth 1956, pp. 72, 196) is also a theological thesis. And it is inconsistent with the theological thesis of the Scripture, which claims that God has revealed himself in such a way that can be tested as to its agreement with the demands of human structures of knowing, as I have shown above. (I address the issue of God-talk and apophaticism in greater detail in Chapters 6 and 8). Moser (2024, p. 247) notes that

God, of course, is not a theology, and we cannot plausibly claim that our favorite theology, even if Barth's theology, is God ... It is a serious category mistake to conflate the unmatched authority of God with the authority of our theology. Our theology can go wrong, very wrong, in ways that a God worthy of worship does not.

Frame replies by agreeing that there are provisions in Scripture for testing God's Word empirically and rationally, but he argues that the Word of God should set the rules for thinking and knowing, and for the use of evidence and reason. He thinks that the Christian needs to presuppose a Christian epistemology—a view of knowledge, testimony, witness, appearance, and fact

¹¹ I thank a reviewer for suggesting these distinctions.

that is subject to Scripture, and by doing that he is using Scriptural standards to prove Scriptural conclusions (Frame 1994, pp. 9–11).

It is indeed important to examine presuppositions, and many non-Presuppositionalists recognize this as well. However, the problem with Frame's view is that Frame's type of circular approach is nowhere endorsed in the Christian Scripture itself. Scriptural passages which advocate the testing of claims of divine revelation (e.g., Deut 18:21–22) and which issue the challenge to other gods (Isa 41:21–29, etc.) do not affirm that Scripture *should* determine what views of reasoning, evidences, and epistemology are to be adopted in order to prove Scripture. On the contrary, these Scriptural passages presuppose that logical inferences from experiences are ways by which people can know whether prophecies have been fulfilled and whether miracles have occurred. These passages also presuppose that logical inferences from fulfilled prophecies, miracles, etc. are ways by which pagans can come to know who the true God is, *without having to first presuppose* that any Scripture should control the way in which a person chooses, evaluates, and formulates these evidences. It is interesting to note that, while Frame prides himself on upholding Scripture, his approach is not found in Scripture. No servant of God is ever portrayed in the Scripture to have presented Frame's type of circular argument when challenged by an objection from pagans. On the contrary, they used a different method. In addition to the above examples, others may be given: When addressing the skeptics in Corinth who doubted the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:12), Paul appealed to the sensory experiences of eyewitnesses to prove his point: he asked the Corinthians to check out those who had seen Jesus. The statement that Jesus 'appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now' (1 Cor. 15:6) is clearly intended as testimonial evidence that is verifiable by his audience so that they might also know that the resurrection occurred. As Richard Bauckham observes, Paul is saying in effect that 'If anyone wants to check this tradition, a very large number of the eyewitnesses are still alive and can be seen and heard,' and this is provided to address the problem that the Corinthians found resurrection incredible (1 Cor. 15:12) (Bauckham 2017, p. 308).

Likewise, Theissen and Merz (1998, p. 489) observe that 'The references to appearances in chronological order and the accessibility in the present of many witnesses, only some of whom have died, support the understanding of 1 Cor. 15:3–11 as an attempt to prove the resurrection of Christ.' Paul did not argue for his view of evidence using Frame's circular manner. In another passage, Luke portrays Paul as questioning the reasonableness of the skeptics' presupposition by asking 'Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?' (Acts 26:8, NIV). Following the Scriptural example of Paul (to which Frame would be committed) would imply that, when facing skeptics who reject all supernatural claims (such as Bultmann and Hume), the Christian should not argue for his/her view using Frame's circular method. Rather, he/she should show the unreasonableness of their rejection without Frame's circularity.

Other examples of arguments based on sensory experiences can be seen from the writings of Luke, who emphasizes that the resurrected Jesus was seen, heard, touched, and ate fish (e.g., Acts 1:3 cf. Luke 24:39–43). Similarly, the author of the Epistles of John emphasizes that the Incarnated Word was ‘what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life— and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us’ (1 John 1:1–2).

It is true that Paul et al. affirm that Jesus’ resurrection fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament (this is what the phrase ‘according to the Scriptures’ in 1 Cor. 15:4 meant) (Theissen and Merz 1998, p. 489). Nevertheless, the question ‘how they knew it was Jesus of Nazareth’ and not another person who fulfilled the prophecies is answered by them on the basis of what were claimed to be the experiences of the eyewitnesses (e.g., ‘he appeared to me’ [1 Cor. 15:8], ‘touched him,’ ‘saw him ate fish,’ etc.). It is true that concluding that the resurrection occurred requires interpretation which is conditioned by the particularities of one’s horizon of perception (cf. postmodernist James Smith’s comments in Penner 2005, p. 218). Nevertheless, the New Testament authors took care to portray details that would serve to exclude alternative interpretations in a non-circular way (e.g., the touching of Jesus’ hands and feet which excludes a non-physical interpretation in Luke 24:36–43). Additionally, while the belief in the divine inspiration of the Old Testament was also part of the New Testament authors’ pre-understanding, this does not imply that they reasoned like Frame. On the contrary, it should be noted that the Jewish belief in the Old Testament was also claimed to be based on logical inferences from evidences (such as fulfilled prophecies and miracles, as noted above) rather than argued circularly. Therefore, the New Testament authors would probably think that the resurrection of Jesus would also have to be consistent with Old Testament prophecies and the mode of inference as well.

Frame’s view leads to the absurd implication that, even if Scripture fails to agree with all extra-biblical data, the Scripture must still be considered as God’s word. He writes ‘we may use extrabiblical data in apologetics, but not as independent criteria to which Scripture must measure up’ (Frame 1994, p. 21).

This is inconsistent with Scripture itself, which affirms the use of extra-biblical data to test claims of divine revelation (e.g., to determine if a prophet’s prophecies fail to come to pass) in order to recognize genuine divine revelation (see Deut. 18:21–22, Isa. 44:6–8). One might object by citing Deuteronomy 13:1–5, which affirms that even if a person’s prediction comes true or he performs a miracle, he is still a false prophet if he tells people to follow other gods.¹² This objection fails to note the rationale of the Old Testament narrative which claims that there were already sufficient evidences to regard the Mosaic revelation to be from God in the first place; see, for example, the contest of miracles between Moses and the magicians of Pharaoh in Exodus 7, which

12 <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2018/12/a-response-to-frames-presuppositionalism.html>.

according to the narrative was supposed to have taken place before Deuteronomy 13 was written.

Now, if a particular historical source (e.g., Josephus) is apparently in conflict with the Scripture, it might be that that source is in error or that there is no real conflict, but these points would need to be argued for by methods of historical reasoning and exegesis¹³ rather than merely presupposed. Endorsing Frame's Presuppositionalist approach would lead to absurdity, for believers of various creation tales (such as those Chinese who believe in the legend of the personal creator Pan Gu; here I use an example familiar to Chinese Christians among whom Presuppositionalism is quite influential) could likewise argue that, even if these stories fail to agree with all external data, they must still be considered as divinely revealed.

Frame tries to avoid the need for historical evidence by claiming that no religious doctrine other than that of Christianity is compatible with absolute-personality theism; that is, the view that there is a perfect and personal Creator, and therefore only Christian doctrine is to be accepted (Frame 1994, p. 135).

However, one can easily propose a modified Pan Gu: by asserting that he is infinite [rather than finite], perfectly moral, etc. and thus is compatible with absolute-personality theism. If historical evidence is not considered, one would not realize that the modified Pan Gu is different from the original story of Pan Gu and that modifications have been made. Indeed, one can come up with many internally consistent stories, all of which are compatible with absolute-personality theism, but all of which are baseless tales.

In summary, the Scriptural passages cited above endorse a method of argumentation which uses experiences and reason as starting points in a manner that is contrary to Radical Fideism and Frame's Presuppositionalism. Moreover, as I shall explain in Chapter 6, contrary to Presuppositionalism, some of the arguments of natural theology (e.g., the Cosmological Argument) do not in fact require presupposing the Bible or the Christian worldview as the starting points or intellectual framework in order to demonstrate the conclusion that a Creator God exists. This is in line with Acts 14:17, which indicates that people who had not previously heard about Christianity can nevertheless perceive the evidence for God and infer that he exists (see Chapter 4).

2.3.2 The problem of contradictory religious claims for Radical Fideism, Frame's Presuppositionalism, and reformed epistemology

A major problem with reformed epistemology, Radical Fideism, and Frame's Presuppositionalism is that they do not adequately answer the question why think that the traditional Christian claims are true while other contradictory religious claims—including their claims about the natural world and its relationship with religious beliefs—are false.

13 For example, one should ask questions such as 'are there other plausible interpretations of the Bible? Are there other evidences to think that that particular historical source is correct?'.

Other than Christianity, a number of religious traditions also claim divine special revelation for their religious texts. For example, Muslims regard the Qur'an to be divinely revealed (Surah 26:192–195; 53:3–4). Hindu traditions regard the Vedas to be authored by the deities.

The Vedas, conveying salvific content that is heard (*śruti*) from a transcendent realm, are considered to be the primary source of revelation, while other sources of revelatory teaching can be found in what is called *smṛti*, “that which is remembered,” that is, handed down in the various traditions and communities.

(Habito 2021, p. 359)¹⁴

Religious Daoism claims divine revelation for its scriptures; the Dao De Jing, for example, was understood to be a revelation by Lord Lao, the divinized Lao-tzu (Oldstone-Moore 2003, p. 38). Unlike Christianity, however, Daoism claims that all things come from the blending of the two movements of the *yin* and *yang*, which represent two movements of the Dao; a ‘harmonious’ blending is called good, and the ‘disharmonious’ is called evil.¹⁵

While a reformed epistemologist would claim that ‘we know that the traditional Christian claims are true because we know them via the help of God (though the witness of the Holy Spirit),’ Muslims can also reply that ‘we know that the Islamic claims are true because we know it via the help of God.’ Now, the fact that believers of other religions can also make similar claims about God does not imply that the Christian claim is therefore invalid, but the question here is how to know whose claim is valid. That is, on what basis does a reformed epistemologist think that what he regards as the work of the Holy Spirit is veridical, whereas the Muslims are mistaken when they say that they know via the help of God that their claims (e.g., their denial of Jesus’ deity, which contradicts the traditional Christian claim) are true? Why think that conversion to (say) Christianity is the result of genuine divine supernatural work but conversion to (say) Islam isn’t? Craig asks us to

14 Habito (2021, p. 366) also claims that ‘revelation’ is understood to be an underlying presupposition and continuing theme operative in various forms of Buddhism (Theravāda, Tibetan, Chan/Son/Zen, Lotus, Pure Land). This is based on his definition of revelation as ‘an actual disclosive event or events ... given an authoritative interpretation by a community ... expressed in canonical form for transmission to later generations’, and which ‘includes the later reception of these transmitted forms and their impact upon the recipient’ (p. 360). Habito (2021, pp. 360–366) argues that there are collections of Scripture generally recognized and accepted as canonical by various forms of Buddhism, and the ‘underlying authoritative source’ is ‘the primal disclosive (revelatory) event in Buddhism, that is, the Buddha’s realization of this Dharma in his awakening experience’ (p. 365). However, he acknowledges that Buddhism from its origins disclaims any notion of a transcendent divine reality as the source (p. 360) and that the term ‘revelation’ is not used in the language of Buddhism (p. 366).

15 http://ri.urd.ac.ir/article_46549.htm.

Consider then the case of a Christian confronted with an adherent of some other world religion who also claims to have a self-authenticating experience of God ... this situation taken in isolation results in an epistemic standoff. For neither person knows how to convince the other that he alone has a veridical, rather than delusory, experience ... the Christian in such circumstances is at a complete loss as to how to show his non-Christian interlocutor that he is correct and that his interlocutor is mistaken in his respective beliefs.¹⁶

While Plantinga and Alston have offered theories of knowledge that attempt to explain how knowledge of God might be possible for Christians, they do not demonstrate that Christians do indeed have knowledge of God (Greco 2017, p. 14).

Plantinga himself has at times unnecessarily and unwarrantedly downplayed the competence of philosophical arguments for answering the question whether Christian Theism is true, as illustrated by the disappointing ending of his *Warranted Christian Belief* (Plantinga 2000). However, at other times, he has considered several theistic arguments (e.g., the ontological argument) and argued against methodological naturalism which is often presupposed in the historical-critical study of Scripture. Nevertheless, Muslims have made similar arguments too. Historical arguments concerning Jesus's claims and resurrection are of key importance in the Christian-Muslim dialectic. However, Plantinga has neglected such historical arguments and has even raised an objection by claiming that the case for Jesus' resurrection suffers from the problem of dwindling probabilities (Plantinga 2006). In response, McGrew points out that Plantinga's claim is based on a blunder; in particular, it is based on the assumption that the probabilities of the background propositions are fixed. This assumption is false because, while background beliefs such as theism are premises for the resurrection, the resurrection can also serve as a premise for background beliefs such as theism. Thus, the probability of theism should be updated (increased, rather than dwindled) after considering the evidence for the resurrection. Therefore, Plantinga's objection fails (McGrew & McGrew 2009, pp. 644–648).

The main contribution of reformed epistemology is defensive: it shows that skeptics cannot reasonably argue against the beliefs of Christians without providing a powerful *de facto* argument. My complaint is that this project *in itself* is insufficient where addressing the broader issue of faith and reason is concerned. It is true that reformed epistemology may succeed as a defensive project as such. In particular, with regard to people living in some isolated places who do not have access to knowledge about the evidence for Christianity, reformed epistemology shows that there is no good reason to think that these

16 Craig (2025, pp. 285–286); Craig goes on to explain that this deadlock can be broken by bringing in the arguments of Christian apologetics which would show the objective difference between their epistemic situations. I discuss the use of such arguments below.

people are unwarranted in believing Christianity (see Section 7.5). However, to adequately respond to the challenge concerning conflicting religious claims, a positive case involving historical evidence should still be provided, even if not everyone needs to know about this evidence. (Analogy: to respond to doubts concerning the efficacy of a vaccine, a positive case involving scientific evidence should be provided, even if not everyone [e.g., people living in isolated villages] needs to know about these evidences first before they are warranted to believe and receive the vaccine.).

A reformed epistemologist might reply by claiming that other religious traditions have been refuted by *de facto* objections, but Christianity has not. Such a claim would require detailed argumentation in response to the apologetics of other religious traditions. Moreover, such a claim is vulnerable to the objection that—in principle—it is possible for a new religious movement to claim to have received divine revelation and formulated a new set of theistic doctrines which are contrary to Christian doctrines, which are not beset by *de facto* objections (other than the fact that they are contrary to Christian doctrines), but which nevertheless have no positive evidence to support either. For example, the new religious movement might claim that Jesus was an alien rather than God Incarnate. (This suggestion is not *ad hoc*, for hypotheses concerning aliens can be found in many new religious movements nowadays; see for example *The Urantia Book*). In this case, if the reformed epistemologist does not offer any positive evidence for thinking that Christian doctrines are divinely revealed and true, it is difficult to see how he/she can reasonably answer the question, ‘why think that the traditional Christian claims are true, but the claim of the new religious movement is not.’ (I offer positive evidence and reply to the alien hypothesis in Loke 2020, chapter 8.)

In summary, I have argued that reformed epistemology *by itself* is insufficient for addressing the broader issue of faith and reason. Nevertheless, the theory of knowledge which it presents is consistent with offering arguments for God and historical arguments for Jesus (Boone 2012),¹⁷ even though (as noted above) Plantinga himself has at times (unnecessarily and unwarrantedly) downplayed the competence of such arguments (for Plantinga’s own correction to this, see *The Plantinga Project* in a more recent publication titled *Two Dozen (or so) Arguments for God* [Walls and Dougherty eds. 2018]).

With regard to Radical Fideism, it is evident that believing something doesn’t make it true. Many people in Ancient Greece had faith in Zeus, but that does not imply that Zeus existed. While it may be a psychological requirement that we have to trust (i.e., have faith in) our sensory and rational capacities first before we can reasonably conclude anything (see the discussion in Section 6.8), faith itself is not truth indicative. Faith is just an attitude; at the end of the day, it is reason and evidence (not faith) which are truth indicative.

17 Analogy: a person seeing a car and having a basic belief that the car exists is compatible with him/her giving arguments that the car exists by appealing to other evidence (e.g., a video recording of that car).

Moreover, while a Radical Fideist might reply to objections to his beliefs by claiming that religious belief is autonomous, this view needs to answer the serious question it raises: ‘how does religious belief get its unique status? Why should we not suppose that the theologian’s use of “reasonable” and the like is Pickwickian, sealing theologians off from communication with the intellectual community?’ (Wilson 1991, p. 442).

A Barthian might reply that Christian belief gets its unique status because the source of the content of theology’s statements is unique and requires a different method (Moore 2013, p. 240). Following Barth, Moore argues that ‘the order of being precedes the order of knowing.’ This requires (in the words of Barth) the ‘recognition of the basis that is peculiar to the object of faith itself ... The element of reason in the knowledge of the object of faith consists in the recognition of the rationality that is peculiar to the object of faith itself. Ontic rationality precedes noetic’ (Moore 2013, p. 240, citing Barth 1960, p. 60). T. F. Torrance likewise speaks of a fundamental re-alignment of human reason in which it ‘becomes determined by its object, its proper object, God in Christ, whom reason was made to apprehend’ (Torrance 1942, pp. 29–30). Barthian John McDowell (2024, p. 207) has claimed that ‘demands for rational intelligibility and persuasiveness do not tend to bother diviners, astrologers, voodoo priests, and the like, or at least not terribly much,’ whereas Barth is not a fideist who simply begins with faith but someone who follows ‘the logic of God’s presenting God’s Self’ (p. 211).

However, one might ask how Moore and McDowell know that God is truly the source of the content of Christian theological statements and that ‘the rationality that is peculiar to the object of faith’ is indeed as peculiar as Barth or Torrance describes. While Moore quotes Barth’s assertion that ‘it is the Existence of God that is the criterion of general [creaturely] existence’ (Barth 1960, p. 155), one might ask how Barth knows that God indeed exists and that Barth’s way of knowing this is valid. Moore cites Barth’s assertion that ‘God’s existence and essence are made known in and through his self-revealing to humans; there is no “independent knowledge alongside that of faith ... able to draw from its own sources,”’ and Moore insists that to argue from creature to creator is to subordinate the order of being to the order of knowing (Moore 2013, pp. 240–241, citing Barth 1960, p. 53). However, one might ask how Moore and Barth know that the faith to which they refer does indeed yield knowledge of God, why God’s self-revelation to humans might not involve his revelation through the evidence in creation, and how Moore knows that God’s being is indeed such that God cannot be known by arguing from creation.

As I shall elaborate in Chapter 4, Scriptural passages such as Acts 14:15–17 and Acts 17:24–28 (taken together) imply that God has created humans with the ability to infer his existence and some of his attributes from nature. To reason inferentially from evidence is not to use a standard that is ‘alien’ (Moore 2013, p. 242) to Christian theology, but one which is assumed by various Christian Scriptural passages (e.g., Isa. 44:6–8; Luke 7:18–23, see above).

Some have objected to the idea that the content of revelation is capable of being ‘found out’ by the human mind (Quash 2007, p. 332). However, on the one hand, these objectors have not proved that an omnipotent and sovereign God (if he exists) cannot or will not create the human mind with the capacity to infer God’s existence from nature. I shall explain in the rest of this book that considerations concerning ‘the limited character of such knowledge’ and ‘God is not one more thing in the universe’ (Quash 2007, p. 332, citing Aquinas, ST 1a. 12, 12) do not imply that humans cannot discover any knowledge about God at all. Quash (2007, p. 325) asserts without proof that the being of God is ‘transcendent, incomprehensible, and hidden’ in the way he describes; he fails to demonstrate how he knows that the being of God is like that.

On the other hand, the existence of non-divine objects in our universe, such as stars, planets, etc., requires an explanation: where do they ultimately come from? One can make the case (as many natural theologians do) that various arguments of natural theology indicate that, irrespective of Moore’s questionable claims concerning the rationality that is peculiarly valid for the divine being, the inferential reasoning using laws of logic (which we know are universally valid; see Chapter 6) does lead to the conclusion that these objects ultimately came from a Divine First Cause (see Chapter 6).

Barth rejects the use of external evidence, claiming that the warrant for the specific claims of theology is purely *internal* to God’s Word, which cannot let itself be questioned as to its agreement with the demands of human structures of knowing (Barth 1956, pp. 72, 196). In response to the question of how we know that the purported revelation is indeed a revelation from God, Barth answered

How could the statement that the Bible is his Word *be proved in any other way than* by an act of free grace by which he *himself* makes the proof? Would it be the Word of God if it could be verified except by him? The astonishing statement that the Bible is his Word has been called an axiom. But it is such only in its logical form. In content its certainty is wholly unlike the *self-evidenced revelation* which God gives simultaneously to his Biblical witnesses and to those who accept their witness. It expresses obedience to the *testimonium spiritus sancti internum*, to the spirit of God in which the human spirit of the writer and the reader become one in common adoration; and the truth of the statement stands or falls with the reality of this sovereign act preceding from God and authenticated by him.
(Barth 1928, p. 244; italics mine)

In light of the above emphasis on internal warrant and self-evidence, Barth writes

Talk about God has true content when it conforms to the being of the Church, i.e., when it conforms to Jesus Christ ... Hence it does not have to begin by finding or inventing the standard by which it measures. It sees

and recognizes that this is given with the Church. It is given in its own peculiar way, as Jesus Christ is given, as God in His revelation gives Himself to faith...

(Barth 1956, p. 12)

However, the problem with Barth's view is that believers of other religions—say, Islam—can also generate their own internal criterion (indeed, some have done so).¹⁸ For example, a Muslim can claim that

Talk about God has true content when it conforms to the Quran. Hence it does not have to begin by finding or inventing the standard by which it measures. It sees and recognizes that this is given with our community. It is given in its own peculiar way, as our Quran is given, as God in His revelation gives Himself to faith.¹⁹

The Muslim can likewise claim that the Quran is the word of God 'by which he *himself* makes the proof' and that it is 'an axiom,' and he/she can likewise appeal to 'self-evidenced *revelation*' and the spirit of God.²⁰ However, the Quran and the Bible (which testifies Christ according to Barth) cannot both be divinely inspired because they contradict each other at various crucial points. (For example, Surah 5:116–117 claims that Jesus denied his divinity by saying 'It was not for me to say that to which I have no right,' contrary to New Testament passages such as John 8:58, Matthew 28:19, etc.). If Barth objects to this Muslim's Barthian reasoning by asserting that it is contrary to his Christian principle of reasoning and strikingly dissimilar to the orthodox Christian view that the Word assumed human nature, the Muslim can reply that Barth is judging Islam 'in accordance with alien principles,' to use Barth's phrase. Moreover, followers of any fictitious tales such as (say) the legend of the Monkey God in the Chinese religious tradition can also devise their own internal criterion and make it into an axiom or first principle of reasoning similar to the way Barth does for his Barthian Christianity, while rejecting Barth's Christological first principle as being foreign to their system similar to the way Barth would reject other principles that contradict his view. This shows that using an internal criterion with its own first principle leads to the absurd conclusion that believers (e.g., of superstitions) who adopt such a criterion would not be able to accept the evidence against their view and be corrected from their errors. It also raises the suspicion that Barth himself may be

18 <https://www.bethinking.org/is-christianity-true/karl-barth-and-natural-theology>.

19 Peter May observes that a Muslim scholar has responded to objections in a Barthian manner in a public debate. <https://www.bethinking.org/is-christianity-true/karl-barth-and-natural-theology>.

20 It should be noted that the position of Christ in Christian theology is different from position of the Quran in Islam; for example, Christian theology affirms that Christ is the revelation of God in the sense of being God Incarnate, whereas Islamic theology does not affirm that the Quran is God incarnate. Nevertheless, the point here is that both the Christian Barthian and the Muslim Barthian can set up an internal warrant.

believing in superstition²¹ as well when he claims that Christ is God incarnate on the basis of a purely internal criterion (unless he is able to provide external evidence for his view).

In response to the objection that his method is guilty of circular reasoning, Frame claims that ‘even many non-Christian authors concede that circularity is necessary. It simply is not responsible ... to dismiss all circularity as a mere logical fallacy’ (Frame 1994, p. 230, n. 48).

It is true that many think that epistemic circularity is necessary (see my response to this in Chapter 6). Nevertheless, this does not imply that circular arguments of the sort which Frame uses—such as the sort which presupposes the conclusion (‘God exists’) rather than the alternative (‘God does not exist’) as the premise (e.g., ‘*God* exists [presupposition], therefore God exists [conclusion]’²²)—are therefore valid. On the contrary, such circular arguments are demonstrably fallacious. Now, one should note the distinction between formal and informal fallacies. A circular argument is formally valid (an argument that infers as a conclusion some claim implicit or explicit in the premises is always formally valid: from the premise ‘*p*,’ we can always infer ‘*p*’). However, a circular argument *which begs the question* is well-recognized in the standard philosophy literature as a form of informal fallacy. As the article in *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* explains (Hansen 2024), to limit fallacious arguments to those which are formally invalid would be overly restrictive, for there are arguments which are formally valid but fallacious, and a question-begging argument would be one example. If they were to use such arguments, other religions—such as Islam which denial of Jesus’ deity contradicts the teachings of Christianity—can also use their Scriptures to determine what principles of reasoning are to be followed so as to prove that their Scriptures are the inerrant Word of God the way Frame does. But it cannot be the case that both the Quran and the Bible are the inerrant Word of God given that they contradict each other at various crucial points, as noted above. This demonstrates that the begging-the-question type of argumentation used by Frame is fallacious. Frame might observe that Muhammad appealed to the witness of Christians and Jews, and Frame might claim that the Quran requires biblical validation while the Bible does not require Quranic validation. However, many Muslims

21 In Kierkegaard’s *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Johannes Climacus criticizes the superstitions of those who put their faith in the externals of religion hoping to control the religious sphere of existence to make it serve them. However, such an attitude of manipulation is not essential to the definition of superstition which can be understood as an irrational belief in the supernatural. For example, a devotee of Monkey God may sincerely wish to worship and serve him rather than manipulate him, but the belief in Monkey God is still a superstition, nonetheless.

22 ‘But are we not still forced to say, “God exists (presupposition), therefore God exists (conclusion),” and isn’t that argument clearly circular? Yes, in a way. But that is unavoidable for any system, any worldview’ (Frame 2000, p. 217).

would object by claiming that the Bible has been corrupted.²³ In order to answer the question ‘How do we know that the Bible has not been corrupted as the Muslim claimed?’, we would need to consider extra-biblical historical evidence (for example, the evidence of early manuscripts) as an independent criterion (as many scholars have done),²⁴ rather than resorting to the question-begging arguments of Frame (for further discussion on the question-begging objection and whether the classical approach is also guilty of it, see Section 6.8).

Another problem with Frame’s and Barth’s methodology is that one can come up with a coherent system of doctrine which is similar to that of Christianity—the only difference is that another person (perhaps a legendary figure) is substituted for Jesus of Nazareth. One can then use a question-begging argument based on an internal doctrinal criterion to ‘prove’ that this doctrinal system has divine origins, the way Frame and Barth do. Using such question-begging arguments (whether narrow or broadly circular), one can ‘prove’ many baseless stories to be divinely inspired. Again, this shows that the methods of argumentation used by Frame and Barth are fallacious.²⁵

A Barthian might reply that ‘when God speaks ... those to whom he speaks, who are drawn into the circle of his self-knowing, can be and are left in no doubt about the matter. The Holy Spirit ... draws us in a supremely self-involving way into the presence and knowledge of a wholly and holy Other whose reality and claim upon us are self-authenticating within this encounter’ (Hart 2000, p. 48). Hence, ‘in the Holy Spirit we are confronted by what we cannot deny even if we wanted to do so’ (Hart 2000, p. 48).

Contrast this Barthian approach with that of the Apostle Paul; although he had overwhelming revelatory experiences, he sought confirmation concerning the Gospel he preached from historical sources, viz., the other apostles (Galatians 2:2) who were eyewitnesses of Jesus during his earthly ministry.

Psychological certainty is not evidence of truth. The Barthian approach has similarities to members of cults who also claim such experiences. This approach inevitably begs the question and leaves crucial issues unaddressed, for those who would argue for a totally different set of doctrines could also appeal to an internal criterion or ‘self-authentication’ as the Barthian does (Jehovah Witnesses, Mormons et al. can—and some of them do—appeal to claims about the inner witness of the Holy Spirit to secure the location of special revelation) (Abraham 1998, p. 386). Those who are familiar with the writings of cult groups would recognize a certain semblance between some of these writings with Barth’s and Webster’s appeal to ‘God’s Word which cannot let itself

23 See, for example, the arguments raised by the popular Islamic apologist Hamza Abdul Malik. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nxyD6DrcKXA>.

24 See <http://ehrmanproject.com/>.

25 Frame retorts that everyone else reasons circularly in the sense of using its own standards in proving its conclusions, but this retort commits the *tu quoque* fallacy; for further reply, see Chapter 6.

be questioned' or to 'communicative self-presence of Christ.' Leaders of these cults also claim the Word of God and the self-presence of their deities and—in a way similar to the internal 'logic' claimed by Barthian McDowell (2024, p. 207, quoted above)—argue that these should not be judged by limited human reason. Various claims to unquestionable divine authority and unfalsifiable omnipotent deities are prevalent among religious groups, including those groups which deny that Jesus was God incarnate (contrary to Barthians). Now, the fact that such claims are also present in other groups does not imply that the Barthian claim is therefore false. Nevertheless, the question here is why think that the Barthian's claim of 'self-authentication,' etc. is true or his/her supposed recognition of divine self-presence is veridical, while those of other religious groups are not. Barth's response begs the question by presupposing that traditional Christianity is true. Webster replies by claiming that the domestic doctrine of the church should be trusted to have sufficient authority to determine the formal means by which investigation into Jesus Christ might properly be undertaken (Webster 2004). Such claims can and have also been made by other religious groups and cults for their own domestic doctrines as well. Why think that the church got it right when it comes to conflicting claims? In the context of this dialectic, using an internal criterion such as claiming 'conformity to Christ (rather than Quran),' 'authentication by God,' presupposing the Bible as an axiom, appealing to 'self-evidence' or 'the spirit of God' does not answer which conflicting claim is correct. In the rest of this book, I shall consider the classical approach which would argue that the way out of this conundrum is to reason from external philosophical, scientific, and historical evidences. In answer to Barth's question 'Would it be the Word of God if it could be verified except by him?', a proponent of the classical approach can argue that the ability to reason from external evidences to the truth of Christianity has been given by God to humanity so as to help people recognize what is genuine revelation from God (see Chapter 4. McDowell (2024, p. 212 objects that examination and critique of 'God-talk' would have to begin from somewhere, 'and the issue is whether that place is any more rationally demonstrable than the conditions for belief in God as axiomatic.' 'After all, there is no agreement regarding either the role of "evidence" with respect to "natural theology" so-called, or what would properly constitute "evidence"' (p. 250). I address this objection in Chapters 6 and 7).

Moser (2017a, p. 121) likewise appeals to God's self-authentication and claims that 'as self-authenticating, God wants people to know God directly, in a cooperative acquaintance relationship of direct interpersonal knowledge, without the distraction of philosophical arguments.' He complains that traditional natural theology focuses on merely *de dicto* (propositional) arguments rather than on an experienced divine intervention *de re* in human life, and this obscures the human need for (a) the cognitive grace of God's personal Spirit taking the initiative to intervene in a human's experience, and (b) human turning, in volitional repentance, to cooperate with that intervention (Moser 2017b, p. 337). Moser's claims are similar to Kierkegaard's

(1846/1992, pp. 29–31), who claims that rational defense and attack have no bearing on faith, that offering proofs for religious claims is not helpful for bringing people who previously did not have faith a single step nearer to its acquisition, and that ‘Faith does not need it; aye, it must even regard the proof as its enemy’ (1846/1992, p. 31).

It is true that an excessive focus on philosophical arguments may distract people from ‘a cooperative acquaintance relationship of direct interpersonal knowledge’ of God (‘too much study, and too little prayer’—Charles Finney 1871). Craig (2025, xv) warns that ‘we need to be self-consciously engaged in Christian spiritual disciplines like corporate worship, prayer, study of Scripture, fellowship, and evangelization, lest our faith become overly-intellectualized and our hearts become cold.’ Nevertheless, while God (if He exists) can engage with people in direct interpersonal relationships, it will be explained in the rest of this book that He can also use philosophical arguments to remove philosophical objections and doubts that hinder people from realizing that He exists, as a first step toward a personal knowledge of God. The Holy Spirit can take the initiative to intervene in a human’s experience by using these arguments to help people realize that there is a Creator of the universe who has resurrected Jesus, and thus brings about an experience of awe of this Creator and volitional repentance toward Him. Indeed, contrary to Kierkegaard, philosophical arguments have helped to direct people to believe in God and to love God and others. Taliaferro (2024, p. 230) argues that, instead of distracting us from Christ, the arguments of natural theology can instead give us reasons for taking Christian revelation claims seriously, sharing his own personal testimony of how arguments such as the Teleological Argument have helped to lead to his conversion (see other examples of testimonies below). Moser’s (2024, p. 163) rhetorical question ‘What do we value more? Knowing God or knowing an argument regarding God’s existence?’ fails to appreciate the value an argument can have for helping people to know God, as illustrated by Taliaferro’s testimony.

The Scriptural passages cited by Moser (e.g., Ps. 18:2, 31, 28:1, 31:3; Isa. 44:8; cf. 1 Cor. 2:9–13) only imply that God alone is the foundation, which is an ontological claim. These passages do not imply that God cannot use arguments to help people realize that He is the foundation. On the other hand, the Scriptural passages discussed in Section 2.3 contain implicit arguments from evidences such as fulfilled prophecy and miracles. While ‘God in God’s self-manifesting interventions through the Spirit in one’s life’ can be an evidential foundation for people past and present as Moser claims, nowhere does the Scripture imply that this is the only evidential foundation. While the New Testament portrays Jesus, John, and Paul as stating that his disciples will be *known* by their *agapē* for others as Moser observes, the New Testament also portrays Jesus citing his miracles as evidential claims (see Section 2.3). While the Scripture says that ‘God ... has put his seal upon us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee’ (*arrabōn*; 2 Cor. 1:21–2, RSV) as Moser observes (Moser 2017b, p. 337), this does not exclude the Spirit using various means

(e.g., the words of Scripture or arguments of natural theology) to speak to people in their hearts (see further, Section 10.3).

On the other hand, as noted above, believers of other religions (e.g., Daoists) can also appeal to the self-authentication of their deities, and they can (indeed some have) also appeal to other features Moser cited as manifestation of the Spirit, such as nonpropositional character traits similar to ‘love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, and so on’ (Gal 5:22–3; Matt 7:15–17). In the context of dialectic with these religious believers, merely appealing to these features is unhelpful.

To illustrate how the classical approach can answer the problem of contradictory religious claims, consider the testimony of the eminent philosopher and historian of Buddhism, Paul Williams. Williams writes in his spiritual autobiography, *The Unexpected Way*, how the Cosmological Argument and the historical argument for the resurrection of Jesus have led him from Buddhism to Christianity in his search for truth (Williams 2002). O’Collins (2016, p. 86) cites a long list of intellectuals whose testimonies of their own conversion indicate that rational arguments have been helpful in leading them from unbelief to belief in Christ: G. K. Chesterton (1874–1938), Paul Claudel (1868–1955), Dorothy Day (1897–1980), Avery Dulles (1918–2008), T. S. Eliot (1888–1965), Ronald Knox (1888–1957), C. S. Lewis (1896–1963), Rose Macaulay (1881–1958), Thomas Merton (1915–1968), Malcolm Muggeridge (1903–1990), Flannery O’Connor (1925–1964), Dorothy L. Sayers (1893–1957), Evelyn Underhill (1875–1941), and Charles Williams (1886–1945). While leading atheist philosopher Antony Flew and Nobel laureate physicist Yang Chen Ning have not converted to Christianity, they have converted from atheism to believing that there is a God who created the universe because of scientific evidence (see Chapter 9).

The testimonies of the intellectuals mentioned above indicate the falsity of the popular misconception that ‘only those who had already believed have found their own arguments convincing.’ From a theological perspective, the examples of conversions to Christianity indicate that, while the Holy Spirit can use other ways to bring an unbeliever to salvation, the Holy Spirit can use rational arguments as well.²⁶ Even for those who do not initially come to faith through rational arguments,

many do wish to confirm or explore the sense-making capacity of their existing faith. This leads them to assess how a Christian *theoria* is able to accommodate their observations and experience—for example, the success of the natural sciences—and compare this with a rival way of seeing things, such as naturalism.

(McGrath 2018, p. 104)

26 For further testimonial evidence, <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/testimonials/>; <https://www.academia.edu/84929596/Testimonials>.

The arguments of natural theology have been helpful for many believers in this regard.²⁷ Saying this does not exclude the involvement of other factors in grounding and sustaining genuine Christian commitment. These include factors often mentioned by believers themselves, such as a serious study of scripture, a more direct perception of God's presence and love in prayer, the love and concern shown by friends in the Christian community, and the conviction by the Holy Spirit of sin. These factors can be considered together with the rational arguments as parts of a cumulative case for Christianity. It is true that there is a gap between the kind of assent that evidentialist arguments could produce and living Christian faith (Evans 1996, p. 283), because the Christian faith is supposed to be a personal relationship with God, not merely intellectual assent. Nevertheless, this does not exclude the role of arguments in helping some people to put their trust in God to start and continue this relationship. Personally speaking, the defense of these arguments in my lectures and publications which have responded to the objections by Dawkins, Hawking, Oppy, and so on has helped people from around the world overcome their doubts and find harmony between science and theology in ways that are life-changing, being used by the grace of God to help non-Christians become Christians and strengthened the faith of Christians, as indicated by the testimonials found here: <https://www.academia.edu/84929596/Testimonials>.

Finally, it might be objected that, while there are non-Christians who have converted to Christianity because of (perceived) rational arguments, there are also reports of Christians who have de-converted because of (perceived) rational arguments against Christianity or (perceived) lack of evidence for Christianity, the New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman being a well-known example.

The following two responses may be offered to the above objection. First, one can show that the arguments against Christianity can be rebutted and that there is in fact good evidence for Christianity (see, for example, my replies to Ehrman's objections in Loke 2017b, 2020). Second, one can argue that God would treat people who respond honestly to perceived evidence or perceived lack of evidence mercifully and fairly (see Loke forthcoming-b). Consider, for example, the story of Abimelech who took Sarah as his wife in Genesis 20:3–7. He was not aware of the fact that Sarah was Abraham's wife (Abraham had only told him the half-truth that Sarah was his sister) until God appeared to him and told him about it. God also noted that Abimelech did it with a clear conscience, and that was cited as the reason for keeping him from sinning against God and facing judgment. This story illustrates that God does not judge people based on what they do not perceive, but based on what they perceive. Now, it is also possible (although we should not simply assume that this is the case) that some of those who cited evidential considerations for their de-conversion may be using these considerations as an excuse—the real reason for their de-conversion might be due to other factors (see, for example, the

27 See, for example, <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/testimonials/>; <https://www.academia.edu/84929596/Testimonials>.

discussion on the Cosmic Authority Problem in Chapter 9). The Christian tradition affirms that such secret motivations would be known and judged by God, who examines the heart. The point here is that, in any case, people should be encouraged to find out the evidence and rational arguments with an attitude of honesty and humility (see further, Chapter 9).

2.4 Conclusion

I have introduced the objections raised by secular modernist and postmodernist scholars and provided an overview of the classical and non-classical responses to these objections. The classical approach offers arguments from external evidences for the doctrines (in particular, the foundational doctrines) of traditional Christianity; this often (but not always) involves the use of the traditional arguments of natural theology. Non-classical responses include Liberal Theology, which discards (at least some of) these foundational doctrines, (Barthian) Radical Fideism, which retains these foundational doctrines but rejects the use of arguments from external evidences, and Frame's Presuppositionalism, which uses these arguments while embracing a circular (question-begging) argument for Christianity. Reformed epistemologists (e.g., Plantinga) do not necessarily reject external evidences, but they do not think that these are required in order for Christians to be warranted in their beliefs; rather, they think that the beliefs are warranted as long as they are formed in a proper way (i.e., by the work of the Holy Spirit).

I have argued that the methodologies of (Barthian) Radical Fideists and Frame commit the fallacy of begging the question and are inconsistent with Scripture to which they often appeal. In particular, various Scriptural passages affirm the use of external evidences (e.g., extra-Biblical data) to test claims of divine revelation (e.g., to determine if a prophet's prophecies fail to come to pass) in order to recognize genuine divine revelation (Deut. 18:21–22, Isa. 44:6–8). I have also argued that Radical Fideism, Frame's Presuppositionalism, and Reformed epistemology (by itself) do not adequately answer why they think that the Christian claim is true while other contradictory religious claims are false.

It is commendable that Barth wrote his theology with a concern for the life of the church. Gibson (2016, p. 270) explains that

Because Barth is assuming the church as the proper location for dogmatic reflection, he is not trying to account for the Bible as a fact in the world so much as he is trying to explore what may be said about the Bible as a confession of faith by the church. And this necessarily involves a certain kind of stance on the part of the one doing the exploring: prayerful faith.

However, many Christians in those churches who (like Barth) affirm the foundational doctrines of traditional Christianity are concerned about why they

should think that these claims are true while the contradictory claims of other religions are not, and Barth's theology does not provide an adequate answer to this question. Thus, Barth's theology is inadequate for the life of those churches which he was concerned to minister to, and Barthians who wish to answer this question adequately should reconsider the classical approach. As Pannenberg (2004, p. 127) observes, Barth's attempt is a dead-end which has

From the outset the character of a mere assertion even though we make it in the name of an institution as 'church' dogmatics. The absoluteness of the assertion is then hard to distinguish from a materially different fanaticism. To present the primacy of the deity of God in the form of a cogent argument, direct assertion is not enough. The mediation of reasoning is needed.

In the rest of this book, I shall offer a reassessment of the classical approach and evaluate the use of this approach for responding to the objections to natural theology. In particular, I shall respond to the Barthian objections as well as other philosophical-theological objections in Chapters 4 to 10. I shall begin with an overview of some of the arguments of natural theology in the next chapter.

3 An overview of some arguments of natural theology

3.1 A correction to the popular misconception that Hume and Kant successfully rebutted the traditional arguments of natural theology

In the 18th century, David Hume and Immanuel Kant mounted an extensive critique of the traditional arguments of natural theology for the existence of God. Since then, many have thought that these arguments have been successfully refuted.¹ These include influential atheist philosophers such as Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, Arthur Schopenhauer,² and Friederich Nietzsche;³ liberal theologians such as Friedrich Schleiermacher and David Strauss; Neo-Orthodox theologians such as Karl Barth, and many postmodernist

- 1 It was probably not Kant's intention to promote atheism, however, others have interpreted and utilized Kant's critique of the arguments of natural theology in a way which resulted in the promotion of atheism or at least agnosticism.
- 2 Schopenhauer (1889, pp. 42, 146) claimed that Kant had dealt a 'death blow' to the Cosmological Argument and that theistic proofs had 'lost all credit'. It should be noted that Schopenhauer did not agree entirely with Kant. For example, with regards to Kant's first antinomy, Schopenhauer thought that the thesis is incorrect while the antithesis is correct, and therefore the cosmos could have had no beginning (see Schopenhauer's 'Critique of the Kantian philosophy' appended to his *The World as Will and Representation* 1818). However, as argued in Loke 2017b, the opposite is true: the thesis is correct while the antithesis is incorrect, and therefore there is a Divine First Cause. See further, Section 9.7.
- 3 It should be noted that Nietzsche thought that a historical refutation is more definitive. He wrote 'In former times, one sought to prove that there is no God, today one indicates how the belief that there is a God could *arise* and how this belief acquired its weight and importance: a counter-proof that there is no God thereby becomes superfluous. When in former times one had refuted the "proofs of the existence of God" put forward, there always remained the doubt whether better proofs might not be adduced than those just refuted: in those days atheists did not know how to make a clean sweep' (Daybreak, Book I - Aphorism # 95). However, Nietzsche's argument concerning how human's belief that there is a God could have *arisen* and acquired importance does not answer the question where did humans, the physical universe, and the laws of nature ultimately come from. Nietzsche may have assumed that Schopenhauer had proved that the series of events could have no beginning and thus Nietzsche famously postulated an eternal recurrence. However, as noted in Section 3.2, this assumption is demonstrably false and there is a Divine First Cause.

philosophers and theologians. Pannenberg (2004, p. 125) observes the disastrous results concerning the status of religion in the minds of many people:

‘But when ideas of the primacy of natural religion and the theoretical validity of natural theology came under the criticism of Hume and Kant, the obstacle that was based on the concept of natural religion and that blocked the reduction of the knowledge of God to religious practice collapsed. Religion, including the awareness of God, now became no more than an expression of our practical needs in our capacity as rational beings.’

However, many are unaware that the objections by Hume and Kant have been shown to be fallacious by other philosophers.⁴ Contrary to popular misconceptions, Hume and Kant did not successfully rebut the traditional arguments of natural theology (Sennett and Groothuis eds. 2005; Sudduth 2009; Swinburne 2012; Craig and Moreland eds. 2009). These arguments have been around for millennia and—even in our present scientific period—are still being defended today in journals and monographs published by world-leading academic publishers such as Oxford and Cambridge University Press, Wiley-Blackwell, Springer Nature, Routledge, etc.

For example, in 2018, Oxford University Press published *Two Dozen (or so) Arguments for God* (Walls and Dougherty ed. 2018), which provides an overview of many of the theistic arguments in the literature today.⁵ The arguments include:

1. The Argument from Intentionality (or Aboutness)
2. The Argument from Collections
3. The Argument from (Natural) Numbers
4. The Argument from Counterfactuals
5. The Argument from Physical Constants
6. The Naive Teleological Argument
7. The Ontological Argument
8. Why is there Anything at All? The Leibnizian Cosmological Argument
9. The Argument from Positive Epistemic Status
10. The Argument from the Confluence of Proper Function and Reliability
11. The Argument from Simplicity
12. The Argument from Induction
13. The Argument from the Rejection of Global Skepticism)
14. The Argument from Reference
15. The Argument from the Confluence of Proper Function and Reliability
16. The Kripke-Wittgenstein Argument from Plus and Quus

4 See, for example, Richard Swinburne’s responses to David Hume’s criticism of the Teleological Argument in Swinburne (2004, Chapter 8), and the response to Immanuel Kant’s First Antinomy (which bears on the Kalam Cosmological Argument) in Craig (1979, pp. 553–567).

5 For a recent overview, see also Ruloff ed. (2021).

17. The General Argument from Intuition.
18. Moral Arguments
19. The Argument from Colors and Flavors
20. The Argument from Love
21. The Argument from the Meaning of Life
22. The Mozart Argument
23. The Argument from Play and Enjoyment
24. Arguments from Providence and from Miracles
25. C.S. Lewis's Argument from Nostalgia
26. The Kalam Cosmological Argument
27. The Argument from Possibility
28. The Argument from the Incompleteness of Nature
29. Cumulative case argument, e.g., The Argument from 1 to 28.

3.2 Introducing the Cosmological, Teleological, and Moral Arguments for the existence of God

The Cosmological Argument is particularly noteworthy given that many in the history of humankind have pondered the question concerning the ultimate explanation of our natural world. Indeed, the contributors to the discussion concerning this argument include some of the most brilliant thinkers in human history. Bruce Reichenbach (2024) notes that in Western philosophy, the earliest formulation of a version of this argument is found in Plato's *Laws*, 893–896, and took its classical expression in Aristotle's *Physics* (VIII, 4–6) and *Metaphysics* (XII, 1–6). From this, Islamic philosophy developed two types of arguments: an atemporal version from contingency which was later taken up by Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) in his *Summa Theologica* (I,q.2,a.3) and his *Summa Contra Gentiles* (I, 13), and a temporal version known as the Kalam. Traces of the Kalam can be found earlier in the writings of the Christian philosopher John Philoponus (c.490–c.570). The Muslim *mutakallimūn* (theologians who used argumentation to support their beliefs) such as al-Ghāzālī (1058–1111) later developed it (see his *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*), and it was subsequently defended by other Christian philosophers such as Bonaventure (1221–1274) and John Locke (1632–1704; see Book IV of Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*). In Eastern philosophy, an abbreviated form of the Cosmological Argument can be found in Udayana's *Nyāyakusumāñjali* I, 4 (India, 10th century) (Potter ed., 1977, pp. 100–107).

From an overview of its history, three types of Cosmological Argument can be distinguished:

- (1) The Thomist (named after Thomas Aquinas); this version attempts to show that the universe has a First Sustaining Cause.
- (2) The Leibnizian (named after Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz 1646–1716; see his *Monadology*, §32), this version attempts to ground the existence of the contingent realm of things in a necessarily existent being.

- (3) The Kalam Cosmological Argument (KCA) which, in distinction from the Thomist and Leibnizian versions, focuses on the issue of *beginning of existence of a series of events*.

In my previous publications, I have shown that the insights from the Leibnizian and Thomistic traditions can be used to argue for a First Cause of the first event, as affirmed by the Kalam tradition. Such a move has advantages over the Leibnizian and Thomistic versions in that it is able to demonstrate that the First Cause has libertarian freedom, and therefore is a personal Creator rather than an impersonal entity.⁶

The Cosmological Argument which I have formulated is as follows⁷:

1. There exists a series of causes-and-effects and changes (=events).
2. The series either has an infinite regress that avoids a First Cause and a first change, or its members are joined together like a closed loop that avoids a First Cause and a first change, or its members are not so joined together and the series has a First Cause and a first change.
3. It is not the case that the series has an infinite regress that avoids a First Cause and a first change. (See Section 6.6).
4. It is not the case that its members are joined together like a closed loop that avoids a First Cause and a first change. (See Section 6.6).
5. Therefore, the series has a First Cause and a first change. (From 1 to 4).
6. Since the First Cause is the first, it is uncaused.
7. Since whatever begins to exist has a cause (Causal Principle; see Section 6.5), the First Cause is beginningless.
8. Since every change is an event which has a beginning as something/part of a thing gains or loses a property, the beginningless First Cause is not a change/event; rather, it is (initially) changeless. (From 5 and 7; here, 'initial' refers to the first in the series of states ordered causally, not first the series of changes/events/temporal series).
9. Since the First Cause is initially changeless, it is transcendent and immaterial (i.e., it is distinct from the material universe and is the cause of the universe). (See Section 9.6, see also Loke 2022a, Section 6.3).
10. In order to cause the first change/event (regardless of whether the first event was the Big Bang or whatever) from an initial changeless state, the First Cause must have:
 - 10.1. The capacity to be the originator of the event in a way that is undetermined by prior event, since the First Cause is the first.

⁶ See Loke (2022a, pp. 285–287), where I explain in detail that my version of the Cosmological Argument does not arrive at a Pure Act and a strong notion of divine immutability, essential divine timelessness, and divine simplicity, and Loke (2014, forthcoming-d) where I argue that there is insufficient philosophical, theological, and Scriptural justification for these views.

⁷ For a simplified single chapter summary which omits many detailed replies to objections by other scholars, see Loke (2021).

- 10.2. The capacity to prevent itself from changing, for otherwise the First Cause would not have been initially changeless and existing beginninglessly without the event/change.
- 10.1 and 10.2 imply that the First Cause has libertarian freedom.
11. A First Cause that is uncaused, beginningless, initially changeless, transcendent, immaterial, and has libertarian freedom is the Creator of the Universe.
12. Therefore, the Creator of the universe exists. (From 5 to 11).

I have defended the premises and the deductive validity of the above argument and replied to the classic objections by Hume and Kant as well as the objections of more recent scholars such as philosopher Graham Oppy and scientist Stephen Hawking in my previous publications (see Loke 2017b, 2022a, 2023), thus demonstrating that the argument is a sound argument which guarantees the truth of the conclusion that the Creator of the universe exists. (For a summary of the explanations concerning the truth of the premises and the soundness of the argument, see Chapter 6. For the reasons for calling the Creator ‘God,’ see Chapter 10).

The Teleological Argument is perhaps the argument with the widest appeal, being found in the ancient Greek philosophers (as noted in Chapter 1) and in Judaist, Christian, Islamic, Hindu, and Deist traditions. This appeal can be explained by the obvious impression of design in nature, which is acknowledged by many atheists (e.g., Dawkins 1986, p. 1) who have tried to explain the impression away using modern scientific explanations such as the theory of evolution. However, it turns out that the *high degree of precise mathematical order* of physical reality that underlies scientific explanations (including the evolutionary explanations mentioned by Dawkins) is the most obvious evidence *discovered by modern science* which indicates that physical reality has a Designer. (See the quote from Yang at the beginning of this book and the discussion of his view and Einstein’s view in Chapter 9).

In Loke (2022a), I have demonstrated the failure of the alternative explanations by using a more rigorous deductive formulation of the Teleological Argument for the existence of God based on the high degree of precise mathematical order and the fine-tuning of the universe. This deductive formulation avoids the problem of arguing from analogy (which has been criticized by Hume 1779/1993). It also avoids the objection that ‘appealing to God can be used to solve any problem, so it is not helpful’ (Roger Penrose, cited in Loke 2022a, p. 7). My deductive formulation shows that the conclusion that the Designer of the universe exists is not based on analogy nor is it appealed to solve a problem; rather, the conclusion follows from deduction:

1. The high degree of order and fine-tuning of the universe is either fundamentally Uncaused, or it is fundamentally due to either 1.1, 1.2 or 1.3.⁸

⁸ 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3 involve causes which may or may not be uncaused. I argue that there is an uncaused Designer in Loke (2022a, Chapter 7).

- 1.1 Random cause(s) ('Chance').
- 1.2 Non-random cause(s), in which case either
 - 1.2.1. It is fundamentally due to non-intelligent, non-random cause(s) ('Regularity'), or
 - 1.2.2. It is fundamentally due to intelligent, non-random cause(s) ('Design').
- 1.3 A combination of random and non-random causes, in which case either
 - 1.3.1. It is fundamentally due to a combination of non-intelligent, non-random cause(s) + random cause(s) ('Combinations of Regularity and Chance'), or
 - 1.3.2. It is fundamentally due to a combination of intelligent, non-random cause(s) + random cause(s) +/- non-intelligent, non-random cause(s) (e.g., Evolutionary Creationism: involves a Designer).
2. The high degree of order and fine-tuning of the universe are not⁹ fundamentally due to Chance, Regularity, or Combinations of Regularity and Chance, or Uncaused (and there is no good reason for thinking that they are not fundamentally due to Design).
3. Therefore, the high degree of order and fine-tuning of the universe is fundamentally due to Design.

From the above syllogism, it can be seen that all possible hypotheses (e.g., those that involve postulating a multiverse) belong to the following categories: (i) Chance (ii) Regularity (iii) Combination of Regularity and Chance (e.g., evolution) (iv) Uncaused (v) Design (the Designer may or may not have used processes such as evolution).

I have defended the premises of the above argument in Loke (2022a, chapters 4 and 7) and demonstrated that there is an essential feature of each category of hypotheses such that, while there are good reasons to show the failure of all the possible alternatives to design, there is no good reason to show the failure of the Design hypothesis, and therefore the conclusion that the Designer exists should be accepted. (For a defense of the use of probabilistic reasoning for discovering the truth of the premises, see Chapter 7. For the reasons for calling the Designer 'God', see Chapter 10).

9 It should be noted that my argument by exclusion does not require 'perfect' elimination understood as demonstrating that other possible hypotheses have zero probability. It only requires showing that their probability is so low that they can be eliminated as reasonable alternatives to Design even if we assign them very generous probability estimates (see Loke 2022a), and this is how the 'not' in the above syllogism should be understood. See further the discussion on probabilistic reasoning in Chapter 7.

The Moral Argument can likewise be found in a wide range of philosophical traditions (Baggett and Walls 2020). I have contributed to the discussion by formulating the argument more rigorously in a deductive manner as follows:

1. A number of objective moral truths exist (e.g., moral obligations such as ‘a person should not torture babies for fun’).
2. These objective moral truths are either metaphysically grounded in an impersonal entity, a non-divine personal entity, a combination of impersonal entity and non-divine personal entity, or a divine personal entity, i.e., God, or they are not metaphysically grounded.¹⁰
3. These objective moral truths cannot be metaphysically grounded in an impersonal entity.
4. These objective moral truths cannot be metaphysically grounded in a non-divine personal entity.
5. These objective moral truths cannot be metaphysically grounded in a combination of impersonal entity and non-divine personal entity.
6. These objective moral truths can be metaphysically grounded in a divine personal entity, i.e., God.
7. It is not the case that these objective moral truths are not metaphysically grounded.
8. Therefore, these objective moral truths are metaphysically grounded in a divine personal entity, i.e., God. (From 2 to 7).
9. Therefore, God exists. (From 1 and 8).

The premises of the above argument are defended in Baggett and Walls (2016, 2025), Evans (2013), and Loke (2023) (where I reply to objections such as the Euthyphro dilemma). Using the above deductive formulation, it can be argued that there is an essential feature of each category of hypotheses such that, while there are good reasons to show the failure of the alternatives to the ‘God hypothesis’, there is no good reason to show the failure of the ‘God hypothesis’, and therefore the conclusion that God exists should be accepted.

10 In Loke (2023), I missed ‘a combination of impersonal entity and non-divine personal entity’ in the syllogism, even though this combination hypothesis is addressed in the rest of the article. I also mis-stated ‘not metaphysically grounded’ as ‘brute facts’. This is vulnerable to the objection that ‘there could be relaxed [moral] realist views—such as Parfit’s (2011), which holds that moral truths lack actual states of affairs as their truth-makers—according to which moral truths are not metaphysically grounded (distinct from a brute fact view, on which moral truths do have facts as their truth-makers but the facts lack explanation),’ as pointed out by Jack, Khuramy and Schulz (2024, pp. 2–3). They then go on to defend this relaxed moral realist views against my arguments that moral truths need to be metaphysically grounded. However, their defense is unconvincing because they fail to recognize that things without ontological weight cannot lay claim over us and give us duties (p. 8), and that (as explained in Loke 2023; contra Wielenberg 2014) moral obligations are characterized by accountability, responsibility, expectation, prohibition, and a binding character, all of which (considered together rather than separately as they did in their article) indicate that there must be Someone who sets the expectation, prohibit us and bind us, and holds us accountable.

In the following chapters, I shall examine the relationship between the Cosmological, Teleological, and Moral Arguments and the theological and epistemological objections which have been offered against natural theology, as well as other relevant issues concerning Biblical exegesis and philosophical argumentation. The reasons for focusing on these three arguments are as follows:

- (1) These arguments have been prominent historically¹¹ across a wide range of religious and philosophical traditions (as noted above).
- (2) These arguments have close relations to the important philosophical-theological issues discussed in the subsequent chapters. For example, the Cosmological Argument is closely related to the epistemological issues such as those concerning deduction and causality and the overcoming of the problems concerning divine transcendence and human limitation, as well as the theological implications discussed in Chapters 3 and 4. The Teleological Argument is closely related to the issues concerning probability and the scientific study of nature discussed in Chapter 7. The Moral Argument is closely related to the problem of evil and the ambiguity of nature which have traditionally been seen as the strongest objections against traditional natural theology (see Chapter 10).
- (3) These arguments have close associations with the teachings found in the authoritative (Scriptural) sources of Christian theology. These sources will be discussed in the next chapter.

11 See, for example, the discussion in Wright (2019). Eddy (2013, p. 100) notes that 'During the nineteenth century... primary school students were often instructed to observe the wisdom of God evinced in nature, and university students were taught that there were generally three kinds of natural theological arguments: cosmological, teleological, and moral ... These were used across the denominational spectrum and appeared in a variety of genres.'

Part II

Biblical and Theological Issues



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4 An examination of some scriptural passages relevant to natural theology

4.1 Psalm 19 and Romans 1:20

‘The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.’ (Psalm 19:1 ESV)

‘Ever since the creation of the world God’s eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been seen and understood through the things God has made. So they are without excuse.’ (Romans 1:20)

For many readers of the Bible, it seems evident that the above two passages of Scripture imply the traditional view of natural theology explained in Part I of this book. Nevertheless, a number of theologians have offered alternative interpretations of the above passages. For example, some have argued for a mere ‘Theology of Nature’ by claiming that verses such as ‘the heavens are telling the glory of God’ (Ps. 19:1) are a confession made by God’s people.¹ However, this does not imply that only God’s people who are informed by Biblical theology can infer that there is a Creator. On the other hand, the context (e.g., ‘their words to the end of the world,’ verse 4) implies that the testimonial evidence of creation is present to people everywhere, even in those areas where people do not have the opportunity to come into contact with Biblical theology. Thus, this passage affirms traditional natural theology rather than merely a Theology of Nature. This conclusion also fits better with other ancient Jewish theological writings in which traditional natural theology is affirmed, such as Wisdom of Solomon chapter 13: ‘And if people were amazed at their power and working, let them perceive from them how much more powerful is the one who formed them’ (verse 4). ‘For from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator’ (verse 5). ‘For if they had the power to know so much that they could investigate the world, how did they not more quickly find the Lord of these things?’ (verse 9). These verses from the Wisdom of Solomon form an important background for the interpretation of Romans 1 (see below).

Barth objects to natural theology by claiming that it would establish some other focus for theology other than Jesus Christ: ‘Christian doctrine, if it is to

1 I thank Andrew Moore for suggesting this in personal correspondence.

merit the name and if it is to build up the Christian church in the world as she must needs be built up, has to be exclusively and conclusively the doctrine of Jesus Christ—of Jesus Christ as the living Word of God spoken to us men’ (Barth 1969, p. 43).² Barth states that ‘Theology ... does not measure by an alien standard but by its own source and object ... Jesus Christ as its basis, goal and content’ (Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I.I, 4;6). While acknowledging this statement, McDowell (2012, p. 254) tries to explain that it does not deny Barth’s affirmation elsewhere that Christ ‘is revealed *through* the scriptures, church proclamation, or (to use later language) “the little lights of creation.” In other words, the *content* of Revelation is God in God’s Word, but the *means* of the Revealedness by the Spirit cannot be controlled or specified in advance.’ McDowell (2024, p. 253) thus objects to Moser’s suggestion that Barth reductively dismisses natural theology by referencing the argument in Barth’s CD IV/3.1 on ‘the little lights’ of creation. Nevertheless, it should be noted that Barth’s argument in CD IV/3.1 is that these ‘little lights’ are able to bear witness to God only when Christ illuminates himself through the pages of Scripture and enables the readers to perceive him; it is only then that Christ would occasionally ‘commissions’ and ‘empowers’ the world around us to bear witness to Him (Barth, CD IV/3.1, 111). In other words, Barth is arguing for a Christian Theology of Nature (rather than natural theology; see the discussion on the distinction between these two notions in Chapter 1). Concerning Romans 1:18–20, Barth agrees that ‘it is unquestionable that knowledge of God is here ascribed to man in the cosmos, and knowability is ascribed to God,’ but he claims that the context in Paul’s Epistle to the Romans indicates that

Paul is not speaking of the heathen in themselves and in general ... The Jews and the heathen of whom he speaks are very definitely characterised as Jews and heathen objectively confronted with the divine ἀποκάλυψιν in the Gospel ([ROM 1:15 ROM 1:16]). The theme of the epistle as a whole is the representation of this ἀποκάλυψιν as the ἀποκάλυψις τῆς δικαιοσύνης τοῦ θεοῦ ([ROM 1 17]; [ROM 3 21]). There can be no doubt that Paul meant by this the revelation of the grace of God in Jesus Christ.
(Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, p. 119)

However, Barth’s exegesis does not seem to be consistent with the context of Paul’s statement, for regardless of whether Paul was addressing those who had already been confronted by the Gospel of Christ, Paul says that God’s

2 Barth’s famous debate with Brunner in 1934 (‘No! A Reply to Emil Brunner’) was set in the crisis facing Germany at that time, in which Barth ‘saw the rejection of natural theology as central to his programme of theological resistance to National Socialism and its allies in ecclesial encroachment, the German Christian movement’ (McGrath 2014, p. 129). To protect theology from being reduced to an anthropological theory and to safeguard the priority of revelation, Barth developed such an anthropology on the basis of his decision to understand every doctrine from a Christological standpoint, in which God’s self-revelation in Christ disclosed a proper understanding of human nature (McGrath 2014, p. 135).

attributes are ‘understood through what has been made’; he did not mention Christ or the Bible here. While Paul writes about ‘the Gospel’ in Romans 1:16–17 which he identifies as ‘concerning his Son ... Jesus Christ our Lord’ in Romans 1:3–4, in Romans 1:18–31 Paul is explaining why humankind needs this Gospel: because they have been guilty of suppressing the truth (v. 18).³ That is, the ‘divinely disclosed knowledge of God’s deity *from the creation of the world* (Rom. 1:20), which was already present long before the historical revelation of God in Jesus Christ’ (Pannenberg 2004, p. 75). This implies that ‘true knowledge of God is available in nature and that people *apart from God’s revelation in Christ* come to know this truth about God’ (Moo 1996, p. 123). It should be noted that Paul does not speak of merely believing God, but knowing God—‘For even though they knew (Greek *ginóska*) God...’ [Rom. 1:21]). This substantial point remains valid regardless of whether (as Barth, Moore 2010 and Marion 2016, p. 28 claims) Paul himself argues for natural theology in Romans 1 on the basis of what he holds to be an antecedent revelation in the Gospel. Taken by itself, Romans 1 might not imply (though it is consistent with) the view that people can start with the natural world apart from Christ and infer that God exists, since the knowledge referred to may be referring to innate knowledge (rather than inferred knowledge) of God (see the discussion concerning *cognitio dei insita* and *cognitio dei acquisita* in Chapter 1). Nevertheless, by affirming a form of knowledge that God has made available in nature *apart from his revelation in Christ*, Romans 1 does affirm general revelation and natural theology in distinction from special revelation, and in this sense it offers support to what is presupposed by the implication of Acts 14:17. That is (as explained below), the implication that there are ‘witnesses’ in the natural world from which people can infer (using natural phenomena and principles of reasoning, without requiring special revelation) that God exists.

Campbell (2009), who opposes interpreting Romans 1 as Paul’s affirmation of natural theology, acknowledges that the Wisdom of Solomon is playing some role in the arguments of Romans 1:18–32 and that the intertextual relationship is strikingly extensive: ‘Wisdom of Solomon famously attacks pagan idolatry from 12:3 onward. Natural theology, and consequent pagan responsibility, are then emphasized at several points—in 13:1, 4, 5, and 9; also 15:11 (see Rom. 1:19–20). A progression to sexual immorality is then announced, as idolatry is equated with sexual immorality in 14:12, and this is made more explicit in 14:24’ (p. 360). Nevertheless, Campbell hypothesizes that the affirmation of natural theology in Romans 1:18–32 was not Paul’s; rather, Campbell attributes it to a ‘Teacher’ in Rome (cf. Rom. 16:17–19) whom Paul was opposing using sarcastic parody in Romans 1 (p. 391).

While Campbell’s hypothesis is novel and interesting, it has been rejected as implausible by many New Testament scholars. Wright rightly notes concerning the rhetorical device of *prosopopoeia* (where an author communicates to the audience by speaking as another person) that ‘the great classical examples of

3 See my reply to Campbell’s (2009) objection below.

the phenomenon stand against him [Campbell], because there it is always obvious in the texts themselves that a new “speaker”, or at least a new “voice”, is being introduced and then answered’ (Wright 2013, p. 197). But that is not the case in Romans 1:18–32. Moreover, ‘it is a serious objection to the case even for a “sarcastic” reading that not a single one of the Greek Fathers appeared to get the point’ (Wright 2013, p. 198). While Campbell claims that his view fits better with the overall theology of Romans, other New Testament scholars have argued that this is unproven and that Campbell’s view is in fact contrary to what Paul actually says concerning Law and Grace (Watson 2021). Hence, Campbell’s attribution of the affirmation of natural theology in Romans 1:18–32 to Paul’s opponent should be rejected; rather, it should be attributed to Paul himself.

Contrary to Moore (2010, p. 131), Paul does not say that striving to attain a knowledge of God which is available in nature apart from revelation in Christ leads to self-deception about God. Rather, Paul is blaming those people who are not presently seeking and responding in the right way to this knowledge which is available in creation, but suppressing it instead (v.18; see also Rom. 3:9–11). Contrary to Barth, many Christians throughout history have found the arguments of natural theology (when done properly) beneficial for building up the Christian church and leading people to Jesus Christ, the Logos who speaks through creation (see below). These arguments provide a demonstration of the existence of God, the truth of which (according to Paul) humans have been suppressing; this justifies the claim that humans are sinful and condemned and thus need the forgiveness which is offered in Christ (Rom. 3:23–26). Thus, instead of harming human appropriation of salvation in Christ (as Moore claims), natural theology can lead them to it. Where salvation itself is concerned, I am not claiming that natural theology is valuable in itself. Rather, as will be explained in Chapter 5, it is valuable as the first of a two-stage approach. The two stages are: (1) showing that there is a God and (2) showing that this God has revealed himself in Christ. These two stages correspond with what Swinburne (2003) calls a ‘ramified’ natural theology, a natural theology supplanted with additional arguments to go beyond bare theism. For example, Swinburne himself supplanted the Teleological Argument, Cosmological Argument, etc., with the historical evidence that Jesus rose from the dead and was God incarnate (see also Holder 2021).

Moser (2017b, p. 338) claims that Paul does not say or imply in Romans 1 that the created world *by itself* is evidence for a personal God worthy of worship. Citing Romans 1:19 ‘what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them,’ Moser asserts that

Paul claims that ‘*God* showed them’ about God’s reality via creation, but not via creation *alone* ... God must show people God’s reality, if they are to know God, because creation does not do this by itself, even if God sometimes uses it as a medium for divine self-manifestation. In that case, natural theological arguments from creation alone will not deliver a personal God worthy of worship.

Moser (2017b, p. 338)

I agree with Moser that ‘God must show people God’s reality.’ However, according to Paul, the manner by which God has shown it to them (Romans 1:19) is through human understanding of what has been made (1:20). This implies that the created world *by itself* is evidence for a personal God worthy of worship and that the human understanding of this evidence may be expressed by the arguments of natural theology (see discussion in Chapters 1 and 3). I shall explain in Section 10.2 that, contrary to Moser, the arguments of natural theology do indicate the existence of a transcendent personal God who is worthy of worship.

4.2 Acts 14:15–17

Moreover, the view of Moser, Barth, and Moore concerning Paul’s gospel is questionable if we take seriously Luke’s portrayal of Paul’s preaching of the ‘good news’ in Acts 14:15–17. In particular, verse 17 states ‘and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness’ (Acts 14:17).

Regardless of whether it accurately represents Paul’s own thoughts,⁴ this text belongs to canonical Scripture. It refers to the inference of the specific personal and moral character of God (see further, Chapter 10) who does good things by providing rains, fruitful seasons, food, and joy. He left ‘witnesses’ of himself (Acts 14:17) in the natural order; the phrase ‘he has not left himself without a witness in *doing good*’ (v.17a) indicates that the giving of rains from heaven and fruitful seasons (v.17b) is a testimony that *reveals* God’s character as a good Creator. This God is ‘the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them’ (v. 15). He is distinct from the Greek pantheon, the ‘worthless things’ which Paul urges people to turn away from (v. 15). Moreover, God’s leaving of ‘witnesses’ (a form of evidence) presuppose that (God had created) humans (who) have the intellectual ability to understand these evidences (the creation of humans [and all things] by God is mentioned elsewhere by the Lukan Paul in Acts 17:24–26), such that they are able to infer⁵ the personal and moral character of God who does good things. This is said to have happened already ‘in the past’ (v. 16), i.e., prior to their hearing of the Gospel concerning Jesus Christ (see also the discussion on Romans 1:20 in Chapter 4).

The above interpretation of Acts 14 fits the historical background of the text; apart from Epicureans, most Ancient Greeks believed that much about

4 Some critical scholars have questioned this; for replies, see Keener (2015).

5 While some testimonial knowledge gained from ‘witnesses’ is immediate (e.g., when somebody testifies to you that he is in pain, you know immediately that he is telling you that), others require inference. For example, the rains and fruitful seasons mentioned in Acts 14:17 are not personal entities telling us in plain language that they were created by a good God; rather, they serve as evidence from which one can infer the existence of a good God.

God could be inferred from his creation. As Keener (2015, footnote 3360) observes:

Most recognized divine design in nature (*Dio Chrys. Or.* 12.29, 34, 36–37; cf., e.g., *Plut. Isis* 76, *Mor.* 382A; *Let. Aris.* 132); creation did not result from chance or human hands (a Pythagorean in *Diod. Sic.* 12.20.2). The supreme deity was present in, and known by, his works (*Epict. Diatr.* 1.6.23–24; *Jos. Ag. Ap.* 2.190, 192; cf. 2.167). Design in nature also showed something about the divine nature, such as that it was spherical (*Cic. Nat. d.* 2.17.45–46), that it was revealed by nature and not human religion (*Heraclitus* Ep. 4, 9), and that the gods were benevolent (cf. *Sen. Y. Ep. Lucil.* 95.50) and cared for people.

(*Xen. Mem.* 4.3.12–13)

Against those historical-critical scholars who question the portrayal of Paul in Acts 14:15–17, Keener argues that

The approach is more Pauline than scholars often recognize. Most of Paul's epistles address Christians; when we approach the texts, however, that exemplify his understanding of natural theology (Rom 1:19–22), idolatry (1:23–25; cf. 1 Cor 8:5–6; 10:20–21), and repentance from idolatry (1 Thess 1:9), the resemblance between Luke's Paul and the Paul of the epistles is substantial ... Luke's natural theology is compatible with the natural theology in Rom 1:19–25 ... In fact, in different ways, Acts 14:15–17 and Rom 1:19–25 might even draw on the same source in Wis 13–15 ... Wisdom of Solomon used God's revelation in nature to make idolatry morally indefensible.

(Keener 2013, p. 2158)

In summary, Acts 14:17 indicates that the 'witnesses' of the creator God (who is distinct from the pagan Greek pantheon, i.e., the 'worthless things' which Paul urges people to turn away from [v. 15]) are already present in creation to the pagans prior to these pagans coming into contact with Christian beliefs (it is said to have happened already 'in the past' [v. 16], i.e., prior to their hearing of the Gospel concerning Jesus Christ). In other words, this Biblical passage affirms the realm of reason (by which one can infer the existence of God) that is engaged outside of Christian beliefs.

Concerning Acts 14, Barth (1957, p. 122) objects that Paul's attempt at contact ends in failure. Barth fails to note that, regardless of the success or failure of Paul's attempt, Acts 14 affirms that the witness to God is present and understood through God's creation, even for people who had not heard of Jesus.

Rutledge (forthcoming, p. 4) objects that the people in Lystra do not know God in the right way as shown by their worshiping of Paul and Barnabas as gods, and he claims that this supports Wright's contention that 'the evidence normally found in natural theology consists of "broken signposts"; that is,

signs of God that can be best understood only from a post-Easter perspective' (Wright 2019, chapters 7 and 8). Rutledge writes 'in the Acts passage, Paul does not pretend that the people of Lystra have correctly understood these signs apart from knowledge of Jesus. No. Indeed, they have misunderstood them, which is why Paul engages them as he does' (p. 4).

However, when we read how the Lukan Paul engaged the people of Lystra in Acts 14:14–17, we find that Paul did not mention Jesus' resurrection ('post-Easter perspective') but rather the evidence from creation ('rains from heaven and fruitful seasons' [Acts 14:17]). This implies that the people *should have* known God in the right way based on the evidence from creation, but they chose to commit idolatry instead. This is consistent with the notion of suppressing the truth which results in idolatry that Paul speaks about in Romans 1:18–25. In other words, it is not the case that the 'signposts' in creation are broken and can be best understood only from a post-Easter perspective. On the contrary, Paul is saying that the people distort the truth which they already understood pre-Easter and hence are guilty and therefore require the message of forgiveness and redemption found in the Good News mentioned in Romans 3:23–26 and Acts 14:15.

Against my earlier criticism of Wright in Loke (2022d), Rutledge also claims that I fail to appreciate the distinction between knowing that God exists (propositional knowledge) and knowing God personally, claiming that 'Wright admits that there is some sense in which there is evidence, even knowledge, of God prior to the Easter event. But such evidence and propositional knowledge is insufficient on its own for personal knowledge of God ... Given the above reflections, Loke's scriptural criticisms of Wright's natural theology miss the mark' (Rutledge forthcoming, pp. 5–6).

However, Rutledge fails to note Wright's objection mentioned on page 191 of his book (and cited by myself in Loke 2022d, pp. 246, 252), which concerns propositional knowledge rather than personal knowledge. Namely, the objection that, starting with the natural world (without considering Jesus or the Bible), one would not reason to the existence of a personal God 'but to an Epicurean divinity, aloof, detached, uninvolved. You might, as many have, reason your way to the "Unmoved Mover" or the gods of pantheism and panentheism. You might well end up with some kind of Platonic divinity, though the question of *whether this being is really "God" or something less personal*—"the divine", perhaps—would remain open' (Wright 2019, p. 191, italics mine).

From the above quote, it can be seen that Wright is not merely arguing that the evidence from the natural world is insufficient for personal knowledge of God (as Rutledge thinks). Rather, Wright is also claiming that arguing from the evidence of the natural world is insufficient for propositional knowledge that a personal God exists. My response to Wright concerning propositional knowledge (I argued from Scripture and also corrected Wright's misunderstandings of the arguments of natural theology) is therefore right on the mark. In short, Rutledge missed Wright's point which I am responding to, and straw-manned my position by falsely claiming that I fail to appreciate the distinction

between propositional knowledge of God and personal (salvific) knowledge of God (see further, Section 5.3).

It is true that many have inferred from the prevalence of evil and suffering in the world ('nature, red in tooth and claw'—Tennyson, *In Memoriam*) that if God exists, he must be malevolent or at best indifferent to humanity. However, we must not let this consideration obscure (1) the fact of what the Lukan Paul himself thought and (2) the fact that many natural theologians have offered plausible responses to the problem of evil and offered defenses of the Moral Argument for the goodness of God from ancient times (see Chapters 3 and 10).

4.3 Some Scriptural passages often cited by Fideists

The following Scriptural passages have often been cited by Fideists against the classical approach. However, a closer analysis of these passages indicates that they do not contradict the classical approach.

- (1) Moore interprets 1 Corinthians 1:18ff. as saying that 'the gospel is folly to the world's wisdom but in God's wisdom it has made folly of that wisdom which believes the word of the cross to be utmost folly. God has come to us in humility; humble acceptance of his self-giving in Christ is the way to enter the kingdom' (Moore 2010, p. 135). He writes

Indeed, if his treatment (in 1 Cor 1:18–2:16) of the contrast between God's and the world's wisdom is any guide, Christians ought to be cautious lest, in seeking to make their faith more evident to themselves than God has already made it through the weakness and folly of the gospel, they become over-confident in themselves and their own (intellectual) powers and fall into that perilous state described as 'boasting.'

(Moore 2010, p. 140)

Moore cites anecdotal evidence from philosopher A. J. Ayer, who claims that vanity is the single most needful qualification to be a philosopher, and Frederick Suppe, who claims that 'to tackle the big issues – full-blown metaphysical and epistemological systems' seems to require 'one giant ego to fuel the whole process ... Philosophy thus remains a constant, profound threat to faith and humility for me' (Suppe 1993, pp. 172, 174, cited in Moore, 2010, p. 136).

Moore has misinterpreted 1 Corinthians 1:18–3:23, which should be understood in light of 1 Corinthians 1:10–17. This passage addresses the problem of division of the church at Corinth resulting from the Corinthians' boasting about leaders such as Apollos, Cephas, and Paul. This context indicates that the wisdom of the flesh which Paul opposes is not inferential reasoning from evidences (as noted previously, Paul himself also uses such reasoning for Jesus' resurrection in the same epistle, viz., 1 Corinthians 15:6). Rather, Paul is opposing a self-centered wisdom that takes pride and boasts of its own abilities, denies the need to rely on God for salvation, and causes division in the church. While the Greeks understood wisdom to be involved in living well, and that for Aristotle the

person who is living well would be prominent in the city and recognized as great by those around him, Paul states that to live well is to live in accordance with God's will, which could require great sacrifice as exemplified by Christ crucified, which is foolishness in the eyes of the world (Grimm 2017, p. 200). Paul does not choose worldly wisdom in this sense, but rather that of the crucified Christ who, in contrast with the wisdom of the flesh, exemplifies a spiritual wisdom that is humble and selflessly submissive to God. Grimm (2017, p. 194) observes that 'the correct way to interpret St Paul's disapproval of "the wisdom of the wise" is not to suppose that he had no time for wisdom ... but rather that those alleged to be wise by the pagans were not really wise at all because they failed to appreciate what was truly important for living well.' (The same point can be made with regard to the wise and prudent mentioned in Matthew 11:25, which portrays Jesus referring to the Pharisees who were wise in the eyes of people, achieving worldly success and gaining people's praises, but failing to receive divine revelation.) According to Paul, spiritual wisdom cannot be known by the 'natural man,' but only by people who have received God's Spirit. Paul does not say that this kind of wisdom excludes inferential reasoning from historical evidences, a method of reasoning which he uses elsewhere (e.g., 1 Cor 15:6).

Moore's warning to be cautious against 'boasting' is well-taken. Nevertheless, his misgivings against seeking to make faith 'more evident to themselves than God has already made it through the weakness and folly of the gospel' seem to neglect the fact that, according to Paul, God has also made his existence evident in creation (Rom. 1:20) and the Christian faith evident through the resurrection of Jesus (1 Cor 15:1–11). While the New Testament authors think that self-denial and humility are important (Moore cites Luke 9:23; Matt 11:25; 16:24; 18:3; Mark 8:34; 1 Cor 2), their use of inferential reasoning from evidences (see Chapter 1) indicates that they do not think that such reasoning would necessarily lead to ego or pride.

With regard to Ayer's and Suppe's claim, one might indeed be tempted to tackle the big philosophical issues out of pride and ego. However, one might also choose to be a philosopher and tackle the big issues out of love for the truth, and there are philosophers who have found philosophy helpful for inspiring faith and humility (Moreland and Craig 2017, pp. 3–27).

- (2) 'See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ' (Col 2:8).

To understand what Paul means by 'philosophy and empty deception,' which Paul describes as 'according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world,' note the context in Colossians 2:16–23, where Paul contrasts dying to the elemental principles of the world (verse 20) with submitting to regulations such as 'Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!' (verse 21) which 'are simply human commands and teachings' (verse 22). The latter relates to 'matters of food or drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or Sabbaths' (verse 16), 'self-abasement and worship of angels, initiatory visions, puffed up

without cause by a human way of thinking' (verse 18). That is, by 'philosophy (philo-*sophia*) and empty deception,' Paul is referring to the teachings that are based on human regulations which have 'an appearance of wisdom (*sophia*) in promoting self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence' (verse 23).

In other words, Paul is not attacking all philosophical reasoning, for as Dunn observes, by 'philosophy and empty deception,'

what was in mind here were the sort of popular religious speculations which must often have appeared in marketplace discourses by self-styled 'philosophers' ... without content, without any basis, without truth, without power ... This 'empty deceit,' or better the whole phrase 'philosophy and empty deceit' (governed by a single definite article), is given a further dismissive shrug as being 'in accordance with human tradition' Paul the Pharisee would be bound to think of the importance of 'traditions' in the 'philosophy' of the Pharisees, as he recalled his own devotion to them (Gal. 1:14). Most striking is the fact that the very same phrase, 'the tradition of human beings' ... occurs in Mark's account of Jesus' denunciation of such pharisaic traditions (Mark 7:8; Mark 7:3–13; Matt. 15:2–9). This adds strength to the likelihood that the sort of 'philosophy' in mind here was essentially a form of Jewish thought being presented as a 'philosophy' by Jewish apologists.

(Dunn 1996, pp. 147–150)

With regard to the phrase 'according to the elemental forces of the cosmos,' Dunn observes that precisely the same phrase is used in Galatians 4:3, 9 (as again in Col. 2:20), where it is linked to the Jewish law, understood as itself a kind of power set in charge over Israel like a slave-custodian or guardian (Gal. 3:23–25; 4:1–3, 9–10) and given 'through angels' (3:19) (Dunn 1996, pp. 147–150).

- (3) 'Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen' (Heb. 11:1) is often misunderstood as implying that faith excludes evidence (Boghossian 2013, pp. 21–22). The Greek words *hypostasis* ('assurance') and *elegchos* ('conviction') refer to the assurance and conviction concerning things not yet seen, but that does not imply that there is no evidence for believing. On the contrary, the author of Hebrews claims that there were evidences such as miracles (Hebrews 2:3–4), which justify the claim that what the Lord and his disciples preached were divinely revealed. Given this, the reader can have assurance that their message concerning things not yet seen (e.g., concerning the city which is to come: Hebrews 13:14) is true. While the skeptic would doubt the veracity of these supposed miracles, the point here is that this passage indicates that its author does not think that faith excludes evidence.
- (4) 'Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe"' (John 20:29).

The phrase ‘blessed are those who have not seen’ has often been interpreted as saying that those who believed without evidence are blessed. However, this interpretation is based on a misunderstanding.

The Johannine Jesus is implying that he would not appear frequently to people after his appearances to the apostles. However, this does not imply there isn’t evidence to show that he resurrected, nor does it imply that his believers shouldn’t offer evidence or check out the evidence that shows that he resurrected. On the contrary, the author of the Gospel of John emphasizes apostolic eyewitness evidence in 1 John 1:1–3.⁶ Thus, the phrase ‘blessed are those who have not seen’ should not be interpreted as saying that those who believed without evidence are more blessed. Rather, it is saying that those who do not have the opportunity to see the resurrection appearances for themselves and yet come to believe that he resurrected are blessed. Seeing for oneself is not the only form of evidence; testimonial (eyewitness) evidence (by which we have come to know many events of the past) is another. Classical apologists from the second century onward have not claimed to have seen the resurrected Jesus for themselves, but this does not imply that they believed without evidence. On the contrary, they have argued that there is historical evidence (first-century eyewitness testimonies) which indicates that Jesus resurrected.

- (5) Jesus said, ‘unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven’ (Matt. 18:3).

Contrary to popular misconceptions, reading this passage in its context indicates that the Matthean Jesus is speaking about humility (‘whoever then humbles himself as this child...’ [Matt 18:4]); he is not speaking against rational thinking.

4.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown that, contrary to a number of theologians and biblical scholars, the classical approach to natural theology is affirmed by a number of passages in the Christian Scripture (and also the Christian tradition; see Chapter 1). In particular, I have argued that Scriptural passages such as Acts 14:15–17 and Acts 17:24–28 (taken together) imply that God has created humans with the ability to infer his existence from nature. I explain that a number of Biblical passages (e.g., 1 Cor 1:18–2:16) which have been cited by Radical Fideists against the classical approach to natural theology have been misinterpreted (e.g., taken out of context). On the basis of the exegetical foundations established in this chapter, I shall discuss a number of significant biblical-theological issues related to natural theology in the next chapter.

6 The importance of (eyewitness) evidence is also emphasized in other New Testament passages such as 2 Peter 1:16–18 (‘For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty’).

5 A reassessment of the Biblical-theological issues related to natural theology

5.1 Concerning the issue of epistemic authority

A number of important questions concerning how natural theology should be related to systematic theology have been asked. For example,

Should natural theology stand as the judge of what purported “special revelation” is the most likely to be the revelation of the true God, and perhaps even change religious beliefs based on its arguments? Should natural theology seek to begin from premises shared by both the believer and the nonbeliever, then perhaps ultimately leading to the recognition of a religious tradition as supplementing this natural theology? Or should natural theology be done beginning from openly confessional theological premises, attempting to connect some religious tradition to the broader world and culture?

(Kojonen 2017)

Against starting with external evidence, Webster claims that the central doctrines of Christianity (e.g., the Incarnation) should start from a given: the presently active, personal, communicative self-presence of Jesus Christ, which cannot be justified or falsified from a higher vantage point (Webster 2004). Frame likewise objects that to assess the truth-claims of Christianity in a non-presuppositional way would be to judge it by another, more ultimate standard (Frame 2000, pp. 218–219). Frame is concerned that not presupposing the truth of Christ’s word would be inconsistent with the Scriptural command to honor Christ by setting apart Christ as Lord (quoting 1 Peter 3:15), and not trusting Christ’s wisdom beyond all other wisdom. He thinks that Christ and his word should be the ultimate standard of truth, because there could not possibly be a higher and more authoritative standard (Frame 2000, pp. 4–9, 21). Frame claims that to argue in a non-presuppositional way would not glorify God (cites 1 Cor. 10:31) (Frame 2000, pp. 228–229), arguing that it would depend on autonomous reasoning, which he defines as reasoning that rejects the authority of God’s revelation in favor of some other ultimate norm, by which everything (including Scripture) is to be judged.

Autonomous reasoning is antagonistic to Christianity, in that it denies God the Lordship and authority to command human beliefs and methods of thought and makes humans their own lords (Frame 2000, pp. 355–356). Frame supports his views by quoting Biblical passages which say that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge (Prov. 1:7) and that the wisdom of Christ (1 Cor. 1:30) is something that transforms and governs the whole of life; it gives a new ‘mind’ (1 Cor. 2:16) and calls Christians to bring every thought captive to Christ (2 Cor. 10:5) (Frame 2000, pp. 350–351).

It is true that other theologians such as Aquinas have said something similar, e.g., ‘Whatever is not in agreement with Christ is to be spewed out ... because he is God’ (in Col. 2, 2 (nos. 95–96) *Thomae Aquinatis super Epistolas S. Pauli Lectura*, vol. ii; cited in Marshall 2000, p. 125). However, the reason Aquinas does not beg the question by saying this is because he has already established that God exists and that Christ is God by using arguments from external evidences (see Chapters 1 and 2), while Webster has not. Webster argues that his views are required axiomatically by the notion of the Lordship of Jesus. He writes, ‘Because Jesus Christ is Lord, comprehending all other contexts but comprehended by none, thought about him must follow the particular path indicated by his self-presenting reality’ (Webster 2004). He claims that this reality cannot be deduced from some higher vantage point, and so it works from an assumption which ‘is a genuine and proper assumption, in so far as it cannot be over-topped by any other, and therefore suspended on, and even disputed by, a higher assumption’ (Webster 2004, citing Barth 1956, p. 131). He concludes that Christology deals with that which grounds all things and therefore cannot itself be grounded; ‘Christology deals with the revelation of God as a mystery’ (Webster 2004). However, religious groups which deny that Jesus was God incarnate could argue (and some indeed have argued) similarly that their views are required axiomatically by the notion of the Lordship of their deities and claim the reality of the ‘self-presence’ of their deities, that this reality cannot be deduced from a higher vantage point, and that the revelation of God is a mystery. Thus, Webster’s arguments are not helpful for adjudicating which contradictory religious claim is true (see Section 2.3).

Various Scriptural passages portray the servants of God (e.g., Paul) using an alternative approach: even though they evidently honored God’s lordship, they argued for the truth of their claims about God on the basis of external historical evidences in a non-question-begging manner, as shown in Chapter 2. While a Christian would agree with Webster and Frame that honoring Christ’s lordship is an attitude which people should have, how it could be demonstrated that Jesus of Nazareth is truly the Christ is a different question. Of course, if the words of Jesus are from God, then they must be our highest standard, but how they could be shown to be from God is another issue.

Of course, God (if He exists) is axiomatically the ultimate standard of truth, but this is true ontologically; the question for us is epistemological: how can we know that such a God exists and is the God of Christianity, and that he has revealed his standard in the Holy Scripture? Webster might reply by

presupposing that Christ is divine, but others can reply that this presupposition is also human reasoning as well, and a faulty (question- begging) one at that. Likewise, Presuppositionalists such as Frame tend to emphasize that the ways of God are higher than the reasoning of finite humans. Nevertheless, the question ‘how it can be shown that the God of the Bible is the true God’ still needs to be addressed. Presuppositionalists reply by presupposing that the Bible is God’s word, but others can reply that this presupposition is also human reasoning, and a faulty (question- begging) one at that.

A Barthian would insist that the possibility of knowing God is determined by the reality of God and not by the knowing subject through the conditions for the possibility of knowledge (Schwöbel 2000, p. 30). Theology must start, not with the question of whether we can know anything about God, but with the being of God and the reality of the Word of God and then gaining insight into the possibility of doing theology which is given only in the reality of God in Jesus Christ (Schwöbel 2000, p. 32).

However, this insistence begs the question against atheism: How do we know God exists and that Barth’s claim concerning the being of God is true? On the one hand, we must be careful not to beg the question against human beings having the capacity to infer God’s existence from nature (as various Scriptural passages affirm; see above). On the other hand, we still need to account for what we know about the world and history, on the basis of which we can arguably infer that there exists a Creator who raised Jesus from the dead (see Loke 2020, 2022a, 2023). As Aristotle et al. have said, the best way to determine that something is possible is to show that it was actual, for actuality entails possibility. While the Barthian objection discussed here is focused on the possibility of knowing God, the arguments of natural theology demonstrate that one can actually know that God exists. This conclusion does not beg the question against the Barthian view concerning the ontological and epistemological uniqueness of God, because (unlike Barth’s view) it is demonstrated by arguments rather than by assertion.

A Barthian would insist that trying to know God apart from God’s revelation is to attempt the impossible, because it ignores the fact that God’s self-revelation is the only condition for the possibility of knowing God (Schwöbel 2000, p. 30). McDowell (2024, p. 225) rejects the possibility of a natural theology, claiming that ‘it involves an effort to work toward “god” via an autonomous rationality. This stands in marked contrast with the “finding” that occurs in following where God reveals God’s Self to be,’ citing Barth’s claim that ‘natural theology, operating independently of God’s revelatory self-givingness, arrives at an idol, “a false god” (CD II/1, 86).’ McDowell (2024, p. 226) cites Rowan Williams (2014, p. 1) who writes that ‘If we bypass revelation ... a God discovered in that way is a God who waits to be discovered ... This is a God who has to be thought of as essentially silent, passively there to be uncovered by our enquiries.’

It is true that, given that God is the supreme sovereign being, ‘human knowledge of God can be a true knowledge that corresponds to the divine reality

only if it originates in the deity itself. God can be known only if he gives himself to be known' (Pannenberg 2004, p. 189).¹ Pannenberg explains further:

The loftiness of the divine reality makes it inaccessible to us unless it makes itself known. Where God and the gods are viewed as an incomparably transcendent and holy power, or as a power that encompasses and determines all things, the knowledge of God is self-evidently possible only as a knowledge that God himself discloses. If the knowledge of God be understood in such a way that in our own strength we can wrest from deity the secret of its nature, deity is lacking from the very outset. This kind of knowledge would not be knowledge of God, for it would contradict the concept of God. Hence the knowledge of God is possible only by revelation.

However, epistemologically, we are not God, and therefore in our arguments we have to begin with premises using the human way of reasoning involving logic and evidences, while noting that 'these deliberations are only methodologically fundamental. Materially only God, or his self-revelation in Jesus Christ, is fundamental. "No other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 3:11)' (Pannenberg 2004, p. 61). This is in line with the traditional distinction between the order of being (*ordo essendi*) and the order of knowing (*ordo cognoscendi*). 'The order of being concerns the ontological dependence of some aspects of reality on other aspects. For example, in the order of being God precedes the universe, since the universe depends upon God for its existence. But in the order of knowing the universe may well precede God, since we can infer from the universe that God exists' (Craig 2022).

Concerning epistemic autonomy for humans, Moser (2024, p. 242) observes that 'God, if real, would decide the parameters for human knowledge of God, and this topic, regarding what God has decided, is controversial. Some inquirers find no problem with God's giving humans a certain degree of autonomy in discovering evidence of God's reality and in formulating notions and standards for evidence for divine reality. It gains nothing to beg the key questions in this area of controversy. Barth's theology, in any case, is not the only game in town, nor has it ever been.'

Rowan Williams (2014, p. 17) himself notes

But the challenge to start from somewhere other than claims to revelation is not necessarily nonsensical or impious. It obliges us to pay attention to the ways in which language about God actually finds its way into our speech, and so delivers us from discussing the language of belief in a vacuum. The classical so-called 'proofs' of God developed by Aquinas and others in fact sit very well with this: they are not arguing in the abstract

1 While Christian doctrine also includes statements about humanity and the created world, these things enter into theological discussion only inasmuch as they are related to God (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1.2 a 2).

towards an otherwise unheard-of conclusion, but charting some of the ways in which we comprehensively make sense of the workings of the world.

Williams also adds that ‘A “natural” theology need not be an exercise in trying to replace revelation, to forestall the action of God. It may be a way of tracking that action through the impress left upon our speech and action, as upon other aspects of our world; and thus it may be, as Hauerwas’s Gifford Lectures proposed, a form of “faithful witness”’ (p. 180).

It should be noted that appealing to historical evidence of miracles, as the apostles did, does not necessarily amount to the affirmation that human structures of knowing are more ontologically foundational than God. On the contrary, once it is demonstrated using this evidence that Christ is the revelation of God, it can be argued retrospectively that the miracles and their historical evidences, which are discoverable by historical inquiry, are both given by the grace of God. In response to McDowell, Moser (2024, p. 245) notes that ‘A natural theology can coherently recommend “following where God reveals God’s Self to be” ... it pursues a needed evidential rationale for belief in God. That rationale could provide an evidential basis for “following where God reveals God’s Self to be.”’

While Christians should not let cultural agendas sway their religious beliefs, as Barth emphasizes, this does not imply that humans have no capacity to recognize such evidences, a capacity which ultimately originates from God, and which can be used by the Holy Spirit and God’s providence to guide people to recognize divine revelation in Christ.

In line with McDowell’s and William’s statement noted earlier, Barthian John Webster also emphasizes the need for Christ to take the initiative in divine revelation to ‘moves towards us’ in the matter of the knowledge of himself, ‘for the corollary of his lordship is that there is no access to him other than that which he himself affords’ (Webster 2005, pp. 21–23). He calls into question the independent demonstration of positive Christological science, arguing that the law of thinking must be the law of the object (Webster 2005, pp. 28–29).

However, the above objection fails to consider the possibility that the Lord can choose to use evidences to ‘move towards us’ (see, for example, the list of testimonies in Section 2.3). From this theological perspective, the classical approach’s ‘demonstration of positive Christological science’ should not be regarded as ‘independent,’ but it can be regarded as one of the means by which the God in his foreknowledge and providence has graciously and freely chosen to use to make himself known.

As noted previously, various Scriptural passages portray the prophets, apostles, and Jesus himself using evidences such as miracles in a non-question-begging manner to argue for the truth of their message. This implies that the limitation of human reason is not an insurmountable barrier to recognizing this truth through these evidences (see Chapters 8 and 9): humans do not need to have a God’s eye view to recognize that supernatural power is at work in calming the storm, raising the dead, etc., and to recognize the evidences for such events. While Colossians 2:2 speaks of Christ as God’s mystery, the idea

of mystery in that passage refers to aspects of God's plan that are *no longer hidden* but has been fully revealed in Christ (Fee 2007, p. 316). The Scriptural passages cited in Chapter 1 indicate that historical evidence is one of the means by which this revelation has been made known. Now I do not deny the possibility that mystical religious experiences can also be a form of evidence and that God may use them to reveal himself. Nevertheless, such experiences are claimed by other religious groups as well, and merely appealing to these (without considering external evidence) is clearly insufficient in the present context where deciding between conflicting religious views is concerned.

Webster's view and Frame's view on 'autonomous reasoning' seem to assume that one either presupposes Christ in the argument or rejects Christ as the highest standard of truth, which is a false dilemma. The correct view is not to beg the question either way in the argument, i.e., not to deny that Christ is the highest standard of truth, nor to assume that he is in the argument. As explained in Chapter 1, the apologetic arguments of Paul et al. start by showing that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed from God based on logical inferences from evidence (i.e., miracles, including his resurrection), which implies that Jesus' teachings should be regarded as the highest standard. Deuteronomy 18:21–22 and other Scriptural passages cited earlier in Chapter 1 imply that claims to divine revelation (whether true or false) can be tested and discerned by human reason. It is evident that, although human reason is limited, it does have the ability to know many things. For example, we can know based on historical evidences that a number of Christians in the first century claimed to have seen the resurrected Jesus, that the body of Jesus was missing, etc. On the basis of these and other considerations, we can, in principle, discern whether it is reasonable to believe that certain divine revelatory events (e.g., the resurrection of Jesus) occurred (see Loke 2020).

What has been said above does not imply that reasoning based on laws of logic and experiences is therefore of a higher standard or 'higher vantage point' (Webster) than Christ. On the contrary, one can argue that, once it is demonstrated using reasoning based on laws of logic and experiences that Christ is the revelation of God, it can be argued retrospectively that the ability to reason from evidence in a non-question-begging manner for the truth of Christianity is given to humanity so that people can recognize what is genuine revelation from God. If the divine origin of Christ can be established by sound reasoning, what Christ says must also (together with sound reasoning) be taken seriously as the highest standard of truth and epistemic authority. As DePoe (2020, pp. 167–168) observes, the evidential approach is compatible with affirming the importance of epistemic authorities (i.e., a source outside of oneself that one trusts for epistemic goods and practices), which 'play a valuable epistemic role because they are avenues for justified beliefs and knowledge that are inaccessible to us without them.' He explains

For example, I may take a geometry textbook written by a highly qualified mathematician that has been issued by a reputable publisher as an authority on geometry. As I read sections of the book, I immediately

endorse the beliefs about geometry that I acquire from the source. Moreover, I revise my epistemic principles to accord with the beliefs that I am gaining. For instance, I may have previously accepted the principle that whenever I sum the interior angles of a triangle and the sum does not equal two right angles, then I must be mistaken. However, in light of learning about curved geometry, I revise my principle to take into account this new and unusual set of beliefs that I accept on the basis of authority. Importantly, however, for me to embrace this authority justifiably, I must have good reasons to trust the source as an authority in the domains where I regard it as an authority.

DePoe (2020)

He concludes that

Believing by authority, then, is not necessarily a bad epistemic practice. *At the crux of the matter is whether one is justified in accepting the authority.* Adopting an authority without good reason, however, is too risky to constitute a justified epistemic practice. We would not sanction unsubstantiated trust in authorities to justify specialized beliefs in medicine, bridge engineering, or the history of Japan ... the same goes for religious beliefs. They are too important to entrust to an authority without good reason.
(p. 168; italics mine)

Indeed, many Natural Theologians would affirm that, where theology is concerned, the authority of Christ and Scripture is more reliable than natural theology, for in the actual practice of natural theology, the truths about God which human reason discovers is often mixed with many errors (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.1.). This is analogous to a text written by an expert on geometry (see DePoe's illustration above) being more reliable than someone trying to figure out geometry by himself/herself, the process of which is often mixed with many errors. In the case of natural theology, the problem is further confounded by the noetic effects of sin (see further, Section 5.2). Various Scriptural passages such as Romans 1:18–21 imply that people who had never heard about Christianity can know that God exists by understanding the world which He created, and yet people who know that God exists often distort the truth (e.g., idolatry). Many church fathers, therefore, realized that, while Christians can study the arguments of non-Christian philosophers, they must be careful not to blindly follow them. For example, as noted in Chapter 1, many church fathers such as Augustine affirmed the arguments of natural theology (e.g., the Teleological Argument) which was defended by many Ancient Greek philosophers. Augustine remarked that 'Certain partakers with us in the grace of Christ wonder when they hear and read that Plato had conceptions concerning God, in which they recognize considerable agreement with the truth of our religion' (*City of God* 8.11). Nevertheless, he did not accept the views of the Platonist wholesale; in particular, he was critical of the

polytheistic error of the Platonists: ‘Even the Platonists, though they say these things concerning the One True God, nevertheless erroneously thought that sacred rites were to be performed in honor of many gods’ (*City of God* 8.12).

The implication of the views discussed above is that, if one reasons correctly (e.g., concerning natural theology and history) and interprets Christ correctly, the results should be consistent rather than in conflict, for both are equally the highest and ultimate standards. The view that both are equally the highest and ultimate standards of truth is implied by various Scriptural passages (see Chapter 1) which affirm the use of reason to test revelation, and which also affirm Christ is divine on the basis of evidences. This view is also justified by epistemological considerations, such as those concerning sources of knowledge and the necessity of the laws of logic (see Part III of this book), and by the evidence which indicates the divine origin of Christ’s teachings (see Loke 2020). This view is also consonant with the ‘two books’ view, which has a long and distinguished history in Christian thought, and which ‘invites us to see God as the author or creator of two distinct yet related “books”—the natural world and the Bible—and thus to imagine nature as a readable text that requires interpretation, in a manner comparable to the Christian interpretation of the Bible’ (McGrath 2020).

Kojonen (2017) raises the concern that it is in principle possible for the approach which starts from natural theological considerations and defends the rationality of a more generic form of theism to end up with a less traditional Christian view.

A Natural Theologian can reply that, while such cases are possible, in actuality given that there are good arguments for both natural theology and traditional Christianity (i.e., one that affirms that Christ is the highest authority), and given that truth must be consistent, there are in fact no good arguments that would lead from natural theology to the rejection of traditional Christianity. Of course, many throughout history have claimed otherwise, arguing that there are conflicts between these two. Nevertheless, the view that reason and Christ are both equally the highest standard of truth implies that, when apparent conflicts occur, one should seek to understand and interpret the evidences and Christ’s teachings better and to reply to the objections, rather than to seek refuge in the internal criterion of Barth or to accommodate to what the current culture finds plausible. An example of the latter is Schleiermacher, who tried to harmonize Christian claims with what his culture widely regarded as the best deliverances of scientific and historical reason by rejecting the miraculous bodily resurrection of Jesus and claiming that Jesus swooned on the Cross. As one seeks to reason and understand the evidence better, it becomes evident that that the *a priori* rejection of miracles is unsound (McGrew and McGrew 2009), the swoon theory is untenable, and that there is historical evidence which indicates that Jesus resurrected (e.g., Loke 2009, 2020; Licona 2010). ‘What the current culture finds plausible’ should not automatically be regarded as the norm or universal principle to judge theology, given that ‘what a lot of people think is right’ may be wrong. Thus, a Christian

theologian should not use the principle of seeking agreement as the ultimate principle in theological method to guide theology. Truth is not decided by consensus, but by sound arguments (see Chapter 6). Hence, the classical approach does not imply that the Christian community must decide about the truth of its convictions by seeing how well these comport with those currently dominant in one or another stretch of high culture (a concern raised in Marshall [2000, p. 48]). Rather, it implies the use of sound arguments (for discussion concerning ‘universal principles,’ sound arguments, and the distinction between Laws of nature and Laws of Logic and the epistemological principles for sound arguments, see Chapter 6). One can agree with Barth that the need to preserve the purity of Christian doctrine is more important than the need to engage culture, while arguing that natural theology (when done properly) is consistent with Christian doctrine and helpful for defending it in culture.

The well-known political philosopher Leo Strauss famously argued in his article ‘Progress or Return’ (1981) that true harmonization between the Bible and (Greek) philosophy is impossible because ‘the one thing needful according to Greek philosophy is the life of autonomous understanding. The one thing needful as spoken by the Bible is the life of obedient love’ (p. 33). He thereby concludes that ‘No one can be both a philosopher and a theologian’ (p. 44).

However, his characterization of philosophy (Greek or otherwise) is inaccurate. Philosophy is the love of wisdom. ‘Autonomous’ is not the end point, wisdom is. To refuse to obey wisdom is foolishness and anti-philosophy. Justin Martyr was a Platonist who started with autonomous understanding in search of wisdom, and later found it in the Bible, that was why he lived a life of obedient love of wisdom (=philosophy) and was martyred for it, and he called Christianity the highest philosophy. The Bible and philosophy are compatible, given that (as I have argued in Loke 2020, 2022a) there is evidence for thinking that the central Biblical claims concerning the existence of God and the resurrection of Jesus are true. This implies that the teachings of Jesus conveyed true wisdom from God who is the source of wisdom, which lovers of wisdom (philosophers) should obey. One can therefore be a philosopher and a theologian.

Strauss also claims that the demonstrations of the existence of God (based on philosophical or scientific analysis of the cosmos) result in ‘the place of the divine law in the traditional sense of the term, where it is a code traced to a personal God, is replaced by a natural order’ (p. 42).

However, he fails to consider that the demonstrations, such as the Cosmological Argument and Teleological Argument, show that the natural order came from a personal First Cause Creator God (as I explained in Loke 2022a) and that the historical evidence for Jesus’ resurrection (Loke 2020) indicates that this God has revealed his divine law (and grace) through Jesus Christ. Thus, understood correctly, the natural order does not replace the divine law, but points to the God who created the natural order and who revealed the divine law.

It might be objected that the view that both reason and Christ are equally the highest and ultimate standards of truth is incoherent, for if the Christian community holds to central doctrinal beliefs only insofar as they do not

conflict with some reasoned beliefs, then it would be those reasoned beliefs, rather than the doctrinal beliefs, that are central (Marshall 2000, p. 48).

However, this objection confuses ‘beliefs that are central to a belief-system’ with ‘reasons for accepting the veracity of this system.’ Someone who was initially a non-Christian may eventually come to the conclusion that the Christian belief system (with its central doctrines of Trinity, the resurrection of Jesus, etc.) does not conflict with reasoned beliefs and that these reasoned beliefs can be used to formulate arguments which indicate the veracity of Christian Theism (see Section 3.2). However, this does not imply that, after this person converted and joined the Christian community, he/she (as well as other people in the community) would have to forsake the requirement of conformity with those reasoned beliefs. Nor does it imply that the doctrines of the Trinity, the resurrection of Jesus, etc. are no longer central to their belief system. (It is interesting to note that even though Marshall argues that Jesus’ resurrection must be regarded as the central belief and epistemically primary criteria of truth, he concedes that there are conditions under which Christians should be prepared to give up the belief that Jesus resurrected. For example, if historians should discover historical evidence proving that the disciples stole Jesus’ body and started a conspiracy. See Marshall 2000, pp. 168–169; I argue against these hypotheses in Loke 2020.) The criteria for deciding which beliefs are central/foundational to the Christian belief-system should not be decided by what the culture finds plausible, nor even by sound arguments (to think otherwise would be to confuse ‘beliefs that are central to a belief-system’ with ‘reasons for accepting the veracity of this system’). Rather, the criteria should be based on what Christ affirmed (since *Christians* are, by definition, followers of *Christ*). I have argued in Loke (2017a) that the historical-critical analysis of the New Testament indicates that the doctrines of the Trinity, Incarnation, and resurrection have a historical basis in the affirmations of Christ; therefore, they should be regarded as central/foundational to Christian theology.

In conclusion, where the self-description of Christian theology is concerned, the Christian theologian should not start with philosophical arguments/philosophical systems and use these for Biblical hermeneutics (which often results in the error of eisegesis). Rather, the Christian theologian should start with the teachings of Christ. On the other hand, where discussing the reasons for accepting the veracity of the Christian belief-system is concerned, one should start with the arguments for divine revelation, such as the arguments of natural theology which are relevant to the Christian doctrine of general revelation and the historical arguments for the resurrection of Jesus which are relevant to the doctrine of special revelation.

5.2 Concerning the noetic effects of sin and sola gratia

Brunner (1950, p. 133) observes that the reality of a divine revelation in creation does not imply its subjective appropriation in the form of actual

knowledge of God among pagans, for ‘between the revelation in creation and the natural man stands the fact of Sin.’ However, Brunner goes further to deny that humans can arrive at some truths about God via reasoning. He argues that ‘human beings, even those who know nothing of the historical revelation, are such that they cannot help forming an idea of God and making pictures of God in their minds. The history of the religions of mankind provides incontrovertible evidence of this fact’; however, these thoughts about God become ‘lying pictures of idols’ (Brunner 1950, pp. 133–134). Polytheistic personalism and monistic impersonalism are inconsistent with Biblical theism; with regard to the philosophy of theism, ‘it is not the Creator, in the Biblical sense of the word, who is here perceived; but it is still the closest approximation to the idea of the creator of which reason is capable when left to itself’ (Brunner 1950, p. 156). Brunner equates knowledge of God with a relationship with God in the form of a personal encounter with God, and not the propositional content of beliefs about God. ‘The God who is “conceived” by thought is not the one who discloses himself; from this point of view he is an intellectual idol’ (Brunner 1950, p. 136). Against the project of inferring the existence of God, Bavinck (2003–2004 vol. 2, pp. 72–77) argues that such an inference would depend on an antecedent process of inquiry involving a person’s will in evidence gathering and evaluation, but he claims that the depraved human will is in rebellion against God, and hence the inquiry will be biased and unreliable.

Ward (1994, p. 17) observes that the difficulty with Brunner’s and Barth’s views of human nature is how one ever is to attain to truth about God. He notes that

Barth’s answer is hardly satisfactory. He simply asserts that ‘Scripture is the only valid testimony to revelation.’ But how can anyone know this, if every human judgement is sinful, including this one? Indeed, one can very easily turn the tables on Barth and insist (as it seems very plausible to do) that the belief that everyone else’s revelation is incorrect and only one’s own is true is a particularly clear example of human pride and self-interest ... One may claim that this possession is by the grace of God alone—but this only makes the element of human pride more pronounced, since one is now asserting that grace is only truly possessed by oneself. One can hardly get more proud, more self-righteous, and more short-sighted than that.

(Ward 1994)

On the other hand, Sudduth (2009, p. 125) observes that an unregenerate person’s lacking a ‘correct’ understanding of general revelation or a ‘valid’ knowledge of God does not entail the absence of all true beliefs about God. On the contrary, as the Canons of Dort affirm, fallen, unregenerate persons do possess correct ideas or true beliefs about God. For despite the Fall of humankind,

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

Sudduth (2009, pp. 115–116) observes that the loss of piety is logically compatible with the retention of some theistic beliefs with correct propositional content, noting that Calvin refers to an instinctual ‘awareness of divinity’ by which people perceive that ‘there is a god’ and that ‘he is their maker’ (*Institutes* 1.3.1), even while sin does negatively impact the propositional content of the natural knowledge of God, such that humans fall into a ‘huge mass of errors’ in their thoughts about God (1.4.4).

Citing Romans 1:21 (‘they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened’), Moore argues that ‘sin has noetic effects; it prevents our faculties of reasoning and cognition from working as God meant them to’ (Moore 2010, p. 132). Against Sudduth’s argument for a place for consequent natural theology for believers, Moore claims that, ‘from a Pauline point of view, the mind is always affected by sin; human beings do not cease to be liable to suppress the truth and twist what they know to their own (idolatrous) ends after conversion’ (Moore 2010, p. 137). Moore questions the assumption that our faculties of inferential reasoning are untouched by sin. He asks, ‘but why should our inferential reasoning faculties be privileged in this way; humans might be rational beings, but why, and on what theological grounds, should we think that we can be as confident in them as a medium of our knowledge of God as Sudduth’s argument requires?’ (Moore 2010, p. 138). Moore adds (citing Rom. 8:20), ‘Nor is it only our cognitive faculties that do not function properly. For Paul the whole creation is disordered – “subjected to futility” is how he puts it; it does not glorify God as it was meant to do. In other words, what occurs on the input side of the cognitive equation does not function as it should either’ (Moore 2010).

Likewise, Frame thinks that in one sense the unbeliever knows God (Rom. 1:21), but in spite of that knowledge, the unbeliever intentionally distorts the truth (Frame 1994, p. 8). The human ability to judge consistency and logical validity is not always accurate and can be distorted by sin (Frame 2010, pp. 22–24). Frame thinks that the unbeliever, when most self-conscious, opposes the very rational principles to which Natural Theologians appeal, and he reasons in ways designed to exclude the theistic conclusion (Frame 2000, pp. 80–81). He concludes that there is no neutrality: our witness is either God’s wisdom or the world’s foolishness (Frame 1994, p. 21).

2 Canons of Dort III and IV, article 4. For an analysis of the Reformed theological tradition on this and other points, see Sudduth (2009).

Now, it is true that human judgment of consistency and logical validity is not always accurate, and unbelievers might oppose the rational principles to which Natural Theologians appeal. However, this does not imply that such inaccuracies and opposition cannot be demonstrated to be fallacious by sound arguments. Many Natural Theologians also believe that sin has affected the cognitive equipment of the human race (resulting in a desire to distort the truth about God for selfish reasons, for example). However, they argue that this does not imply that the human cognitive equipment has been affected to such an extent that it is no longer able to arrive at some truth of God by non-question-begging reasoning. It is true that, according to Paul, sin can affect human reasoning and that the whole creation is disordered. Nevertheless, it can be argued from the context of Romans that Paul does not think that these factors would affect our reasoning to the extent that humans cannot recognize God's existence through creation (Rom. 1:20). What truth is there to presently suppress (Rom. 1:18) if it cannot even be presently recognized? Moore's view that human beings are 'liable to suppress the truth and twist what they know to their own (idolatrous) ends' assumes a recognition of the truth in the first place. Thus, Paul's logic requires a recognizable truth that exists, even if humans misuse this truth for their own purposes. As Sudduth (2009, p. 57) explains 'All people may be born with an innate disposition to know God, but the Reformed doctrine of sin entails that people will suppress and corrupt this natural disposition to know God in various ways. One of the consequences of this is ignorance of God to varying degrees, but this ignorance will be culpable inasmuch as it is the product of voluntary actions.' Geisler (2011, p. 56) argues that theologians who reject general revelation and hold to special revelation have ignored the fact that special revelation (i.e., Scripture) affirms that people distort the Scriptures as well (2 Peter 3:15–16). 'The problem is not with God's revelation but with humankind's rejection of it' (Geisler 2011, p. 56).

Concerning human faculties of inferential reasoning, Reformed theologians typically understand Romans 1:19–20 'to affirm the reality of natural knowledge of God, which may be confirmed, clarified, and developed by theistic proofs. Such a justification ... is, of course, strengthened by passages of Scripture that ostensibly illustrate natural theistic reasoning (for example, Acts 14, 17)' (Sudduth 2009, p. 52). This is consistent with various other Scriptural passages (including Pauline passages) which provide the theological grounds for thinking that, despite the effects of sin, humans can nevertheless acquire knowledge about God by reasoning inferentially from evidences (Isa. 41:21–29; 44:7, 24–28; 46:10; 48:5, 14; 1 Kings 18:20–45; Luke 7:18–23; Acts 2:22–24; 16:30–31; 1 Cor 15:6; see Chapter 1).

Concerning 1 Corinthians 15, Moore objects that 'although part of the tradition of resurrection belief to which Paul appeals in 1 Cor 15:4ff. includes Christ's having "appeared" to witnesses, it remains the case that their testimony only relates to Christ's appearing; it does not relate to the substance of resurrection faith, i.e., that "Christ died *for our sins* ... and that *he was raised on the third day*" (1 Cor 15:3, 4; emphasis added). Paul's appeal to the witnesses'

testimony, therefore, offers only circumstantial support for the reflective rationality of his belief that Christ's death and resurrection was the reconciling work of the triune God' (Moore 2010, p. 142, n. 56).

However, Paul's citation of the witnesses' testimonies in 1 Corinthians 15 does not merely relate to Christ's appearing; it also relates to the substance of resurrection faith when taken together with Old Testament Scripture. This is evident from Paul's statement that 'Christ died for our sins *in accordance with the Scriptures* ... he was raised on the third day *in accordance with the Scriptures*' (1 Cor 15:3–4, italics mine). Paul affirms that Jesus' resurrection fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament—this is what the phrase 'according to the Scriptures' meant in the context (Theissen and Merz 1998, p. 489). Nevertheless, the question 'how they knew it was Jesus of Nazareth'—and not someone else—who fulfilled these prophecies is answered by Paul on the basis of the experiences of the witnesses (e.g., 'he [Jesus] appeared to me' [1 Cor 15:8]). While belief in the divine inspiration of the Old Testament was part of the New Testament authors' pre-understanding, it should be noted that the Jewish belief in the Old Testament was also claimed to be based on logical inferences from evidences (such as fulfilled prophecies and miracles, as noted previously). Therefore, the New Testament authors would agree that the resurrection of Jesus—as well as the substance of resurrection faith—would also have to be consistent with Old Testament prophecies and mode of inference as well.

The Scriptural passages cited above presuppose that logical inferences from experiences are ways by which people can know whether prophecies have been fulfilled and whether miracles have occurred. These passages also presuppose that logical inferences from fulfilled prophecies, miracles, etc. are ways by which people can come to know who the true God is. Many natural theologians agree that sin has affected the cognitive equipment of the human race and that human reasoning is limited. However, they argue that this does not imply that the human cognitive equipment is affected or limited to such an extent that it is no longer able to arrive at some truths about God by inferential reasoning. Barth objects that this view is contrary to *sola gratia* (Brunner and Barth 1946/2002, p. 82), claiming that natural theology involves the impossibility of 'guaranteeing the knowability of God apart from grace' (CD II/1, 85). Feinberg replies that the ability to arrive at some truths about God can be seen as a matter of God's grace as well—his common grace (Feinberg 2000, pp. 250–251), rather than as an 'epistemological version of Pelagianism' (cf. Wright 2019, p. 255). Likewise, the arguments of natural theology can be regarded as the means God uses to convey the gift of faith. Barthians should therefore be careful to consider the possibility that to reject these arguments might be to reject the grace of God. It would be to reject an approach which, when it is well executed, has the potential for adjudicating in a non-question-begging way the conflicting claims about Ultimate Reality made by different religious traditions. (The Barthian concern regarding the noetic effects of sin is also related to the philosophical and psychological issue concerning the constructive activity of the human mind in the process of observation; I discuss this issue in detail in Chapter 9).

5.3 Concerning the work of the Holy Spirit

Objecting to natural theology, Moore argues that ‘even then, as now, Christian knowledge of God and of his creation never ceases to be dependent on what he has revealed in Christ and endowed by the Holy Spirit’ (Moore 2010, p. 139). Citing ‘we walk by faith, not by sight’ (2 Cor. 5:7) and 1 Corinthians 13:9ff which indicates that we only have partial knowledge, Moore claims that ‘Paul presents no argument to the effect that we ought to seek to make what is known by faith evident or more evident than it is made by the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of those whose relationship with God is founded upon love’ (Moore 2010). He thinks that Christians should seek confirmation and strengthening of their faith ‘not by natural theology but as a result of the work of the Spirit and because they heed the Pauline writer’s injunction to “set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Col. 3:2)’ (Moore 2010, p. 140). Some have argued that, for the successful recognition of Jesus as God incarnate by those whose minds are alienated from God, there needs to be a change of mind (Greek *metanoia*, variously translated in the New Testament as ‘repentance’; see also Rom. 12:2, which speaks of the renewing of minds) by the work of the Holy Spirit (Rae 1997, pp. 115–116); such recognition depends on what flesh and blood cannot reveal (citing Matt. 16:17) (Kähler 1964, pp. 42–43).

I have explained in previous sections (citing 1 Cor. 15:6, etc.) that Paul and other Biblical authors who wrote about the work of the Holy Spirit also wrote about evidence such as the historical evidence for miracles and fulfilled prophecies. This implies that the work of the Holy Spirit and the use of evidence are not mutually exclusive; rather, the Holy Spirit often uses such evidence as well. Paul’s statement ‘we walk by faith, not by sight’ (2 Cor. 5:7) is saying that Paul and his readers trust the Lord for the future which they do not see now. This does not exclude the fact that he thinks that there is evidence for trusting the Lord (1 Cor. 15:6). This point remains even though (as Moore points out, citing 1 Cor. 13:9ff) human knowledge is only partial. The fact that we don’t know everything does not imply that we don’t know anything on the basis of evidence.

The Christian life does involve a change of mind (*metanoia*), but this does not rule out the view that the investigations of history or the workings of human reason can be regarded as a vehicle of God’s grace for accomplishing this change (Hamilton 1999, p. 107). Likewise, taking other passages of Matthew into account (e.g., Matt. 14:22–33), Matthew 16:7 should be understood as referring to divine revelation *which includes external physical evidences* such as Jesus’ miracles (e.g., walking on the sea, stopping the wind) (Keener 1999, p. 426), of which God (and not flesh and blood) is the source.

With regard to other Scriptural passages, Evans observes that, though it is fashionable for many theologians today to deny this, the writers of the Gospels, particularly the writer of the Fourth Gospel (see John 2:23, 3:2, 6:2, 11:47–48), seem to view faith in Jesus as the Messiah as something that was called for by the evidence of the miraculous signs that Jesus did. Therefore, the assumption that one must choose between the Holy Spirit and rational evidence is to be rejected. Evans also observes that

the writer of this Gospel also clearly holds that despite the signs Jesus did, many refused to believe; see John 12:37. Another subsidiary theme is that requiring signs as a condition of faith is not praiseworthy; see John 4:48. Both of these subsidiary themes are quite consistent with the claim that the signs do in fact warrant a believing response.

(Evans 1996, pp. 285–286)

Moore might ask, if historical evidences can point people to believe that Jesus is Lord, then what role is left for the Holy Spirit in Christian theology, of whom Paul says, ‘No one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit’ (1 Cor. 12:3)?

In response, various New Testament passages imply a distinction between *salvific faith* (i.e., a faith that brings a person into a love relationship with God and redeems him from sin and produces good works as a result) and *propositional faith* which refers to belief in the right doctrines (e.g., belief that God exists, Jesus resurrected, etc.). For example, James 2:18–20 affirms that the demons believe that God exists, but this kind of belief by itself is not sufficient for salvific faith (Craig 2025, pp. 225–226). However much these are linked in practice, a theoretical distinction between recognizing something as true and obeying the truth must be made. The context of James indicates that the problem is with the will (James 4:17 writes of someone who knows the right thing to do but does not do it). Demons willfully refuse to submit to what they know (knowledge includes belief) to be true and thus lack salvific faith. A rational agent might recognize that something is true on the basis of evidence but refuse to admit or commit to this truth. (Whether our beliefs are within our control [as affirmed by doxastic voluntarism] has been debated by philosophers. Suffice it to note here that a number of philosophers have argued that we do have direct control over at least some of our beliefs, and their position has not been refuted; see the sources cited in Chignell 2018, 3.4). Even if we cannot directly choose what to believe, ‘we can choose to investigate, gather evidence, take time to ponder the evidence, and so on—all practices that influence the sorts of beliefs we form and how existing beliefs are revised’ (Sudduth 2009, p. 138).

Barth thinks that all divine revelation and real knowledge of the true God are redemptive (Brunner and Barth 1946/2002, p. 82). Likewise, O’Collins (2006) claims that ‘revelation to some extent brings salvation’ (p. 36).

However, in the New Testament, the demons are portrayed as recognizing the identity of Jesus and of God but refusing to submit (e.g., Mark 1:23–24; James 2:19), and that God’s Final Revelation on the Great White Throne judgement does not bring salvation but condemnation to those whose names are not found written in the book of life (Revelation 20:11–15).

Gibson observes that, according to Scripture,

Human hearers are capable of remaining implacably hardened to the Lord even as he speaks (Jer. 13:10; 19:15; cf. Isa. 6:9–10). The great benefit of being a Jew and so ‘entrusted with the words of God’ does not ensure that all have faith (Rom. 3:2). In the context of divine speech

heeded by the nations but rejected by his own people, God says: ‘All day long I have held out my hands to an obstinate people’ (Isa. 65:1–2) ... Perhaps we are closer to the biblical presentation if we suggest that revelation is the publication of the divine identity, regardless of its effects, even as God remains Lord of the effects.

(Gibson 2016, p. 290)

Paul’s view is that people’s sinful tendencies would cause them to reject God even while recognizing his existence (Rom. 1:18–32), but such tendencies can (and need to) be overcome by the work of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:1–13; cf. Barth who states that the reality of God’s graciousness would not be evident to us if we ceased to be aware of our need [Barth 1957, p. 129]). The need for the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing people to submit to Jesus’ lordship (1 Cor. 12:3) can thus be understood in this way. This is in line with Pinsent’s (2024, p. 68) helpful distinctions concerning ‘the full range of subjective cognitive possibilities as (1) a natural understanding of natural matters; (2) a natural understanding of supernatural matters; (3) a supernatural understanding of natural matters; and (4) a supernatural understanding of supernatural matters.’ He clarifies that the state of nature refers to ‘the natural human state without sanctifying grace’ and that it is “unnaturally” natural, in the sense that this state is not one that we were ever meant to experience, according to God’s will for prelapsarian humanity’ (p. 96). Gresham Machen (1947, p. 63) explains that:

There must be the mysterious work of the Spirit of God in the new birth. Without that, all our arguments are quite useless ... What the Holy Spirit does in the new birth is not to make a man a Christian regardless of the evidence, but on the contrary to clear away the mists from his eyes and enable him to attend to the evidence.

Jonathan Edwards argues that unassisted reason can prove that God exists and establish the credibility of Scripture. However, grace is needed to (1) help our natural principles ‘against those things that tend to stupefy [them] and to hinder [their] free exercise’—such as our tendency to ignore everything that doesn’t bear on our immediate self-interest, and biases arising from temperament, education, custom, and fashion, and to (2) sanctify ‘the reasoning faculty’ and assist it to see ‘the clear evidence there is of the truth of religion in rational arguments’ (Edwards 1957, vol. 18, pp. 155–156).

5.4 Why the Scripture does not present the arguments for the existence of God

Moser (2017a, p. 122) objects that the Jesus of the Gospels does not mention or does not use any philosophical arguments with regard to God’s reality and intervention. However, it can be replied that the reason is that most of those for whom the Scripture was written already believed that there is a God

(Swinburne 1981, p. 86, cf. Moser 2017b, p. 338), and thus there is no need to present such arguments. The crucial issue for them is ‘why believe in the God of Israel rather than other gods?’ Given this, the Biblical authors understandably emphasize the evidences for the acts of this God in history to address this issue, and their narrations of these evidences do contain implicit inferential arguments, as explained in Chapter 1.

Moreover, arguments for the existence of God were already in existence when New Testament passages such as Romans 1:20 and Acts 14:17 were written. For example, Plato formulated a Cosmological Argument and argued for a First Cause, and concluded that there must be a ‘best soul’ who is the ‘Maker and Father of all’ (*Laws* 10.893b–899c). Plato also argued for the existence of God ‘from the order of the motion of the stars, and of all things under the dominion of the Mind which ordered the universe’ (*Laws* 12.966e); this is a Teleological Argument from the order of nature. Given that such arguments were already widely accepted among the Gentiles (see also Chapter 1), there was no need for the Lukan Paul and Barnabas to use an argument in Acts 14. They only had to proclaim that God has left witnesses of Himself (Acts 14:15–17; as noted above, this passage implies that humans can reason inferentially to God) and point out that these witnesses were what the Gentiles were suppressing with their idolatry. Paul’s statements that humans ‘suppress the truth’ in Romans 1:18 and ‘did not honour [God] as God or give thanks to him’ (v.21) do not imply that natural theologians cannot formulate sound arguments for the existence of God. On the contrary, Paul’s statements are consistent with the view that sound arguments can be formulated, but their conclusions are suppressed by those who refuse to honor God and give thanks to him (suppression can be in the form of refusal to believe or distortion of belief).

In addition to the inferential reason in Acts 14, another relevant passage is ‘the celebrated “Areopagus address” of Paul to the Athenians (Acts 17:22–31), generally regarded as one of the most significant encounters between the gospel and classical Greek culture described in early Christian literature’ (McGrath 2008, p. 28). This passage portrays Paul as starting from what the Athenians may know about God (the ‘unknown God’ [v.23] is not totally unknown; some of them knew that ‘For we too are his offspring’ [v.28], i.e., that there is a God who created humankind), before proceeding to talk about God’s revelation through Christ’s resurrection (v.31).³ This implies that the pagans had at least one correct belief about God before they encountered the Christian message, viz. that they were the offspring of God, even if they suppressed this belief by distorting it into idolatry.

While Paul’s Areopagus speech should not be read as a ‘translation’ of Christian theological convictions into pagan philosophical terms (Rowe 2010), this does not imply that there is no similarity whatsoever indicative of natural

3 Contrary to the opinion of some scholars, Luke intended to portray Paul’s speech in Areopagus as a model for apologetics rather than as a failure in ministry; on this and other points (e.g., concerning the authenticity of this passage), see Keener (2015).

theology. Both Paul and the pagan philosophers evidently believed that humans have divine origins, for example. Rowe (2009, pp. 37–38) notes that Luke’s citation of Aratus (*Phaenomena*, 5, a poem to Zeus; cf. Cleanthes’ famous hymn to Zeus: ‘We are your offspring, and alone of all mortal creatures which are alive and tread the earth we bear a likeness to god’ [*Hymn to Zeus*, 1]) and that by Luke’s time the general notion that the original source of humans was ‘from the gods’ was widespread (see, e.g., Seneca *Ep.*, 44.1, Dio Chrysostom *Or.* 30.26).

Barth objects that even though the pagan poets said in unconscious piety:

‘We are his offspring’; but they themselves and of themselves bear witness to this truth of God in such a way that they treat of God as if He could be equated with χάραγμα τέχνης καὶ ἐνθυμήσεως ἀνθρώπου as if He belonged to this cosmos, as if He could therefore be sought and felt after and found like one novelty with others.

(Barth 1957, p. 123)

Indeed, Luke argues that pagan idolatry erroneously thought that because human beings are the ‘offspring’ of God, they can image God in human form using human technical skill and imaginative power (17:29) (Rowe 2009, p. 38, citing Barrett ‘From nature the Greeks have evolved not natural theology but natural idolatry’), e.g., turning the Creator into a figure like Zeus. While it is said of Zeus that ‘We are your offspring, and alone of all mortal creatures which are alive and tread the earth we bear a likeness to god’ (Hymn to Zeus, 1; SVF In. 4), Zeus was not regarded as the First Cause nor as ‘Maker and Father of all’ in Greek thought; on the contrary, he was procreated by Cronus and Rhea.

However, the view that the pagans treated God inappropriately does not deny that they did have a true belief about God, which the Lukan Paul picked up from within their system to argue against their inappropriate behavior. As Rowe notes, ‘Luke is able both to affirm the worth of pagan insight (we are God’s offspring and do live, move, and have our being in God) and to turn it critically back upon pagan practice (we therefore cannot image God because we cannot refract the notion of divinity through our humanity)’ (Rowe 2009, p. 38). While the author of Luke regarded pagan practice as wrongheaded, he did affirm that the pagans had some correct knowledge about God, viz. God brought humanity into existence and that God is omnipresent. Thus, with regard to Barth’s question concerning how the idolatry in pagan cultures can be some kind of preparation for the gospel (Brunner and Barth 1946/2002, p. 82), Luke might reply that there can be true beliefs which are mixed with error in those cultures (hence giving rise to idolatry); nevertheless, those true beliefs themselves can be preparatory for the Gospel.

In conclusion, Acts 17:28 portrays Paul as affirming that the pagans have some true beliefs about God. The Greeks did not arrive at this belief by accident, such that it just happened to coincide with what Acts affirmed. Rather, as noted earlier, Plato et al. had formulated Cosmological and Teleological Arguments for the existence of God. Although there is no indication in Acts 17

that the Lukan Paul specifically knows about and endorses Plato's Cosmological and Teleological Arguments, it is likely that (granting the truth of the narrative) Paul might have come into contact with these arguments while debating with the Athenians in the marketplace. Interpreting Acts 17:28 in light of this background and in the context of Acts by considering Acts 14:15–17 (see above), the Lukan Paul is implying that pagans had the ability to infer that God exists (Acts 14) and that the Greeks have in fact come to this conclusion (that we are his offspring; Acts 17), and he used the result of this inference as part of a two-stage case in Acts 17. Moreover, Acts 17:34 indicates that there were people who converted. Within the context of Biblical theology, this implies that natural theology as part of a two-stage approach (see Section 5.5) can be helpful and has been used by the Holy Spirit to bring a number of people to Christ.

In another passage, the author of Acts portrays Paul referring to the witnesses of the resurrected Jesus (Acts 13:30–31). As noted earlier, Paul appeals to the evidences of eyewitnesses of Jesus' resurrection in his presentation of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15:1–11. It can be argued that, for Paul, the presence of these eyewitnesses (including Paul's own experience of Christ) is the evidence for thinking that the gospel he preaches is indeed divinely revealed, and this provides him with the confidence to be unashamed of it (Rom. 1:16). Given that Paul affirms that there is knowledge of God's existence in creation (Rom. 1:20), and given his approach of using inferential reasoning from evidences as portrayed in various Scriptural passages (see Chapters 1 and 4), there are good reasons for thinking that, if Paul were alive today and writing to people who (unlike his first century audiences) do not already believe that there is a God, he would present the evidences for God in creation together with the evidences for God's acts in history (particularly in Christ).

In summary, concerning natural theology, one needs to distinguish between (1) 'can a good argument be given for the existence of God without starting from a religious premise?' and (2) 'do people generally benefit from natural theology alone?' Taken together, various Scriptural passages imply an affirmative answer to (1) but a negative answer to (2). That is, these passages affirm that people tend to suppress the truth they know about God (as evidenced by the prevalence of idolatry throughout history) and that the work of the Holy Spirit is required to overcome this tendency. Nevertheless, the Scriptural passages discussed above indicate the value of natural theology as the first of a two-stage approach.

5.5 Does natural theology lead to Deism/Atheism and the denial of special revelation?

Against the attempt to demonstrate the existence of God using the arguments of natural theology, Barth objects

it is ... hard to see how what is distinctive for this god can be made clear if, as has constantly happened in Roman catholic and Protestant dogmatics

both old and new, the question of who god is, which it is the business of the doctrine of the Trinity to answer, is held in reserve, and the first question to be treated is that of the That and the What of God, as though these could be defined otherwise than on the presupposition of the Who.

(Barth 1957, vol. 1.1, pp. 300–301)

However, Barth's objection stems from a failure to see the value of natural theology as the first of a two-stage approach. As Charles Hodge (1985, pp. 21–22) observes, one can use a cumulative argumentation, with each argument filling out some aspect of the concept of God. The two stages are two kinds of arguments that correspond with general revelation and special revelation, respectively. As described by Evans (2010, p. 5), 'the first stage is an argument for the existence of a God with at least some of the properties of the God of the Abrahamic faiths. The second stage is an argument that this God has in fact revealed himself through particular historical events and/or a particular book that is a revelation from God.' Thus, for example, the Cosmological Argument, Teleological Arguments, etc. indicate that the universe has a Creator God (in line with Romans 1), while the historical evidences indicate that Christ claimed to be God-Incarnate and substantiated his claim through his miraculous bodily resurrection.

Concerning the first stage, as noted in Chapter 1, there are arguments for the existence of God which indicate the existence of a Creator, and even some non-Christians throughout history (e.g., Plato, Al-Ghazali) have formulated such arguments for the existence of God.

Barth may object that these are arguments for the existence of the Creator but not the Triune God. Hauerwas (2001, p. 15) claims that 'natural theology divorced from a full doctrine of God cannot help but distort the character of God ... The Trinity is not a further specification of a more determinative reality called god, because there is no more determinative reality than the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.'

However, hardly any theologian would claim that what Paul meant in Romans 1:20 is that the Trinity can be clearly seen from creation.⁴ As Sudduth (2009, p. 199) observes

Trinitarian descriptivism ... is logically inconsistent with the Reformed thesis of natural knowledge of God. Reformed theologians have all agreed that the knowledge of God as redeemer or Trinity of persons is not part of the content of the natural knowledge of God. So none of the descriptions of God that fall under the category of the natural knowledge of god includes a Trinitarian description of God.

4 Augustine (*City of God*, 10.23,29) claims that the Platonists knew of The Trinity as the Father, the Father's mind, and something between these, and Sebonde's *Theologia Naturalis* identifies the Trinity with the principles of power, wisdom, and goodness, but most other theologians who have used the argument of natural theology (e.g., the Cosmological Argument) have not found such arguments convincing and have not used them.

Kojonen (2017) argues that one does not need to begin our theological discourse from Christ and the Trinitarian understanding, for even ‘the prophets of the Old Testament do not talk of the Trinity,⁵ yet the Christian tradition identifies the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as the Trinitarian God. The Christian tradition includes the idea of progressive revelation, where not all truth about God was clear instantly, but was progressively revealed.’ General revelation of a generic conception of a Creator through His creation can be understood as an initial step of progressive revelation, while special revelation (in particular, through Christ and the New Testament) clarifies that this Creator is a Triune God (see further, Section 10.2).

Wright (2019, pp. 257–258) raises the concern that the standard arguments of natural theology (e.g., Cosmological, Teleological, and Moral) work toward some variant of ‘classical theism’ (p. 51)—which affirms essential divine atemporality, a strong sense of divine immutability, and divine impassibility. Wright notes that fitting the Jesus of the Gospels to classical theism is difficult, ‘especially when we consider the agony in Gethsemane and the ‘cry of dereliction’ from the cross’ (Wright 2019).

The term ‘classical theism’ is understood in different ways in the literature. Here, I shall simply argue that, contrary to Wright, the arguments of natural theology (if established) do not entail ‘classical theism’ *as Wright understood it*. Indeed, Wright fails to note that many of the leading proponents of these arguments (e.g., Craig and Moreland) in fact reject this form of classical theism. The Kalam version of the Cosmological Argument, the Teleological Argument, and the Moral Argument do not lead to essential divine atemporality, a strong sense of divine immutability, and divine impassibility, but are compatible with the rejection of these. There is no problem fitting the resultant picture with the Jesus of the Gospels, and I have proposed a model (The Divine Preconscious Model) to show how this can be done (Loke 2014).

Moore might ask, given that ‘Christian faith is that God has acted climactically, uniquely and exclusively in Jesus Christ to save us from our sins and to restore us to fellowship with himself, and that he has sent his Holy Spirit to bring those salvific acts to completion in his people, what point there can be to “discover” arguments of natural theology.’⁶ Wright (2019, pp. 257–258) claims that the standard arguments of natural theology lean toward Deism, with its rejection of miracles. He writes, ‘start with the world as a machine, and you

5 Saying that the Old Testament prophets do not talk of the Trinity does not deny the fact that traces of the doctrine of the Trinity (in particular, the idea that the one God is multi-personal) can already be found in the Old Testament. While many Islamic apologists have claimed that the Christian doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation were a distortion of the doctrine of God found in the Judaist Scripture (which Christians call the Old Testament), the well-known Judaist scholar Daniel Boyarin has argued, on the basis of passages such as Daniel 7, that ‘the ideas of Trinity and incarnation, or certainly the germs of those ideas, were already present among Jewish believers well before Jesus came on the scene to incarnate in himself, as it were, those theological notions and take up his messianic calling’ (Boyarin 2012, p. 102).

6 I thank Andrew Moore for raising this objection.

will end with God as a celestial Chief Engineer, whose being and operations can be deduced from the way the world currently is' (p. 257). Wright (p. 181) thinks that

The tradition of the modern 'natural theology' at its best ought then to be seen as a gesture towards a more complicated, and ultimately more interesting and fruitful, set of questions. By starting with Jesus himself (instead of trying to get straight about 'God' first, and then to force a 'Jesus' – figure into the picture), such questions might answer the longings of the heart as well as the enquiries of the mind, and do so in a way which, transforming heart and mind in the process, retrospectively validated the questions and longings themselves.

A complete defense of miracles is beyond the scope of this book (I defend this in Loke 2020, chapter 8); here, I shall focus on addressing the objections Wright raises. In particular, I shall show that, contrary to Wright, contemporary versions of the arguments of natural theology (if established) do not lead to a Deist God ('Chief Engineer') but rather increase the plausibility of miracles.

To begin, I agree that Jesus himself can answer the longings of the heart as well as the enquiries of the mind. However, a person's understanding of Jesus and his salvific work involves the context of his/her worldview. To an atheist who thinks that the origin of the universe is explained naturalistically, the belief that God has acted in Jesus makes no sense. One might present the evidences that this God has acted in Christ, but the atheist might think that there is compelling evidence for (say) Hawking's atheistic model, which weighs against the evidences one presented. In this context, the Cosmological Argument is helpful for demonstrating the universe has a Creator and the inadequacy of Hawking's no-boundary proposal (see Loke 2022a, chapter 6), thus opening people's minds to the plausibility of miracles. This is important for many people from (say) mainland China, where naturalistic evolution is strongly emphasized. Hence, chapter 1 of the book *Song of the Wanderer* by Li Cheng, one of the most effective evangelistic books in recent Chinese history, starts with 'The general revelation of God: The Orderly Universe.' This book has helped many unbelievers come to faith and contributed to the growth of the church in China significantly over the years, and it refutes the common misconception that 'arguments for a God's existence are not likely to lead to the God revealed in Jesus Christ' (Moore's 2010, abstract; for further evidence against Moore's claim, see <https://www.academia.edu/84929596/Testimonials>).

Now, I am not claiming that the arguments for special revelation must depend on first establishing the arguments of natural theology; on the contrary, the arguments for the acts of God in history (in particular, the historical argument for Jesus' resurrection) can serve as evidence that God exists even without the arguments of natural theology (McGrew 2018). Nevertheless, the arguments of natural theology can enhance the arguments for special revelation by addressing certain objections and increasing the plausibility of special revelation.

Natural theology is therefore not ‘a worthless distraction from what God has done in Jesus Christ and the Spirit.’⁷ Rather, it can help people understand the plausibility of what God has done in Jesus Christ and the Spirit within a proper context. It is also helpful for addressing those religions (e.g., Buddhism and Daoism) which deny the existence of a First Cause Creator. By referring to what can be known by people from all cultures, the arguments of natural theology provide an important point of contact for cross-cultural mission; indeed, they have been used with great success by missionaries (see, for example, the sixteenth century Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci’s *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*) (Loke forthcoming b).

Many contemporary natural theologians have used the two-stage approach mentioned above. For example, the combination of the arguments (such as the Cosmological Argument, Teleological Argument, and the historical argument for the resurrection of Jesus) in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology* implies a personal Creator God who has revealed himself by raising Jesus from the dead (Craig and Moreland 2009). Thus, Deism is avoided by the two-stage approach. The Cosmological/Teleological/Moral Arguments do not imply Deism, for there is no good reason why the First Cause/Designer/Moral Lawgiver cannot also freely choose to do miracles to reveal himself in a special way to people (see Loke 2020, chapter 8 for replies to objections).

While Deists have argued that, as human reason was qualified to judge claims of divine revelation, it can be used to eliminate any element within religion that the Deists regard as irrational or superstitious (McGrath 2012, p. 185), the appropriate response is not to reject reason, but to point out that the Deists’ arguments are flawed using reason (see, for example, the response to Hume’s objections to miracles in Loke 2020). The Cosmological and Teleological Arguments provide reasons for thinking that there is a God who created the universe with its laws of nature; a God with such powers would have no difficulty raising the dead. There are also reasons (based on natural theology!) for thinking that such a God would interfere in history by becoming incarnate and that it is highly improbable that we would find the evidence we do for the life and teaching of Jesus, as well as the evidence from witnesses to his empty tomb and resurrection appearances, if Jesus was not God incarnate and did not die and rise from the dead to accomplish salvation for us as he claimed (Swinburne 2003, 2013a, 2013b; cf. Cavin and Colombetti 2013). Therefore, even though there are philosophers and scientists who affirm the arguments of natural theology (e.g., Einstein, see Chapter 9) who end up with Deism rather than (Christian) theism, this does not mean that no good arguments can be given to show that ending up with (Christian) is a more rational conclusion and that Christian theism is true.

One may affirm that natural theology provides partial knowledge of God that complements special revelation but is insufficient for other purposes which require the Incarnation and other forms of special revelation. Thus, the

7 A phrase quoted from Andrew Moore’s email correspondence.

necessity of the Incarnation (which Barth emphasizes; see Torrance 1970, pp. 125–126) does not imply that natural theology is invalid.

Wright objects that ‘if a “natural theology” is seeking to find the building blocks for a doctrine of God from within the present creation, then ... it is attempting to leap forwards to the final moment when God will be “all in all”, but without going by the cruciform route the New Testament takes to get there’ (p. 258). ‘The problem with trying to start with this present world and argue up to God is that the present world still reflects, from the Johannine point of view, the fact that it has been taken over by “the ruler of this world” (p. 264). An eschatological objection to the use of the arguments of natural theology to demonstrate the existence of God has likewise been raised by Jürgen Moltmann. He argues that the present world is “out of order” and that only in the future kingdom of glory will God be manifest, because he will then be “all in all”’ (Moltmann 1967, p. 282). He thinks that a true natural theology rather lies in the sighs and groans of creation and the anxieties of the present, which can only be met by Christian hope based on God’s revealed promises for the future (Moltmann 1967, p. 32).

Wright is claiming that the cruciform route is a route to the final moment according to the New Testament. However, New Testament passages such as Acts 14:14–17 (see above) show that, according to the New Testament, neither the final moment nor the cruciform route is necessary for knowing that God exists, since Acts 14:14–17 implies that the present world is not dysfunctional to such an extent that humans are unable to know that God exists on the basis of the evidence in nature. In other words, the textual evidence (e.g., Acts 14:14–17) indicates that Wright’s objection is based on a misunderstanding of the New Testament, and I have explained elsewhere (see Section 3.2) that good arguments which indicate the existence of God are indeed available. The existence of these arguments is not inconsistent with God making himself more evident in the future (just as Paul did not think that his affirmation of God being ‘all in all’ in 1 Cor. 15:28 is inconsistent with his argument to prove that Jesus resurrected on the basis of eyewitness evidence in 1 Cor. 15:6). Neither is it inconsistent with the attempt to meet the needs of the present with answers drawn from God’s promises about the future.

5.6 Conclusion

In engagement with Webster (2004) and Marshall (2000), I have shown that the classical approach to natural theology does not imply that sound reasoning based on laws of logic and experiences is a higher standard of truth than Christian doctrines. On the contrary, it is theoretically possible to argue that the divine origin of Christian doctrines can be established by sound reasoning (Loke 2017a, 2017b, 2020); therefore, what these doctrines affirm should also be regarded as the highest standard of truth alongside sound reasoning. He/she might argue that sound reasoning and Christian doctrines are both from Christ the Logos (John 1:1–18) and that the ability to argue for the truth of

Christianity is given to humanity so that people can recognize what is genuine revelation from God. This view implies that, if people reason correctly (e.g., concerning natural theology, science, and history) and interpret Christian doctrines correctly, they should be compatible rather than in conflict (for a case study concerning the creation and evolution controversy, see Loke 2022e). This view is consonant with the ‘two books’ view, which has a long and distinguished history in Christian thought (McGrath 2020).

Concerning the noetic effects of sin, I have shown that the relevant Scriptural passages imply that the human cognitive equipment has not been affected by sin to such an extent that it is no longer able to arrive at some truths about God by inferential reasoning. Contrary to Barth, this ability can be seen as a result of God’s grace and the work of the Holy Spirit. Barth’s view that all divine revelation and real knowledge of God are redemptive (Brunner and Barth 1946/2002, p. 82) is contrary to various Scriptural passages. Moser’s (2017a, p. 122) objection that the Gospels do not mention or use any philosophical arguments with regard to God’s reality overlooks the fact that, given that the Cosmological and Teleological Arguments had already been formulated by Plato, Aristotle, etc. and were already widely accepted among the Gentiles, there was no need for the Biblical authors to present such arguments. They only had to proclaim that God has left witnesses of himself (Acts 14:15–17—this passage implies that humans can reason inferentially to God from creation) and argue that these witnesses were what the Gentiles were suppressing with their idolatry.

The affirmation that we can know that God exists using a philosophical argument does not deny divine revelation. On the contrary, it is based on divine (General) Revelation, which humans can understand and from which we can infer that God exists (as indicated by Acts 14:15–17), without implying that we can fully comprehend him. It does not follow from the fact that we can discover God’s existence that our reason is greater than God, just as if we discover that superintelligent aliens exist in the future, this would not imply that our reason is greater than these aliens (on the contrary, they can be far more intelligent and powerful than us).

Finally, natural theology can be regarded as the first of a two-stage classical approach:

- (1) The Cosmological Argument, Teleological Arguments, etc. indicate that there is a Creator God of the universe.
- (2) The historical evidence indicates that Christ claimed to be God-Incarnate and substantiated his claim through his miraculous bodily resurrection.

I have addressed the philosophical-theological issues concerning the second stage (such as Lessing’s ugly ditch and the contingency of history, the uniqueness of the subject matter of theology and the identification of Christ’s divinity, the issue of bias in historical research, and the so-called problem of miracle) in Loke (2020). I shall address the philosophical-theological issues concerning the first stage in the next part of this book.



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Part III

Philosophical and Theological Issues



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6 A brief historical overview and a reassessment of epistemic foundationalism and the problem of epistemic circularity

6.1 On the use of philosophical tools in the history of Christian thought on natural theology and systematic theology and a defense of conceptual analysis

In this section, I shall discuss the use of philosophical tools and categories in the history of Christian thought, pertaining not only to natural theology (which is based on general revelation) but also to systematic theology (which includes the contents of special revelation), as this would help to strengthen my response to the theological objections against natural theology (e.g., those raised by Barthians) which are discussed in the rest of this book.

Although there have been some who oppose the use of philosophical tools in theology, the consensus within Christian theology as a whole is that a critical appropriation of such tools (based on the insight that ‘all truths are God’s truths’) in clarifying doctrines which have their basis in the Scriptures is helpful, productive, and integral to the theological task (McGrath 2007, pp. 108, 173–200). Such an appropriation has long been practiced in the history of the church, especially in the formulation of creedal statements by the church councils. For example, Athanasius observed that both the supporters and the opponents of Arius could use similar Scriptural texts and phrases to undergird their positions. He thus argued that this made it necessary for the Council at Nicaea to employ terms taken from philosophy rather than Scripture as interpretative norms, to ensure that the Scriptures would be understood in the way that they have been traditionally understood and the way that the New Testament’s authors had intended them (Athanasius, *Defence of the Nicene Definition* 5.18–24).

Stump (2010, pp. 32–33) notes that many historical critical biblical scholars would object to philosophical analysis of biblical texts given that these are made up of bits and pieces of sources stitched together at various times by various redactors for various religious or polemical purposes. Stump rightly replies that

There is no reason for rejecting a priori the supposition that such redactors may have had literary or philosophical skills that were employed in the compilation of the final form of the text, even if the redactors’ primary motivation was political or ideological ... And, of course, one way

for us to decide whether a final redactor was artistically or philosophically competent is to see if the text can be read as the product of such a mind.

(pp. 34–35)

It is true that the New Testament authors did not use exactly the same concepts or terminologies as those which were used in later doctrinal controversies; there are certainly differences between the language, formulation, and thought patterns of the later Greek creedal statements and those of the New Testament (Brown 1994, p. 171). Nevertheless, while one should be wary of the danger of anachronistic reading of the New Testament texts, one should also be careful not to beg the question against the view that many aspects of the creedal statements are a development in understanding of what was already essentially there at the beginning of the Christian movement.¹

While ‘ontological’ issues were more explicitly expressed from the second century onward as Christians took up and used philosophical categories in the defense and articulation of their faith, the following examples indicate that there were ontological ideas implied in the OT and NT writings as well, and not merely functional ideas. Commentators have noted that the phrase ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ (‘in the form of God’) in Phil. 2:6–7² expresses an ontological idea (even though the terminology is not as specific and fully developed as the ontological concepts of later patristic discussions). Gordon Fee takes it to be referring to Christ as having that which characterizes the reality of him being God. He argues that μορφῇ was the right word for the dual usage of characterizing both the reality (his being God) and the metaphor (μορφὴν δούλου, ‘form of a slave’ – Phil. 2:7) for humanity. In his earthly existence, he took on the ‘essential quality’ of what it meant to be a slave (Fee 2007, pp. 377–385). ‘Having that which characterizes,’ ‘reality,’ ‘being,’ and ‘essential quality’ are all ontological concepts. In a similar vein, Yarbrow Collins distinguishes between the functional (e.g., activities like ruling over a universal kingdom, sitting on a heavenly throne, judging human beings) and the ontological (e.g., ‘in the form of God’ – Phil. 2:6, which implies the nature of Christ and what kind of being he was), noting that these two senses are implied by Second Temple Jewish and early Christian texts (Yarbrow Collins 2008, pp. 57–58; see also Loke 2017a, Chapter 2). Likewise, Reginald Fuller argues that, while much of New Testament Christology is functional, it is not just a quirk of the Greek mind but a universal human apperception that action implies prior *being* and that *ontic* reflection about Yahweh is found even in the Old Testament (e.g., in the ‘I AM’ of Exodus and ‘Deutero-Isaiah’) (Fuller 1965, pp. 247–249).

1 This view is affirmed in Bauckham (2008a, p. x), although it should be noted that Bauckham prefers the term ‘identity’ rather than ‘ontology’. For comments on Bauckham’s usage, see Loke (2017a, Chapter 2).

2 ‘Who, though he [Christ] existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness.’

I argued in Loke (2017a) that, likewise, ideas of ‘person’ and ‘being’ are also implied in the NT writings and that there are good reasons for thinking that the earliest Christian leaders would affirm with the pro-Nicene theologians that the Son and the Father are ‘of equal ontological standing’ (the phrase is from Ayres 2004, p. 236) and within one divine being, even though they did not use the same terminology but (in large measure) expressions from their biblical/Jewish tradition. Bauckham observes that the Jews in the late Second Temple period did not often talk about divine nature, but they had well-known ways of defining the one God by contrasting him with ‘all things’ and affirming him as the sole Creator of all things. Thus, supposing that the earliest Christians regarded Jesus as truly divine, the evident way for them to convey this would be to say that he was involved in the creation of ‘all things’ rather than using categories such as divine essence or nature. While creation of all things is a ‘functional’ category, it is performed only by God the Creator according to the ancient Jewish conception (e.g., Isa. 44:24). Therefore, the attribution of such a function to Jesus implies that Jesus was regarded as ontologically truly divine (see Bauckham 1999 and Loke 2017a, chapters 1, 2, and 4).

Historians have no problem inferring that the New Testament authors thought of Jesus as a human who had to eat, drink, sleep, etc. Indeed, historians would not think that it is anachronistic to do so, even though terminologies which were used in later creedal statements to refer to Jesus’ humanity were not used by New Testament authors to refer to his humanity. To be consistent, historians should also be open to the idea that the New Testament authors, without using later terminologies, also thought of Jesus as truly divine (Bauckham, in Hurtado 2016). Just as modern historians studying ancient warfare can draw from modern-day knowledge (e.g., of infectious disease, a knowledge that was unavailable to the ancients) to explain historical events (e.g., why soldiers die from contaminated wounds), it can be argued that later knowledge (including more precise knowledge of philosophical language concerning categories) can be employed in the study of earlier history to fulfill an explanatory function (Kitcher 1998, p. 43). Here, the explanatory function is to show in what sense was Jesus regarded as equal with the Father (e.g., 1 Cor. 8:6 and Phil. 2:6-11; see Loke 2017a, Chapter 2) yet lower than the Father (e.g., being obedient to the Father [Phil. 2:7]; obedience is clearly a functional concept, even though Paul did not use the word function). In a similar vein, Bates argues that later Christian texts can be a potential source of evidence for the meaning of the earlier Christian texts which influenced their writing (Bates 2015, pp. 56–58), while Hill argues that the concern about anachronism and misinterpretation can be addressed by assessing whether the conceptualities found in later texts can make good sense of the data in the earlier texts (Hill 2015). As argued in Loke (2017a), the ontological-functional distinction helps to make sense of what the New Testament authors were trying to convey when they portray Jesus to be equal with the Father in some sense and yet lower than the Father in another sense.

McGrath (2018, p. 208) thus rightly observes that

Some early Christian theologians, embedded in a Hellenistic cultural context, used the language of Greek metaphysics in developing their theology (for example, in the statements of the Council of Chalcedon); this, however, is not to be seen as an assimilation of Christology to secular Greek thought, but a strategic deployment of its vocabulary to map the contours of the Christian vision of reality, which is rooted in (and is to be evaluated on the basis of) the New Testament.

In response to theologians who naively assert that they merely intend to keep to the Scriptures alone and reject everything else such as philosophy, Küng observes that:

If ... interpretation is not a mere exposition of single words, but rather an explanation of the sense, then it is easy to see that it must bring its own idea into the foundational Word ... Man necessarily brings his own pre-suppositions, prejudices, ideas and thinking into his exegesis. These things do not hail from the Bible, but are brought to the Bible, and they have their own conditions and intrinsic forms before they come into contact with the Bible. And for interpretation, for exegesis, and, finally for the theology of the reader of Scripture himself, everything hinges on whether his thinking is correct or not.

(Küng 1987, p. 360)

Küng goes on to point out that the fundamental science of philosophy is useful for judging the *a priori* correctness of thinking. Against the objection that the use of philosophical tools is a move away from the simplicity of the biblical narratives to a more metaphysical view of Jesus, McGrath argues well that the New Testament vision of Jesus is itself highly complex, weaving together strands that occasionally seem to contradict each other. He writes:

Here is someone who is clearly human – who gets tired, thirsty, and so on – but who says and does things that put him way beyond humanity, on any understanding of an index of its capacities. It's not a 'simple' picture, and cannot lead to a 'simple' answer. In this case, 'simple' just means simplistic – failing to attend to the complexity of the issues.

(McGrath 2006, pp. 78–79)

Some might raise the concern that the use of philosophy in theological discourse would yield 'the God of the philosophers' vastly different from the God whom we meet in the revealed Scriptures. In response, philosopher of religion William Abraham argues that the God who is identified is not some idol invented by philosophers, but precisely the God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ, the triune God of Christian revelation. The tools of philosophy

are used to do justice to this God, whom Anselm realizes can be identified as nothing less than that which nothing greater can be conceived, by unpacking as fully as possible what is involved in confessing faith in him, and how believers may speak appropriately of him who is worthy of worship (Abraham 2009, pp. 61–63).

On the one hand, we need to be careful about the use of philosophy because some philosophical ideas or systems may be unwarranted (for example, ancient Greek ideas of divine immutability; see Loke 2014, chapter 4). Indeed, some contemporary theologians think that the rejection of metaphysics is a good thing because they think of examples of metaphysicians who have sought to violently impose their concepts onto the world and are guilty of misidentifying ‘the fundamental reality of objects – their being as such – with our ideas about them’ (Hector 2011, p. 9).

On the other hand, the solution is not to reject metaphysics, but to engage in careful metaphysics that aims to make its conceptual categories fit the world as we reflect upon the world (Mullins 2016, pp. xiii–xiv). Against those who object to ‘conceptual analysis’ by arguing that such analysis only shows how we think about the world and not what the world itself really is, it has been shown in Loke (2022a, chapter 1) that we are able to formulate ideas such as mathematics and laws of logic which correspond with the world (see further, Chapter 8, which discusses the use of language to refer to the transcendent God). Lakoff and Johnson (2008) argue that, while abstract thought is largely metaphorical, it is not entirely metaphorical; instead, ‘abstract concepts have a literal core but are extended by metaphors’ (p. 272).³ Using the laws of logic, one can formulate sound arguments to prove that conceptual analysis concerning causation corresponds with the world as well (see Section 6.5).⁴ One should not ignore philosophical ideas that are based on sound arguments, i.e., true premises and valid deductive inference, such as the impossibility of an actual infinite regress of events (see Loke 2022a, Chapter 5; Loke 2023), otherwise one would risk thinking nonsensically about God (e.g., thinking that God has endured an infinite number of durations before creation). As Pannenberg (2004, p. 94) observes, the arguments of natural theology have ‘the important function of correcting other statements about God, and especially whatever might be contrary to the concept of a primal being. It also has the task of purifying from any admixture of empirical limitations.’

Some might raise the concern that the explications of divine attributes such as omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence offered in philosophical theological literature are not exactly the same as what the Scripture affirms of God.

3 They also claim that ‘our conceptual systems are not consistent overall, since the metaphors used to reason about concepts may be inconsistent’ (p. 272). Here, they have unwarrantedly slid from ‘may be’ to ‘are not’. In any case, my argument that we can arrive at *some* true conclusions via *some* sound arguments does not depend on the claim that *all* our concepts are consistent with one another.

4 For replies to the objection that the concept of causality may not be applicable to the universe as a whole, see Loke (2022a, pp. 129–131).

Nevertheless, as long as these explications are not contradictory to the Scriptural portrayal of God and are philosophically defensible, they are possibly true of God, and they could therefore be used to formulate a *possible* model of the Trinity, Incarnation, etc., which is all that is required in the dialectic with the skeptic who doubts the logical coherence of these doctrines (see Loke 2014).

Throughout history, various other objections have been raised against the use of philosophical tools and categories for Christian Theology and natural theology. I shall address some of these objections in the rest of this chapter and the next chapter.

6.2 Concerning epistemic foundationalism

A number of scholars have regarded the attempts to meet the skeptical challenges to laying a secure foundation for knowledge and then a secure method to build on to the foundation to have failed (Stiver 2003, p. 170). They have thus abandoned foundationalist theories of epistemic justification (foundationalism) and embraced coherentism.

Following philosopher W.V.O. Quine, coherentists regard beliefs as having a web-like structure, with some beliefs being more central and well-established in relation to more peripheral beliefs. However, every belief is in principle open to revision (e.g., in light of new beliefs that resulted from new experiences): usually, the less central belief is revised; sometimes, however, the revision may reach the center (Stiver 2003, pp. 172–173). Some have applied coherentism to theology. Thus, for example, even though Marshall claims that the Trinity, the resurrection of Jesus, etc. must be regarded as the central beliefs and epistemically primary criteria of truth for Christians, he states that there are conditions under which Christians should be prepared to give up the belief that Jesus is risen. For example, if historians discover a document indicating that the disciples stole Jesus' body and started a conspiracy (although he thinks that these conditions will never be met because he has reasons for thinking that God has revealed himself through Jesus; Marshall 2000, pp. 168–169). The problem with Marshall's account lies elsewhere in his rejection of foundationalism, his embrace of certain tenets of coherentism, and his failure to recognize that the sort of foundations affirmed by most foundationalists is also the primary criterion of truth. I shall explain these points in detail in what follows.

To begin, there are significant problems with Quine's coherentism. For example, Quine's claim that 'there are no necessary truths' is incoherent, for it entails that the claim itself is also not necessarily true, and therefore it is false in at least one possible world. However, this implies that 'there are necessary truths' is true in that possible world, and given the nature of necessity, if there are necessary truths in one possible world, then there are necessary truths in all possible worlds (Rauser 2009, p. 163).

Rauser also points out that Quine's argument against analyticity depends on the unwarranted rejection of propositions, leaving sentences as the sole truth bearers. Now, no sentence is necessarily true; e.g., the sentence

‘All triangles have three sides’ would become false if the word ‘triangle’ were to be used to refer to a square. However, shifting of word meaning has no implications for the necessity of the proposition that the sentence ‘All triangles have three sides’ currently expresses (Rauser 2009, p. 162).

Moreover, as I shall explain below, the law of non-contradiction (LNC) is necessarily true, and indeed is required for ‘coherence’ itself as well as the reason (if any) for the revision of beliefs, and thus the LNC should be regarded as a non-revisable foundational principle instead.

Many so-called post-foundationalist theologians might not be aware that the anti-foundationalist arguments of philosophers Quine, Sellars, Wittgenstein et al. have already been rebutted in contemporary analytic epistemology (Bonjour 2010) and that foundationalism continues to be defended by many epistemologists today. A good justification for foundationalism is Aristotle’s regress argument. If a belief requires another belief to justify it inferentially, then this generates the so-called Agrippan trilemma (also known as the Münchhausen trilemma): either

1. it goes on forever, with belief A justified by B justified by C justified by ... *ad infinitum*.
2. it circles back on itself at some point, with A justified by B justified by C justified by ... justified by B
3. it stops at some point, with A justified by B justified by C justified by ... justified by X, which is not justified by any further belief.

Proponents of the trilemma think that each of these three options is unsatisfactory. The problem with infinite regress is that there would only be ‘an unending series of promissory notes never fulfilled ... in order to get justification into the inference chain, there must be some source of justification apart from mere inference’ (Bergmann 2017, pp. 253–534). The problem with a circular chain of beliefs is that it would be viciously circular. Concerning option 3, proponents of the trilemma think that it seems to make justification arbitrary, since X seems to be merely asserted rather than defended; if X can have no justification, why not other beliefs? On the other hand, if justification is required, terminating with an unjustified belief would lack a source of justification. Foundationalists reply that the regress can terminate with a foundational belief which (unlike non-foundational beliefs) satisfies the condition for being properly basic (and hence not merely asserted) and which can then serve as a foundation and a source of justification.

Different kinds of foundationalism affirm different conditions of proper basicity⁵ and/or different ways one belief can be inferred from another. Some think that a belief is properly basic if and only if it is incorrigible (see below), while others think that it has to be psychologically certain, or adequately

5 This condition is not a further justification (for otherwise the supposedly properly basic beliefs would not be basic), but rather an explanation of why the belief is proper for being a basic belief.

supported by nondoxastic evidence (i.e., evidence in the form of conscious mental states that are not beliefs); or (as externalists would affirm) is reliably formed by properly functioning cognitive faculties (Bergmann 2017, pp. 253–254; Bergmann goes on to defend foundationalism against other objections).

Dougherty (2017, pp. 241–242) argues for the importance of experience with regard to properly basic (foundational) beliefs:

suppose you truly claim to have discovered a new planet, and I ask you for the evidence ... when you describe the evidence, I, like a child, am going to repeat the question ‘What’s your evidence for *that*?’ until we reach a natural stopping point. So suppose you mention that part of your evidence consists in verifying that there are perturbations in a certain asteroid belt. ‘What’s your evidence for *that*?’ ‘Well, a number of the larger asteroids in this belt don’t take the trajectory that would be predicted by the absence of a massive object in the region’. ‘What’s your evidence for *that*?’ ... At the end of this chain, all you can do is say that when you looked into the telescope, a certain image was generated ... After that, my question is meaningless or obviously out of place or implies making a category mistake.

DePoe (2020, pp. 52–53) argues for the stronger notion (‘Strong Foundationalism’) that ‘incorrigibility is the appropriate standard for foundational beliefs is that it is the only way to guarantee that one’s noetic structure has a connection to truth,’ where incorrigible beliefs are defined as ‘beliefs that are held by someone in such a way that they are uncorrectable with respect to its truth’ (p. 54).⁶ For example, when someone believes that he is experiencing a severe headache, ‘that person cannot be corrected by anyone with respect to the belief that he is experiencing a headache. The same can be said for a multitude of other experiences because the experience is formed in direct reference to the experience’ (p. 54).

A particular version of foundationalism, viz. the Cartesian version, requires that the higher-ordered inferential beliefs be deduced with certainty if they are to be justified. However, there are other versions of foundationalism which allow, in addition, that justification can arise via inductive inference from a representative sample or abductive inference to the best explanation (Bergmann 2017, p. 254), which can be approximately understood as ‘an item of evidence

6 While Plantinga has famously argued that classical Foundationalism is self-refuting, DePoe (2007) has shown that Plantinga has not in fact proven his case. The specific claim of classical Foundationalism which Plantinga attacks is the claim that a belief is acceptable for a person if and only if it is either (i) basic (i.e., self-evident or incorrigible) or (ii) believed on the evidential basis of propositions that are acceptable and support it deductively, inductively, or abductively. My arguments in this book do not require such a strong claim as expressed by the phrase ‘if and only if.’

E supports a hypothesis H to the extent that H tells the best story about E' (Dougherty 2017, pp. 241–412). For example,

what would the truth of evolution lead us to expect? How well do the data fit into the story of evolution? ... The doctor or detective or investigator constructs a narrative that weaves the data—the evidence—into a coherent fabric that makes sense as a whole. To the extent that the narrative holds together, each part supports the rest. If a proposed narrative—the hypothesis—makes sense out of the data (tells a story in which the evidence fits naturally) then the data support that hypothesis).

(Dougherty 2017)

Many influential theologians have assumed the demise of foundationalism in philosophy (e.g., Grenz and Franke, p. 46; Hauerwas 2001). However, this is a misunderstanding; it is only *the Cartesian version* of foundationalism which has been widely rejected (Bergmann 2017, p. 269). The other versions of foundationalism continue to be defended by many contemporary philosophers. I shall be referring to these other versions of foundationalism in the subsequent discussion of this book.

6.3 The problem of epistemic circularity

Against the objection that his version of Presuppositionalism is circular, Frame retorts that everyone else reasons circularly in the sense of using their own standards in proving their own conclusions, and he argues that to argue for an ultimate standard by appealing to a different standard would be inconsistent. For example, he thinks that those who affirm that reason is the ultimate standard must presuppose this standard in their arguments for this position, i.e., 'Reason is the ultimate standard because reason says so' (Frame 2000, p. 217). In addition, Frame questions whether logic in the tradition of Aristotle is merely a form of Western, linear thinking (Frame 2000, p. 135). Against my criticism of Barth, Webster et al. in Chapter 1, one might object that not all humans accept or operate with the view of reason that I work with, and that given this lack of consensus, it needs to be shown how my view is valid and not merely an appeal to a criterion internal to my group.⁷

I shall be replying to the above objections in the following sections.

6.4 Concerning the laws of logic and the criteria for a sound argument

To begin, it should be noted that 'consensus' is neither a necessary nor a sufficient criterion of truth; rather, the criteria for universal epistemic justification are those beliefs for which good reasons can be given, and not necessarily those

⁷ I thank a referee who raised this objection.

which are universally, or even widely, held (Pannenberg 2004, p. 50). In response to Frame, Craig explains ‘How do we decide which arguments are worth believing? We see whether they follow the pattern of valid inference forms, are informally valid, and have true premises that are more plausible than their contradictories’ (Craig 2000a, p. 315).

Underlying valid inference forms are the laws of logic. These laws are necessarily true, as shown by the fact that a violation of the laws of logic such as the LNC would be non-existent. This claim does not merely reflect a ‘Western’ form of thinking, but is grounded in the meanings of the terms, as illustrated by Huemer’s (2018, p. 20) explanation that the LNC is part of the meaning of ‘not’:

If you think there is a situation in which both A and $\sim A$ hold, then you’re confused, because it is just part of the meaning of “not” that not-A fails in any case where A holds.⁸ The lack of overlap between A and $\sim A$ is the main point of the concept of negation. Now, a contradiction is a statement of the form (A & $\sim A$). So, by definition, any contradiction is false.⁹

Understood in this way, there cannot be any exception to the classical account of logic. For example, there cannot be a shapeless square because ‘shapeless’ (no-shape) would fail in any case where there is a shape (e.g., a square). This illustrates that laws of logic are necessarily true; they would hold even at levels far beyond our daily experiences, such as at the beginning of time (there cannot be shapeless squares at such levels too, because ‘shapeless’ [no-shape] would still fail if there is a shape [e.g., a square] at these levels).

Laws of logic are not merely psychological principles of reasoning nor concepts in the mind; rather, they are descriptive of reality, as illustrated by the impossibility of a shapeless square in reality. They are not based on agreed definition by human communities, as illustrated by the fact that I am referring

8 Beall’s (2021) proposal that the incarnate Christ is a contradictory being relies on using a different definition of negation (see Restall 2022, p. 3) and hence does not refute classical logic as defined by Huemer and used in this monograph.

9 There are alternative definitions of the term ‘contradiction’ compared with what is used here. For example, Marxist dialectical materialism sometimes uses the term ‘contradiction’ to refer to opposing forces in conflict (e.g., Newton’s third law of motion states that ‘for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction’); the latter is not claiming that the force ‘is’ and ‘is not’ at the same time and thus can possibly exist. Scholars have interpreted what Hegel (for example) meant by contradictions differently. While many of the oppositions embedded in Hegel’s dialectical development and the definitions of concepts or forms are not contradictions in the strict sense as defined here (and therefore can possibly be true), some of them arguably are (Maybee 2020). Priest (2006a, 2006b, pp. 172–175, 213–214) has developed Hegel’s argument that motion involves contradictions: something is both here and not here at the same time. However, the conclusion is unwarranted because an alternative analysis of motion is available: something is here at one time with a velocity and inertia which accounts for it being at some other place at some other time. Moreover, Priest’s analysis assumes that time is composed of points, but an alternative conception of time as composed of durations is available (see Loke 2017b, chapter 2).

to the impossibility of a shapeless square in reality rather than our agreed definition of 'shape' and 'square' (of course, some other communities might use a different definition of 'shape' and 'square,' in that case they would be referring to something else). The conclusion that there cannot be a shapeless square in reality is based on understanding the nature of 'square' and 'shape' as well as the laws of logic. Once we understand the concepts, we have understood some aspects of what reality is (i.e., metaphysics), namely, that there cannot be shapeless squares (nor violation of laws of logic in general) in reality.

The above conclusions follow from Huemer's definitions of 'not' and 'negation,' given which contradictions are impossible and laws of logic are necessarily true. If a dialetheist were to object by using a different definition of negation, that would be to talk about something else and to miss the point of the argument which I shall offer below. (It would be similar to someone objecting to 'All humans are mortal, Socrates is a human, therefore, Socrates is mortal' by using alternative definitions of human or Socrates, which, of course, misses the point of the argument by talking about something else. To rebut an argument, one has to rebut the premise or the validity rather than use an alternative definition of the terms [Loke 2022a, p. 16].)

Both Deguchi et al. (2021, p. 3) and Beall (2021, p. 8) mention the liar paradox (is the sentence 'This sentence is false' true or false?) as a well-known entity that 'apparently instantiate or exemplify or have both of the given contrary properties' (Beall 2021, p. 8).

However, both books fail to note that 'the claim that contradictions can exist in self-referential paradox in linguistic games (which may be due to inadequacies of language) is irrelevant to the claim that ontological contradictions can exist in a concrete individual (the Incarnate Christ) or the transcendent realm' (Loke 2024, p. 14). Moreover, Huemer (2018, p. 29) has argued that one can resolve the liar paradox by showing that the liar sentence fails to express a proposition because the rules for interpreting the sentence are inconsistent, and thus it does not have the property of truth or falsehood, and hence there is (in fact) no glut and no contradiction. While Huemer gives no model to serve as proof of consistency, this does not invalidate his argument, which is simply intended to show that his 'solution to the liar paradox holds that the liar sentence fails to express a proposition due to an inconsistency built into our language' (p. 29). (Priest, Berto, and Weber [2024] mention the 'strengthened' liar paradox such as L: L is not true, and argue that if this sentence is neither true nor false, it is not true; but this is precisely what it claims to be; therefore, it is true. Huemer [2018, pp. 34–36] replies by denying that L makes any claim at all. L does not make any claim because it fails to express a proposition. However, one can say that N: L is not true. Huemer explains 'N expresses the proposition that L is not true; yet L does not express that proposition, even though L is syntactically identical to N. Why is this? Because when we read L, we are invited to accept an inconsistent story about the proposition that it expresses; but when we read N, there is no inconsistent story about what N expresses' [p. 35].) Huemer also replies to other paradoxes in his book (Huemer 2018).

For example, Huemer argues that Russell's paradox does not imply the denial of LNC; he explains that the solution to the paradox (which defines 'the Russell set' as the set of all things that are not members of themselves) is to argue that the Russell set does not exist, given that it has an inconsistent definition (pp. 42–43).

A large number of books and articles have been published on non-classical logic in recent years, and some of its world-leading proponents, such as Jc Beall (2021, 2023) and Graham Priest (Deguchi et al. 2021), have claimed that the LNC can be violated. I have shown in Loke (2024) that these proponents have failed to distinguish between different forms of the LNC that are based on different definitions of negation. Moreover, they have failed to state clearly that a particular form of the LNC (based on a particular definition of negation, such as that by Huemer) cannot be violated, but have instead been talking about something else other than that particular form of the LNC. For the purpose of stating the LNC, a contradiction-permitting sense of negation is inappropriate, since that would be contrary to the purpose of stating the Law as a law in the first place, which is to express the sense in which there cannot be contradictions. If the Law uses a contradiction-permitting sense of negation, it would no longer be a 'law' in the intended sense.

Some religious mystical traditions¹⁰ (e.g., certain forms of Chinese Buddhism, Daoism, and some [not all] forms of apophatic theology) postulate a transcendent realm in which laws of logic are violated (Capra 2010; Deguchi et al. 2021).¹¹ However, this is impossible, for there cannot be shapeless squares in the transcendent realm either.¹² This conclusion is not based on our inability to imagine it, but based on understanding that the existence of A implies the non-existence of not-A.

The Chan Buddhist might object that our language and our understanding of meaning might be mistaken. Against the arguments of natural theology, they might object that these arguments use language, and claim that we are not

10 A reviewer observes that 'some "mystics" might charitably be interpreted as avoiding contraries, e.g., to use a bizarre example, we should not think of God as being either bald or being hairy (contraries). A mystic may be claiming God is neither (bald or hairy) without thereby denying the law of noncontradiction, e.g., it is impossible for God to be both bald and not-bald at the same time in the same respect.'

11 Some have even argued that laws of logic are violated in the mundane realm of mind-body relation, claiming that the mind emerges from the world and the world emerges from the mind (Deguchi et al. 2021, p. 170). These arguments can be answered by the alternative view of substance dualism which has been defended against various objections in a number of recent academic publications such as the comprehensive *Blackwell Companion to Substance Dualism* (Loose ed. 2018; see also Koons and Bealer 2010; Kuhn 2024; Rickabaugh and Moreland 2023). A substance dualist can deny that the mind emerges from the world and argue that both the mind and the world are created by an immaterial and divine First Cause (see Loke 2022a, chapter 6).

12 If someone refuses to acknowledge the claim that there cannot be a shapeless square, one can ask that person what is the meaning of 'shapeless,' 'shape,' and 'square,' and he/she should realize there cannot be such things.

referring to reality but reality shaped by our language, and thus the conclusion of the arguments might not correspond with transcendent reality but merely reflect our use of language and way of thinking.

The problem with the above objection is that the objection itself assumes a correct understanding of the meaning of the term ‘mistaken’ and the correctness of expressing this meaning using language. Moreover, the meaning of ‘mistaken’ itself presupposes the LNC, because ‘mistaken’ means ‘not-correct’ where ‘not’ is used in an exclusive sense to imply that the understanding of the meaning of negation and the LNC fails to apply to (transcendent) reality. However, this exclusive sense is the sense which Huemer is using for the LNC. In other words, if the LNC does *not* apply to (transcendent) reality (i.e., if it is merely our use of language or ways of thinking), this would require that the LNC applies to (transcendent) reality. This indicates that the LNC cannot in fact fail to apply to (transcendent) reality; i.e., the LNC (as defined by Huemer) cannot be violated. While there might be different perspectives and different levels of understanding, and something might be a shape in one aspect but no-shape in another aspect, it remains the case that there cannot be something which is a shape and shapeless in the same respect, and LNC concerns the same respect.

In any case, the claim that there is a transcendent realm in which the laws of logic are violated cannot be proven. This claim is pure speculation. On the other hand, religious mystics evidently acknowledge the truths of the well-established conclusions of modern science concerning the law of gravity, etc. (see the discussion on Latour’s view in Section 7.2). Modern science acknowledges the principle (following the laws of logic) that the conclusion of a sound argument is true (see Section 7.1). Thus, the conclusion of the Cosmological Argument (which I have explained is indeed a sound argument; see Loke 2022a) that there is a Creator God would still follow as a ‘scientific’ conclusion that ought to be accepted as a true conclusion, regardless of whether one calls this God transcendent or not. In other words, the Cosmological Argument cannot be rebutted by the religious mystics’ view concerning the laws of logic in any case.

It is one thing to say that the transcendent realm of Ultimate Reality is ‘supra-rational’ in the sense that it exceeds the capacity of human reason to comprehend (Avis 2021, p. 181). It is another thing to say that it violates the laws of logic. Religious mystics might claim that we have difficulties describing or conceptualizing the transcendent realm (if it exists) due to the limitations of human language. Nevertheless, the definition of negation explained by Huemer (see above) and the LNC would still apply to it (e.g., it is *not* the case that ‘it is easy to describe’). While apparent paradoxes are often used in various religious traditions to ‘trigger enlightenment,’ my argument here is that the LNC cannot be violated, as illustrated by the impossibility of a shapeless square.

Hewitt (2020, p. 20) notes that apophatic theologians have at times apparently and knowingly contradicted themselves (citing on page 12 Meister Eckhart’s statement that ‘[God] is pure nothing: he is neither this nor that. If you think of anything he might be, he is not that’ [Eckhart 1979, p. 54]).

However, he argues that ‘language is used for many things other than the context-insensitive statement of propositions. The mystical theologian and the preacher are not, typically, in the business of communicating theories, but rather are accompanying the spiritual lives of others’ (p. 20). He elaborates

Devices such as the utterance of contradictions can play their part in this: bringing hearers to realise for themselves the inadequacy of their ideas about God, or inviting them to playfully deploy images of God without supposing themselves to have an understanding of the divine nature, or leading them to a realisation of the inadequacy of our words when confronted with the reality of God, and thereby to silence.

(pp. 20–21)

Some Eastern religious mystics have appealed to the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum physics and claimed that it violates LNC (Capra 2010). However, the Copenhagen interpretation is unproven. Other viable interpretations exist, and some of them, such as de Broglie-Bohm’s pilot-wave model and Everett’s Many Worlds Interpretation, are perfectly deterministic and consistent with the laws of logic. (Bricmont [2017] notes that according to Bohm’s interpretation, the system consists of a particle riding on a wave which follows the Schrodinger equation, and which guides the particle to only one position which is revealed when an observation is made. There is no violation of the laws of logic.) Compared with other viable interpretations, the Copenhagen interpretation is a bad interpretation because (as explained earlier) the LNC cannot be violated. While multiple non-classical logics have been developed to meet specific tasks in knowledge production (McGrath 2018, p. 31), their proven utility has to do with definition, designation, proving, computability problem solving, etc.; i.e., they are helpful in situations where (say) the definitions are vague. On the other hand (as I have argued), classical logic applies to what is actually the case or can be the case (regardless of whether one can define it, prove it, etc.). Thus, for example, it cannot be the case that shapeless squares exist (Loke 2022a, p. 17).

Some might think that a solution to the Paradox of the Stone (if an omnipotent God exists, can He create a stone He cannot carry?) would require the claim that God can violate the Laws of Logic. However, this is not so.¹³ Concerning the Paradox, one can ask, ‘If God exists, can God create a shapeless square?’ The answer is no, because there is no such thing. Likewise, there is no such thing as a stone which God cannot carry; thus, God cannot create such a stone. This does not mean that God’s power is limited; rather, there is no such object (‘a shapeless square’, ‘a stone which God cannot carry’) for God to bring about. Thus, the person who asks God to create a stone He cannot carry

¹³ Theologians at least from Thomas Aquinas (*Summa Theologiae* 1a, q. 25, a. 3) onward have argued that not even an omnipotent God can perform logically impossible tasks because such tasks are not genuine tasks.

is asking God to create nothing, which poses no challenge to His power. Neither do the Christian doctrines of the Trinity, Incarnation, and divine foreknowledge and freedom entail the violation of laws of logic (see Craig and Moreland 2017; Loke 2014; Loke forthcoming d).

The Scriptures affirm that it is impossible for God to lie (cf. Hebrews 6:18) and that God cannot deny Himself (2 Timothy 2:13); these passages presuppose that the laws of logic cannot be violated, just as God cannot make himself exists and not-exist at the same time—there is no such state, just as there is no such thing as a shapeless square. While apparent contradictions can exist, true contradictions cannot.

One should note the distinction between laws of logic and laws of nature/order of creation. Laws of logic (e.g., the LNC) are necessarily true and inviolable (illustration: there cannot be a shapeless square in any universe), and this impossibility can be known *a priori*. By contrast, there can be different laws of nature in different universes (e.g., there may not be the law of gravity in another universe). Miracles do not violate the laws of logic; it is debatable whether they violate the laws of nature (see Loke 2020, chapter 8).

Laws of nature are created by God; they are not necessarily true, and God could have created a different set of laws of nature. Whereas laws of logic are necessarily true, they are not created by God; rather, they are essential to truth, and truth is an essential property of the Logos of God. (Saying this does not imply that the Logos can be reduced to propositional truth, nor does the ontological inseparability of the laws of logic with Christ the Logos imply that epistemologically we need to presuppose Christ as the premise of theistic arguments.) As explained earlier, the laws of logic are not merely the laws of our psychology of reasoning. The fact that they are necessarily true implies that they are not ontologically grounded in the human mind (which is not necessarily existent) and hence are unaffected by the noetic effects of sin, and that they are not created by humans but are discovered by humans.

Pannenberg (2004, p. 22) observes that ‘no argumentation is possible, even in theology, unless there is recognition of the basic principles of identity and contradiction. These principles have always been especially presupposed in efforts to present the systematic unity of Christian doctrine.’ Even Luther, who was sharply opposed to the Aristotelian view of reason, finally accepted the validity of logical deduction, while pointing out that their application must respect the uniqueness of the theme of theology in order to avoid false conclusions (Pannenberg 2004, p. 20).

When communicating with proponents of Eastern religious traditions, it may be necessary to contextualize the arguments by conveying them in the format of narratives, poems, songs, and personal stories, which are preferred vehicles of communication of religion in most contexts of Asia (Karkkainen 2014, p. 59). However, this does not mean that all ways of thinking and arguing are valid; those that deny the laws of logic are not.

In summary, I have shown that, contrary to popular misconceptions, quantum physics, Russell’s paradox, and non-classical logics do not entail the

violation of laws of logic (neither do Gödel's Incompleteness Theorems, for there can be incomplete but consistent systems). Against the worry that how we think about the world may be very different from what the world itself really is, I have argued that laws of logic correspond with what the world itself really is, and we can therefore use the laws of logic to formulate various arguments concerning the world, including the arguments of natural theology. The laws of logic imply that the conclusion of a deductively valid argument from true premises is true.

As for Frame's claim that an argument for an ultimate standard of truth must necessarily be circular, Evans (2010, pp. 179–180) likewise notes that some philosophers (e.g., Alston 1993) have argued that no non-circular justification of human faculties that produce basic knowledge can be given.¹⁴

In reply, the circularity can be avoided by understanding what the belief involves. Our knowledge that the laws of logic correspond with reality is not based on proof(s) which is based on laws of logic (this would be circular). Rather, we just need to understand the terms used in these laws (such as the meaning of 'identity' and 'negation') and other relevant terms (such as the meaning of 'implication' and 'reality') in order to know that they correspond with reality. This is analogous to the fact that one does not have to prove that a square has four sides, but understand the definition of the term 'square' that it is something that has four sides. Likewise, we just need to understand that the existence of A implies the non-existence of not-A. The understanding of 'what reality means' and 'what the laws of logic are' indicates that the laws of logic correspond with reality. While this conclusion is compatible with the standard used, i.e., it is compatible with the laws of logic, compatibility is not circularity. Likewise, we understand that 'the justification of your belief that you're in pain (in a case where you're feeling serious pain) doesn't seem to require that you infer this from another justified belief of yours' (Bergmann 2021, p. 61).

A skeptic might ask, 'But how do we know that our faculty of understanding is reliable?' We can imagine the following dialogue between this skeptic and the believer (note that I am using this fictional dialogue as a starting point for discussion; I will engage with the actual skeptical arguments taken from Bergmann [2021] below):

Skeptic: How do I know that my faculty of understanding is reliable for understanding anything correctly?

Believer: Do you understand what you have just asked?

Skeptic: Yes.

¹⁴ Bergmann (2006) has also argued that, if strong awareness (i.e., an awareness that involves conceiving of the justifier as relevant in some way to the belief's justification or truth) is required for justification, the awareness that justifies the belief will itself at least involve conceptualization, which will have to be justified, requiring a further conceptualization, on to infinity. In response, DePoe (2012) argues that internalists can hold their ground and insist that the right sort of non-conceptual awareness is sufficient to 'see' that the conclusion follows, thus there is no further regress.

Believer: Good. You understood something correctly.

Skeptic: Uh ... wait, I am not sure.

Believer: In that case, we can ignore the question, since you are not even sure that you understand what is it that you are asking. In any case, you do understand *that*, do you? That is, you understand that you are not sure that you understand?

Skeptic: Well, it seems to me that I understand, but I am not sure if I truly understood.

Believer: This shows that you are able to understand something about reality correctly, i.e., in reality, you are *not* sure that you truly understood. This also indicates that you are able to understand the meaning of ‘not’ (and ‘truly’) correctly, from which the LNC follows.

Against the above dialogue, it might be asked, ‘why would a radical skeptic accept that she understands the LNC? If she rejects the LNC, she might accept anything and everything—even the LNC itself. Thus, she can have no particular reason to accept that she understands the LNC even if she understands the LNC.’

The answer is that the rejection of LNC itself would require understanding the meaning of ‘negation,’ because rejection means ‘*not* LNC.’ Likewise, skepticism about the LNC itself would require understanding the meaning of ‘negation,’ because skepticism means ‘it might *not* be the case that x.’ Accepting anything and everything also requires understanding the meaning of ‘negation,’ i.e., that one is *not* only accepting some things, but everything. Based on the understanding of the meanings of ‘negation,’ one would know that one should *not* accept anything and everything (in particular, one should not accept ‘contradictions’), and this would be a reason to accept that one understands the LNC. The skeptic cannot escape this conclusion by accepting dialetheism (e.g., by claiming both that she does understand the meaning of negation and that she does not), because dialetheism uses a different definition of negation according to which it is *not* ‘part of the meaning of “not” that not-A fails in any case where A holds’ and thus it is talking about something else other than the particular form of LNC that Huemer and myself are talking about here.¹⁵

Note that the above point holds even if a skeptic refuses to admit that she understands the meaning of ‘negation.’ Her refusal may be due to various factors such as dishonesty or ignorance, but that does not deny the fact that I (and hopefully, the reader!) do understand the point concerning (say, for example) what is required by ‘rejection’ itself, namely, an understanding of ‘negation.’ A similar response can be made if the skeptic refuses to admit the points below. This reply does not beg the question against the skeptic because it has already

¹⁵ See the discussion of Huemer’s definition in Section 6.4. Huemer’s point is helpful for clarifying that the LNC follows from a particular definition of negation which is different from the definition used by dialetheists (see the explanation of this point in Loke 2024, citing Restall and others).

been explained in the previous paragraphs that the skeptic herself also assumes (whether inadvertently or not) that she understands the meaning of ‘negation’ in order to be skeptical about the LNC. Thus, skepticism (‘it might *not* be the case that *x*’) itself is not possible without assuming ‘negation,’ which amounts to the defeat of skepticism concerning negation and LNC. My point is not merely pragmatic; i.e., it does not merely concern what is not possible for us to think or speak without the LNC. Rather, I have argued above (in response to the Chan Buddhist) for the ontological (rather than pragmatic) point that, if the LNC does *not* apply to reality (e.g., if it is merely our use of language or ways of thinking), this requires an exclusive sense of ‘*not*’ such that the understanding of the meaning of ‘not’ and the LNC fails to apply to reality. However, this exclusive sense is the sense which Huemer is using for the LNC. In other words, if the LNC does *not* apply to reality, this would require that the LNC applies to reality. This indicates that the LNC cannot in fact fail to apply to reality, i.e., the LNC (as defined by Huemer) cannot in fact be violated. The LNC holds in terms of facts about meaning which are recognized when we understand the meanings correctly.

The skeptic might object that what seems correct to the understanding may be false and ask how do we know whether one has correctly grasped the meaning of ‘not’ in order to know that one knows that the LNC is true. Bergmann (2021, p. 86) notes that

You can have an intellectual seeming or *a priori* intuition that *p* is of necessity true even when *p* isn’t of necessity true and is, instead, false. For example, to many people (perhaps to most humans who consider and understand it) it seems that the naïve comprehension axiom—which says that for every predicate, there exists the set of things that satisfy that predicate (even if it’s the null set)—is true of necessity. Bertrand Russell showed that this supposed axiom was false by drawing our attention to the predicate ‘is non-self-membered,’ which applies to sets that don’t have themselves as members (e.g., the set of pigs is non-self-membered because that set is not itself a pig, so it is not a member of the set of pigs).

Bergmann (p. 87) also claims that ‘an evil demon can be the cause of misleading intellectual seemings. Even instances of something seeming clearly and strongly to be obviously true of necessity can be demon-caused illusions.’ The key premise of Bergmann’s (p. 91) underdetermination argument against *a priori* intuition states that ‘we cannot see independently (of justifiedly believing that the contents of our *a priori* beliefs are necessarily true) that the existence or occurrence of the intellectual-seemings evidence on which our *a priori* beliefs are noninferentially based entails the truth of our *a priori* beliefs.’ In support of this claim, Bergmann asks us to

consider again our evidence for our *a priori* beliefs. The most compelling evidence we have is the strong and clear intellectual seemings that the believed propositions in question are true, of necessity. But given that

such evidence could easily be caused by a sufficiently powerful evil demon bent on deceiving us, what we have to admit is that we could have evidence that is just as compelling, clear, and strong that is consistent with the falsity of an *a priori* belief based on it.

(p. 92)

It is true that our intellectual seeming can be wrong sometimes, as illustrated by Bergmann's example of Russell's paradox. However, there are also cases where it cannot be wrong. For example, when we correctly understand the meaning of 'not' (as explained above, citing Huemer). Even if the skeptic does not understand 'not' the way I understand it, this does not deny the fact that I know I understand it correctly. What I know about is not denied by the fact that others may not agree with my understanding. For example, I know (based on my grasp of the meaning of the concept) that a square is a shape that has four sides. If others do not know this, I should regard them as ignorant rather than doubt the fact that I know that a square has four sides. I do not have to persuade everyone (including blockheads) to assent and agree with me before I know that I have understood something correctly. Likewise, for the definition of 'not.' As explained above citing Huemer, the LNC is part of the meaning of 'not.' Now, if I do *not* have the relevant knowledge that I have correctly grasped the meaning of 'not,' this would require an exclusive sense of '*not*' that what I regard as knowledge of 'not' does *not* correspond with reality. However, this exclusive sense of 'not' is the sense Huemer uses for the LNC. This implies that I do have the relevant knowledge that I have correctly grasped the meaning of 'not,' which enables me to know that the LNC is well-grounded in the meaning of 'not' and thus is necessarily true. Hence, radical skepticism is refuted in a non-question-begging way that is grounded in the meaning of the terms. Thus, the LNC is true; i.e., it corresponds with reality. The LNC implies that the conclusion of a deductively valid argument from true premises is true.

It might be objected that my view assumes that we understand these terms in a factive sense, which presupposes that we can grasp reality as it is and begs the question against the skeptic.

Now, there is no question begging against the non-factive sense because, as explained in previous paragraphs, the possibility of falsity (non-factive) itself implies that we do understand these terms in a factive sense, which implies that we can indeed grasp reality as something to which the LNC necessarily applies. Consider the following analogy: if a person is able to walk well on her legs, this implies that her legs are reliable for the purpose of walking. Likewise, our ability to understand the meanings of 'not,' 'the laws of logic' and that the laws of logic correspond with reality implies that our faculty of understanding is a reliable faculty for the purpose of understanding the meaning of these terms and that these laws correspond with reality. In this way, the reliability of the faculty of understanding does not require justification based on assuming the reliability of the faculty of understanding, which would be circular. Rather, it is justified by instances of acts of understanding, such as understanding the

words of this sentence, understanding the laws of logic, etc. It is also justified by the fact that skepticism concerning the correctness of these instances of understanding would itself require that the understanding of the meaning of the relevant terms (e.g., 'not') is correct in a factive sense, as explained above (and in the following paragraphs).

Ontologically, it is true that the sufficient reliability of my reason is necessary for me to understand this. However, epistemologically, the presupposition of the sufficient reliability of my reason is not necessary for me to understand this. For the presupposition of the sufficient reliability of my reason is not the premise from which I infer (for example) that shapeless squares cannot exist; this would be epistemically circular. Rather, the premise is my understanding of the meanings of the terms 'shapeless,' 'square,' 'not,' 'cannot,' and 'exist.' In other words, I do not have to presuppose the reliability or proper function of reason in order to know (for example) that the laws of logic are necessarily true by definition. Rather, I understand that the laws of logic are necessarily true by definition and that is the evidence that my reason is sufficiently reliable or functioning properly to the extent that is at least sufficient for me to know that. Thus, there is no epistemic circularity.

Other examples of truths which we can know are necessarily true by definition include mathematical truths which are also implied by the meanings of the terms, such as $0+0\dots=0$ and the proven equations of Bayesian probability, which can be used to provide justification for Ockham's razor.¹⁶

It might be objected that our beliefs in mathematical truths are defeasible because our intellectual seemings are defeasible. An evil demon could deceive me every time I set out to reason (Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, p. 14). That is, the demon might cause me to suffer from some seeming defects such that it seems to me that, by adding 0 and 0, I obtain 1, when the number should be 0.

In reply, we do understand that in such cases where the objector postulates that the real answer of $0 + 0$ is 1, he/she is no longer using the same definition of '0' or '1,' i.e., he/she is talking about something else rather than $0 + 0 = 0$ per se, the justification of which remains indefeasible. That is, in such cases where we do understand what is stated in the preceding sentence, we cannot be wrong about that, and this shows that we are not, in fact, suffering from 'seeming defect.'

6.5 Concerning the Causal Principle and Hume's Fork

I shall explain the Modus Tollens Argument for the Causal Principle in this section and use it to address the challenge of epistemic circularity concerning other beliefs, such as the belief about the external world, in the subsequent sections.

16 Jansson and Tallant (2017, 794) show that, in order to account equally well for the data, the less parsimonious hypothesis will turn out to have a lower prior probability (as well as lower posterior probability) than the parsimonious hypothesis (given the shared background knowledge and theories).

Skeptics influenced by Hume have objected to the Causal Principle (premise 1) by doubting causation; David Hume regarded our knowledge of the causal relation as merely a customary association of that which happens with that which precedes (*An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Sections 4–8). He also claims that

As all distinct ideas are separable from each other, and as the ideas of cause and effect are evidently distinct, ‘twill be easy for us to conceive any object to be non-existent this moment, and existent the next, without conjoining to it the distinct idea of a cause or productive principle. The separation, therefore, of the idea of a cause from that of a beginning of existence is plainly possible for the imagination, and consequently the actual separation of these objects is so far possible that it implies no contradiction or absurdity.
(Hume 1888, p. 79)

Kant thought that, while the principle of causality is valid for objects as phenomena, it may not be valid for objects as things in themselves (the noumenal world); thus, to extend the idea of causality beyond the boundaries of the sensory world is illegitimate.¹⁷

The Causal Principle has also been rejected in recent years by some philosophers due to considerations of quantum-mechanical indeterminacy (Grünbaum 2009, p. 15). However, others have responded that quantum particles emerge from the quantum vacuum, which is not absolute nothingness. Rather, quantum particles are manifestations of the quantum field; i.e., a pre-existing necessary condition which can be acted on by the relevant laws of nature (Bussey 2013, p. 33). As for radioactive disintegration of atomic nuclei, this exhibits statistical regularities that strongly indicate the existence of more fundamental ordered causes (Stoeger 2001). Moreover, many different interpretations of quantum physics exist, and some of them, such as de Broglie-Bohm’s pilot-wave model, are perfectly deterministic (Goldstein 2024). The Heisenberg uncertainty principle does not imply it is possible that energy comes from absolutely nothing; it just means that the pre-existing energy (i.e., the vacuum energy which is already present) can (unpredictably) have a very high value in a very short period of time. Our inability to predict the appearance of the quantum particles in the quantum vacuum may be due to our epistemological limitations. Physicist John Wheeler notes that our current understanding of quantum mechanics is provisional: some deeper theory, waiting to be discovered, would explain in a clear and rational way all the oddities of the quantum world and would, in turn explain the apparent fuzziness

¹⁷ Kant writes ‘suppose now, on the other hand, that we have undertaken this criticism, and have learnt that an object may be taken in two senses, first, as a phenomenon, secondly, as a thing in itself; and that, according to the deduction of the conceptions of the understanding, the principle of causality has reference only to things in the first sense’ (*Critique of Pure Reason*, Preface to the Second Edition, 1787). By saying ‘the principle of causality has reference only to things in the first sense i.e., as a phenomenon,’ Kant rejects the validity of the Causal Principle for ‘thing in itself.’

in the quantum-classical boundary (Ford 2011, p. 263). While some physicists such as Krauss (2012) has argued that for a universe from nothing, their argument is based on a philosophically inadequate understanding of ‘nothing’ (what they mean by ‘nothing’ is not the absence of anything but rather something that can be described by laws of physics) and fails to consider the deductive and inductive arguments against ‘uncaused beginning’ (Loke 2017b, 2022a).

In summary, no compelling scientific evidence has been offered against the Causal Principle.

On the other hand, the following Modus Tollens Argument (i.e., a deductive proof rather than an inductive generalization) has been offered for the Causal Principle, which addresses the doubts of Hume and Kant:

1. If x begins uncaused, then some other particular things/events $y, z \dots$ would also begin uncaused ($y, z \dots$ refer to things/events the beginning of existence of which is phenomenologically compatible with the present circumstance around me).
2. It is not the case that $y, z \dots$ begin uncaused.
3. Therefore, it is not the case that x begins uncaused.¹⁸

Very briefly, the justification for premise 1 is as follows. Premise 1 is true because (1.1) if something x (which can refer to an observable or unobservable entity) begins uncaused at any time (whether past or future), then ‘begins un-caused’ means that there would be no cause (no necessary condition) which makes it the case that only x , rather than (say) y (which can refer to something observable around me), begins uncaused. Moreover, (1.2) any properties of x or the properties of y which make x and y different from each other in the world of concrete objects (i.e., objects with causal properties) would be had by x and y only when x and y had already begun to exist in the concrete world. As any difference between x and y would have to be a difference in their properties (that is, their characteristics or attributes), and these properties would not be had by x and y if they do not already (had begun to) exist given that something must exist in order to possess a property. (Note that a property can also be a categorical difference between the states of x and y .) (1.1) and (1.2) imply that there will be no difference between x and y where beginning uncaused in the concrete world is concerned, given that the circumstances in the concrete world are compatible with their beginning of existence. This means that if x begins uncaused, y will also begin uncaused given that (1.3) my surrounding circumstances are indeed compatible with the beginning of y . For example, y can refer to an increase in the strength of an electric field. I know that the circumstances around me are compatible with the beginning of such things. For example, if I press a switch to switch on the TV, its electric field will increase in strength. And I know that such events are caused (e.g., by pressing the switch, which

18 Note that there is no fallacy of composition because the argument does not reason from the parts to the whole; rather, the argument is based on deducing the consequence of the meaning of the terms ‘begin uncaused’ and falsifying the consequence (modus tollens) using our undeniable experiences.

brings about the causally necessary conditions for the event). However, (1.1.), (1.2.), and (1.3) imply that if x begins uncaused, then such things would also begin uncaused. That is, if something begins uncaused, I would observe other things such as the strength of electrical fields increasing to begin to exist around me without causally necessary conditions, and the so-called laws of nature would not hold. The ‘other things’ would include events in my phenomenological world which involve my undeniable seemings. My seemings would have been very different and utterly chaotic: there would be different seemings (e.g., ‘I seem to experience an electric shock’) beginning uncaused uncontrollably right now (premise 1). Which is not the case (premise 2). Given that premises 1 and 2 are true, it follows that it is not the case that something begins uncaused, because it entails a contradiction with my seemings which are undeniably true.

To explain a simplified version of the above argument using an illustration: suppose you ask why it is that I am a human being rather than a lion. Obviously, the circumstances in our world are compatible with lions existing, so why am I not a lion? The answer is quite simple. My parents are human beings. If my parents were lions, I would not be a human being. What this illustrates is that what begins to exist is an effect that is dependent on its cause. My beginning of existence is determined by the properties of my father’s sperm and my mother’s egg. If the causes were different (e.g., if my parents were not humans), I would have been different.

However, if something begins uncaused, this means that there would be no cause that determines the effect. For example, suppose a human being begins uncaused (such as in the hypothetical scenario of a human and the space he occupies popping into existence out of nothing. Or a stone changing *uncaused* into a human [who then occupies the same space occupied by the stone previously]. The term ‘uncaused’ implies that this event which involves the beginning of existence of a human being is not determined by the properties of the stone, nor by any human sperm or egg or whatever). If such an event happens, this implies that there is no cause that makes it the case that only a human being begins to exist uncaused rather than (say) a lion. Moreover, the properties of a human being and the properties of a lion which differentiate between them in the concrete world¹⁹ would only be had by them when they had already begun to exist. Whatever difference between that human being and that lion would only exist when they have already begun to exist. What this means is that there would be no difference between them before they began to exist such that

19 It might be objected that there are abstract entities which explain why one begins uncaused instead of the other. The problem with this objection is that abstract entities (e.g., mathematical facts) do not by themselves explain what begins to exist. For example, $2 + 2 = 4$ by itself does not explain why there are four apples in the basket; rather, it is a concrete entity (e.g., a human person) adding two apples to two apples in the basket which explains why four apples exist in the basket. Thus, if someone claims that w explains the beginning of x , a proponent of the Cosmological Argument can reply that, for the purposes of the Cosmological Argument, w can be regarded as a causal explanation of x (Loke 2023), in which case x would not be uncaused and w would not be regarded as an abstract entity following the standard definition (adopted by the Cosmological Argument) that the difference between an abstract entity and a concrete entity is that an abstract entity is defined as something that cannot be a causal explanation for anything.

only a human, rather than a lion, began to exist uncaused. Since there would be no such difference, they would be the same where beginning to exist uncaused is concerned. This implies that, if one thing begins uncaused, the other thing(s) would also begin uncaused. I would observe lions beginning uncaused around me (e.g., a stone in front of me changing uncaused into a lion). I would also observe many other kinds of things (tigers, elephants, events such as increase in strength of electric fields, etc.) beginning uncaused around me (premise 1). My world would have been very different. But that is obviously not the case: I do not see lions, tigers, etc. beginning uncaused around me (premise 2). Therefore, it is not the case that something began uncaused.

Reichenbach (2024) mentions critical questions concerning the grounds on which premise 2 is true. He states that ‘there is a significant difference between quantum events and nonquantum events’ and raises concerns about ‘the epistemic and ontological status of quantum indeterminacy, the nature of the Big Bang as a quantum phenomenon, the nature and role of indeterminate causation, and whether realist theories about quantum phenomena have serious traction.’

In reply, my Modus Tollens Argument shows that if any event (regardless of whether it is a quantum event or a non-quantum event) began uncaused, then some other particular things/events would begin uncaused around me. The ‘some events’ would be (for example) an increase in strength of electric fields around me, which (given reasons 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3 above) would begin uncaused in a *detectable* way if some other undetectable events elsewhere begin uncaused. But the consequent is not the case. The explanations given above address the critical questions concerning the grounds on which premise 2 is true.

Some have objected that if the universe begins uncaused, then, once it existed, it could have prevented other things from beginning uncaused (e.g., Linford and Malpass forthcoming).

This objection misunderstands what it means to prevent something from happening. Obviously, something *y* cannot be prevented by something else (*x*) acting on the existence of *y* itself, since if *y* has already existed, then it has not in fact been prevented by *x*. Therefore, in order for *x* to prevent *y* from happening, *x* must act on something else other than *y* before *y* happens. That is, *x* must either (1) act on the conditions which are (causally) necessary for the beginning of *y* or (2) act on the circumstances to make them incompatible with *y*. For example, in order to prevent a moving battery-operated toy car from entering a room, I would have to either (1) act on the causally necessary conditions (such as by switching off the batteries, by changing the direction of movement of the car, etc.) or (2) act on the circumstance to make it incompatible with the event occurring, such as by filling the room with hard objects such that there is no space for the car to enter into. However, if the universe began uncaused (i.e., if the Causal Principle does not apply to it), what this implies is:

1. There is no causally necessary condition which makes it the case that only the universe rather than other things begins to exist.
2. Additionally, any difference between the universe (*x*) and other things (e.g., *y*) would be had by them in the concrete world only when they had already

- begun to exist. That is, before x begins to exist and before y begins to exist, there cannot be any unique characteristics of x and the unique characteristics of y which differentiate between them in the concrete world, such that 'the universe is not caused to begin to exist' but 'y-type thing is caused to begin to exist.' Since there is no differentiation, they will be the same (i.e., there would be no difference between them) where the requirement for the causally necessary condition is concerned. In other words, the beginning of y will not require a causally necessary condition that can be acted on by x .
3. The circumstances around me have been shown to be such that they are compatible with the beginning of existence of many things/seemings which I have had (let this = y).

These three points jointly imply that the beginning of y (uncaused) could not have been prevented if the universe began uncaused.²⁰

Against Craig, Oppy had suggested that the reason why it is impossible for a raging tiger to 'suddenly come into existence uncaused out of nothing' in the room in which you are reading this is that there is no space in that room for a tiger to come to occupy uncaused (Oppy 2015, p. 4). In reply, granting that the apparently unoccupied space around me is occupied by fields, the three points mentioned above would still imply that the field would not have prevented the increase in strength of the field from happening uncaused (since this would not require more space or the displacement of objects occupying the space). Moreover, points 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3 explained above would also imply that (say) the table occupying the space in front of me would not have prevented it from changing uncaused into something else occupying the same space (since this would not require more space or the displacement of objects occupying the space). (For detailed replies to various objections [e.g., Oppy 2010, 2015], see Loke 2017b, chapter 5; Loke 2022a, chapter 3; Loke forthcoming-a).

As can be seen from the above explanation of the premises, premise 1 is based on the meaning of the terms (i.e., what it means for something to begin uncaused) and is known *a priori*, while premise 2 is based on my seemings (it is undeniably true that these seemings are not utterly chaotic) and is known *a posteriori*. Both premises are based on foundational basic beliefs that do not require further inferential justification (premise 1 follows from the meaning of the terms, and premise 2 is based on undeniable seemings). My Modus Tollens Argument is not affected by the limitation of my present scientific knowledge, because I can know that the premises of the argument are true even though my scientific knowledge is limited. The fact that I do not know everything does not deny the fact that I do know some things. For example, I do not need unlimited scientific knowledge in order to know that the LNC cannot be violated (e.g., there cannot be a shapeless square). The LNC follows from the meaning of the

20 For replies to other objections to the modus tollens argument, see Loke (2022a, chapter 3); Loke (2023); https://www.academia.edu/115795811/90_Errors_in_Richard_Carriers_objections_concerning_the_Kalam_Cosmological_Argument.

term ‘not’ (as explained previously). Likewise, premise 1 of my Modus Tollens Argument follows from the meaning of the terms ‘begins to exist’ and ‘uncaused,’ as explained above, and it shows that a contradiction with my undeniable seeming would be entailed if something begins uncaused. Thus, it follows that the Causal Principle is true.

In response to the views of Hume and Kant, the Modus Tollens Argument explained above shows that the Causal Principle is not a customary association of that which happens with that which precedes, nor is it merely valid for objects as phenomena. Rather, the Modus Tollens Argument shows that the Causal Principle is valid for everything (including things-in-themselves that are beyond the boundaries of the sensory world), for if it is not, it will entail a contradiction with my undeniable seemings.

Hume’s skepticism concerning causation is related to a dichotomy commonly known as ‘Hume’s Fork.’ It has been famously argued by Hume in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (4.1–2) that all the objects of human reason or enquiry may be divided into relations of ideas and matters of fact. Hume claims that

Matter[s] of fact and existence ... are evidently incapable of demonstration. Whatever is may not be.... The non-existence of any being, without exception, is as clear and distinct an idea as its existence. The proposition, which affirms it not to be, however false, is no less conceivable and intelligible, than that which affirms it to be ... that Caesar, or the angel Gabriel, or any being never existed, may be a false proposition, but still is perfectly conceivable, and implies no contradiction

(Hume, *Enquiry*, 12.28).

Millican (2019, p. 90) comments that

This seems extremely plausible on general commonsense grounds. A deductively valid argument can be used to reveal logical consequences that are implicit in its premises, but it cannot be ampliative, demonstrating new substantial conclusions that are not thus implicit. So if P is some proposition about the world whose denial is not itself somehow absurd or self-contradictory, then it looks as though we cannot possibly prove P to be true unless we include within the argument some premise that supplies relevant information about the world, from which P can then be deduced.²¹

21 Millican goes on to comment that, historically, ‘This line of thought famously woke Immanuel Kant from his dogmatic slumbers ... he was prompted to develop a sophisticated theory to circumvent Hume’s objection and justify the claim that some synthetic propositions (such as universal causation and the conservation of momentum) could be thus known. Kant’s position is ingenious but no longer convincing.’

Based on Hume's Fork, Millican thinks that 'a demonstration (i.e., valid deduction) from *a priori* premises is confined to abstract and immutable relations between our ideas, and could never prove the existence of a substantial being' (p. 90). However, it would be a mistake to infer from this that such demonstrations tell us nothing about the world.²² On the contrary, *a priori* reasoning can tell us universal principles about the world such as 'it is impossible that shapeless squares exist anywhere in the world.' Likewise, *a priori* premises such as the justification for my Modus Tollens Argument for the Causal Principle (which is based on the analysis of the concept of 'beginning uncaused') does tell us something about the world, namely, that, if something begins uncaused, it will entail a contradiction with my undeniable seemings.

Of course, this *a priori* reasoning does not tell us whether any substantial being exists. Nevertheless, it does tell us the universal principle that, if any substantial being begins uncaused, my phenomenology and seemings would have been very different. I can then use the phenomenology of my undeniable seeming to deny this consequent (premise 2)²³ and thereby know the universal principle that it is not the case that something begins uncaused. In this way, 'relation of idea' taken together with 'matter of fact' such as my undeniable seeming can be used to prove the universal principle that whatever begins to exist has a cause. (Hume fails to consider the possibility that the justification for the Causal Principle can involve 'relation of idea' taken together with 'matter of fact' in this way.)

Other philosophers have pointed out that Hume's Fork is self-refuting, 'since it is not itself either a conceptual truth (a matter of the "relations of ideas") or empirically testable (a "matter of fact")' (Feser 2017, p. 283).

Even if it is true (as Hume says) that 'whatever is may not be,' this does not imply that we cannot demonstrate that something is the case (even if it is not necessarily the case). Hume seems to have conflated necessity with certainty by thinking that the absence of necessity implies that one cannot have a certain demonstration. This is false, as illustrated by the fact that Hume's claim that the proposition that 'any being never existed ... is perfectly conceivable, and implies no contradiction' fails to note that a person (e.g., myself) can be certain that I am thinking about this proposition right now. This implies that I (the thinking thing) exist and that I can be certain about this fact about the world, even if my existence is not necessary (e.g., I can conceive of a possible world in which I do not exist). Starting from such facts or relevant information about the world (to use Millican's phrase) such as the existence of the undeniable

22 Based on this mistaken inference and the view that experience is limited and not demonstrably universal (this is related to the problem of induction), Humeans would draw the inference that one cannot derive the Causal Principle which is universal.

23 To deny the consequent does not require demonstrating the universality of the experience of caused beginning, but only requires my immediate undeniable experience that my phenomenological world is not at present utterly chaotic, which would not have been the case if something ever begins uncaused.

phenomenology of changes (such phenomenology [e.g., it seems that changes exist] is not affected by the fallibility of our senses, see Section 6.6), one can deduce that a Divine First Cause exists via the Cosmological Argument (Loke 2022a; see Section 6.6). As noted in Section 6.4, as long as the deduction is valid and the premise is true, the conclusion is true.

Hume's objection that the causal connection cannot involve relations of ideas is related to his argument that there is no contradiction in conceiving of uncaused beginnings. However, Hume's objection that we can conceive an uncaused beginning (at most) only indicates that an uncaused beginning is logically possible and that *a priori* reasoning cannot show us any necessary 'inseparable and inviolable connection' between cause and effect. It does not imply that an uncaused beginning does happen in the actual world. On the other hand, my Modus Tollens Argument for the Causal Principle is not claiming that an uncaused beginning is logically impossible, but rather that an uncaused beginning does not happen in the actual world (for otherwise my phenomenological world would be utterly chaotic) (see Loke 2022a, pp. 74–75). Thus, Hume's objection does not rebut my argument but is consistent with it. Moreover, Hume fails to consider the fact that, while there is no contradiction in conceiving of uncaused beginnings, there is nevertheless a contradiction in conceiving something beginning uncaused while other things around me do not begin uncaused (the contradiction is demonstrated by premise 1 of my argument). One should distinguish between

- (1) the Causal Principle is logically necessary; and
- (2) it is logically necessary that if something begins uncaused, then I would observe other things begin uncaused around me if the circumstance around me is compatible with the existence of those things.

My Modus Tollens Argument denies (1) (i.e., it agrees that a totally chaotic world is logically possible), but it affirms (2) on the basis of the three reasons for premise 1 explained above.

It should also be noted that, in order to prove that it is always the case that 'everything that begins to exist had a cause' (Causal Principle), I only have to prove that the Causal Principle is always true in the actual world (since 'always the case' refers to what actually happens). I do not have to prove that the Causal Principle is always true in all possible worlds (which is what 'logically necessarily the case' means). One should distinguish between 'logically necessarily the case' and 'always the case.' My Modus Tollens Argument proves that the Causal Principle is always true in the actual world.

Hume claims that causal inferences have 'no just foundation' (*A Treatise of Human Nature* 1.3.6.10). Hume's argument is that, in order to infer that P is the cause of R, we have to depend on observing a constant conjunction of P followed by R based on reports of direct experience, but this suffers from Hume's problem of induction which prevents one from rationally justifying any causal reasoning and making conclusions concerning claims about states of affairs not directly observed (Lorkowski 2024).

Hume's argument assumes that induction is the only way to infer a cause, but this assumption is false. Given my deductive Modus Tollens Argument, the beginning of R would have a cause, regardless of whether the cause is P or some other entity (say, Q). And given my deductive argument from the viciousness of causal dependence regress (see below), there must be a First Cause, and one can deduce that this First Cause has the properties of being a Creator God. The entire argument is deductive, and it is not susceptible to Hume's problem of induction (I reply to this problem in Section 6.6).

6.6 Concerning sensory experience, belief about the external world, the impossibility of an infinite causal regress, and the existence of a Divine First Cause

Evans (2010, pp. 179–180) notes that internalists want to avoid circularity for perceptual beliefs by appealing to rational reflection as its justification, but he asks how do we know that reason itself is a reliable faculty for this purpose? Many philosophers have claimed that there is simply no good inference from phenomenal appearances to beliefs about the physical world. One may reply that 'The way you know that your faculties are functioning properly is the same way you know anything else—by investigating the matter with properly functioning faculties. For example, if you want to know whether your visual perception is functioning properly, there are familiar ways of finding out' (Greco 2017). Nevertheless, it has been objected that we can check on the reliability of sensory perception only by using sensory perception, which is circular ('epistemic circularity') (see Alston 1993). Against my examples of arguments based on sensory experiences mentioned in Chapter 1, Frame might object that it is a non-circular argument *given* sensory perception, but that only pushes the issue back a step: is there a non-circular argument for the reliability of sensory perception? Radical skepticism endorses the extreme claim that, in the absence of a non-circular argument, it is irrational to embrace large swaths of our ordinary beliefs, such as those produced by perception or memory (Bergmann 2021). Radical skeptics claim that our sensory experience and memory seemings underdetermine the truth of our beliefs based on them. For example,

The sensory experience we think of as evidence for our perceptual beliefs could be the result of a (rather extraordinary) dream; or it could be caused by a powerful evil demon who can induce such sensory experience in us in the absence of a physical world; or it could be artificially produced by a computer as in movies like *The Matrix*. The point is the same whether we consider the Dream Hypothesis, the Evil Demon Hypothesis, or the Computer Hypothesis: there is a gap between our evidence for our perceptual beliefs and their truth; our evidence, therefore, underdetermines the truth of what we might call 'the Standard Hypothesis,' according to which there is a world of physical objects that stimulate our sense

organs and thereby cause our sensory experience, which, in turn, produces in us mostly accurate beliefs about those physical objects.

(Bergmann 2021, pp. 27–28)

Three points may be made in response.

First, sensory perception is a faculty which even skeptics of Christianity would need to assume to be reliable in order to doubt (for example) what their eyes read from the Bible. Thus, the assumption that sensory perception is justified does not beg the question against the epistemology of these skeptics, unlike Frame's type of circular argument which begs the question against these skeptics by claiming that even if Scripture fails to agree with all extra-biblical data, the Scripture must still be considered as God's word (Frame 1994, p. 21).

Second, concerning the justification of sensory perception (the inference from the contents of our subjective mental states to facts about the external world), it is true that philosophers are still working on these issues. Nevertheless, our current inability to fully understand these issues does not imply that we have to seriously doubt our beliefs about the external world, or to embrace those types of question-begging arguments (such as Barth's and Frame's) which are clearly fallacious. Even if philosophers fail to provide a justification of sensory perception or exclude (say) a brain in a vat scenario (more of this below), it does not follow that all beliefs (e.g., that horses exist, that unicorns exist) are on equally unreliable footing. Abraham (2006, pp. 28–29) observes that, 'like historians and natural scientists, theologians should not worry too much if they do not have a full-blown epistemology ... historians and scientists do not feel under an obligation to resolve, say, disputes between foundationalism and anti-foundationalism.' Wise theologians, like scientists and historians, will cheerfully accept the following platitudes—accept the general reliability of our senses (pp. 35–36). On the other hand, if one wants to use radical skepticism to (say) avoid the conclusion of the arguments from natural theology, one can also use it to avoid almost all other significant conclusions. For example, if the skeptic was (apparently) knocked down by a driver and accused the driver of dangerous driving, the driver could appeal to the possibility of an evil demon causing the (false) sensations/memories of his accuser. Against an overtly skeptical approach with its motivation to avoid false beliefs, William James (1896) famously argued that the goal of epistemology is not only to avoid false beliefs but also not to fail to accept true beliefs. One should avoid gullibility on the one hand but also ignorance on the other. In view of this, it is wise to adopt the critical trust approach: unless we have good reasons to doubt our experiences, we should accept our experiences; this should be the default position (Kwan 2011). Others have defended phenomenal conservatism,²⁴ which affirms that our seemings provide some degree of justification to the beliefs based on them (Huemer 2014). Another approach is the externalist

24 *Phenomenal Conservatism* and the critical trust approach are epistemologically internalist, whereas the approach by Thomas Reid (see below) is externalist.

common-sense non-inferential response defended by Thomas Reid and developed by a number of contemporary philosophers such as Michael Bergmann (2021; Bergmann acknowledges that there is epistemic circularity but argues that certain types of epistemic circularity are acceptable).

One may settle for a more modest foundation of basic beliefs that provide a *reason* for their acceptance but without a guarantee of their truth (Lehrer 1990, p. 40). Developing the reasoning of Susan Haack's foundherentism, Kwan notes that a foundational belief ('presumptive datum') can be epistemically enhanced by their coherence with other foundational belief, and when its truth is coherent with or suggested by the simplest theory that can explain many other datum (Kwan 2011, p. 80).

Third, in any case, a number of promising and plausible non-circular arguments have been offered by other philosophers in response to radical skeptics. In what follows, I shall briefly summarize some of these proposals (it is beyond the scope of this book to explain and defend these proposals in detail; readers can refer to the sources cited below [e.g., Bonjour 2010; McGrew and McGrew 2006] for detailed explanation and defense). I shall develop these proposals to formulate various foundationalist arguments that are based on the laws of logic, the content of our perceptual and memory seemings, and the arguments of natural theology. I shall argue that the conclusion that a Creator God exists cannot in fact be avoided by the radical skeptic's hypothesis. This conclusion is supported by the observation that these possible hypotheses typically require the postulation of a god-like entity. By god-like entity, I mean an entity which seems to have unlimited powers to cause everything that is experienced, such as a Cartesian demon.

I shall begin by considering the proposal by philosopher Laurence Bonjour (2010; see also McGrew and McGrew 2006; Fumerton 2022).

Concerning sensory experience and belief about the external world, Bonjour notes that, while Descartes' foundationalism has been widely rejected, Descartes correctly observes that, even if skeptics make us doubt the external world, 'still it is at least quite certain that it seems to me that I see light, that I hear noise and that I feel heat' (Descartes, *Meditations* 1996: 67). For example, I know it seems to me that I am reading this book right now. Even if I am not sure whether I am having a hallucination of this book, I can nevertheless know for sure that *it seems to me* that it exists. I can know for sure that my experience of this book (the 'seeming' of this book) exists, even if my experience is a hallucination.

Building on this and responding to objections, Bonjour (2010, pp. 20–21) notes that our various seemings are often independent of our will and are, in general, related to each other in such a way as to fit together in a seemingly cohesive manner. For example, my visual seeming that this table is square coheres with my touch seeming that it feels like a square and my auditory seeming that people are telling me that this is a square. Bonjour argues that this differs significantly from the fragmentary experiences characteristic of intramental events such as dreams and is best explained by the inference from the

contents of our subjective mental states to facts about the external world. (This does not deny that we can sometimes be mistaken about these facts; for example, the seeming that the spoon appears to be bent inside a cup of water is an illusion and does not correspond to the actual shape of the spoon. Nevertheless, even in this case it corresponds with facts concerning the bending of light by the water.) I shall develop Bonjour's reasoning concerning my seemings below, using the laws of logic, mathematics, and Causal Principle which I have established in the previous sections.

To begin, it has been argued previously that laws of logic are necessarily true, and thus they must be true not only for the phenomena world but also the noumena world, and they must be true not only for intramental but also extramental entities. Following the laws of logic, the following is a logically exhaustive list of possibilities concerning my seemings:

1. My various seemings either
 - 1.1 begin uncaused, or
 - 1.2 begin caused; in which case they are either
 - 1.2.1 wholly caused intramentally (i.e., only caused by entities within my mind), or
 - 1.2.2 involved extramental entities.

Consider now the objection that is often posed to Descartes: how does one reason from 'it seems to me that there is a tree' to 'there is a tree'? Marshall (2000, p. 86) claims that the evidence for the belief that 'There is a tree' is neither a tree nor other beliefs, but the content of my sensations, but how can we be sure the evidence so conceived is reliable? 'We are apparently unable to take up a position independent of our beliefs and our sense experience so as to compare them with the objects and thereby tell which beliefs are true and which experiences reliable' (2000).

I shall begin addressing this issue by arguing that the beginning of various sensory experiences in my consciousness needs to be explained: what caused them? As explained in Section 6.5, there is a *Modus Tollens* Argument which demonstrates that whatever begins to exist depends on a cause(s), for if it isn't (i.e., if something begins uncaused), it would entail a contradiction with my undeniable seemings. Indeed, even radical skeptics seem to recognize the untenability of 1.1, for (in addition to not rebutting the above arguments) they do not typically claim that it might be the case that these experiences begin uncaused; rather, they typically claim that the experiences could have been caused (for example) by a rather extraordinary dream; a powerful evil demon who can induce such sensory experience in us in the absence of a physical world or a supercomputer as in movies like *The Matrix* (Bergmann 2021, p. 27).

Against 1.2.1 (they are wholly caused intramentally, i.e., only caused by entities within my mind) is the fact (pointed out by Bonjour) that our various sensory experiences are often independent of our (intramental) will and differ significantly from the fragmentary experiences characteristic of dreams. Now

I am able to distinguish between (1) those experiences which I have when I seem to close my eyes and doze off—such experiences seem to be fragmentary in character—and (2) those experiences which I have when I seem to open my eyes and which are not so fragmentary. I refer to (1) as dreams and (2) as waking experience. The fragmentary character of dreams is evidence that my mind by itself does not have the capacity to cause my various sensory experiences to be related to one another in such a way as to fit together in a seemingly cohesive manner ('unified seemings') consistently. The fragmentary character of dreams indicates that, even though I do have unified seemings in my dreams occasionally, the unity of my seemings in the vast majority of my experiences in my everyday life is far less plausibly explained by a continuous intramental state than by real, extramental entities. (Concerning the possibility that this extramental entity might be an Evil Demon, and for further response to 1.2.1, see below.) Additionally, the counterintuitive nature of quantum physics indicates that the mathematical equations that are used to describe it are not merely the creation of our own minds (Polkinghorne 2011, pp. 72–73). (I shall argue below that, in any case, even if the seemings are wholly caused intramentally, the conclusion that a Divine First Cause exists cannot be avoided by 1.2.1.)

Concerning 1.2.2, some people worry about whether, unknown to us, we could be brains in vats controlled by a supercomputer simulation similar to what happened in the movie *Matrix*, in which case our sensations of our 'hands' are caused by the inputs into our brains determined by the computer simulation.

Now, on the one hand, there is no independent evidence for thinking that we are brains in a vat, and to postulate such a supercomputer seems ad hoc and unnecessarily complicated.

On the other hand, philosopher David Chalmers has suggested an interesting proposal by arguing that 'even if I am in a matrix, my world is perfectly real' and that we could still know that we really have 'hands,' only that our understanding of the underlying metaphysics needs to be adjusted. For example, instead of understanding the hand as being fundamentally constituted by unobservable quantum entities, we understand the 'hand' as fundamentally constituted by computer inputs (Chalmers 2005).

Chalmer's response addresses Bergmann's (2021, pp. 27–28) worry that

Our evidence, consisting mainly of sensory experience, underdetermines the truth of the perceptual beliefs based on that evidence. The possibility of this sort of error has been highlighted in many different ways: the sensory experience we think of as evidence for our perceptual beliefs ... could be artificially produced by a computer as in movies like *The Matrix* ... there is a gap between our evidence for our perceptual beliefs and their truth; our evidence, therefore, underdetermines the truth of what we might call 'the Standard Hypothesis,' according to which there is a world of physical objects that stimulate our sense organs and thereby cause our sensory experience, which, in turn, produces in us mostly accurate beliefs about those physical objects.

Bergmann's (2021, pp. 27–28) worry that our sensory experience underdetermines the truth of the perceptual beliefs is due to his assumption that perceptual beliefs (e.g., my belief that I have a pair of hands) resulting from experiences caused by (say) a matrix are regarded as erroneous. Against this, Chalmers argues that these beliefs should not be regarded as erroneous, but only that our understanding of the underlying metaphysics needs to be adjusted. Given this, there is no gap between our evidence for our perceptual beliefs and their truth. The only gap is that our evidence underdetermines our understanding of the underlying metaphysics in the sense that it does not distinguish between the hypothesis that the hand is fundamentally constituted by unobservable quantum entities and the hypothesis that the hand is fundamentally constituted by computer inputs (but not in the sense of avoiding a First Cause, see below, where I also discuss an objection to Chalmers's view).

Additionally, even if we are brains in a vat (or deceived by the evil demon, etc.), we would still need to ask where the supercomputer (or evil demon, etc.) came from (i.e., what caused it). Now,

- (1) It has been noted above that the possible hypotheses suggested by the radical skeptic typically do not deny the Causal Principle and that the Modus Tollens Argument explained in Section 6.5 shows that the Causal Principle is true. (The Modus Tollens Argument for the Causal Principle is not affected by the radical skeptical doubts concerning perception, since the Modus Tollens Argument is based on deduction from the meaning of the terms, as explained in Section 6.5.)
- (2) The arguments for the impossibility of an actual infinite regress of causes and changes and against a closed causal loop are not affected by the radical skeptical doubts concerning perception, since the arguments are deductive with premises that are known *a priori* and/or based on truths already previously established such as the Causal Principle. An example is the argument from the viciousness of *causal dependence* regress, which is based on the Causal Principle that whatever begins to exist *depends* on a causes(s) (and not merely one event following another as Hume thinks) and the equation $0 + 0 + 0 \dots = 0$.²⁵ Note that a vicious regress is one in which an explanation which is proposed to solve a problem suffers from the very same problem itself, which implies that no problem is solved. I explain below that a causal regress is vicious in this sense. (See also Loke 2017b, chapter 3, where I address Aquinas' distinction between *per se* and *per accidens* causal series on pp. 97–100 and explain in detail that Aquinas' claim in *Summa Theologiae* I q. 46 a. 2 ad 7 that *per accidens* causal series can have an infinite regress fails to consider the point which I shall explain below.)

25 See Loke (2022a, chapter 5); Loke (2023, pp. 4–6) for a defense of such arguments; my version of the Cosmological Argument combines insights from the Kalam, Thomistic, and Leibnizian versions of the Cosmological Argument and responds to objections by Oppy, Morriston, Malpass, Oberle, Linford, Schmid, et al. who had criticized earlier defences of the Cosmological Argument by Craig, Pruss, Rasmussen, Koons et al.

Consider the following illustration of a vicious dependence regress. Suppose I have no money and depend on Daniel to give me money, but Daniel also has no money and depends on Cameron. If everyone is like this, no one would ever begin to have money. For if every member in a series of debtors has 0 capacity for explaining the beginning of existence of money, then all the members (regardless of the number of members) would have 0 capacity for explaining the beginning of existence of money, because $0 + 0 + 0 \dots = 0$.²⁶ Even if there is an infinite regress of debtors, this does not solve the problem, because an infinite chain of 0 is still 0. What is required is a First Source of money.

This is analogous to the case in which something x has no existence before it begins to exist, and (given the Causal Principle) x 's beginning of existence is dependent on prior cause(s) w . However, w also has no existence before it begins to exist, and its beginning of existence is dependent on prior cause(s) v . If everything is like this, nothing would ever begin to exist. No matter how many such dependent ancestors there are, none of them would begin to exist because no prior ancestor escapes from the problem of depending on a prior dependent member in order to begin to exist. For every preceding member is not existing originally and has no power to begin to exist by itself. In other words, every member of a causal series has 0 capacity for explaining why there are entities which begin to exist. $0 + 0 + 0 \dots = 0$. What is required is a First Cause which does not need to depend on another thing in order to exist—i.e., a *uncaused* First Cause which exists beginninglessly, independently, and necessarily, and which causes other things to exist (Loke 2022a, chapter 5; Loke 2023; note that the above argument does not require understanding what an infinite is, but merely understanding what 0 is, viz. the absence of capacity in this case). The First Cause can be deduced to be a personal Creator with libertarian freedom, following the steps of the Cosmological Argument (see Section 3.2).

A skeptic might object to the above argument by claiming that everything came from pre-existent materials (e.g., my body came from pre-existent molecules) and therefore there isn't anything which begins to exist.

However, this objection is based on a misunderstanding, since the term '*whatever*' in the Causal Principle (*whatever* begins to exist has a cause) refers to events/changes and arrangements as well. Thus, for example, even though my body came from pre-existent molecules, there was a beginning to the event at which the molecules constituted the first cell of my body that resulted from

26 Oberle's claim that 'borrowed wealth requires a source is only correct if the chain of lenders is finite' (Oberle (2024, p. 43) fails to note that an infinite chain of 0 is still 0. He seems to assume that there is already money in the chain, such that 'there is a source of the wealth of z in virtue of a never-ending line of borrowers' and that 'if the wealth transference is infinite, then we never reach a last member of the chain where someone neither has wealth in a derived nor underived manner' (p. 45). However, the problem here is that every member in the series was not supposed to have money originally (analogous to every member in a series not existing originally, as in a causal regress without a beginningless First Cause). This implies that no one in the chain actually has money. In which case it is false to think that there is already money in the chain such that everyone is a borrower rather than a debtor. For other responses to Oberle, see Loke (2023).

the new arrangement of the molecules. This new arrangement (= your body) did not exist originally and has 0 power to begin to exist by itself. Rather, the new arrangement was *caused* by the event of the fertilization of my mother's egg by my father's sperm. The Causal Principle is claiming that, regardless of whether an entity/thing (e.g., event, arrangement, state, substance, whatever) begins from pre-existing materials or not, it has a cause and is dependent on the cause. For having a beginning implies that the event, arrangement, state, etc. did not exist originally and hence (given the Modus Tollens Argument explained earlier) is dependent on the cause for determining its existence. A causal regress in which all the events, etc. do not exist originally and which require an explanation for why they begin to exist does not explain why any event, etc. exists. An infinite regress of events does not explain anything, because every event in that regress is dependent on the one before it, and hence always begs an explanation, which is what a 'vicious regress' means. While it is true that every event in that regress has causal powers (e.g., the events of our galaxy had the causal power to bring about other events which resulted in the formation of the solar system, and eventually me and you), the events are still dependent on prior causes in order to begin to exist and have causal power in the first place. Thus, my existence cannot have come from an infinite causal dependence regress of events, just as one cannot become rich merely by having a limitless supply of debtors, each borrowing from the one before, because $0 + 0 + 0 \dots = 0$, as explained above (Loke 2022a, pp. 227–228). What is required is a beginningless First Cause which has already existed originally. In other words, an independent uncaused First Cause with underived causal power.

The above argument is independent of other arguments against an infinite regress of events, such as the Hilbert Hotel Argument and the argument from the impossibility of traversing an actual infinite. Thus, it is not susceptible to the objections against those other arguments, although those other arguments have also been defended in recent literature and the objections have been answered.²⁷ Where arguing against an infinite regress of events is concerned,

27 See Loke and Haitov (2025); Loke (2022a). Malpass' (2023) objection to my defence of the argument from the impossibility of traversing an actual infinite fails to engage with what I stated in the following sentences which explain what I mean by 'more fundamental question of how the series is constituted by its individual elements in the first place,' and why I think that a beginningless sequence is not possible (I am referring to my scenario of a person marking a stroke each year in the following sentences): 'The essential feature of this one-by-one sequential process is that the series of strokes is supposed to have been made up by each stroke; none of the strokes existed beginninglessly. Each of them was added at some finite point earlier in time, one by one. This point is illustrated by Fig. 5.2 and the mathematical induction proof, which is about how each element which is added into the series at each year constitutes the whole, without begging the question either way. That is, without assuming whether the total number of elements in the series of earlier events is already infinite or not, the fact remains that the series is constituted by its elements, and each element is a finite quantity (i.e., "one" event is a finite quantity), and together they constitute a finite quantity because finite + finite = finite; therefore, the series of earlier events cannot be actually infinite' (Loke 2022a, p. 210).

any one of these arguments is sufficient. Thus, the skeptic would need to rebut all of these arguments, but this has not been done.

Given (1) and (2), the conclusion of the Cosmological Argument that there is an uncaused, beginningless, transcendent First Cause with libertarian freedom and enormous power (i.e., a personal Creator) follows deductively as explained in Loke (2022a, chapter 6).

Radical skepticism concerning the existence of the external world (including parents and grandparents) cannot successfully rebut the conclusion that a Personal First Cause exists. The reason is because the existence of changes in my subjective mental states (e.g., *it seems to me that* the words which I am reading now *change* from moment to moment as I read some words and move on to read other words) is a seeming that is undeniably true, even if the seemings are wholly caused intramentally. Given that a change is (by definition) something that has a beginning, the Causal Principle (i.e., whatever begins to exist depends on a cause(s)), which is demonstrated by the Modus Tollens Argument, will apply to it. And given the impossibility of an actual infinite regress of changes (which can be argued for using the argument from causal dependence regress which is based on the Causal Principle and the understanding what 0 is, as explained above), the conclusion of the Cosmological Argument that there exists a first change caused by a First Cause Creator with libertarian freedom would still follow (see Section 3.2. Could it be that, unknown to me, my mind is the only entity that exists and is the First Cause of my experiences? The argument which I offer below [citing Clayton and Knapp 2011] which shows that the First Cause brought about the first change as a libertarian free choice for the sake of other entities implies that it is not the case that my mind is the only entity that exists. Moreover, I am aware that my mind is not a god-like entity that has unlimited powers to cause the universe that I experienced. This indicates that my mind is not the First Cause Creator. For other problems related to this hypothesis, see also the discussions under premise 1.2.1. above and note 31).

Moreover, the Cosmological Argument can be combined with the Teleological Argument to show that the First Cause must be highly intelligent in order to bring about the world of experience with its high degree of order (Loke 2022a, chapter 7), such that the mathematical equations in physics can be treated by physicists as expressing a kind of software of the universe (Heller 2013, p. 594; see also the quote by Yang Chen Ning at the beginning of this book). ‘The theological claim is that such an intelligible unity implies a fundamental informing intelligence ... things exist with intelligible form because intelligence is what actively structures them’ (Williams 2014, p. 120). This resonates with the possible hypotheses suggested by the radical skeptics which typically require a similar, highly intelligent, and powerful god-like being. For example, an evil demon with high intelligence and power to create my seemings in a highly ordered way in order to massively deceive us. (Or a mind that produces an extraordinary dream. Or a supercomputer that functions like an Artificial Intelligence and controls the Matrix; see further, the discussion on god-like being below.)

The radical skeptic might claim that the evil demon/supercomputer/mind could be the uncaused First Cause; this would answer the question where the evil demon/supercomputer/mind came from by claiming that nothing caused it, given that it is beginningless and uncaused.

The following three points may be said in response.

First, the radical skeptic's claim does not affect the substance of the Cosmological and Teleological Arguments for the conclusion that there is a First Cause which is uncaused, beginningless, and has libertarian freedom, intelligence, and enormous power, since this conclusion follows from the premises of the arguments, and I have explained elsewhere (Loke 2022a) that the premises are true, and the deduction of the argument is valid.

Second, it is misleading and therefore inappropriate to call the First Cause a computer, since this term is usually used to refer to a physical entity that is programmed. In which case, the computer cannot be the First Cause; rather, there must be something else that caused it to be programmed, and we would need to enquire what programmed it. On the other hand, the Cosmological Argument shows that the First Cause is immaterial and uncaused, which implies it is not programmed.

Third, let us consider whether the First Cause could be an evil demon who wants to deceive us.²⁸ Recall that the Cosmological Argument (see Chapter 3) shows that the First Cause (Creator) was beginningless without the first event (which had a beginning). This implies that the Creator existed eternally without doing anything and freely brought about the first event of creation. Bergmann (2021, p. 49) suggests 'we could include in EDH the claim that the demon simply wants to be highly amused (this is a basic desire it has) and that it just happens to find deceiving me in a convincing way highly amusing.' This hypothesis implies that the demon was in a state of insufficiency; it lacked amusement (bored?) and wanted to satisfy such a lack by deceiving us. If such a demon were also the First Cause, this would imply that it had existed eternally without causing the event of deception and in a state of insufficiency, even though it had the power to satisfy such a lack and would freely choose to satisfy it. It is implausible that such an agent who would freely choose to satisfy his/her lack of sufficiency would not do so for eternity but tolerate it for eternity and decide to do it. This indicates that the First Cause was not in fact insufficient; for example, it was not bored for eternity. Rather, it chose to bring about the first event which eventually led to the existence of other entities (including

28 Compare with the evil-god challenge by Stephen Law (2010).

creatures) ‘not for its own sake—it doesn’t need those others—but for the sake of those others themselves ... doing so out of what, resorting to admittedly anthropomorphic terms, we can only regard as sheer generosity: sheer love for the finite others’ (Clayton and Knapp 2011, 38; the fine-tuning argument [Loke 2022a] also indicates that the First Cause designedly brought about the universe which allows for our existence). One might ask, ‘but isn’t love also a condition of wanting something, just like boredom?’ The answer is that the love which I have described above is not a condition of wanting something for oneself (unlike boredom), but for the sake of others (creatures) who did not exist in beginningless eternity. Thus (unlike boredom), such a want is not a state of insufficiency, and there is no problem for the First Cause with not satisfying it for eternity.

The above considerations indicate that the beginningless First Cause is a loving and good Creator and imply that the First Cause is not an evil demon who wants to deceive me, such that I do not know the truths concerning everything that I seem to see, hear, etc. This is a hypothesis for which there is no good reason to believe anyway. Swinburne (2003, p. 64) argues that a God who deceives us ‘would be like leaving someone’s fingerprints at the murder scene when they had not committed the murder,’ which would be contrary to his goodness. Swinburne (2013a) offers other considerations for thinking that a good God would not allow for massive deception that would prevent us from knowing any empirical truths whatsoever concerning his revelation in creation and history. He explains that this does not deny the possibility of the existence of the devil who can deceive human beings to a lesser extent, as postulated by Christianity on independent grounds (i.e., the claimed evidence of special revelation which Swinburne argues for).

It might be objected that, since an eternity is no time at all, the evil demon would not be bothered by a state of insufficiency at all.

In reply, the eternity of the First Cause can be understood in two different ways, and both possibilities are defensible (see Loke 2022a, chapter 6):

- (1) Timeless sans creation and in time with creation (the so-called Hybrid view; see Loke 2023).
- (2) Assuming a substantial view of time which affirms that time can exist as a dimension independently of change, ‘the First Cause could have been in an initially changeless state with an actual infinite past extension ... causally and temporally antecedent to the first change. In this way, God (the First Cause) could have existed beginninglessly before creation in an undifferentiated, non-metric time ... This view does not face the problems with postulating an actual infinite number of earlier durations, since the earlier

extension of time is undifferentiated' (Loke 2022a, p. 253, citing the view of the Oxford School comprising Swinburne, Padgett et al.).

Both views are compatible with the argument in this book. The view of the objector that 'an eternity is no time at all' is rejected by the Oxford School. On the other hand, proponents of the Hybrid View can reply that the term 'no time' is ambiguous. It can mean either (1) or (2):

- (1) Existing for zero seconds. An evil demon would not be bothered by a lack that lasts for zero seconds, for the experience of lack would be immediately satisfied by the event of satisfying it. In this case, the evil demon does not truly exist in a state of insufficiency apart from the event of satisfying the lack. However, 'eternity' should not be understood as 'existing for zero seconds,' since a second is a measurement of the temporal dimension; it has a beginning and is defined as a sixtieth of a minute of time, and 'zero seconds' implies being less than a second within the measurement of the temporal series.
- (2) Alternatively, the term 'no time' can mean existing without the temporal dimension and thus without beginning, which is what proponents of the Hybrid View would affirm. Such a beginningless state of insufficiency would be troubling, for it exists without beginning and thus exists apart from the event of satisfying it, given that such an event would have a beginning and thus would not exist together with the beginningless state; i.e., they are not co-eternal. While it is true that once there is creation in time there would be satisfaction, this does not remove the problem of being *eternally insufficient* sans creation.

It might be objected that the First Cause might have been deceiving its creatures for all eternity since its creatures need not include only terrestrial beings such as humans.

This objection does not work, because the creation of creatures are events that have beginnings in time, and the premises of the particular version of the Cosmological Argument I cited imply that an infinite regress of events is not the case and that there is a first event, which had a beginning rather than existed eternally (see Section 3.2). Thus, all creatures have beginnings, and it is not the case that creatures have existed for all eternity, and therefore it is not the case that creatures have been deceived for all eternity.²⁹

It might be objected that the First Cause could have other possible goals besides satisfying a desire for deception that could explain why it produced our

29 The version of the Cosmological Argument I cited also argues against the essential timelessness of the First Cause (see Loke 2022a, pp. 285–287). This implies it is not the case that the First Cause is deceiving its creatures in timeless eternity.

unreliable seemings, and not all of these possible goals would entail that it waited for eternity before satisfying its desires.

Now, one might reply that, as argued in previous paragraphs citing Clayton and Knapp, the goal for creating anything at all was not for the sake of the First Cause itself, but for the good of those others which the First Cause created and that knowing the truth is a good (citing Swinburne 2003; 2013). To think that the First Cause has other possible goals (for which we have no independent argument or evidence) that would result in it producing unreliable seemings that made us fail to know the truth is contrary to its purpose for creation in the first place. Against this, the skeptic might suggest it might be the case that, while the First Cause Creator created for the sake of others, the others in question are not human beings but other beings such as angelic beings, one of whom became bored and the Creator allowed it to satisfy its boredom by deceiving us. Or it might be the case that the Creator created angelic beings with significant moral freedom to choose to do evil, such as massively deceiving us. (This is analogous to Christian theism's postulation that God created human beings with significant moral freedom which includes the ability to harm other creatures; this might include the technological ability to create a matrix world in the future in which the inhabitants are deceived.) Or it might be the case that the angelic being turned evil and got out of control of the First Cause. (This is analogous to the way that humans are concerned that AI might get out of control in the future.) Alternatively, could it be that there is an evil demon who existed beginninglessly alongside the loving Creator and who did something to massively deceive us after we were created by the loving Creator?

The problem with the above hypotheses is that there is no independent reason for thinking that there indeed exists such an evil demon/angelic being (or a supercomputer, or a mind) which has the power to massively deceive us.³⁰ By contrast, there is an independent reason, viz. the Cosmological Argument, for thinking that there is a First Cause Creator God who created the world out of love. Given that the existence of such a good divine First Cause is already sufficient to explain the world of my experience (which, following the logic of the Cosmological Argument, must have ultimately come from this First Cause), following Ockham's razor which is justified probabilistically *a priori* as noted in Section 6.4, one should reject the hypothesis that there is such an evil demon or Matrix, etc.

The above discussion highlighted the relevance and importance of the arguments of natural theology for addressing radical skepticism, but such an approach has been neglected by many contemporary epistemologists. Bergmann (2021, p. 37) dismisses the appeal to the arguments of natural theology by saying 'we'd be hard-pressed to find a contemporary philosopher

30 The demons mentioned in the New Testament are not portrayed in the New Testament as having the power to massively deceive us; see the citation from Swinburne (2003, p. 64) above.

(theistic or non-theistic) who didn't find the premises and reasoning in such theistic arguments to be more doubtful than the conclusion that we shouldn't be skeptical of perception.'

Perhaps contemporary philosophers have failed to notice the following fact. It is noteworthy that the possible hypotheses of radical skepticism mentioned by Bergmann (2021, p. 92: 'such evidence could easily be caused by a sufficiently powerful evil demon bent on deceiving us') presuppose the laws of logic and the Causal Principle, as explained previously. (It has also been explained in previous sections that the laws of logic and the Causal Principle cannot be rebutted by radical skepticism.) Moreover, these possible hypotheses typically postulate a powerful god-like being in order to explain what *causes* my experiences without affirming 'the Standard Hypothesis,' which postulates a world of physical objects that stimulate my sense organs and thereby *cause* my sensory experience. (By god-like being, I mean an entity which seems to have unlimited powers to cause everything that is experienced; examples of god-like beings include an evil demon, something that can create an extraordinary dream, a supercomputer, and something that can create the world five minutes ago with the appearance of age [see next section].) The above observations indicate that the laws of logic and the Causal Principle, as well as the Cosmological Argument which is based on these and the undeniable seemings concerning changes, and which also concludes that a god-like being exists, cannot in fact be rebutted by radical skepticism. Since the arguments of natural theology are traditionally offered to show that the world of physical objects is caused by a god-like entity, and since a god-like entity seems to be required by even the radical skeptical hypotheses as well, this seems to indicate that the conclusion of the arguments of natural theology that a god-like entity exists is even more resistant to skepticism compared to our perception. (Indeed, as already explained above, radical skeptical doubts concerning the existence of the world external to the mind do not rebut the Cosmological Argument and its conclusion that a Personal First Cause exists.)

Given the above conclusion, the historical seeming concerning 'experiences of resurrected Jesus' by the earliest Christians (Loke 2017a, 2020) should still be regarded as ultimately caused by the Divine First Cause.

One might object that these experiences could also have been caused by secondary causes such as a powerful alien. However, there is no good independent reason for thinking that there exists an alien who had such powers to resurrect the dead or to cause such historical seeming. There is also no good independent reason to think that we are living in a Matrix (or that EDH is true). On the other hand, there is an independent reason (viz. the Cosmological Argument) for thinking that there is a First Cause (Creator God) who created the universe with its laws of nature out of love. A God with such love is unlike an evil deceiver, and a God with such powers would have no difficulty raising the dead. Thus, following Ockham's razor (which is justified probabilistically *a priori*; see Section 6.4), one should affirm that 'God (the First Cause) raised Jesus from the dead.' This conclusion is simpler and more probable than the

hypothesis that ‘God (the First Cause) caused an alien who raised Jesus from the dead,’ or ‘God (the First Cause) caused the Matrix which caused the historical seeming that Jesus rose from the dead,’ or ‘God (the First Cause who is a loving Creator) caused an evil demon who deceptively caused the illusion of the resurrection of Jesus who showed love to humanity.’³¹ Hence, the conclusion of the historical argument for special revelation would still follow as well, and therefore the reasonableness of the foundational doctrines of Christianity is not rebutted by radical skepticism.

Against Chalmers’s proposal noted earlier, it might be objected that a hand is supposed to be an extramental entity which can exist independently of my mind, but if I am (say) a brain in a vat, then it would not be so. Chalmers might reply that extra-mentality and mind-independence are not essential to the definition of a hand. Rather, he might define a hand phenomenologically (Chalmers draws a parallel with the idealist hypothesis put forward by Bishop Berkeley, according to which ‘the simulation of the world is implemented in the mind of God. If this is right, we should say that physical processes really exist: it’s just that at the most fundamental level, they are constituted by processes in the mind of God’ [Chalmers 2005]).

Chalmers’s proposal can also be used as part of a response to the so-called Problem of Induction (how do we know that ‘instances of which we have had no experience resemble those of which we have had experience’ (Hume 1739/1888, p. 89). Concerning this problem, a promising approach has previously been suggested by Bonjour (2010). We begin by asking why is it that event P (e.g., when I let go of my pen) is very often followed by Q (it falls to the ground)? This convergence demands an explanation. Bonjour argues deductively that, while it is always logically possible that such apparent convergence results merely from chance, this becomes more and more unlikely the longer it persists. Bonjour thinks that the apparent convergent series of observations can be explained by the natures of P and Q and the way they relate to each other, as a result of which P is very often followed by Q (pp. 66–68). The radical skeptic would object by claiming that the convergence can also be explained by a matrix, an evil demon, etc. However, once again, one can respond by making the ‘Chalmers’s move’: our beliefs in induction in such instances should not be regarded as erroneous, but only that our understanding of the underlying metaphysics may need to be adjusted (e.g., instead of understanding the

31 Likewise, the following variant of the matrix hypothesis (‘Unknown to myself, I was the First Cause who programmed impressions of Jesus and programmed myself to enter the matrix as a normal human being and forgot that I was the First Cause and had the power to create the universe’) is logically possible but unlikely because it requires a number of additional and unnecessary postulations which should be eliminated by Ockham’s razor. To illustrate the implausibility of such a hypothesis, consider the fact that it is also logically possible that one jumps down from ten stories and suddenly remembers (in mid-air) that he/she was the First Cause and uses his/her power to save himself/herself, but no reasonable and non-suicidal person would go ahead and jump because the hypothesis is unlikely. See further the importance of probabilistic reasoning in Section 7.3.

convergent series of observations as being explained by the natures of P and Q, we understand it to be explained by the computer inputs).

Nevertheless, Chalmer's own proposal has difficulty concerning persons. For example, if I am in a matrix, then my wife would be fundamentally constituted by computer input; even if her bodily form is still 'real,' she would not be a conscious person with libertarian freedom. Chalmers (2005) replies that 'we are not much worse off than in the actual world, where there is a legitimate issue about whether other beings are conscious, quite independently of whether we are in a matrix.' In response, it is true that there is a legitimate epistemological debate here concerning knowledge of other minds. However, if I am truly in a vat, then my wife would not be a conscious person with libertarian freedom. Thus, Chalmer's proposal by itself does not preserve all of our common-sense beliefs, and it is insufficient for preserving many of my significant beliefs (e.g., concerning my wife).

In any case, it should be noted that my response to radical skepticism does not depend on Chalmer's view (indeed, it is independent of it, see below). Rather, my response incorporates natural theology and historical seemings to argue that a good (unlikely deceiving) God exists, given that Chalmer's proposal is not necessary for my response. Nevertheless, Chalmer's view is helpful in showing that, in any case (and contrary to Bergmann), many beliefs (e.g., concerning my hand) can still be preserved even if we are in a matrix, etc. Moreover, I have also shown that, in any case, radical skepticism's hypothesis requires a god-like entity. These are helpful moves which show that, even apart from the arguments of natural theology, not as much is lost compared to what radical skeptics think. I then go on to argue that, given the arguments of natural theology and the historical seemings mentioned above, it is unreasonable to think that we actually live in a world postulated by radical skeptics.

My approach has similarity with Descartes' response to the evil demon hypothesis in his *Meditations*, where Descartes also argues that this skeptical hypothesis is unlikely given the existence of God. It has been objected that Descartes' argument in his Third and Fourth Meditations is guilty of circular reasoning (Cartesian Circle). That is, Descartes has been accused of arguing that the certainty of the truth of clear and distinct premises depends on God's existence, while also arguing that the certainty of God's existence depends on a proof from clear and distinct premises. Descartes had responded to this objection, and a vast literature has accumulated concerning how to understand Descartes' response and whether it is successful (Nelson 2015). For example, it has been proposed by Clark (2019) that what Descartes is actually arguing is that one can have knowledge of truths when attending to clear and distinct premises without epistemically depending on God's existence. However, when one's mind is not attending to these premises, doubts can arise as a result of using the faculty of memory rather than the intellect to access the truth. Descartes' proposed solution is to argue that one can use the knowledge of truths when attending to clear and distinct premises to prove God's existence, and the knowledge of God's existence can then be used to refute the doubts

that one has when one's mind is not attending to these premises, thus resulting in an epistemic state that is not 'shifting and changeable' (Fifth Meditation, CSM 2:48), but 'sufficiently firm and stable to have "true and certain [scientia]"' (Fifth Meditation, CSM 2:48)' (Clark 2019, p. 667). There is no circularity in the above explication of Descartes' argument. My approach is similar in the sense that it likewise uses knowledge of truths (e.g., truths concerning the laws of logic, Causal Principle) that can be established without epistemically depending on God's existence to prove God's existence, and I would follow Descartes in using the knowledge of God's existence to argue for the general reliability of memory (see also Section 6.7). Nevertheless, my approach goes beyond Descartes' own approach in the following significant ways.

First, Descartes uses the Ontological and Cosmological Arguments to try to show that God exists. His arguments rely on the problematic premise that the idea of God represents something so perfect that God must exist as the only possible cause of the perfection found in my idea of God, and his arguments do not respond to Hume's objection to the Causal Principle and Kant's objection to the ontological argument. By contrast, I cite a different version of the Cosmological Argument which uses a *Modus Tollens* Argument for the Causal Principle (and the consideration that the Causal Principle is also typically presupposed by the possible hypotheses suggested by the radical skeptics). These provide a response to the objection to the Causal Principle by Hume. Moreover, my approach does not depend on the ontological argument. Hence, my approach is not susceptible to the objections against Descartes' approach. (In addition, the Moral Argument can also be used to argue that the First Cause is good and as a response to the problem of evil; see Chapter 10.)

Second, my approach uses recent work on probability theory³² concerning Ockham's razor to address a series of objections (e.g., it might be the case that the Creator created angelic beings with significant moral freedom to choose to do evil, such as massively deceiving us) which Descartes did not consider.

Third, unlike Descartes, I also appeal to the historical seeming that Jesus died and resurrected to reveal the love of the Divine First Cause, and argue that the best explanation for all these considerations (the Cosmological Argument and the historical seeming) is Christian Theism. It should be noted, however, that while appealing to the historical seeming concerning Jesus makes my case against radical skepticism stronger, my case does not depend on it. The Cosmological Argument mentioned under the first point is already sufficient. Thus, to defeat radical skepticism, one does not have to depend on special revelation or a 'Theology of Nature' approach; traditional natural theology is sufficient.

32 While the Cartesian version of foundationalism requires that the higher-ordered inferential beliefs be deduced with certainty if they are to be justified, my approach does not have such a requirement; instead, my approach allows that justification can arise via probabilistic reasoning as well as inductive and abductive inferences.

6.7 Concerning memory

Skeptics have also argued that no non-question-begging argument can be given for the reliability of memory. Kwan (2011, pp. 110-111) explains the rationale of the skeptics as follows:

Suppose we have a valid proof that needs several pages to be written out. When you come to the end and believe that the conclusion is proved, how is this justified? Not directly by the steps, because we can't hold all of them together in our minds and see their connections all at once; but it is by memory that you have checked all the connections and found them convincing. So memory would also be vital in this piece of reasoning (and any other reasoning). So either way (empirical or a priori), it is extremely difficult to see how there can be noncircular justification of memory.

Now, as with sensory perception, memory is a faculty which even skeptics of Christianity would need to assume to be reliable in order to doubt (for example) what they remembered about Christianity. Thus, the assumption of the general reliability of memory does not beg the question against the epistemology of these skeptics (unlike Frame's type of circular argument which begs the question). We can imagine the following dialogue between the skeptic and the believer:

Skeptic: How do I know that my memory is reliable?

Believer: Do you remember correctly what you have just asked?

Skeptic: Yes.

Believer: Good.

Skeptic: Uh ... wait, I am not sure.

Believer: Forget it, let's move on.

Skeptic: Wait, you didn't answer the question!

Believer: What question?

Skeptic: How do I know that my memory is reliable?

Believer: Good, you have just shown that it is reliable enough for remembering the question correctly.

Against the above dialogue, it might be objected that there is no argument to the effect that the skeptic must agree that they remember anything correctly. On the contrary, the skeptic might ask 'we both agree that that was the question, but how do we know that we both remembered the question correctly? Moreover, even if memory works once in the circumstance of remembering the question, why think that it is reliable beyond that circumstance?'

To the first question, the Believer might reply, 'If it is not correct, what causes our memories to seem to cohere, i.e. to seem to agree that that was the question?'

This reply highlights an important consideration which leads to the following arguments for the general reliability of memory that are applicable to other

circumstances that are beyond the one circumstance of remembering the question. When I think about what myself and many others *seem to remember* (say, for example, seeing the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001), there seems to be a coherence between what we seem to remember. We can realize at an instant that the coherence exists and understand that either the coherence is caused by past events (i.e., 9/11 attack) or it is caused by the entities postulated by the hypotheses of radical skepticism (which I address below). Given that the latter hypotheses do not work (see below), this implies that the general reliability of memory (e.g., concerning 9/11) can be given a non-circular justification, since the realization is based on our awareness and understanding at an instant rather than the reliability of our memories.

The following two points should be noted. (i) Affirming the general reliability of memory does not exclude occasional cases of misremembering, memory distortion, etc. (ii) The argument in the previous paragraph does not beg the question by assuming that we correctly remember the past, nor does it assume the accuracy of the seeming of coherence, rather it is arguing from the seeming of coherence. To elaborate, the above argument grants, for the sake of the argument, the possibility that both myself and others may have remembered wrongly and that we may even be wrong that our (apparent) memories concerning the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001 actually cohere. Nevertheless, it remains a fact that it seems that our memories cohere, and one can argue that the cause for this is the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001.

The above argument also does not beg the question by assuming that we remember correctly the meaning of the words of the argument. For even if the meaning of the word 'seeming' (for example) is not what it seems, nevertheless, the phenomenology of seeming of coherence is still present, and this is what I am thinking about at the instant. While the process of determining that my beliefs about the past cohere with those of others may take time and require the presupposition of the accuracy of memory, the realization of the seeming of coherence and the best explanation for this seeming can happen at an instant of immediate awareness of the seeming and the best explanation,³³ without presupposing the accuracy of memory.

It might be objected that the cause of the seeming of coherence might not be what happened in the past, rather it might be (for example) what is suggested by Bertrand Russell's (1921/1995) famous hypothesis, i.e., we (with our seeming of coherence) and the world was created five minutes ago with the appearance that everything is much older. Bergmann (2021, p. 77) suggests that 'an evil demon could deceive you in your memories just as it could deceive you in your perception. If that were to happen, your memory evidence (including even your clear and strong memory seemings that appear to be of events happening just a few moments ago) would feel to you in that circumstance exactly as compelling as your current memory evidence in fact feels to you now, despite the fact that it would be, for the most part, misleading.'

33 See footnote above.

Notice once again that the possible hypotheses suggested by the radical skeptic require the postulation of a god-like entity who is Bergmann's evil demon or something else which is able to create the world five minutes ago with highly ordered (deceptive) memory seemings (given the Causal Principle defended previously in Section III, which implies that such a highly ordered world would not have begun uncaused). Moreover, we would still need to ask: if the world was caused to begin five minutes ago, where did that cause come from? The conclusion of the Cosmological Argument that there is a Divine First Cause who created for a good purpose (see above) has not been rebutted by radical skepticism. (See also Chapter 10, where it is explained that the Moral Argument indicates that the Creator is morally perfect; the goodness of the First Cause is further supported by the historical seeming that Jesus died and resurrected to reveal the love of the Divine First Cause.) Given these conclusions, it is unreasonable to think that the Creator actually deceived us, e.g., by making the world seem much older when it was only created five minutes ago, a hypothesis for which we have no good reason to believe anyway. Given that the existence of such a good divine First Cause is already sufficient to explain the world of our memory seemings (which, following the logic of the Cosmological Argument, must have ultimately come from this First Cause), following Ockham's razor, one should reject the hypothesis that there is another powerful being that caused us to be massively deceived concerning our memories. Therefore, it is more reasonable to believe that past events (September 11, the resurrection of Jesus) truly happened. Hence, the arguments of natural theology and the historical argument for special revelation are not rebutted by radical skepticism concerning memory.

6.8 Additional remarks concerning the problem of epistemic circularity

In the previous sections, I have used a logically exhaustive list of possibilities together with arguments of natural theology and the contents of my seemings to show that non-question-begging arguments (deductive and probabilistic) can be provided to demonstrate the superiority of the Standard Hypothesis concerning the external world and the past and argued that—contrary to what many philosophers and theologians think—strong foundationalism is defensible. Indeed, strong foundationalism is arguably superior to alternative epistemologies which seem unable to escape from the problem of question-begging circularity as noted by Evans and others. Nevertheless, as explained above, the project of natural theology does not require strong foundationalism; weaker versions of foundationalism would suffice.

Frame might object that I am still using a circular argument by appealing to reason as an ultimate standard to argue for reason.

In reply, since the appeal to reason is necessary for argumentation (and Frame would have to agree, since he has to appeal to reason to justify his inference from his theological premises), I have to use it to argue for my position.

Those who are unwilling to accept the appeal to reason would also have to appeal to reason to argue for their position. In this case, the accusation of begging the question is invalid, because

The appeal to reason is implicitly authorized by the challenge itself, so this is really a way of showing that the challenge is unintelligible. The charge of begging the question implies that there is an alternative—namely, to examine the reasons for and against the claim being challenged while suspending judgment about it. For the case of reasoning itself, however, no such alternative is available, since any considerations against the objective validity of a type of reasoning are inevitably attempts to offer reasons against it, and these must be rationally assessed. The use of reason in the response is not a gratuitous importation by the defender: it is demanded by the character of the objections offered by the challenger.

(Nagel 1997, p. 24)

Therefore, a challenge to the appeal to reason would bring it back to reason.

By contrast, a challenge to the appeal to God does not bring it back to God. Presuppositionalists such as Van Til have argued that God is necessarily for rationality, but Frame notes that this Transcendental Argument for God (TAG) requires premises that in the end make the argument similar to traditional arguments for God (cosmological, teleological, etc.).³⁴ Various philosophers have laid out these traditional arguments in a non-question-begging way, which indicates that these arguments do not need to presuppose the existence of God as the premise of these arguments (Craig and Moreland eds. 2009) (I cite the traditional arguments not to show that they contradict Frame's circularity, but to show that we do not have to embrace the kind of circularity Frame endorses in order to formulate a plausible argument of natural theology).

Additionally, to argue that our rationality requires God as a cause is different from arguing that our rationality depends on presupposing God for the justification of our beliefs.³⁵ While one might argue that one's ability to reasonably believe that one is in pain (for example) is dependent on God (in the sense that the ultimate origination of the human conscious mind depends on a Personal

34 Frame (1994, pp. 71–88). Frame himself uses these arguments as his 'extrabiblical data in apologetics' together with his fallacious question-begging broad circular argument by which he says, 'but not as independent criteria to which Scripture must measure up' (1994, p. 21) which makes the Scripture unfalsifiable. The extra-biblical arguments are not question-begging, but the unfalsifiable broad circular argument is.

35 Oliphint (2020, p. 188) seems to be guilty of this confusion when he writes concerning sensory experience, testimony, etc. that, while he acknowledges that these are necessary for knowledge to be had, they 'cannot be foundational because they are not the source of what we know, only the avenues by which we gain the content that we do know or believe'; i.e., 'they are seen as avenues by which God reveals Himself—given that they are all a part of God's creation.'

Creator³⁶), one does not need to depend on God in order to reasonably believe that one is in pain (one's direct experience is enough to justify it). Since presupposing God is not necessarily for the justification of our beliefs in the same way that presupposing reason is necessary, the assumption of God in response to atheists is a gratuitous importation, but the assumption of reason is not.

In summary, the fact that the appeal to reason as an ultimate standard is necessary for argumentation implies that one is not begging the question by appealing to reason to argue for reason, since the charge of begging the question implies that there is an alternative, but there is no alternative in this case (Nagel 1997, p. 24). We know that there is no alternative by understanding the nature of reason and argumentation.

Moreover, the reliability or proper function of reason in many instances of reasoning is not assumed but is indicated by its ability to arrive at true conclusions (e.g., I know what existence means and know that some things including myself do exist, I know that shapeless squares cannot exist, etc.). In other words, I do not have to presuppose the reliability or proper function of reason (or have faith in reason) in order to know (for example) that the laws of logic are necessarily true. Rather, I understand that the laws of logic are necessarily true, and that is the evidence that my reason is sufficiently reliable (or functioning properly) to the extent that is at least enough for me to know that.

Ontologically, it is true that the sufficient reliability of my reason is necessary for me to understand this, but epistemologically the presupposition of the sufficient reliability of my reason is not necessary for me to understand this. For the presupposition of the sufficient reliability of my reason is not the premise from which I infer (for example) that shapeless squares cannot exist. Rather, the premise is my understanding of the meanings of the terms 'shapeless,' 'square,' 'cannot,' and 'exist.' In this sense, the starting point of epistemology is neither presupposition of nor faith in the reliability of our reason or sensory organs. Rather, the epistemological starting points are our understanding of concepts and our direct awareness of experience (I may not have faith in my eyes, but I cannot deny I have the experience of sight; see discussion on Bonjour above). Presuppositionalists such as Frame would also require these as epistemological starting points before they could read and interpret the Bible and construct their Presuppositionalist views.

6.9 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have noted that philosophical tools and categories have been widely used in the history of Christian Theology and that this usage can be

36 This is the so-called argument from consciousness defended in, for example, the chapter by J.P. Moreland in Craig and Moreland eds. (2009). Others have argued that if human reason is the result of naturalistic evolution, i.e., the by-product of an aimless, stochastic process, then it's hard to see how reason can have any normative standing; this implies that the mere existence of normative reason is evidence for the existence of God (see Plantinga 2000, Chapter 7, IV.B.2; Reppert 2009).

defended against the objections to epistemic foundationalism and the problem of epistemic circularity. In particular, I have responded to the challenge of radical skepticism by offering non-circular arguments for our ordinary beliefs, such as those concerning the laws of logic, mathematics, and those produced by perception and memory.

With regard to the laws of logic and the proven equations of mathematics, I have provided a non-circular justification which shows that these are grounded in the meanings of the terms. I have also shown that the laws of logic, together with my undeniable seemings and the meanings of the relevant terms, can in principle be used to provide a non-circular Modus Tollens Argument for the Causal Principle and that the Causal Principle is also typically presupposed by the possible hypotheses suggested by the radical skeptics.

I have also explained that, by using the Causal Principle, the laws of logic, and the proven equations of mathematics, it can be deduced via the Cosmological Argument that there exists a Divine First Cause and that the claims of radical skepticism do not constitute valid objections against the Cosmological Argument. On the contrary, I observe that the possible hypotheses concerning our perceptual and memory beliefs which are suggested by radical skeptics would also require the postulation of a god-like entity (e.g., the evil demon, or something which created the world five minutes ago with the appearance that everything is much older). This is an indication that even the radical skeptical hypotheses cannot avoid the conclusion that a divine being exists, that this conclusion is even more resistant to skepticism than our ordinary beliefs produced by perception and memory—which is bad news for atheism and agnosticism—and that the radical skeptics have more commonality with Natural Theologians than what is commonly realized.

I have also highlighted some considerations related to the cosmological and Teleological Arguments which have been overlooked by the possible hypotheses suggested by the radical skeptics, and which indicate that the First Cause (Creator) is a good and loving Creator who created for a good purpose. As explained previously, it is unreasonable to think that the Creator is an evil demon who massively deceived us (e.g., by making the world seem much older when it was only created five minutes ago, a hypothesis for which we have no good reason to believe anyway). Given that the existence of such a good Creator God (which follows from deductive arguments rather than probabilistic arguments) is already sufficient to explain the world of my experiences and memories, following Ockham's razor (which can be justified by the proven equations of Bayesian probability) the possible hypotheses suggested by radical skepticism should be rejected. Thus, there are good non-epistemically circular justifications for accepting the truths of our ordinary beliefs, such as the belief that you have finished reading this chapter.

In the next chapter, I shall address other challenges to natural theology which are related to scientific reasoning and the nature of faith.

7 Concerning scientific, deductive, and probabilistic reasoning and the nature of faith

7.1 A critical reflection on the challenges of scientism and verificationism and the sources of knowledge

Many people today claim that science is the only or the best way for understanding reality. They reject the claim that God created the universe because this claim cannot be tested by the scientific method. This objection assumes that the scientific method is the only way to find out the truth concerning the ultimate origin of the universe. But is this assumption true?

There is no doubt that the scientific method is extremely useful for discovering how the natural world works. The successes of modern science over the last few centuries have led some to think that science¹ is the only or the best way for understanding the nature of reality, a view known as scientism. For many people, such as Herman Philipse (2012, chapters 6, 9, 10, 11), the superiority of the scientific method is shown by its power to make predictions; indeed, this power underlies the great successes of modern science.

Scientism, however, is susceptible to the objection that scientism cannot be proven by science itself and that its advocates ‘rely in their argument not merely on scientific but also on philosophical premises’ (Stenmark 2003, pp. 783–785). Additionally, science itself cannot answer the question ‘why scientific results should be valued’; the answer to this question is philosophical rather than scientific. With respect to the criteria for a good scientific theory, cosmologist George Ellis observes the following four areas of assessment:

1. Satisfactory structure: (a) internal consistency, (b) simplicity (Ockham’s razor), and (c) aesthetic appeal (‘beauty’ or ‘elegance’).

1 In a helpful article, Mikael Stenmark (1997) discusses various forms of scientism and observes that, while the word ‘science’ has a variety of meanings, ‘what is characteristic of scientism is that it works with a narrow definition of science ... the advocates of scientism use the notion of science to cover only the natural sciences and perhaps also those areas of the social sciences that are highly similar in methodology to the natural sciences’ (p. 20). Such a methodology typically involves a systematic study using observation and experimentation.

2. Intrinsic explanatory power: (a) logical tightness, (b) scope of the theory—the ability to unify otherwise separate phenomena, and (c) probability of the theory or model with respect to some well-defined measure.
3. Extrinsic explanatory power, or relatedness: (a) connectedness to the rest of science, (b) extendability—providing a basis for further development.
4. Observational and experimental support, in terms of (a) testability: the ability to make quantitative and qualitative predictions that can be tested; and (b) confirmation: the extent to which the theory is supported by such tests as have been made.

Ellis acknowledges the importance of philosophy for these criteria, noting that ‘These criteria are philosophical in nature in that they themselves cannot be proven to be correct by any experiment. Rather, their choice is based on past experience combined with philosophical reflection’ (Ellis 2007, Section 8.1).

Verificationism claims that only statements that are analytic or verifiable (i.e., can be established by empirical means) are meaningful. However, it does not follow analytically from the meaning of the terms that only statements that are analytic or verifiable are meaningful. Nor can empirical means establish that only statements that are analytic or verifiable are meaningful. Therefore, verificationism fails to meet its own demand: it is self-refuting (see also the criticism of New Verificationism [Ladyman et al. 2007] in Loke 2022a, chapter 1).

Popular skepticism toward philosophical arguments is often based on the presupposition that these arguments are merely based on ‘common sense’² and ‘everyday intuitions,’ which recent history has shown to be highly unreliable. For example, while ‘common sense’ might regard it as impossible that something can be a particle and a wave at the same time, quantum physics has shown that it can. A lot of what seems to be rationally intuitive truths differ from eras and cultures. While our ‘everyday intuitions’ might regard that two parallel lines can never meet (this is postulated as an axiom of Euclidean geometry), General Relativity can use non-Euclidean geometries (discovered in the 19th century) to construct a model of the universe according to which space is curved and parallel lines can meet. These examples have been taken by many as indicating the triumph of science over ‘common sense’ and ‘everyday intuitions.’ They warn that we should be careful about trying to understand reality at levels far beyond our daily experiences on the basis of philosophical arguments (which they regard as based on ‘common sense’ and ‘everyday intuitions’), and there are few things as far removed from our daily experiences as the issue of ultimate origins. They argue that our concepts of logic, time, and causality, for example, might break down at the beginning of time. It is not clear that one is justified in extending an intuition that works well in our everyday environment (e.g., all events have a cause) to the universe at large (De Cruz and De Smedt 2016, p. 360). Additionally, many people including the brilliant

2 Note that the term ‘common-sense’ here is referring to the popular usage of the term, not to the ‘common-sense philosophy’ tradition associated with Thomas Reid.

philosopher Gottlob Frege used to think that for every class there is a set of things that are members of it, but Russell subsequently discovered that this leads to the contradictory class of all classes that are not members of themselves: if it is a member of itself, then it is not a member of itself. Rauser (2009, p. 99) comments that ‘the epistemological reverberations were significant, for here we had a principle that *seemed* self-evident, and yet turned out to be false ... But if we can make these kinds of mistakes, then which intuitive beliefs can be completely trusted?’ Using this case as an example, McNabb (2019, pp. 4–5) argues that, while it has been claimed that incorrigible beliefs can be recognized through a direct awareness of the belief and its correspondence to its truth-maker (DePoe 2020, p. 55), this ‘direct awareness’ of ‘seeing’ the truth could be wrong. Others have complained that, unlike scientists who can often confirm or disconfirm their theories, philosophers ‘do not have independent empirical techniques to confirm or disconfirm their intuitions, i.e., they have no “test key”’ (De Cruz and De Smedt 2016, p. 360, citing Cummins).

The warning to exercise caution when discussing matters that are far beyond our daily experiences is well taken. Nevertheless, we need to distinguish ‘common sense’ and ‘intuitive beliefs/direct awareness/seeing the truth’ from philosophical principles such as deductive and inductive reasoning which underlie (1) the construction of scientific theories themselves (including wave-particle duality and General Relativity) and (2) the construction of paradoxes and their solutions (see Section 6.4). In other words, we need to distinguish ‘common sense’ and ‘intuitive beliefs, etc.’ from philosophical principles of reasoning by which we show ‘common sense’ and ‘intuitive beliefs, etc.’ to be unreliable (Loke 2022a, pp. 13–14; I have argued in Section 6.4 that the laws of logic which underlie the philosophical principles of reasoning are based on understanding the meaning of the terms used in the laws).

With regard to General Relativity, the idea that space itself can be curved may seem strange, but it does not violate deductive and inductive reasoning, properly understood (Loke 2022a, p. 14). With regard to wave-particle duality, while this is certainly ‘strange,’ one can conceive of an entity that is neither wave nor particle, but which can behave like a wave under certain conditions and behave like a particle under other conditions. There are different ways of interpreting the observable quantum phenomena, and some of these ways, such as Everett’s many worlds interpretation and de Broglie-Bohm’s pilot-wave model (Goldstein 2024), are perfectly consistent with the laws of logic. (It is also possible that other better ways of explaining the observable quantum phenomena which are also consistent with the laws of logic may be discovered in the future.) Thus, while quantum phenomena may appear foreign to our ‘common sense’ and ‘everyday intuitions,’ they do not prove the violation of laws of logic and deductive reasoning, which (together with inductive reasoning) are required for quantum physics itself. To illustrate, quantum physics is often heralded as a scientific theory that is well-confirmed by experiments, such as those that reveal quantum entanglement. The confirmation would take the following form:

1. If the experiment reveals quantum entanglement, then the prediction of quantum physics is confirmed.
2. The experiment reveals quantum entanglement.
3. Therefore, the prediction of quantum physics is confirmed.

This form of valid reasoning is known as *modus ponens* (1. If A, then B 2. A 3. Therefore, B), which is a form of deductive reasoning and based on the laws of logic. Valid deductive reasoning can give a false result if the premise is false, but if the premise is true, then the conclusion which follows from valid deductive reasoning would be true as well. The above illustration shows that the confirmation or disconfirmation of scientific theories or intuitions itself would require the laws of logic (Loke 2022a, p. 14; cf. De Cruz and De Smedt 2016, p. 360). Kojonen notes that ‘at least some compatibility between the human mind and the cosmos is required in order for the cosmos to be at all amenable to scientific discovery, and for human survival to have been possible in the first place’ (Kojonen 2021, p. 42), and it has been shown in Chapter 6 that the laws of logic are necessarily true.

In summary, the above-mentioned examples taken from quantum physics and General Relativity have not shown that we cannot have any understanding of reality at levels far beyond our daily experiences on the basis of philosophical principles of reasoning. On the contrary, the foregoing discussion indicates that we can understand certain aspects of reality at these levels using these philosophical principles on which scientific theories (including quantum physics and General Relativity) are based. Against the worry that how we think about the world may be very different from what the world itself really is, I have argued in Section 6.4 that the laws of logic correspond with what the world itself really is, and we can therefore use the laws of logic to formulate various arguments concerning the world. The laws of logic imply that the conclusion of a deductively valid argument from true premises is true.

As for time and causality, following the laws of logic, the ‘breaking down’ of these would imply being timeless and uncaused. Using the laws of logic, various arguments lead to the conclusion that there is an uncaused and initially timeless First Cause of the universe.³ Using the laws of logic, one can also offer a *Modus Tollens* argument to show that the principle ‘all events have a cause’ applies to the universe at large as well (see Section 6.5, cf. De Cruz and De Smedt 2016, p. 360).

Against the claim that to be worthy of belief explanations must yield confirmed predictions (Lakatos and Zahar 1978), it can be argued that yielding confirmed predictions is not a necessary condition for worthiness of belief; on the contrary, if a deductively valid argument with true premises can be formulated for an explanation, then that explanation must be true. In Chapter 6, I have explained that such an argument can be offered for theistic explanation for the ultimate origin of the universe. (An alternative to this deductive response is an inductive one. For example, against the worry that a

3 That is, according to the relational view of time, see Loke (2022a, chapter 6).

theory cooked up to ‘explain’ a single fact would be ad hoc, Banner [1990, p. 139] argues that, if a theory

gives a unified explanation of a diverse range of facts not previously known to be connected, the theory will have merit whether or not the scientist’s intention was simply to have a theory which would do just this ... a theory is acceptable in so far as it is supported by convergent lines of argument.

The deductive and inductive responses can complement each other.)

On the other hand, it should also be noted that many scientific views are in the process of changing, and many scientific theories are incomplete. For instance, scientists have yet to figure out the relationship between quantum theory and relativity theory. This indicates the incompleteness of these theories, and it is highly likely that some aspects of these theories would be overturned by future discoveries and that major adjustments or qualifications would have to be made. Scientific theories, in their attempts to explain a connected sequence of phenomena by postulating an entity as a cause, face the difficulty that there may be other underlying causes for these phenomena that have not yet been discovered. In this way, scientific theories are underdetermined by the observations that purportedly supported them, and other theories for these observations remain possible (Loke 2022a, p. 19; for classic discussions, see Duhem 1954; Quine 1951; Laudan 1990). This is not to say that we cannot judge which theory is more probable or reasonable than others, but what this implies is that science can never achieve the kind of epistemic certainty philosophical reasoning is capable of yielding.

To consider an extreme example, it is logically possible that scientific observations (including the predicted observations) are all hallucinations caused by—for all we know—an alien. One might object that there is no evidence for the existence of an alien which has such powers and claim that the existence of such an alien is unlikely. But we cannot know this with as much certainty as we know the non-existence of logically impossible entities such as ‘shapeless square,’ which cannot exist in any possible world. One does not need to observe or scientifically test all possible universes in order to know that shapeless squares do not and cannot exist in any universe. It is sufficient to know that ‘shapeless’ (no-shape) would fail in any case where there is a shape (e.g., a square). This reasoning is philosophical in nature and cannot be overturned by future discoveries of science. The foregoing discussion indicates that philosophical reasoning is capable of yielding items of knowledge which we can be even more epistemically certain about than the conclusions of science.

Now, I am not claiming that philosophy is the only intellectual discipline that leads to knowledge. Rather, I am arguing that philosophy is another method of knowing in addition to science. There are other methods, such as mathematical and historical. These methods use various sources of acquiring knowledge in different ways. These sources include rational insight (by which we come to understand laws of logic, concepts, etc.), sensory experiences (by which you come to know that this book exists), introspection (by which I know that I feel

happy, for example), moral insight (e.g., torture babies for fun is wrong), aesthetic insight (e.g., Mahler's symphonies are beautiful), and reasoning (e.g., deductive, inductive). A person may also consider his/her own memories and also the experiences of others (testimony). Kwan (2011, pp. 284–285) observes that 'looking at the world only through sensory experience and science is, indeed, acting in a way similar to someone who keeps one eye closed. As a result, he can only have an impoverished or even distorted vision of the world, and he robs himself of the stereoscopic spiritual vision of our own existence and the world.'

In summary, science is not the only way to know things, nor is it necessarily the best way. Philosophy is another way, and which way is the best depends on what we want to find out. If we want to discover how the universe works, we should use the scientific method. On the other hand, philosophy is concerned with the analysis, clarification, criticism and justification of the concepts, underlying assumptions and principles (such as laws of logic, rules of inference, induction, causality, and ethics) that all disciplines (including science) require, as well as the fundamental nature, principles and categories of existence, ultimate explanations, and First Cause. Scientific experiments cannot confirm or exclude the existence of a beginningless and timeless First Cause, since they can only investigate processes which occur in time. On the other hand, I have explained in previous sections that the question of whether such a First Cause exists can be answered using philosophical arguments.

Science itself cannot answer the question of what makes science possible. In order for science to be possible, there has to be a physical universe with certain properties which can be studied by scientists. But why does the physical universe exist? And why do mindless and unintelligent physical entities consistently behave in such an orderly manner which is intelligible to the scientist, and which can be described by so many elegant mathematical equations? And why does our universe allow for the existence of living things such as scientists who have the capacity to think about these questions? I have explained in Chapter 6 that the answer to these questions is to be found in a Divine First Cause.

Influenced by Hegel's historical developmentalism,⁴ Auguste Comte (*Cours de Philosophie Positive*, 1842) famously advocated the three stages of human development, by which ancient beliefs in personal gods and medieval metaphysics should be replaced by modern science. However, he failed to realize the problem with his scientism, namely, that the scientific method itself requires various forms of philosophical reasoning, such as deductive and inductive

4 Contrary to a widely held misunderstanding, Hegel did not believe in a Marxian kind of 'dialectic' consisting of thesis/antithesis → synthesis; this misunderstanding was due to Fichte's misinterpretation of Hegel and spread widely by Karl Marx's use of it in his dialectical materialism (Geisler 2011, p. 242). Nevertheless, Hegel did affirm that history is the unfolding of the Absolute Spirit in a developmental dialectic. This supposedly results in 'a new concept but one higher and richer than the preceding—richer because it negates or opposes the preceding and therefore contains it, and it contains even more than that, for it is the unity of itself and its opposite' (Hegel 2010, p. 33) and leads to a completely unconditioned concept for each subject matter—the Absolute Idea (logic), Absolute Spirit (phenomenology), Absolute Idea of right and law (*Philosophy of Right*) (Maybee 2020).

reasoning, and that philosophical reasoning leads to the conclusion that a Personal God exists (see Section 3.2).

McGrath observes that all intellectual disciplines are under an intrinsic obligation to give an account of reality ‘according to its distinct nature’ that is appropriate to the reality being investigated. ‘In the case of the natural sciences, this “given” is the world of nature; in the case of theological science, it is God’s self-revelation in Christ (McGrath 2008, pp. 69, citing T.F. Torrance). While religious theories do not predict in the manner of some scientific theories, this is not a failure in rational virtue but as “a specific outcome of the object of theological study, and a reflection of the limiting conditions under which theology is obliged to proceed”’ (McGrath 2008, p. 122). For being a personal and free agent, God cannot be expected to behave in ways similar to physical entities or natural laws and to act in a similar predictable manner. Additionally, ‘according to many monotheists, God is supposed to be a beginningless and timeless First Cause of the universe, and scientific observations cannot confirm or exclude an entity that is beginningless and timeless, since scientific observations are limited to the observation of processes that occur in time. Therefore, science cannot confirm or exclude the existence of God in this sense. However, one can in principle argue that science can provide the evidences which can form the premises of deductive and inductive philosophical arguments for the existence of God (see Loke 2022a). As noted previously, deductive and inductive arguments are also what science itself requires.

In conclusion, contrary to scientism, we should not insist that scientific evidence should be the only kind of evidence that we would accept and that science itself is based on philosophical and historical evidences. As McGrath (2016, p. 159) notes, ‘science offers a reliable yet partial account of reality, which requires supplementation from other sources.’

7.2 Concerning paradigm shift and the realism-antirealism debate

On the other hand, the reliability of science has been challenged by a number of influential philosophers. One of them is Thomas Kuhn, who famously proposed the idea of a paradigm shift. Kuhn claims that, in a particular period of time of ‘normal science,’ a particular group of scientists’ practice of science is united by a broadly common ‘disciplinary matrix’ or ‘paradigm’⁵ which

5 Banner (1990, p. 8) notes that ‘Kuhn has since recognized his use of the concept to have been “badly confused”, for the reader is offered such an enormous catalogue of characterizations of paradigms that the main point of introducing the concept may be lost ... In response to criticisms, Kuhn has identified two aspects of scientific activity which the word “paradigm” was supposed to capture. First ... the notion of a paradigm refers to a past scientific success which is granted an exemplary status by what Kuhn terms “normal science” an exemplar, “the accepted way of solving a problem which serves as a model for future workers” ... in the second sense, a paradigm is a “disciplinary matrix” including, for example, the generalizations, methods, and models “shared by those trained to carry out the work that models itself on the paradigm-as-achievement”. Now the paradigm as exemplar is but a part of the paradigm as disciplinary matrix, and it is the second and broader characterization which is more important in reading Kuhn’s work.’

includes, for example, certain generalizations, methods, and models. A crisis happens when the paradigm is threatened by a proliferation of discrepancies (anomalies) between what the paradigm predicts and what is revealed by further observations, or by one anomaly which is long outstanding, which challenges fundamental aspects of the paradigm, and/or the solution of which has considerable practical importance. Sometimes the crisis results in a paradigm shift or a scientific revolution, which Kuhn describes as follows:

Like the choice between competing political institutions, that between competing paradigms proves to be a choice between incompatible modes of community life. Because it has that character, the choice is not and cannot be determined merely by the evaluative procedures characteristic of normal science, for these depend in part upon a particular paradigm, and that paradigm is at issue. When paradigms enter, as they must, into a debate about paradigm choice, their role is necessarily circular. Each group uses its own paradigm to argue in that paradigm's defence ... there is no standard higher standard than the assent of the relevant community.

(Kuhn 1970a, p. 94)

One issue concerning Kuhn's view is that, even if it correctly describes a 'paradigm shift,' this does not imply that it ought to be the case (note the distinction between 'is' and 'ought'). Another issue is the distinction between creating a standard of evaluation and recognizing or discovering a standard of evaluation which are based on good reasons. In his later work, Kuhn clarifies that he is not denying that changes of paradigm occur for good reasons; nevertheless, he is 'insisting that such reasons constitute values to be used in making a choice rather than rules of choice. Scientists who share them may nevertheless make different choices in the same concrete situation' (1970b, p. 262). For example, among two competing theories, one might be simpler while the other is more accurate, and one community might (say) value simplicity over accuracy while the other community values accuracy over simplicity (1970b). Moreover, even if the different communities agree on the value of a certain criterion, they may disagree in their application of this criterion (1970b). What Kuhn mentions are all genuine possibilities, and one needs to evaluate case by case and compare the reasons for each case. The problem, however, is that what Kuhn meant by 'good reasons' does not seem to be truth-indicative. As Banner (1990, pp. 24–25) observes, there are two senses of the word 'rational':

1. 'We might describe the behaviour of a witch doctor or of an astrologer as rational, even though we think that the theories which their actions presuppose are deeply mistaken ... a consensus amongst astrologers is explicable just because there are reasons and rules to which reference is made in settling questions and disputes.'

2. 'Immunization of children, for example, we regard as a rational policy, not merely because it is a practice governed by certain specifiable rules, values, and procedures, but because it is based on a theory of the workings of the human body which we take to be true. Thus, the rationality of immunization explains not only the consensus which would exist between its practitioners on some question, but would also explain the success of the practice of immunization.'

Banner notes that Kuhn affirms 1 but not 2, claiming that 'truth' may be 'a term with only intra-theoretical applications' (Kuhn 1970a, p. 266).

Radical postmodernists doubt how much science can help us know the 'real world' by emphasizing the underdetermination of scientific theory by observations, but Kitcher observes that just as Dr Johnson replied to the idealist philosopher Berkeley by kicking a stone, so the critics of radical postmodernists respond to the overemphasis of underdetermination by citing the successes of contemporary science (Kitcher 1998, pp. 40–41).

Kuhn tries to explain the success of science (e.g., the practice of immunization) in terms of a sociological account of puzzle-solving, but Banner argues that this account relies on, rather than avoids, the realist position (Banner 1990, p. 26). Similar problems beset Larry Laudan's (1977) attempt to explain the success of science by the development of problem-solving techniques. Laudan claims that 'one need not, and scientists generally do not, consider matters of truth and falsity when determining whether a theory does or does not solve a particular empirical problem' (1977, p. 24). However, 'since scientific progress could consist in solving only real problems, not spurious, false ones, Laudan's goal of accounting for progress requires reference to truth or falsity' (Banner 1990, p. 30).

One might reply that a significant form of instrumentalism may still obtain, which holds that truth values apply only to observational and not theoretical sentences, and that successful theories are those which latched on to the observed regularities in nature (Van Fraassen 1980, p. 40). However, one still needs to ask why these theories are able to latch on to the observed regularities. Van Fraassen (1980, pp. 23–24) objects that to demand an explanation in terms of truth or approximate truth would be to assume the principle of sufficient reason, which he thinks is at odds with the predominant interpretation of quantum physics. However, what Van Fraassen calls 'the predominant interpretation of quantum physics' (i.e., the Copenhagen interpretation) has been widely and rightly challenged in recent years (Bricmont 2017), and there are good reasons for thinking that the Causal Principle is true (see Section 6.5); this justifies the demand for a causal explanation of phenomena. McGrath (2024, p. 125) observes that, while proponents of instrumentalism claim that scientific theories were mere human constructions 'to provide a scaffolding or framework that could "save the phenomena,"' 'the extent of the capacity of some of these imaginative creations to accommodate observations led many to conclude that this veridical potential had to be grounded in something that lay

beyond the human mind—namely, their correspondence with the actual structures of the world.’ For example,

Nicolas Copernicus’s heliocentric model of the solar system was frequently interpreted in the sixteenth century as a useful ‘mathematical contrivance’ for coordinating astronomical observations, before being later reclassified as a truthful statement about the deeper structures of the real world. The epistemic utility of the theory was found to rest on its ontic foundations.
(p. 126)

It has been objected that, since theories that had once enjoyed considerable success (e.g., crystalline sphere theory of ancient and medieval astronomy, the wave theory of light, phlogiston chemistry) have been shown to be false, we have no good reason to think that our current theories are true (this position is known as pessimistic meta-induction) (Laudan 1981). However, as Kitcher replies, ‘it doesn’t follow from the fact that a past theory isn’t completely true that every part of that theory is false.’ He explains

If we think of individual pieces of scientific knowledge—of past astronomers who calculated the gravitational attraction on comets, theorists in optics who explained interference patterns in terms of the propagation of light waves, chemists who recognized the composition of water—it’s hard not to endorse as correct a large percentage of the important theoretical claims made by the practitioners of the past, even in the antirealist’s preferred examples.

(Kitcher 2002, pp. 387–388)

Others have questioned Laudan’s examples by arguing that the theories he listed as successful in the past were not genuinely so. For example, concerning Laudan’s citation of the crystalline sphere theory of ancient and medieval astronomy. Hardin and Rosenberg (1982, p. 610) object that ‘That theory ... started life as parasitic upon kinematic astronomy and never relinquished that role.’ What realists meant by successful theories are those which ‘are both comprehensive and robust, i.e., supported by convergent lines of independent argument’ (p. 610), ‘in which an increasingly finer specification of internal structure has been obtained over a long period, in which the theoretical entities function essentially in the argument and are not simply intuitive postulations of an “underlying reality”, and in which the original metaphor has proved continuously fertile and capable of increasingly further extension’ (McMullin 1984, p. 17).

Moreover, Laudan and Kuhn’s views are based on an unnecessarily narrow descriptive theory of meaning. Kuhn thinks that because of the theory-laden nature of observational terms, changes of meaning in central theoretical terms occur with a change of paradigm, and this limits the communication and commensurability of different paradigms and results in different worlds of meanings (Kuhn 1970a, pp. 101–102, 128, 150). However, the problem is that if there is

significant incommensurability, then the change of theory cannot be explicated in terms of reasons and there would be no convincing explanation of the formation of consensus (Banner 1990, pp. 22–23, noting that in his later works Kuhn softens his claim about the significance of incommensurability). Banner observes:

Take the case of the electron mentioned by Putnam and enlarged upon by Newton-Smith. Thomson believed things about the electron which Bohr denied, just as present-day scientists believe things incompatible with the theoretical suppositions made by Bohr. If one were to adopt (as does Kuhn) the holistic, or descriptive conception of meaning which suggests that there is a shift in meaning of ‘electron’ every time there is a change in the theory, then it would follow that Bohr and Thomson were not even talking about what we talk about when we mention electrons.
(Banner 1990, pp. 57–58)

To solve this problem, one can adopt a causal theory of reference which maintains that the extension of a term may be specified as that which ‘causes a certain phenomenon in certain ways’ (Newton-Smith 1981, p. 174). Thus, ‘common referential success may be achieved in spite of descriptive error and disagreement’ (Banner 1990, pp. 58–59). Thus, for example, even though J. J. Thomson, Lorentz, and Millikan had a different theory of the electron (and used different terms for it), they shared a common reference ‘for the reason that they intended to theorize about that which was responsible for the cathode ray phenomenon’ (Banner 1990, p. 59).

Physicist Roger Penrose observes that many modern scientists would argue that we should not try to ask what reality is but merely how does it behave (Penrose 2004, p. 1028). Nevertheless, insofar as how entities behave is a result of what these entities are, we can know various aspects of reality by considering how reality behaves.

It has been remarked that while science can reliably find out how many things work, this does not imply truth; for example, science is reliable enough to make planes fly, yet the Newtonian physics we use to work out how they fly is wrong.

Now, concerning Newtonian physics, ‘wrong’ is too strong a word; as Polkinghorne points out, the Newtonian map was not torn up, only its limitations (for events on a subatomic scale and for particles moving with velocities close to the speed of light, which require the insights of quantum physics and relativity, respectively) have been identified. ‘A really successful scientific theory, such as Newtonian mechanics, never totally disappears. In fact, it is still good enough to send a space probe to Mars’ (Polkinghorne 2011, pp. 7–8). Moreover, one can reject the pragmatic definition of truth but hold to the view that there are nevertheless truths about how things work, and we can know these truths based on the philosophical principles (deduction, induction, etc.) mentioned earlier. The technological advances over the last few centuries are indications that our knowledge of how things work is increasing.

While Laudan admits that, if a theory is true, then any of its consequences is true, he asks why we should assume that if a theory is approximately true, its

consequences are more likely true than false (1981, pp. 30–32). Banner (1990, p. 52) replies with an analogy:

For imagine an explorer being given a choice between a map which is plain false and one which is described as possessing verisimilitude (that is, true in some respects or near to the truth). Naturally, the map which has verisimilitude would be chosen, and we would expect those who used it to find their way with more success than otherwise.

My arguments in Section 7.1 concerning the limitations of science do not imply that all scientific discoveries are unreliable. Neither do they imply that all scientific theories are merely relative to historical and social circumstances as some radical postmodernists have claimed. We need to examine the purported items of scientific knowledge case by case and assess how strong the evidence is for each case.

While Popper (1959) had fostered the notion of hypotheses should be held in an entirely tentative way subjectable to falsification by experience (and some have applied this tentativeness to religious beliefs), others have noted that scientific theories are tested in bundles because a theory is not falsifiable unless it is conjoined with background assumptions, initial conditions, and auxiliary hypotheses (Pigliucci 2013). Lakatos (1970) has replied to Popper by observing that research programs can be modified by reasonable⁶ adjustments to their auxiliary theories in response to challenging observations while preserving their core theories, and this is a standard part of normal research in empirical science (Lakatos 1970). Austin (1976, pp. 111–112) has applied this to religion, where certain doctrines are regarded as peripheral while others are ‘hard core’ and held in a way which is neither provisional nor tentative. Thus, the claim that all scientific theories or religious beliefs are always held tentatively is mistaken, whether understood descriptively or normatively, for while some scientific theories are held tentatively, others which are well-supported by evidences are not (Banner 1990, p. 112; for example, see the response to Cupitt below). Banner also notes that the greater a theory’s explanatory power, the more the difficulties associated with it will be tolerated, citing Darwin’s response to objections to his theory as an example (1990, p. 181). Banner applies this principle to Christian theism and argues that whether difficulties such as the problem of evil and suffering are such that theism should be rejected will turn on

the larger question of the explanatory power of theism in relation to its range of evidence: the existence and order of the universe, the allegedly providential and miraculous character of the history of Israel and of the Church, the occurrence of religious experience and of saintliness amongst the faithful, and so on. The apologist’s judgement is that theism has so

6 An unrestricted amount of adjustments and continued ad hoc rationalization of repeated bouts of contrary evidence would be unreasonable and betray a commitment to preserve a desired hypothesis at all costs (Fishman 2009, p. 826).

much to commend it that we should treat the difficulties as puzzles. Theism has a resonance with reality, a fit with experience, so it is claimed, which leads the theist to say that the problems in the theistic hypothesis are not ultimately detrimental to it.

(1990, p. 182)

Contrary to the theological and scientific antirealist Don Cupitt who claims that ‘all theories are not discoveries but inventions, human imaginative constructions that are imposed upon experience and can be described as “true” only in the sense that, and for so long as it is found that, they work usefully’ (Cupitt 1988, p. 188), the National Academy of Sciences (2008) notes that

Many scientific theories are so well-established that no new evidence is likely to alter them substantially. For example, no new evidence will demonstrate that the Earth does not orbit around the sun (heliocentric theory), or that living things are not made of cells (cell theory), that matter is not composed of atoms, or that the surface of the Earth is not divided into solid plates that have moved over geological timescales (the theory of plate tectonics).

While the influential ‘postmodern’ philosopher of science Bruno Latour has been interpreted as offering a critique against ‘logics’ and treating the laws of physics as mere social conventions, an interview with him published in the New York Times indicates that this is not the case. The interview mentions that ‘the physicist Alan Sokal, who was under the impression that Latour and his S.T.S. colleagues thought that “the laws of physics are mere social conventions,” invited them to jump out the window of his 21st-floor apartment.’ Of course, Latour et al. never did; the rest of the interview clarifies that ‘Latour never sought to deny the existence of gravity. He has been doing something much more unusual: trying to redescribe the conditions by which this knowledge comes to be known.’⁷ Moreover, he also presupposes the same conditions of rationality (e.g., using the laws of logic and deduction) when he draws inferences ‘based on the best climate science data available’ and when he argues about ‘how knowledge is transmitted, what we’ve established as the conditions for proof, and whose voices we take as authoritative.’⁸ This implies that Latour ought to accept the ‘logic’ (e.g., the conclusion of a deductively valid argument from true premises is true) which underlies scientific knowledge of gravity (which Latour accepted), Sokal’s challenge, and Latour’s own inferences and arguments, and which I use to formulate the arguments of natural theology.

On the other hand, given the problem of underdetermination of scientific theory by observations, we should adopt an eclectic model of science whereby realist and antirealist interpretations of scientific theories are adopted on a

7 <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/25/magazine/bruno-latour-post-truth-philosopher-science.html>.

8 <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/25/magazine/bruno-latour-post-truth-philosopher-science.html>.

case-by-case basis, and adopt an antirealist interpretation of a theory if a realist interpretation conflicts with well-established metaphysical considerations (Moreland and Craig 2017, pp. 335–351), i.e., metaphysical considerations supported by valid arguments with true premises (see previous chapters). The importance of philosophical considerations has already been demonstrated in Chapter 6. Thus, we should adopt an antirealist view of a scientific theory if a realist interpretation would result in conflict with well-established truths of laws of logic (see Section 6.4) and Causal Principle (Weaver 2019; see Section 6.5), arguments against concrete infinities (Tegmark 2015; Loke 2017b; Loke and Haitov 2025) and infinite causal regress (Pruss 2018; Loke 2017b; 2022a; 2023); all of these are used by various arguments of natural theology.

7.3 On the usefulness of deductive reasoning

It has been claimed that, from the 19th century onward, there has been a tendency among natural theologians to avoid deductive logic, ‘especially since it was widely associated (rightly or wrongly) with the defunct scholasticism that had been overturned by the scientific revolution. The majority of arguments were *a posteriori* and *inductive*. They were seldom presented in a straightforward syllogistic format’ (Eddy 2013, p. 101; italics mine).

The association with ‘defunct scholasticism’ is unfortunate; modern science itself requires deductive logic such as *modus ponens* and *modus tollens* (see Section 7.1) as well as *a priori* mathematics. The Cosmological Argument is an *a posteriori* argument, but it can be presented in a deductive format: starting from our observation of the world, it can argue for the impossibility of infinite regress of causes and the impossibility of closed loop of causes by using *a priori* mathematical reasoning to arrive at the conclusion of a First Cause and deduce that this First Cause has the properties of a Creator (see Section 3.2).

Pinsent (2024, p. 28) claims that proofs for the existence of God that meet the rigorous standard of being incapable of contradiction are impossible, as indicated by the fact that ‘persons can be prepared to find fault with the most evident, if not quite self-evident, truths, such as $1 + 1$ making 2 and the non-spontaneous appearance of whales,’ claiming that ‘In the quantum world, however, such counterintuitive events do happen, such as particles appearing out of nothing or on the far side of otherwise impassable energy barriers.’

Now, the fact that persons can be prepared to find fault with the most evident does not deny the soundness of the Cosmological Argument I offered, because my argument is not merely based on what is evident but on the meaning of the terms and incorrigible experiences, as explained in Section 3.2. If one tries to find fault with $1 + 1 = 2$, one is using different definitions of the terms ‘1,’ ‘+,’ ‘=,’ and ‘2.’⁹ As explained in Section 6.4, it is illegitimate to try to

9 As in the case of ‘nonstandard mathematics. An example is shopping, an experience in which it is common for retailers to offer discounts for buying multiple instances of a product. In such circumstances, we are entirely comfortable with $1 + 1$ making less than 2’ (Pinsent 2024, p. 28).

rebut an argument by using an alternative definition of the terms. As for Pinsent's example concerning the quantum world, he is using a different definition of 'nothing' compared to what is used in the Cosmological Argument (see Section 6.5). Additionally, I have already offered a modus tollens argument for the Causal Principle, which implies that if particles truly appear uncaused out of absolute nothingness, it would entail a *contradiction* (see Section 6.5). Furthermore, I have explained in Section 3.2 that, on the basis of the Causal Principle, it can be deduced (using the Cosmological Argument) that there is a First Cause with libertarian freedom, i.e., a Creator God. Thus, contrary to Pinsent, a proof for the existence of God that meets the rigorous standard of being incapable of contradiction is indeed possible and has already been offered.

Without addressing the details of contemporary defenses of the Cosmological Argument, McGrath (2024, p. 33) claims that 'the more problematic aspects of older forms of natural theology ... rested on criteria of provability that could not be met in practice.' However, McGrath has not explained why the argument is not deductively valid or which premise has not been shown to be true (see the discussion of the premises in Chapter 6). Thus, he has not rebutted the argument, which provides a counterexample to his claim that the criteria of provability cannot be met in practice.

It might be objected that (1) a conclusion does not become guaranteed merely because the argument form is deductive. (2) Formulating the argument deductively might be guilty of relocating the uncertainty from the inferential step to the premises. (3) It is preferable to have a strong probabilistic argument rather than a deductive argument if at a number of junctures of the latter serious questions can be raised. (4) Many deductive arguments have premises that are less than certain, and once the probabilities are factored in, even a deductive argument with probable premises can yield an improbable conclusion.

It is true that a conclusion does not become guaranteed merely because the argument form is deductive. One has to consider the premises. If the premises are true and the deduction is valid, the conclusion is guaranteed to be true. In the case of the Cosmological Argument, the premises are based on undeniable phenomenological and mathematical truths (these are not merely probable but certain), and the deduction is valid, and therefore the conclusion is true (see Section 3.2 and Chapter 6). In the case of the Teleological and Moral Arguments, the worries expressed by (2), (3), and (4) can *in principle* be addressed by demonstrating that the conclusion that God exists is arrived at via exclusion of the alternative hypotheses based on the *essential* characteristics of those alternative hypotheses (see Chapter 3).¹⁰

10 Concerning the Teleological Argument, note that the argument by exclusion does not require 'perfect' elimination ('rule out'), understood as demonstrating that other possible hypotheses have zero probability. It only requires showing that their probability is so low that they can be eliminated as alternatives to Design (see the illustration of the essential characteristics of the 'random' hypothesis using the randomly typing monkey in Section 7.4).

Even if I am wrong about the above, it is still more useful to formulate the argument deductively, rather than inductively/abductively as favored by many philosophers and theologians nowadays (saying this does not deny the value of the abductive approach; for a recent application of the abductive approach to natural theology, see Sijuwade 2024). The reason is that an inductive/abductive approach which seeks to show that a particular conclusion is the best explanation faces the problem that

Substantive comparison can only involve known alternatives, which at any point represent a vanishingly small fraction of the possible alternatives. Choosing the best of the known may be the best we can do, but many would insist that without some further suppressed and significant assumptions, being the best (as humans see it) of the (humanly known) restricted group does not warrant ascription of truth, or anything like it.
(Ratzsch and Koperski 2023)

On the other hand, a deductive formulation which implies a logically exhaustive list of all possible hypotheses (e.g., cosmological models that postulate an infinite regress of events, a closed causal loop, uncaused beginning) allows for substantive comparison of all the alternatives, and a systematic evaluation of whether the ascription of truth is warranted for each of the possible hypotheses. The deductive approach avoids the problem of induction and the problem of underdetermination of scientific theories by the observations that purportedly support them. It also avoids the problems concerning the fallacy of affirming the consequent and non sequitur and shows how the truth of the conclusion would follow from the premises. It assists a cost-benefit analysis of all the available options and helps to reveal which assumption(s) needs to be given up if the conclusion is to be avoided. If there is any uncertainty in the argument, my deductive formulation allows the uncertainty to be precisely located at particular premises (contrast this with an inductive/abductive approach in which the uncertainty may be located at unknown alternatives, which contributes to agnosticism). This is helpful for the objector to show exactly where the argument fails, and for the proponent to improve on the argument in those particular areas.

7.4 Concerning probabilistic reasoning and the issue of certainty

Following Wittgenstein, one might object that one should say ‘I believe’ rather than ‘I know,’ because to say ‘I know’ requires the exclusion of all logical possibilities of error (Wittgenstein, Anscombe and Paul 1979). According to Wittgenstein, we cannot even say that ‘I know that I have a pair of hands,’ because our perceptions are fallible (we can imagine that our perception of our hands is due to [say] a continuous hallucination). However, most people would rightly regard this view as absurd, and they would regard people who say that they do not know that George Washington is the first president of the United States,

Mount Everest is the tallest mountain in the world in 2019, aspirin helps patients who had suffered from heart attack, etc. as ‘ignorant.’ In order not to be misunderstood as ignorant, we should not follow Wittgenstein’s way of using the word ‘know’; i.e., we should not hold the assumption that knowledge requires epistemic certainty or infallibility. Indeed, many philosophers would not follow Wittgenstein’s usage; as Stephen Hetherington (2005) observes, many philosophers do not think that knowledge must be infallible. Rather, we should embrace ‘epistemic fallibilism.’ Patrick Rysiew’s article in *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* notes the ‘near-universal acceptance of fallibilism in epistemology’ (see Section 5.1 of Rysiew 2023).

One might ask, ‘but isn’t it the case that our perceptions are fallible, and that it is logically possible that our perception of our hands, of Mount Everest, of aspirin, of pesticides etc. is due to (say, for example) a continuous hallucination?’

Dougherty (2017, p. 243) replies that ‘one of the advances of the modern era is recognition of the fact that we don’t need epistemological certainty to have the confidence required by any area of life.’

It is true that our experiences require interpretations and both are fallible; for example, people do see illusions sometimes (e.g., a spoon that appears bent in a cup of water). However, we discover this based on experiences and interpretations too (e.g., using our sensation of touch, which confirms that the spoon is not bent), which shows that we can know something based on experiences and interpretations.

In real life, all personal relationships (e.g., with one’s wife) and significant decisions involve beliefs which are not logically certain. For given our cognitive limitations, a person cannot know with logical certainty that his supposed acquaintances with (say) his wife are not due to (say) a continuous hallucination. Nevertheless, because such alternative possibilities are so unlikely, we do not accept them. To reject probabilities would be to reject the findings of science, medicine, etc., which is irrational (would the sceptic take a pesticide for a headache? Or jump down from 10 stories unprotected if he is not suicidal?). One can know and be justifiably certain—that is, have beliefs which could not have been false, realistically speaking—that one’s wife exists, that gravity exists, that George Washington was the first president of the United States, that we have a pair of hands, etc., without requiring logical certainty. Therefore, if there are good (probable) reasons for thinking that one is justifiably certain that (say) ‘God exists,’ then these reasons should be taken seriously, and the conclusion should be accepted as well.¹¹

Rausser (2009, p. 102) notes the emphasis on certainty within the biblical sources; for example, Luke wrote his gospel ‘so that you may know the certainty [*asphaleian*] of the things you have been taught’ (Luke 1:4).

11 It has been explained above in Section 6.6 that the Cosmological Argument can be shown to prove the conclusion that God exists with 100% certainty, but the point here is that, even if that is not the case, one should still accept it is true that God exists given good (probable) reasons.

Peter preached that one could be certain (*asphalos*) of the Messiahship of Jesus (Acts 2:36). These passages do not imply that all believers are obligated to have certainty, but that in the Scriptural portrayal the certainty of the factuality of key events is emphasized. Citing authoritative sources from diverse Christian traditions, such as *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (§157: 'Faith is certain. It is more certain than all human knowledge because it is founded on the very word of God who cannot lie'), and Calvin's *Institutes* (3.2.14: 'The certainty which [faith] requires must be full and decisive, as is usual in regard to matters ascertained and proved'), Dahm (2015) argues that, according to the Christian tradition, faith comes with certainty. He develops John Henry Newman's account of the certainty that accompanies faith which is compatible with epistemic fallibilism. Newman himself speaks of 'the cumulation of probabilities, independent of each other, arising out of the nature and circumstances of the particular case' (*Grammar of Assent* 8:2, 230, 233ff). Dahm comments that 'Through the convergence of probabilities and a kind of insight analogous to prudence in practical matters we attain certainty from probabilities' (Dahm 2015, p. 140). This account has similarities with the justified certainty which I explained earlier. Newman also thinks that 'certainty is the "perception of a truth with the perception that it is a truth."' (*Grammar* 6:2, 163). Because truth cannot change, certitude cannot fail (*Grammar* 7:2, 181). In other words, Newman thinks that the truth of p guarantees that one's certainty that p will not fail' (2015, p. 141). While many postmodernists oppose such certitude, Groothuis (2004, p. 448) observes that

Any intellectual quest is sabotaged and hamstrung by quarantining certainty at the outset. It is like injuring a horse before a race on the general principle that a strong, swift, and healthy steed is too proud to compete fairly or honestly. One should assess the strength of a given conclusion on the basis of the arguments given to support that conclusion, not by stipulating some 'humble' ideal that forswears certitude in principle and in perpetuity.

Wallace (2003, p. 22) notes that

'The very assertion that no one can determine with complete certainty the validity of any truth claim implies that the one who makes this assertion has absolute knowledge about the limits of knowledge of everyone else! Whatever the merits of postmodernism, modesty is not its long suit.'

Various probabilistic arguments have been formulated by philosophers of religion (e.g., Swinburne, McGrew), using (for example) Bayes' theorem. Dougherty (2017, p. 251) notes that

Bayes proved a theorem (or a version of a theorem) that would come to be incredibly important in fields as diverse as medical diagnostics, computer science, and engineering. So when Richard Swinburne, say, applies Bayes's theorem in assessing the force of evidence for and against the

existence of God, he is merely standing at one end of a continuum stretching far back in history and in continuity with medicine and law ... All three disciplines are ordered to human flourishing.

Against probabilistic reasoning, Webster claims that

Knowledge of Jesus Christ is possible and legitimate because of his antecedent, gratuitous and utterly real self-presence. Setting himself forth, expounding himself as the present one who encloses and orders all things, Jesus Christ makes himself known, and thereby excludes the possibility of legitimate, well-founded ignorance of himself. He is, and therefore he is present, and therefore he is known ... Jesus Christ's givenness sits ill with, for example, those Christologies which make historical scepticism or probabilistic reasoning the first principle of the knowledge of Christ.
(Webster 2005, pp. 23–24)

Webster's reasoning begs the question against skeptics by assuming that Jesus is divine and has revealed himself. Moreover, how does Webster know with logical certainty that his supposed recognition of Jesus' divine self-presence is not caused by (say) hallucination, wishful thinking, etc., however improbable and unreasonable these may be? Webster might reply that the divine Christ would ensure that hallucinations, wishful thinking, etc. are ruled out, but without further argumentation, this reply begs the question against those who hold non-incarnational views.

While the Bible-believing Van Til objects to probabilistic arguments for the existence of God by claiming that it is an insult to the living God (Van Til 1963, pp. 197, 258), he does not seem to be aware that he cannot be logically certain that he is reading the Bible because it is logically possible (however unlikely) that he is having a continuous hallucination. Moreover, he does not seem to realize that his preferred Transcendental Argument for the existence of God is probabilistic as well; it is logically possible (however unlikely) that naturalistic evolution produces humans with the ability to reason. He also fails to rule out the possibility that God would not feel insulted, given his knowledge of our epistemological limitation.

While Plantinga objects that one cannot base a firm and unwavering belief on an argument the conclusion of which is that the probability of theism is 0.9 or even 0.999 (Beilby 2005, p. 140), he does not seem to realize that one can have unwavering belief and commitment to (say) his wife even though her existence is likewise not logically certain given the possibility (however unlikely) of continuous hallucination. As noted earlier, there isn't 100% epistemic certainty for most things in life. For example, there isn't 100% epistemic certainty that what you are reading now is authored by a human being rather than a randomly typing monkey. The latter hypothesis is logically possible, yet unlikely. The more probable answer ought to be accepted as the true answer; i.e., the contents of this book ought to be regarded as evidence of an intelligent

author, rather than the product of unintelligent random causes, which is highly unlikely.

The random fine-tuning of our universe is even more unlikely compared to the above example. Consider, for example, the astonishing fine-tuning of entropy. The probability that a universe chosen at random would possess the necessary degree of order that ours does (and so possesses a second law of thermodynamics according to which the universe is progressing from a state of order to states of increasing disorder) is 1 in $10^{10(123)}$. If the universe were less ordered than this, the matter in it would have collapsed through friction into black holes (which represent extreme states of disorder and incompatible with any form of life), rather than form stars (Holder 2021, pp. 38–39, citing Penrose 1989, pp. 339–345, who notes that $10^{10(123)}$ is a number so large that the noughts cannot be written down in full even if each of the 10^{80} protons of our universe were to be used to write down 1 nought).

I have argued in Loke (2022a) that other proposed explanations, such as the multiverse, do not avoid the conclusion that the most probable explanation involves an intelligent Creator. In particular, for the following two reasons, one should avoid the misleading impression that multiple universes and fine-tuning are pitted against each other. First, the process which led to the formation of multiverse would itself require fine-tuning in order to stably generate so many different kinds of universes (and ensure that they do not face other problems such as colliding and destroying one another), such that eventually one that is ‘fine-tuned’ (and describable by highly sophisticated mathematical equations) is generated (Loke 2022a, pp. 180–181). Second, the fine-tuner (Designer) may have chosen to design a multiverse.

Contrary to Plantinga, Evans (1996, pp. 254–255) rightly argues that a passionate, all-or-nothing, costly commitment can be grounded in argument or evidence that is merely probable. The key ‘is to reject the implicit acceptance of a Lockean ethic of belief that regards belief as necessarily to be proportioned to internally accessible evidence’ (Evans 1996, p. 255). Trust in God is understood as a willingness to act on the assumption that God exists and that God is good, and is compatible with a less-than-certain belief.¹² Faith thus transcends reason (not against reason) in the sense that (1) commitment can be 100% (e.g., in marriage and commitment to God) even if the evidence is not 100% certain, and (2) some things are known by trust (e.g., in the testimony of a person).

Sudduth (2009, p. 183) notes that probabilistic inferences are sufficient for human accountability,

‘we are accountable or morally responsible ... on the basis of what we know ... in a criminal case, while one must prove the guilt of the accused beyond all reasonable doubt, one’s case need not be so clear and convincing as to withstand the skeptical arguments found in book one of

12 Evans disagrees with Swinburne’s view that ‘trust requires some degree of doubt. Surely, I can trust an individual about whom I have very certain beliefs’ (Evans 1996, pp. 254–255).

Descartes's *Meditations*.⁷ Even if the proofs do not yield conclusions that are logically certain, they may still be sufficiently strong such that one cannot say it is unreasonable to believe' (Rauser 2009, p. 19, citing Pascal). (Concerning the issue of certainty, see further, Sections 9.5 to 9.7)

7.5 Does faith exclude philosophical argumentation and evidence?

Dawkins claims that faith means 'blind trust, in the absence of evidence, even in the teeth of evidence' (Dawkins 1989, p. 198). While this might be true of how some religious believers think about the relationship between faith and reason, as noted in Chapter 1 Biblical authors and theologians think that there is external evidence for Christian doctrines.

Faith does not have to be blind or uncertain. Faith is a kind of trust. There is no indication that this excludes evidence. When I sit down and rest on my chair, I trust that it will hold me throughout the time I typed this paragraph—I am quite certain that it would do so, given the evidence I have about the chair (it's pretty sturdy, etc.). Likewise, a Natural Theologian can argue that believers can rest in God knowing that He will carry them through their lives and even beyond death to all eternity, and that they can be quite certain that He will do that given the evidences that He has revealed himself in creation and also in history in the person of Jesus Christ (see Loke 2017a, 2020, 2022a).

The underlying assumption of Dawkins' claim is that, if one can offer evidence for a religious doctrine, faith would not be necessary. However, this assumption is false. For example, there might be evidences that a particular surgeon is capable, but if a patient refuses to trust him and go for the surgery, the patient would not experience the benefits of the surgery. Similarly, one can in principle argue that there are evidences for thinking that God exists and that Jesus is the Saviour; nevertheless, one has to trust him in order to receive eternal life. On this view, evidence and faith are complementary rather than mutually exclusive: the evidence indicates that the doctrine is true, while faith is required so that one can receive its benefits.

Now Kant had argued that if one has evidence such that one knows that 'God and eternity with their awful majesty [stood] unceasingly before our eyes,' then 'most actions conforming to the law would be done from fear' rather than from the motivation to do one's duty, and the moral worth of actions would not exist at all (Kant 1997, pp. 121–122). In response, one can argue that the highest moral law and duty is to love God, that loving God should be the highest motivation behind fulfilling other duties, and that it is morally worthy to choose to act out of love for God rather than out of fear. Thus, the knowledge of the evidence that God exists is not inconsistent with the moral worth of actions (this does not deny the fact that if God's presence is completely unhidden it may result in overwhelming fear for humans at this stage of our existence, making moral testing and free choice psychologically impossible; see further the discussion on divine hiddenness in Loke 2022b).

Dunaway and Hawthorne (2017) object that a wide range of states that we think of as virtuous (e.g., courage) are states that do require the presence of risk,

which requires the absence of knowledge. Citing Kierkegaard (1846/1992), they note it has been argued that ‘faith requires total commitment to a belief, the kind of commitment that could not in principle be arrived at rationally via evidence, precisely because reason always leaves room for some doubt or future revision.’

The word ‘risk’ can mean ‘a situation involving exposure to danger’ or ‘a person or thing regarded as likely to turn out well or badly in a particular context or respect’ (OED). It can be argued that being willing to be exposed to danger for the sake of doing what is right is sufficient for being courageous and virtuous. Having evidence and knowledge that God exists is compatible with taking risks in this sense (as seen, for example, in the lives of many missionaries who are willing to be exposed to dangers for loving others). It is not true that reason always leaves room for some doubt or future revision; for example, one can be justifiably certain about various matters, including philosophical and scientific matters mentioned previously and historical matters such as the achievements of Julius Caesar and his death in 44 BC, and likewise (one might argue) the resurrection of Jesus (O’Collins 2016, vi; see also Loke 2020, chapters 8 and 9).

Kierkegaard (1846/1992) claims that without uncertainty there is no faith. One can qualify Kierkegaard’s view by understanding uncertainty in the sense that faith involves what we have not yet experienced ourselves (such as the resurrection of our bodies; cf. Heb 11:1 and 1 Cor 15). This does not exclude the possibility of having evidence for the one we trust (such as the possibility of having evidence for the existence of God and the resurrection of Christ, which indicates that God can be trusted to resurrect believers in Christ).

As an illustration, consider a father who told his daughter that he would bring her to Disneyland tomorrow. His daughter rejoices in that promise because she believes that he would do so. Her faith in her father is completely consistent with her certainty that her father exists, but it involves an uncertainty in the sense that she has not arrived at Disneyland yet. Likewise, people may know of the evidence that God exists, but they would still need faith to trust what He would do in their lives, including bringing them to their eternal home after they die since they have not arrived there yet.

Schellenberg (1993) explains that, for Kierkegaard, having evidence is contrary to the value of faith as that which takes the greatest risk, the staking of one’s whole life on an objective uncertainty, venturing to believe against the understanding the difficult doctrine of the Incarnation, which requires the highest degree of decisiveness and strenuous effort of the will (p. 155). Whereas having evidence would deceive people into thinking that they had a proper understanding of religious truth, that an external prudential response to God was sufficient to establish a proper relationship with him, and people would become complacent (p. 159, summarizing various parts of Kierkegaard’s *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*).

Kierkegaard’s main focus is on the ethical context, where one chooses the good (e.g., caring for one’s enemies) despite such actions appearing to be irrational. Nevertheless, Schellenberg rightly objects that Kierkegaard’s view neglects other goods, such as the good of having evidence for one’s religious beliefs (p. 163). Indeed, Kierkegaard’s view seems to imply that it is better to believe that fairy tales are true (despite all odds) as long as they can inspire us to ethical

actions, which would surely lead people to be deceived. On the other hand, Kierkegaard neglects the fact that seeking to find out whether there is evidence (and to understand the evidence and the truth which the evidence points to) also requires strenuous effort. Having evidence that God exists does not imply understanding God fully. A person who has come to believe that God exists on the basis of evidence would still require decisiveness and effort of the will to choose to know God more and follow God daily, and to pursue a deeper personal 'inward' relationship with God. 'There will always be new facets of the Divine nature to discover and appreciate ... The one who believes that there is a God has open to her a lifetime of worship and costly service' (Schellenberg 1993, p.167).

Moore raises concerns regarding the scope of the demand that one be reflectively rational (would this exclude infants, the mentally handicapped, etc.) (Moore 2010, p. 141).

A natural theologian can reply that it is not the case that all unbelievers are required to investigate the relevant evidence first before they can believe or that all Christians are required to investigate the evidences before they can continue believing. If that were so, the mentally handicapped, uneducated, etc. would be left out. Rather, his/her view is that if someone wishes to find out more about whether, for example, belief in God is reasonable, there is evidence which can be sought to show that it is worthy of belief. Consider this analogy: it is not necessary for a person to investigate the relevant scientific evidence first before he/she can consume a well-tested medication and experience its benefits. Nevertheless, if someone wishes to find out more about whether taking the medication is reasonable, there is evidence which can be sought to show that it is. The New Testament writers' encouragement of a truth-seeking attitude should be understood to mean that people should seek the truth as far as their abilities allow and to love the truth which they know. This understanding places no demands on those who lack such abilities, and neither does it imply that they have an inferior faith in the eyes of God who sees the heart (1 Sam 16:7).

Therefore, not all Christians are obliged to offer natural theological arguments for themselves in order to be justified in their theological beliefs. To illustrate with an analogy: not all patients need to do research in order to be warranted in taking a particular medicine, and indeed many patients may not have the skill to do the relevant investigation. What matters is that their beliefs in the medication are formed in the right way. Likewise, as reformed epistemologists have argued, not all Christians need those arguments to render their Christian beliefs warranted. Nevertheless, as long as the belief is formed in the right way—and there are arguments to show that it is—it is warranted. Reformed epistemology and natural theology are therefore compatible, and a Natural Theologian does not need to insist that all beliefs about God must be justified *only* inferentially.¹³

13 This view is sometimes called 'evidentialism,' but it would perhaps be better to refer to it as *theistic inferentialism*, given that the term 'evidentialism' has other uses in epistemology, referring to a view that allows for noninferentially justified belief (Bergmann 2017).

While rational argument is neither necessary nor sufficient for authentic faith, this does not mean it is unimportant. To think otherwise is to commit the write-off fallacy, viz. the fallacy of arguing that something is not important, because it is not necessary or not sufficient for something else that is good or valuable (Lau 2011, pp. 35–36).¹⁴

Stenmark (1995, 325–327) offers a helpful analogy for why a religious believer who does not regard belief in God as merely a hypothesis might nevertheless use such a concept and discusses the evidence for the God hypothesis. It is similar to a husband who believes that his wife loves him on the basis of his life experiences with his wife, and who encounters a skeptic who doubts this. Even though the husband does not regard his relationship with his wife as a hypothesis, he could in principle discuss some evidences. Stenmark argues that a religious believer may similarly discuss the existence of God as a hypothesis and attempt to present evidence for it, even though the grounds for that religious belief may be broader and not entirely communicable. Doing this does not require faith to desert its own standpoint and to take up the contrary standpoint of unbelief (Wolterstorff 1986, p. 39, citing Barth), but merely not to use faith as the premise of the argument.

Fergusson (2009, pp. 35–36) notes that, on the one hand,

A faith commitment is not ventured or refused in the same way as a hypothesis about an object in our solar system ... As personal trust it involves a reorientation of the entire self and not merely the addition of one more belief to our cognitive stock ... In appreciating the transformative nature of faith, moreover, one can also recognize that belief is only one element therein ... The practice of a religion involves typically an array of customs, rituals, ethical commitments, and celebration of festivals ... there is much more going on in religion than merely an individual's assent to a set of contested beliefs. This is not sufficiently registered by recent critics who tend to assume that religion is more or less equivalent to a collection of beliefs about the supernatural.

On the other hand,

Religious beliefs vary and are contested by some. In the presence of conflicting beliefs, it is necessary to appraise one's own in a way that is not generally required for more universally agreed judgements, e.g., the perception of medium-sized physical objects. Hence, the critical inspection

14 'For example, some people argue that democracy is not really that important because it is not necessary for having a good government. It is possible for a non-democratic government to work efficiently for the interests of the people, and this might be correct. Furthermore, democracy is not sufficient for good governance either, since citizens can make bad choices and end up electing a bad government. This is also possible. However, it might still be the case that a democratic political system is more likely to produce a good government than other alternatives' (Lau 2011, pp. 35–36).

of religious beliefs must have its place. As a form of religious self-description, theology is charged with describing its cognitive claims. And in entering the public domain, therefore, faith is assailed by criticism and burdened with a responsibility of engaging in counter-criticism and argument.

(Fergusson 2009, p. 38)

7.6 Conclusion

I have argued that scientism cannot be justified by science itself, while verificationism cannot be verified; these views fail to meet their own demands. Moreover, both science and verification require philosophical principles of reasoning which can be used by the arguments of natural theology. Just as science itself brings together different explanations to help us see the bigger picture (McGrath 2018), there is a need to bring together different disciplines that would complement one another in our attempt to gain a fuller understanding of reality.

In response to radical postmodernist objections related to paradigm-shift and the realism-antirealism debate, I have shown that there are various things we can know about reality based on the laws of logic, the construction of sound arguments, probabilistic reasoning, evidence from empirical observations, etc. and that the use of arguments and evidence is compatible with the nature of faith.

Concerning probabilistic reasoning (which is required for science), it has been shown that we can recognize truths (e.g., that gravity exists) without requiring 100% certainty.

Probabilistic reasoning can therefore help us discover various truths about the world, and some of these truths can be used as (true) premises of a deductively valid formulation of the Teleological Argument to show that God exists (see Section 3.2).

The Classical Approach to natural theology does not require that people know the evidences first before they can believe; rather, it merely affirms that, if someone wishes to find out more about whether belief in God is reasonable, there are evidences which can be sought to show that it is. In the next two chapters, I shall consider whether the use of arguments and evidence can overcome other objections concerning divine transcendence and human limitation and enable us to know some things about God.

8 A reassessment of the epistemological difficulties concerning divine transcendence

8.1 Introduction

Many people think that traditional natural theology faces an insuperable hurdle because God (if he exists) is supposed to be transcendent. Some have argued that such a transcendent being cannot be known by finite humans, while others have argued that, given the limitations of human language, conception, and experience, one cannot use philosophical argumentation to demonstrate God's existence. The limitation of human cognition is accentuated by human situatedness and the constructive activity of the human mind and illustrated by instances of incommensurability, shifting views of reasonableness, and the lack of consensus among experts concerning the existence of God. These issues will be examined in this chapter and the next chapter.

8.2 Divine transcendence and knowability

Mullins (2016, pp. 6–7) argues that ‘the doctrine of ineffability, or unknowability, of God is false ... the doctrine is self-referentially incoherent. To say that God is unknowable is to know something about God ... One can say that God cannot be fully comprehended by human minds, but that humans can have some significant knowledge of God.’ While Jacobs (2015, p. 165) maintains that ineffability is grounded in the nature of God, Mullins objects that this statement assumes knowledge about how God is intrinsically, and thus the doctrine is once again incoherent (Mullins 2016, p. 7). To claim that God is ‘beyond being’/‘beyond essence’ is to claim to *know* that God has a property (the property of ‘beyond...’) and thus to ascribe existence to God.¹ Likewise, the claim that God is beyond every assertion is an assertion about God, which again is self-contradictory.

1 See further the discussion on univocity and ontotheology in Sections 8.3 and 8.4 below.

Hewitt (2020, p. 23) argues that

a common recourse in the face of problems around the self-application of some condition (in this case we're concerned with the condition of being such that no predicate from P applies, which is itself expressed by a predicate from P and within its own remit) is to excise the offending condition from our theory. In various contexts – set-theories, the theory of properties, and so on – appeals to predicativity, or to the Vicious Circle Principle serve to perform the excision. A similar move can be made by the apophatic theologian.

Now, appeals to predicativity or to the Vicious Circle Principle are controversial in set-theories, etc. Moreover, the applicability of those moves to the present context faced by the apophatic theologian would need to be demonstrated rather than merely asserted.

Hewitt claims that adding the following constraint avoids the objection: No-RS: No predicate in P (a class of predicates) is reflectively semantic ('a predicate F is reflectively semantic just in case " Ft ", with t a grammatical singular term, says of the purported referent of t either that it satisfies singularly or together with other entities some predicate, or fails to satisfy some predicate, or else that it is the referent (singularly or together with other entities) of some expression' (pp. 23–24). He elaborates, 'According to No-RS, "is indescribable" is not one of the predicates whose application to God is denied by the apophatic theologian. She therefore does not contradict herself in saying that God is indescribable if indescribability is cashed out in terms of the non-applicability of predicates from some P' (pp. 23–24).

The key issue, however, concerns what 'describable' means and what is the justification for thinking that the denial of 'describable' applies to God. To claim that the above (constraint added) definition of indescribable applies to God is still an assertion about God, and in any case would still require some knowledge of God in order to know that it applies. (Moreover, I shall explain below that we can nevertheless describe the universe and show that it came from God, who is thus describable in this sense).

Daoists have argued for the ineffability of Ultimate Reality (the Dao) by claiming that (1) since the Dao is the progenitor of the myriad things, 'it cannot be a this rather than a that, since it is behind both, and if it were one, it could not be the other. Hence, it is ineffable, since any description would make it a this or a that.' (2) The Dao is so great that it transcends our finite categories, which draw distinctions and therefore apply to only a part of reality and will never be sufficient to encompass the myriad things (Deguchi et al. 2021, pp. 18–19, citing Laozi and Wang Bi).²

² The Daoist concept of 'non-existence (*wu*)' and the Chinese Buddhist notion of 'voidness' (*kong*) were 'employed to denominate the ultimately real, not because it is nothing, but because it is indescribable. Both Buddhism and Daoism wished to avoid attaching names to final reality, but since the employment of some terms was unavoidable, it was felt that "non-existence" and "voidness" were the least objectionable' (Lancashire 1969, 239).

In reply, (1) to claim that the Dao is the progenitor of the myriad things is in effect to claim that it is a ‘this’ (progenitor) rather than a ‘that’ (non-progenitor). Now, Ultimate Reality cannot be the progenitor of (all things including) itself since this would be self-contradictory. For in order for something to be self-caused, it must have already existed prior to causing itself to exist, which implies that it is not the case that it caused itself to exist. A self-contradictory thing cannot exist (just like shapeless squares cannot exist, as explained in Chapter 6). It is, therefore, misleading to call the Dao, God, or the Necessary Being *causa sui* (=self-caused). Rather, the correct term should be ‘uncaused.’ One can avoid a contradiction by affirming that Ultimate Reality is the progenitor of the myriad things other than itself, which is uncaused. Thus, it can be a this (‘uncaused’), rather than a that (‘caused’).

(2) Claiming that ‘the Dao is so great that it transcends our finite categories’ is in effect to place it in the category of transcendent and to draw a distinction between it and non-transcendent things. Moreover, the drawing of distinctions does not imply that the category is merely finite. Neither does it imply that the category applies only to a part of reality; there can be a category of the whole which is distinct from categories of the parts, and which encompasses the parts.

Philosophically, the claim that God is unknowable implies that the claim cannot be derived from divine transcendence, because ‘identifying any non-trivial consequence of a sentence requires knowing the logical form of the proposition expressed by the sentence, and deriving anything other than trivial and purely formal consequences requires the ability to express both the target sentence and the sentence that allegedly follows from it in a way that clearly exposes the conceptual connections between the propositions they express’ (Rea 2018, p. 45). Taliaferro (2024, p. 232) clarifies that ‘the idea that God is greater than which can be conceived is not equivalent to the idea that one can form no conception of God.’

While we may have difficulties describing God because of the limitation of our language, nevertheless God would still have properties (e.g., the property of being difficult to be described), and the latter affirmation is true and not affected by the limitation of our language (see Section 6.1). Moreover, the laws of logic would apply to God as well, i.e., God cannot be something like a shapeless square. This point is not trivial because it implies that

- (1) If the arguments of natural theology are sound, they would tell us something about the Creator whom Christians traditionally refer to as ‘God.’ The reason is that the laws of logic imply that the conclusion of an argument with true premises and valid inference (i.e., a sound argument) is true. Thus, if (for example) the Cosmological Argument is sound (see Section 3.2), we would know that there exists a Creator God who has libertarian freedom (a property of God’s own self). In other words, it would have implications for the transcendent realm, which Eastern philosophers such as Deguchi et al. are also concerned about.
- (2) Objections based on the (fallacious) claim that Ultimate Reality is beyond the laws of logic would not work (see Chapter 6).

While Isaiah 55:8-9 ('For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts') implies divine transcendence, it does not imply the unknowability or unprovability of God's existence. Rather, as Old Testament scholar Claus Westermann comments, in this passage God's 'thoughts' refer to God's 'plan or design. The ways are appropriate to the execution of these plans or designs. The subject is, what God purposes and how he carries it out' (Westermann 1969, p. 288). The specific issue here concerns God's design to procure Israel's salvation, in contrast with human (in this case Israelites') lassitude and acquiescence because of the situation in which they found themselves (Westermann 1969, p. 288). The context indicates that the 'thoughts' is referring to God's 'plan or design concerning God's amazingly gracious willingness to abundantly pardon and restore (Isaiah 55:7)' (p. 288). There is no warrant for interpreting Isaiah 55:8-9 as referring to God's plan or design concerning whether we can know or prove His existence. To interpret the text this way would be to disregard Isaiah 55:7, i.e., the immediate context which refers to the issue of God's salvation, not the issue of the provability of God's existence. Moreover, other passages in Isaiah (i.e., the larger context of this passage; see Isa. 41:21-29; 44:7, 24-28; 46:10; 48:5, 14) already affirm that people are able to know God based on evidence of fulfilled prophecy, and many of these passages are portrayed as spoken by God himself.

8.3 Addressing issues concerning religious language and apophatic theology

Barth (1956, p. 166) claims that the difficulty with thinking and speaking of God is such that there is no *analogia entis*, no natural correspondence between the created and the uncreated.³ Thus, 'if revelation is to occur, therefore, then this occurrence will necessarily be one in which God takes objects, events, words, ideas and other this-worldly entities and bestows upon them a capacity which in and of themselves they do not possess' (Hart 2000, p. 46). This is the Barthian *analogia fidei*, which claims that God can only be known through faith in God's own self-revelation in Christ.

One problem with the Barthian view is that (as argued in previous chapters) Barth has failed to offer a good answer to the question 'how do we know that God does reveal himself in the way Barth claims? How to know that what is "revealed" is indeed God?' Moreover, if Barth is correct, how could anyone understand the 'revelation' he talks about? For example, how could they understand what was claimed when it was said (as Barth does) that God is 'good'? As Swinburne (2005a, p. 109) observes, 'If there was no real analogy between human goodness and divine goodness, it would be just as informative to say

3 Moore (2013, p. 239) notes that Barth's own understanding of the *analogia entis* is 'complex and changes over time but the only form in which it is ever acceptable to him is one that is founded on the way that God comes alongside human beings in Christ' (see also Johnson 2010).

that God was “splodge” or “fudge” in causing it. Revelation has something more exciting to tell us, that is that God has goodness and wisdom similar to, but far greater than, human goodness and wisdom.⁴

While it is true that divine revelation has to be based on divine initiative, God can create the world in such a way that—in and of itself—it has the power to reflect the wisdom and power of its Creator. This is the doctrine of general revelation argued for in previous chapters, which indicates that according to Christian theology God has indeed done so, just as he has also revealed himself (albeit in a fuller and clearer way) through Christ. It would be false to think of natural theology as being built upon reason rather than divine self-revelation. On the contrary, natural theology—when done properly (i.e., using sound arguments)—is ontologically based on general revelation and is a proper interpretation (involving the use of human reason) of the world which God created, just as special revelation also requires interpretation involving human reason, and God can use both to reveal Himself.

Some apophatic theologians would go further than Barth and argue that one cannot make *positive* affirmations about God (or God per se), because God is so transcendent that his essence cannot be known by creatures in any positive way (this does not deny that one can make negative statements about God). The spiritual motivation behind many apophatic thinkers is to remove the idolatrous image of God so as to achieve union with God. It should be noted, however, that there is a range of different views among apophatic theologians. Some accept natural theology, while others reject natural theology. An example of the former is Hewitt (2020, p.9), who calls Aquinas an apophatic theologian and defends his view in *ST* Ia, q3 that ‘we are not able to know with regard to God what he is, but [rather] what he is not.’⁵ He notes Aquinas’ rejection of the Maimonidean position that we can talk of God only negatively, and appeals to Aquinas’ Cosmological arguments to assert ‘God exists’ just in case there is something rather than nothing at all (p. 73). The milder form of apophatic theology affirmed by Hewitt agrees that we can still talk about God’s

4 McDowell (2024) argues that what Barth is arguing against is the univocal application of concepts; I discuss this below.

5 In *Summa Contra Gentiles* 1.3, after mentioning of ‘the existence and unity of God, which philosophers have proved to a demonstration under the guidance of the light of natural reason,’ Aquinas goes on to say that ‘the human understanding cannot go so far of its natural power as to grasp His substance, since under the conditions of the present life the knowledge of our understanding commences with sense; and therefore objects beyond sense cannot be grasped by human understanding except so far as knowledge is gathered of them through the senses. But things of sense cannot lead our understanding to read in them the essence of the Divine Substance, inasmuch as they are effects inadequate to the power that caused them. Nevertheless, our understanding has thereby led to some knowledge of God, namely, of His existence and of other attributes that must necessarily be attributed to the First Cause.’ This passage indicates that Aquinas’ argument is based on the (controversial and unwarranted) assumption that ‘the knowledge of our understanding commences with sense’ and that he nonetheless affirms that we do have some knowledge of God. See the response by Sherry (1976, pp. 438–446) and others, discussed below.

effects (e.g., creation, resurrecting Jesus). He also thinks that we can talk about God himself using analogy. Nevertheless, Hewitt claims that ‘because God is the Creator of all that is, God in no way falls under the creaturely concepts our language is designed to express. God is, in this sense, wholly “other”’ (p. 89). ‘If I attempt to apply a predicate associated with some logical space of creatures, in a univocal fashion, to God then I am making a mistake. In particular I am committing a category mistake ... the same kind of mistake as if we say, without contextual explication, that yellow is virtuous or that the positive root of four is heavy’ (p. 101).

Hewitt claims that

real definitions specify what it is for an object to be an instance of a kind, and concludes that ‘There is no real definition of God’ on the basis of the (controversial) assumption that ‘God does not belong to a kind, and so the only logical space we can speak of God as occupying is occupied by God alone.’

(pp. 99–101)

In line with this apophatic tradition of reasoning, McDowell (2024, p. 47) claims that ‘God is beyond ... any and every category (citing Nicholas of Cusa); all categories break down when applied to God (citing Placher).’

But isn’t the concept ‘Creator’ which Hewitt applies to God also part of the (so-called) creaturely concepts of our language, even if he denies that ‘Creator’ is a kind term? Hewitt agrees that ‘speaking of God’s effects does not pose any particular difficulties’ (p. 110), and he might say that claiming that God is ‘Creator’ is just to speak about God’s effect in creating the world. However, to speak of the effect of *x* is to say something about *x* itself, since the effect is the result of some causal properties of *x* itself. Thus, Hewitt’s claim (‘because God is the Creator of all that is, God in no way falls under the creaturely concepts our language is designed to express’) is a non sequitur and fails to show that all application of predicates associated with some logical space of creatures, in a univocal fashion, to God commits a category mistake. Moreover, the claim that we can know God’s existence but not God’s nature seems contrary to Romans 1:20 (‘God’s eternal power and divine nature ... have been seen and understood’), which implies that we can know both.

Moser (2024, p. 203) objects that ‘I do deny that God can be known merely by God’s effects ... For any alleged effect of God, we have to ask: Is this truly an effect of God? ... these effects need an identifiable connection to God, and not just to more effects.’ The Cosmological Argument answers Moser’s objection by deducing that the effects have a First Cause and deducing that this First Cause is a Creator (God).

The reason why some people have problems speaking about a transcendent, timeless, and spaceless God may be related to their faulty assumptions about existence. One might object that he/she cannot conceive of something that is

immaterial, spaceless, and timeless, i.e., something that has no spatial and temporal extension, which seems to be non-existence.

Two points can be said in response.

First, the lack of extension does not imply non-existence. The key is how existence should be understood. Some may think that to exist is to be located in space and time, but the problem with this view is that space and time are not themselves located in space and time (Moreland and Craig 2017, p. 173). Others may think that to exist is to be physical, but the problem with this view is that disembodied existence is surely conceivable, and it begs the question against an immaterial God (Moreland and Craig 2017, pp. 174–175).

Existence is better defined as a state involving ‘the predication or exemplification relation ... existence is either the belonging of some property or the being belonged to by a property’ (Moreland and Craig 2017, p. 176). Moreland and Craig (2017) explain:

Things that exist have properties. When something such as Zeus fails to exist, there is no object Zeus that actually has properties. Since unicorns could have existed, this means that the property of being a unicorn could have belonged to something. It would also account for existence itself existing because the belonging-to (exemplification, predication) relation is itself exemplified (a nonfictional, real tiger named Tony and the property of being a tiger both enter into this belonging relation) and the belonging-to relation exemplifies other features (e.g., it has the property of being a relation that belongs to it).

(Moreland and Craig 2017, p. 176)

The terms ‘belonging’ and ‘being belonged’ used in the quotations above indicate that existence is a state involving relations and properties, rather than a mere relation or property.⁶ This state is not a relation or property but a condition involving predication or exemplification of a property by an individual.⁷

Second, one can conceive of immateriality, spaceless, and timeless as the negations of materiality, space, and time. The negation of a meaningful term is meaningful. Materiality is meaningful. Therefore, the negation of materiality is meaningful, and that is what immateriality means. Likewise, space and time (understood as a series of changes ordered by earlier-later relations) are meaningful terms. Therefore, the negation of space and the negation of time are meaningful terms, and those are what spaceless and timeless mean.

6 Given the definition of existence as a ‘state involving relations’ rather than ‘relations’, it does not suffer from the regress problem that Vallicella (2004) alleges against Moreland’s view, which is based on misunderstanding Moreland’s view as affirming existence as a relation.

7 It might be objected that the view that God exemplifies properties is contrary to the doctrine of divine simplicity. In reply, one can argue that there is insufficient philosophical, theological, and Scriptural justification for this doctrine (Loke 2014; forthcoming d; Craig 2025).

One might object that either something is extended or not extended, and if it is not extended, it is a point. However, this reasoning neglected the possibility of spacelessness. A point is something in space, whereas spacelessness is not a point in space. Likewise, timelessness is not a point in time. Rather, a timeless and spaceless First Cause would be something that is not in a temporal or spatial dimension and does not have temporal and spatial extension, and it is not non-existence because it has properties, such as the property of causal power which brought about the first event. Having causal power means having the capacity to bring about something; it does not mean/imply/require having spatial or temporal extension. Likewise, having intelligence means having knowledge, understanding, foresight, wisdom, purpose, and intention; it does not mean/imply/require having spatial or temporal extension. One can think of a Mind having a timeless awareness of truths (including truths about highly ordered structures) and which has the capacity to bring about something in accordance with these truths.

While God is not supposed to be a creaturely reality and does not have qualities in the way that creaturely realities do (Quash 2007, p. 327), it does not follow that he cannot be described in relation to and distinction from other creaturely realities, nor does it follow that God does not have qualities which might be predicated of him (Contra Quash [2007, p. 327, citing Ticcianti], the assertion that ‘one cannot say, God is this and not that; for God is not a thing to be distinguished from other things’ is self-contradictory, because the latter claim ‘for God is not...’ contradicts the former claim ‘one cannot say, God is...not.’). One can think of an immaterial Creator as something that has the properties of causal powers, intelligence, etc., and which can exist without spacetime. One can understand the proposition ‘the universe was created by an immaterial Creator’ to refer to the universe having a beginning and brought into existence by a free, intelligent, and powerful First Cause which is initially changeless, timeless, and spaceless.

Pseudo-Dionysius (late 5th to early 6th century) in *The Divine Names* proposed a three-step process for making determinate claims about God (Mullins 2016, p. 9).

The first step is *via positiva*: one looks for a communicable attribute that God and creatures have in common—such as causal power—and predicates it of God.

The second step, *via negativa*, contrasts the way God and creatures have various properties without denying the predicates simpliciter of God (Mullins 2016, p. 9). For example, God is not a cause in the same way that we are causes; He is an immaterial cause, while we have physical bodies which are material. Negative notions are employed only after a positive affirmation is made in order to define an object or idea more clearly (Shedd 2004, pp. 69–75).

The third step, *via causalitatis*, affirms that God has properties in a superabundant way (Mullins 2016, p. 9). For example, God has causal powers in a

superabundant way because He is the cause of the entire universe, whereas we only have very limited causal powers within a small part of the universe. Hume has raised a concern by claiming that all our 'ideas' are compounded of simple ideas which are derived from 'impressions' and that any purported idea not so derived is meaningless (*An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 2.12–2.17). Swinburne (2012, p. 3) replies that one can combine the idea of a person with the idea of a material part and the idea of not having something, so as to derive the idea of a person who does not have a material part (i.e., non-embodied). We can then combine this with ideas of power, action, goodness, and knowledge (all of which are derivable from 'impressions'), and 'we are well on the way to having an idea of God' (p. 3).

Philosopher Katherin Rogers (2000, p. 16) explains that the similarity between creation and Creator would be in line with Anselm's and Augustine's view that the basic relationship of creation to Creator is one of participation; i.e., every good quality which is possessed by a creature is possessed through some sort of 'reflecting' or 'sharing in' the nature of the divine. Rogers notes Duns Scotus' argument that, in order for us to speak properly of God, there must be some underlying sameness, genuinely applicable to the creature and God, which we are grasping. It could well be the case, as Scotus proposes, that God created humans with the capability of abstracting concepts of sufficient generality from experiential data of creation, such that these concepts can apply univocally to God and creatures. (Since humans are created in the image of God according to the Scriptures, certain similarities between God and humans are to be expected in accordance with Christian theology.) Rogers explains:

We get our concept or wisdom, for example, from observing creatures. In creatures wisdom is limited. Wisdom per se, however, is neither limited nor unlimited. Wisdom is just wisdom. When we abstract the concept we can strip it, in *intellectu*, of all the imperfections which accompany wisdom in the creature but which are not part of the definition of 'wisdom'.⁸

The above conclusion would be similar to the 'partial univocity' view proposed by William Alston. Alston (2005, pp. 234–242) demonstrates that many terms can be analyzed into an abstract component which can be applied univocally and which goes some way toward specifying the relevant analogy, and a more concrete part which is not strictly appropriate to God. Thus, there is an analogy between divine and human properties with an 'abstract univocal core,' and this partial univocity gives us a secure foundation for the less determinate

⁸ Rogers (2000, pp. 17–18; citing Scotus *Oxford Commentary on the Four Books of the Sentences* I, dist. III, q.1 and 2).

portions of our talk of God. Alston differentiates his position from the ‘analogical’ position of Aquinas which denies the possibility of an explicit literal formulation of the points of analogy, resulting in loose ends dangling in our talk of God. Of particular relevance to the discussion here concerning the use of psychological notions is Alston’s view that functional concepts of psychological states can be univocally applied to God and to us.⁹ Alston suggests that a functional concept is in terms of the function of its object, not in terms of its structure or intrinsic character. Thus, a loudspeaker is anything with the function of converting electronic signals into sound, and this is compatible with a great variety of compositions and designs. He writes:

So if we conceive a desire, an intention, a belief, or a bit of knowledge in terms of its function in the motivation of action, then that concept can apply to items that are radically different in their composition and structure, even as radically as the divine psyche differs from the human psyche.

(Alston 2005, pp. 235–236; 1989, ch. 3–4)

Likewise, to understand what the notion of an immaterial divine Creator means, we can conceive how concepts such as ‘free will,’ ‘causal power,’ and ‘Creator’ can apply to human and divine, material or immaterial (immateriality is a meaningful term; it means the negation of materiality). Consider free will and causal power. Moreland (2017, pp. 306–307) notes that

We understand exercises of power primarily from introspective awareness of our own libertarian acts, and we use the concept of action so derived to offer third-person explanations of the behaviour of other human persons. There is nothing obscure about such explanations for the effects produced by other finite persons ... In fact, naturalists like John Searle, John Bishop and Thomas Nagel all admit that our basic concept of action itself is a libertarian one.

We can apply concepts beyond the context of how we gained knowledge of those concepts. For example, while we gained our knowledge of expansion based on what we observe in the universe (e.g., a balloon), we can conceive how the concept of expansion can be applied to the universe itself (Big Bang Theory). Likewise, while we gain our knowledge of the concepts of free will and causal power based on introspection, we can conceive how the concepts of free will and causal power can be applied to a Creator (see Loke 2022a).

Out-of-body experience, demon possession, etc. are meaningful terms used in scientific literature (e.g., Betty 2005). We can understand what demons are

⁹ For a defense of the view that the New Testament affirms God as tri-personal, see Loke (2017a, chapter 1), contrary to the view of Davies and McCabe.

(‘intelligent beings, insensible to us, with a will of their own who seem to bother or oppress us’ [Betty 2005]), even though they are supposed to be immaterial and even if we deny their existence. The concept of a demon does not entail a contradiction and is conceivable and meaningful. Likewise, the concept of an immaterial Creator. Since it is conceivable, it has cognitive content and therefore is meaningful. And since it is meaningful, it can be the conclusion of a valid deduction from the true premises of the Cosmological Argument (see Section 8.3).

One might object by claiming, as theologian Sallie McFague (1982, p. 194) has done, that *all* our language about God is metaphorical. Swinburne (2007, p. 224) notes that ‘the occurrence of metaphor and analogy is to be expected in view of the fact that theology makes claims about transcendent matters, but must perforce use ordinary human words given their meaning originally by their applicability to very ordinary mundane goings-on.’ However, as Alston (1989, ch.1–2) points out, metaphors posit some kind of comparison that can at least in part be literally specified.¹⁰ For example, the metaphor ‘God is my shepherd’ attributes to God property P (e.g., God is the one who cares for me), which is a literal sentence of the form ‘God is P,’ where P is the specific point of resemblance. Alston’s view does *not* imply that ‘the one who cares for me’ *fully* captures the richness of the image of a shepherd; as noted above, his view is merely that the comparison can at least *in part* (not fully) be literally specified. Thus, Alston’s view is consistent with the claim that religious metaphors are essential for expressing transcendent concepts and experiencing religious truths and that they cannot be reduced to literal language without losing significant meaning, as well as richness and depth of insight (Soskice 1985).

Lakoff and Johnson (2008) argue that while evidence from cognitive science indicates that human thought processes are largely metaphorical (p. 272), they are not wholly metaphorical. Instead, ‘metaphorical language has literal meaning in the source domain’ (p. 265). They also argue that ‘metaphor is, in general, not based on similarity ... Instead, it is typically based on cross-domain correlations in our experience, which give rise to the perceived similarities between the two domains within the metaphor’ (p. 244); ‘cross-domain correlations giving rise to perceived similarities’ involve ‘some kind of comparison that can at least in part be literally specified’ and is therefore consistent with Alston’s point.

Concerning Aquinas’s denial of univocity, this arose from Aquinas’s pre-suppositions that words are univocal only if they denote properties in beings which belong to the same genus, and that concepts are abstracted from images derived from sensible things, and so our language is tied in meaning by its applicability to sensible things (Sherry 1976, pp. 438–446). However, these pre-suppositions are unwarranted. ‘Words which denote properties in beings of

10 Scott points out that McFague seems to rely on introducing a non-standard understanding of ‘metaphor,’ observing that, standardly, we can distinguish ‘God created the world,’ where the speaker means what is said, from ‘the Lord is my shepherd,’ where a speaker uses a (false) sentence to convey something else (Scott 2010, Section 5.1).

different genera may be univocal ... We may learn what a word means by learning the syntactic criteria for its application and observing objects to which it paradigmatically applies; and this may allow us to ascribe it in the same sense to objects which we cannot observe' (Swinburne 2007, p. 227). For example, 'God being "wise," like Socrates being "wise," involves knowing and understanding many things, and the truth-conditions of his being "wise" are that he does know and understand many things' (Swinburne 2007, p. 227). Given that Aquinas himself advances Cosmological Arguments for the existence of God using metaphysical principles, and given that these arguments require that there is some concept of being that applies univocally to God and creatures, Aquinas cannot consistently deny that the concept 'being' deployed in these arguments is univocal in Scotus' sense (Cross 2005, p. 71).

It has been objected by members of the Radical Orthodoxy movement that the view that there is a univocal concept of being that applies equally to God and creatures which is advocated by Scotus (*Ordinatio* I, d.3, p.1, qq.1-2, 3) and others commits 'the ontotheological error,' viz. the purported error of subordinating God to being-in-general and implying that God is (merely) a being among other beings¹¹ (Millbank 2007). They worry that, if we were to say that God exists and Socrates exists and that the word 'exists' has the same meaning in both statements, this would imply that God and Socrates can both be grouped together under a single concept¹² which refers to some real, extra-mental attribute that they both have in common. This would turn God into a creature or turning Socrates into God and/or imply that some property is ontologically prior to God, such that God depends on it for his own existence (Wood 2021, pp. 131, 150 citing Milbank et al. and noting that the underlying worry generalizes to all divine attributes and all theological predications; Wood replies to this worry in his book.). A similar worry was raised by Paul Tillich who criticizes the classical arguments for the existence of God for saying that 'God exists,' which (Tillich thinks) is to place God on the same level as creatures, a 'being' like all other existing 'beings' rather than the 'ground of being' (1951], 235–238). McDowell (2024, p. 224) thinks that the problem which Barth is getting at with his critique of the *analogia entis* 'is that of a theological metaphysics that promotes a sense of the univocity between God and creature.' He argues that 'The appropriate contrast, then, is not between envisaging

11 The word 'being' is used in different ways in the literature by different authors. Some use 'being' to mean 'to be,' while others take these terms to mean a thing/empirical object in the world, and to distinguish God from these, they would say that God is "beyond Being" or as "the ground of Being" rather than as "a being" (Wood 2021, p. 130). Still others use it to refer to 'Being-itself,' the absolute and unconditioned, which nothing greater can be conceived (Olson 2015). In this book, I use the term to mean 'to be,' i.e., a thing in existence.

12 Wood (pp. 139–140) notes that this view was associated with Scotus in contrast with the view of Aquinas, and that a number of scholars such as Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Charles Taylor have claimed that Scotus was accountable for secularization, while Scotus specialists such as Richard Cross and Scott Williams have consistently argued that this interpretation of Scotus is untenable.

God to be either a thing or nothing. Instead, God is no-thing, that which does not appear under any identifying category of thing or nothing' (p. 90).

The above objections require a careful definition of 'existence,' 'being,' and 'thing,' which the objectors do not offer (contrast with the definition of existence by Moreland and Craig, discussed above). On the other hand, Wood observes that while the accusation of dissolving the distinction between God and creature seems justified for Hegel's philosophical theology (pp. 134–137),¹³ it is unjustified for analytic theology: 'Nor does any analytic theologian think that God depends on being for his own existence, or hold that being is somehow ontologically or causally prior to God ... for the most part, they deny that there is any really existing property of being at all.¹⁴ If there is no such property at all, then God cannot depend on it for his existence' (p. 138). Moreover, the objection confuses 'the essentially harmless notion of God's falling under the abstract univocal concept "being" with ontological dependence (the metaphysical absurdity of God's ontologically depending on being-in-general)' (Adams 2014, p. 8). As illustrated by the Cosmological Argument advocated by Scotus and others, the univocal concept of being assumed in this argument does not obstruct or deny the conclusion that God is utterly different from creatures in that God is necessarily existent, eternal, independently productive, etc. whereas creatures are not (Adams 2014, p. 6). Far from implying that God is merely a being among other beings, the Cosmological Argument implies that God is the ultimate Creator and superior to creatures. The view that God exemplifies certain properties (e.g., being the uncaused and ungrounded First Cause Creator)—the exemplification of properties fitting the definitions of 'existence' and 'thing' which I have explained previously (citing Moreland and Craig)—does not imply that God ontologically depends on those properties for his own existence. Rather, those properties are merely descriptive of God; indeed, the properties of being uncaused and ungrounded imply that God is not dependent on anything.

13 Wood (2021 p. 134) writes: 'According to Hegel, God is the Absolute Mind, or Absolute Spirit (Geist). Furthermore, God can be identified with reality itself: God is the totality of everything that exists, understood as a teleological process. The teleological process of reality aims at God's own complete self-knowledge. The whole of reality is the process by which God, understood as the Absolute Mind, comes to know itself perfectly and completely as the whole of reality. Human consciousness is a moment in the Absolute Mind's own unfolding process of coming to understand itself. In this sense, "absolute truth" is a label that properly applies only to the Absolute Mind's own self-knowledge, and more precisely to the Absolute Mind's self-knowledge as devoid of all difference and particularity, since the Absolute knows itself truly only when it knows itself as the whole of reality ... in the final analysis, everything that exists is God, who is identical to the world in flux.'

14 See the definition of 'existence' offered by Moreland and Craig (cited above), which denies that existence is a property; rather, it is the having of property/properties. Wood (2021, p. 156) asks, 'Why assume that calling something "an individual" implies that there might be other things that have the same essential attributes? To say that something is "an individual" is just to say that there is at least one such thing, making no reference at all to whether it is necessary or contingent, to whether it is member of a kind, or to whether there are, or might be, any more instances of that item.'

In conclusion, there is no good reason to think that the extreme forms of apophatic theology (i.e., those which deny natural theology) understand God correctly. ‘What might appear to be a proper human modesty before the divine can turn into the supreme blasphemy of denying revelation’ (Gunton 2003, p. 36) and a way of avoiding God’s sheer facticity (Rausser 2009, p. 53).

On the one hand, there are inadequate philosophical or theological reasons for ruling out the possibility that God could have created humankind in his image in such a way that human language is adequate as a means which God can use for divine revelation and that humans can prove his existence. Additionally, as Colin Gunton argues, there is inadequate Scriptural support for apophatic theology; that in its historical and intellectual origins apophatic theology derives from certain forms of Greek theology, and that apophatic theology lacks Incarnational content and runs the risk of denying revelation (Gunton 2003, pp. 11, 36–38, 47–49, 66, 97; cf. Davies and Turner 2002).

On the other hand, on the basis of the arguments for General and Special Revelation (see Chapter 3; Section 5.5) and the Scripture’s numerous positive affirmations about God and the God-man Jesus, and its emphasis that God makes himself known positively through his acts, it can be argued that the *kataphatic* approach should be adopted as long as this approach recognizes its limitations (i.e., it is based on analogies and cannot claim an exhaustive knowledge of God). The conclusion that we can know something about God (e.g., that he freely created the world in wisdom) does not deny the fact that we do not know everything about God (e.g., we do not know how divine omniscience works). Therefore, it does not deny the importance of affirming the divine mystery. The Scripture affirms that we can know some things (but not everything) about the nature of God (‘His eternal power and divine nature’—Rom 1:20) with certainty (‘without excuse’—Rom 1:20). Denys Turner (2004) argues that a proper understanding of the arguments of natural theology and a proper understanding of negative theology would show that both are, in principle, compatible, for the arguments demonstrate the existence of a transcendent Divine mystery that reason cannot fully grasp.

8.4 Addressing the accusation of anthropomorphism and ontotheology

Some have claimed that the application of any concept to God is inherently idolatrous (Caputo 1992; Hector [2011, pp. 20–21]; Marion [2011, p. 6] defines idolatry as ‘the subjection of God to human conditions for the experience of the divine, and he criticizes the use of concept in theology by stating that ‘when a philosophical thought expresses a concept of what it names “God,” this concept functions exactly as an idol’ [1995, p. 16]).¹⁵ Many of these have been influenced by Martin Heidegger’s influential 1957 essay ‘The Ontotheological

15 The fact that Marion has no problem with ‘icons’ (which he explains in later chapters) does not deny that he has a problem with the concept.

Constitution of Metaphysics' (reprinted in Heidegger 1969), which accused the use of metaphysics in traditional philosophical theology as being 'ontotheological.'¹⁶ They claim that it is grounded on philosophical first principles and metaphysical *a priori* and draw the conclusion that it is idolatrous in the sense of substituting human conceptual frameworks for reality, asserting that God is beyond our cognitive capacities. They claim that human understanding of reality (metaphysics) and the nature of God (theology) are always elucidated by the prescribed procedures of human thinking (logic) and draw the conclusion that the deity of this system is a human construct (Gschwandtner 2012, noting that Heidegger therefore prefers 'silence' about God on p. 28).¹⁷

Concerning the accusation of anthropomorphism and idolatry, one should ask whether the views that Heidegger and other like-minded theologians are themselves idolatrous. How do they know that their ideas about God ('a God concerning whom concepts and philosophical argumentation are not applicable') are not idolatrous? The accusation that the application of concepts to God is inherently idolatrous assumes that God could not have created humans with the ability to apply concepts to God, but this assumption (made by humans!) denies divine omnipotence and divine sovereignty and hence is a hubristic and arguably idolatrous assumption. There is no adequate philosophical or biblical justification for a notion of divine transcendence that would rule out the possibility of an omnipotent God creating entities that are similar to him in some positive ways. This is what an omnipotent God would be able to do, and this would be the basis for them knowing him and speaking of him in some limited positive and partially univocal ways.

The application of a concept to God does not reduce God to a concept and it does not imply that God is subordinate to the concept, just as the application of 'sovereign' to an Emperor does not imply that the Emperor is reduced, subordinate, constrained, violently confined, or forced to fit into one's conception (cf. Hector 2011, p. 11),¹⁸ but merely (and truly) describes the powers the Emperor has. In order for the accusation of anthropomorphism and idolatry to succeed, the accuser would need to bear the burden of proof, which would include ruling out the possibility of an omnipotent God creating entities that are similar to Him in some positive ways, but the accuser has failed to do this.

On the other hand, a proponent of natural theology does not need to establish the possibility of an omnipotent God creating entities that are similar to

16 Wood (2021, p. 134) notes that 'Heidegger's famous essay is actually the product of an academic seminar on Hegel ... Heidegger himself thinks that Hegelian idealism is the high point of Western metaphysics, and so he thinks that critiquing Hegel is equivalent to critiquing metaphysics as such. But this is a highly contentious claim, to say the least.'

17 It is debatable whether Heidegger was an atheist. It is interesting to note that the influential Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner was one of his students.

18 Wood (2021, p. 120) notes that 'the assumption that thinking can be a form of violence is well established in the continental tradition; here Marion joins a philosophical lineage that includes Nietzsche, Heidegger, Levinas, and Derrida.'

him in some positive ways, nor does he/she need to presuppose that God can be known. Rather, all the proponent needs to do is to offer a sound argument for the existence of an uncaused transcendent Creator (and say that this is what he/she means by the word ‘God’), for as explained in Chapter 6, the conclusion of a deductively valid argument from true premises is true. Hector’s objection concerning one trying to make something/someone conform to one’s conception¹⁹ is valid only if one’s conception does not fit the fact of the case. However, as I have explained previously, the conclusion of a sound argument is true (i.e., it is in fact the case), and one can formulate a sound argument to show that a Creator God exists.

Against this, one might cite Brunner’s claim that ‘any approach to natural theology ultimately rests upon a prior theological understanding of human nature’ (McGrath 2016, p. 39, citing Brunner). However, it is important that this claim be appreciated ontologically rather than epistemologically. It is true that, ontologically, natural theology requires that ‘God is disclosed through nature’ and that ‘human beings must have the capacity to recognize this disclosure as such’ (McGrath 2016, p. 39). However, it is not true that, epistemologically, natural theology requires us to first know that God has indeed disclosed himself through nature and humans have the capacity to know this; if that were the case, any approach to natural theology would be necessarily beset with the fallacy of begging the question. As explained in Section 3.2, the Cosmological Argument does not require such assumptions; rather, it starts with the world and deduces that it has a Creator. The best way to demonstrate that people have certain capacities for X is for people to demonstrate X; for example, the best way to demonstrate that I have the capacity for walking is to stand up and walk. Likewise, the best way to demonstrate that people have capacities for recognizing divine disclosure is to demonstrate that people can deduce that the world has a divine creator (e.g., via the Cosmological Argument). Once the conclusion that the Creator exists is reached, people can then realize that the Creator, being the First Cause, is the source of the existence of the universe and themselves, and thus their capacities for recognizing divine disclosure ultimately came from the Creator who had chosen to disclose Himself by bringing about the universe. In this way, the fallacy of begging the question can be avoided and the ontological point mentioned earlier can be established without begging the question. (McGrath goes on to note that Brunner thinks that a Christian understanding of human nature created the intellectual matrix from which the classic project of natural theology emerges (McGrath 2014, p. 135). However, as noted in Chapter 1, the classic project emerges before Christianity in ancient Greece.)

The fact that human understanding and procedures of human thinking (logic) are involved does not imply that the result is merely a human construct or that it is making reality conform to our ideas and representations (Betz 2015, p. 489, referring to Heidegger’s claim that metaphysics is the metaphysics

19 ‘When, for instance, a woman or a person of color is allowed to “show up” only insofar as he or she fits within one’s prior conception of femininity, blackness, and so on’ (Hector 2011, p. 11).

of subjectivity). On the contrary, and in response to Westphal's (1999) claim that our conceptual frameworks are not permanently valid, it can be shown that it is necessarily true (and hence permanently the case) that the laws of logic and the conclusions of sound arguments correspond with reality (see Chapter 6). Indeed, Heidegger et al. themselves are making claims about what is the case against other views—i.e., they are making truth claims against other truth claims, regardless of whether they explicitly acknowledge it or not—and one's criteria for adjudicating the differing truth claims requires metaphysics (Betz 2015, p. 497).

One might raise the concern that the meaning of key concepts (e.g., causality) may (or may not) change across different domains (e.g., in physics, in metaphysics, and in theology).²⁰ This might (or might not) result in conceptual fallacies when reasoning from science and philosophy to theology.

In reply, we would still need to consider the conclusion which follows from the premises of the argument. As explained earlier, if the premises are true and the deduction is valid, the conclusion is true. As long as there is no conceptual fallacy within (say) the Cosmological Argument itself and that the argument is sound (see Section 3.2), it remains the case that the conclusion that a Creator of the universe exists is true. Now, the Kalam Cosmological Argument uses philosophy and science, and the Creator of the universe is the One whom Christians refer to using the word 'God' (Romans 1:20). Thus, we see how philosophy and science can arrive at a theological conclusion.

The accusation of idolatry refers to worshipping something other than God as if it were God. The conclusion of the arguments of natural theology is not guilty of this charge if it can be shown that the arguments are sound, since the conclusion of a sound argument must be true and thus correspond with reality (this is based on the laws of logic which are necessarily true; see Section 6.4), and I have explained in Section 3.2 that there are indeed sound arguments of natural theology. The application of concepts to God is not guilty of the charge of substituting human conceptual frameworks for reality (or philosophers setting the terms of the question and predetermining the answer according to their self-serving interpretative choices of the world)²¹ if it can be shown that the application corresponds with the reality about God, and the sound arguments show that. These arguments do not start by presupposing human ability to know God (which would beg the question against Heidegger et al.). Rather, the Cosmological Argument (for example) is based on the understanding that laws of logic and mathematics correspond with reality, and starting with our experience of the world, it deduces that there is a First Cause Creator.

20 I thank Michaël Bauwens for helpful discussion.

21 Heidegger (1969, p. 60), claiming that metaphysicians search for the ground of being and arriving at the answer of God as the cause of all beings as a result of such a procedure. Heidegger claims that Nietzsche killed such a concept of God by arguing that what metaphysicians call a 'fundamental explanation' is merely the contingent result of human beings interpreting the world in self-serving ways (Heidegger 1969, p. 66). Nietzsche's argument is refuted by the sound arguments of natural theology which (in virtue of being deductively valid and having true premises) imply that their conclusion is true, and not merely a contingent interpretation.

This does not imply that we can know God completely (we cannot). Nor does it mean that we have to get our understanding of God totally correct in order to avoid idolatry, any more than one has to get his/her understanding of another person totally correct in order to love that person (a husband may still have some incorrect beliefs about his wife! For example, he may wrongly believe that his wife went to primary school *x* when in fact it was primary school *y*; but that does not mean that he has not referred to his wife when he says he loves her). Wood (2021, pp. 113–114) observes that ‘we need to preserve the distinction between being wrong about God and wrongly worshiping something other than God ... only the latter is idolatry ... we can successfully refer to God even with a false description, but, of course, we can also refer to God with a true description.’ For example, the Creator of the universe is who Christians refer to when they worship (Romans 1:25).

In response to the accusation of anthropomorphism against natural theology, Kojonen (2021) notes that, while Christians understand God as much more than a designer, God is also not understood as less than a designer. He writes

All the properties that we value in the case of humans, such as the ability to act purposefully, partially reflect the fullness of God. In this sense, it does not seem that calling God a designer is any more problematic than the use of other human expressions, such as describing God as “loving.”
(p. 24)

8.5 Divine transcendence and provability

It has been objected that, while we can know quite a lot of things on the basis of evidence, we cannot know whether God exists by reasoning from evidence because God is infinite and transcendent. Barthians, for example, argue that natural theology ignores the infinite qualitative distinction between God and humanity (McCormack 1995). Apophatic theologians think that it is proper humility before the divine to say that, because God is so much greater than us, we cannot prove that God exists. Similar ideas can be traced to Kant and Kierkegaard. While Kant believed that God exists, he claimed that we cannot know that God exists on the basis of philosophical arguments because he thought that any attempt would require attributing omniscience to oneself (Kant 1952, p. 480). Kant writes:

In religion the knowledge of God is properly based on faith alone ... it is not necessary for this belief to be susceptible of logical proof ... Sophistication is the error of refusing to accept any religion not based on a theology which can be apprehended by our reason ... Sophistication in religious matters is a dangerous thing; our reasoning powers are limited and reason can err and we cannot prove everything. A speculative basis is a very weak foundation for religion.

(Kant 1979, pp. 86–87)

Other objections were expressed by Kierkegaard. While Kierkegaard believed that God exists, he argued against believing by virtue of reason, claiming that, according to human reason, truth is rational, but for Christ, truth is paradoxical. While he thinks that there are objective truths, he regards these as largely irrelevant to religious truth, which is found in a subjective encounter with God by the will. McDonald explains:

Christian dogma, according to Kierkegaard, embodies paradoxes which are offensive to reason. The central paradox is the assertion that the eternal, infinite, transcendent God simultaneously became incarnated as a temporal, finite, human being (Jesus). There are two possible attitudes we can adopt to this assertion, viz. we can have faith, or we can take offense. What we cannot do, according to Kierkegaard, is believe by virtue of reason. If we choose faith we must suspend our reason in order to believe in something higher than reason. In fact, we must believe *by virtue of the absurd*.

(McDonald 2012, Section 5)

However, there are multiple problems with the above objections.

First, Christ himself appeals to reason and evidence (Chapter 4), the laws of logic cannot be violated (see Chapter 6), the Incarnation is not paradoxical (Loke 2014; in any case Kierkegaard does not mean logical contradiction when he speaks of paradox),²² and that it can be shown to be plausible by reasoning from evidence (see Loke 2017a, 2020).

Second, God's infinity and transcendence only imply that we cannot understand him fully; they do not imply that we cannot know that he exists on the basis of reason and evidence. There are many things which we cannot fully understand, but which we can know do exist. For example, I do not fully understand my great-grandfather, and I have never seen him before, but I can know that he exists on the basis of reason and evidence.

Third, in any case, the non-transcendent things within our universe require an explanation: where do these things ultimately come from? One can make the case using the Cosmological Argument and Teleological Argument that they ultimately come from a Creator of the universe. These arguments show that, even though humans are not omniscient, they can know that a Divine First Cause of the universe exists by the use of philosophical arguments. While our reasoning powers are limited, reason can err and we cannot prove everything, as explained in previous sections, this does not imply that we cannot prove anything (for other responses to Kierkegaard, see Section 7.4).

With regard to Kant's claim concerning 'speculative basis' and the Kantian claim that we would need to view the entire universe in order to conclude that

22 I thank Stephen Evans for this point.

the Causal Principle applies to it,²³ it has been explained previously in Chapter 6 that the conclusion of a deductively valid argument with true premises is true (not merely ‘consistent’). Thus, we do not need to view the universe in order to know the conclusion, nor do we need to attribute omniscience to oneself (contra Kant 1952, p. 480). Rather, all we need is a deductively valid argument from true premises (i.e., a sound argument), and I have explained in Chapter 6 why the premises of my Modus Tollens argument for the Causal Principle are true and the argument is deductively valid and applicable to the universe, and why the Cosmological Argument is likewise sound.

Apophatic theologians are correct to emphasize the need for humility, which is indeed lacking in a lot of atheistic critiques of religion. Nevertheless, we have to be careful here: wouldn’t a denial of the possibility that ‘God can create humankind in his image in such a way that we can know some of his positive attributes by reason and evidence’ be the opposite of humility? It would seem to be supreme arrogance and pride, supreme because it denies that the Supreme Being has the power to reveal himself to us through the universe he created. By ignoring the evidence for divine revelation, one can create one’s own religion to suit one’s own desires and lifestyle, and this can lead to idolatry and licentiousness. Pride is often shown by a stubborn refusal to admit that one is wrong in light of reason and evidence, while true humility is shown by a willingness to admit that one is wrong.

Suppose there is a God who wants to make himself known to us by providing evidence for his existence through the universe he created. Suppose he wants to reveal his sublime wisdom and power through the ‘extraordinary elegance of Newtonian dynamics ... supreme mathematical beauty of Einstein’s general relativity ... the extraordinary mathematical elegance of quantum-mechanical spin’ (Penrose 2004, p. 1038). Who are we to say ‘No, that does not fit my definition of faith’? One needs to be humble and open to the possibility of God revealing himself in this way. To truly know God, one must be prepared to come to him on his terms, and not on our own terms. As Wood (2014, p. 46) argues,

who but God himself is in a position to say what is or is not indirectly spiritually valuable to someone somewhere? (Believe it or not, I have met people who sincerely claim that they feel closer to God as a result of reading Richard Swinburne.) The point is that it is a mistake, and furthermore a presumptuous mistake, to assume that analytic philosophical theology cannot in principle be spiritually nourishing.

To prove that God exists using sound argument is not to dictate God, nor using human reason to limit God, nor to fashion God according to our image, but

23 I thank Steve Palmquist for mentioning this to me. Kant claims that the attempt to infer from the contingent (within experience) to some cause outside the world of experience involves a transcendental misapplication of the categories; it is a dialectical presumption which must be illuminated and destroyed (*Critique of Pure Reason* A609/B637).

rather to discover the existence of God who made us in his image (since we came from the First Cause who existed before us). As an analogy, one may consider Einstein's derivation of $E = mc^2$: by doing so, Einstein did not dictate that $E = mc^2$; he merely used his reason to discover it. Contrary to Westphal (1999), the arguments of natural theology do not nail God down but help us realize who He is: a supreme First Cause who has the freedom to create the entire universe and thus is sovereign and tremendously powerful rather than nailed down! The arguments are not hubristic nor manipulative of God; nor do they treat God as one thing among other things (a concern raised by Paul Tillich). Rather, they arrive at the conclusion of a God who exists independently, whereas other things are dependent, and who actively revealed himself by taking the initiative to create the heavens which declare his glory (Psalm 19). He is the One on whom humans depend for their very existence (a humbling realization!) and who (as the First Cause) is the ultimate source of the wonders of the world we discover.

Contrary to those who claim that the outcomes of the arguments of traditional natural theology create a sterile image of God that does not provoke worship (Westphal 1999) and far-off from the God of Christian lived experience (*Gschwandtner* 2012), such an understanding of God provokes the deepest sense of awe and worship. While a superficial reflection of our understanding of the arguments for the existence of God may lead to pride, a deeper contemplation of these arguments would lead to the realization that there truly exists a First Cause of the universe with its amazing laws of nature and billions of stars and galaxies, and who is a spirit 'vastly superior to that of men, and one in the face of which we with our modest powers must feel *humble*' (Einstein, in Jammer 1999, p. 93; italics mine). Such a God is far from being 'intellectually manageable and familiar' (McGrath 2016, p. 129; citing John Henry Newman); rather, He is the transcendent First Cause who brought about the universe which declares His glory. This God is 'that without which there would be nothing at all ... To know God is unlike any other knowledge; indeed, it is more truly to be known, and so transformed' (Coakley 2013, pp. 44–45). To claim that philosophical (natural) theology is far from the God of Christian lived experience ignores the experiences of Augustine, Anselm, etc., whose philosophical reflections have led them to outpourings of prayer, thanksgiving, and worship, as well as the experiences of many ordinary believers who have been edified by philosophical arguments (see Chapter 2).

The above conclusion does not deny the possibility of knowledge by acquaintance and encounter, which Heideggerians emphasize, nor the freedom of God to reveal himself through phenomenological revelation.²⁴ Von Balthasar writes that Divine love 'can appear in such an overwhelming way that its glorious majesty throws one to the ground; it shines out as the last word and leaves one no

24 Heidegger uses the term 'unconcealment' to refer to a type of phenomenological revelation facilitated by meditative thinking, which provides an 'openness to the mystery of Being and about the free relation to it that allows it to reveal itself' (Heidegger 1969, p. 33).

choice but to respond in the mode of pure, blind obedience' (Balthasar 2004, pp. 53, 57). However, obedience to God does not have to be blind. The point is that the use of analytic philosophy in theology (analytic theology) can also be understood as a spiritual practice when undertaken in the right spirit (Wood 2014, p. 43). For example, even though Aquinas does not write theology in the genres of prayer, meditation, etc., his method of question, objections, and replies is a kind of implicit dialogue which teaches the readers not just what to think but how to think about theological topics in a way that is truth seeking (Wood 2014, pp. 52–54). Woods notes 'the ancient and medieval claim that the desire for truth is the desire for God because God is truth itself. On this understanding, when we seek the truth, we also, by that very fact, seek God' (p. 54). Moreover,

seeking the truth is a way of conforming our desires to God's plan for us as intellectual creatures: God wants us to know reality as it is, to know ourselves as we are, and, insofar as it is possible, to know God as he is, and not just as we wish him to be. Insofar as inquiry as such features the patient, disciplined pursuit of truth, it is an attempt to see the world as it really is, to live in the Real, and thereby to depart from the shadow land of illusions and fantasies. To seek the truth, in any form, is implicitly to seek God—surely the very essence of any spiritual practice.

Woods then observes that 'analytic philosophy features an almost relentless focus on assessing truth-claims ... Analytic theology features the disciplined pursuit of truth that is common to all sincere inquiry, but as theology, it is actually a higher form of inquiry because it has a higher object' (Wood 2014, pp. 52–54). He concludes that

Like Aquinas, the analytic theologian can rightly insist that reasoning well about God is a way of drawing closer to God. By elucidating the contents of revelation, removing objections to Christian belief, and offering possible models of coherence for disputed Christian claims, analytic theologians pursue a theoretical task that is also indirectly practical. We must be guided by the truth about God in order to understand how to live rightly. Analytic theology is a tool that can help us to be good people and to live good lives.

(p. 55)

8.6 Conclusion

I have shown that objections to natural theology based on considerations of divine transcendence have failed to exclude the possibility that there can be evidences for thinking that there is a God who has revealed himself to humanity through his creation. While some have affirmed divine ineffability (unknowability), others have shown that this view is self-referentially incoherent and

does not follow from the doctrine of divine transcendence. The accusation of ontotheology by Heidegger et al. assumes that God (if he exists) *could not* have created humans with the ability to apply concepts to God or to prove that he exists. This assumption (made by finite humans!) denies divine omnipotence and divine freedom to create humans with that ability and hence is (arguably) a hubristic and idolatrous assumption. On the other hand, the application of a concept to God does not imply that God is subordinate to the concept, just as the application of ‘absolute sovereign’ to an Emperor does not imply that the Emperor is subordinate but merely describes the powers the Emperor has. The fact that the procedures of human thinking (logic) are involved in natural theology does not imply that the result is merely a human construct or that it is making reality conform to our ideas and representations (Betz 2015, p. 489). The accusation of idolatry refers to worshipping something other than God as if it were God, and the application of concepts to God is not guilty of this charge if it can be shown that the application corresponds with the reality about God. I have explained that, since the laws of logic are necessarily true and this implies that the conclusion of a sound argument (an argument with true premises and deductively valid inference) corresponds with reality, the conclusion of the arguments of natural theology would correspond with the reality about God if the arguments are sound (and I have argued that they are indeed sound; see Chapter 3). Concerning apophatic theology, I have argued that there is no adequate justification for a notion of divine transcendence that would rule out the possibility of God creating entities that are similar to him in some positive ways, which would be the basis for them knowing him and speaking of him in some limited positive and partially univocal ways.

Concerning the Barthian claim that natural theology ignores the infinite qualitative distinction between humanity and God (McCormack 1995), I have argued that God’s infinity and transcendence only imply that we cannot understand him fully; they do not imply that we cannot know that he exists on the basis of reason and evidence. There are many things which we cannot fully understand, but which we can know do exist. For example, I do not fully understand my great-grandfather, and I have never seen him before, but I can know that he exists on the basis of reason and evidence. Moreover, the non-transcendent things within our universe require an explanation: where do these things ultimately come from? One can make the case using the Cosmological Argument and Teleological Argument that they ultimately come from a Creator of the universe (see Section 3.2). These arguments show that, even though humans are not omniscient, they can know that a Divine First Cause of the universe exists by philosophical arguments. With regard to the Kantian claim that we would need to view the entire universe in order to conclude that the Causal Principle applies to it, it has been explained previously that the conclusion of a deductively valid argument with true premises is true (not merely ‘consistent’). Thus, we do not need to view the universe in order to know the conclusion, rather, all we need is a deductively valid argument from true premises (i.e., a sound argument), and I have explained in Chapters 3 and 6 why the

premises of my argument for the Causal Principle are true and the argument is deductively valid and applicable to the universe, and why the Cosmological Argument is likewise sound. Contrary to Westphal (1999), the arguments of natural theology do not nail God down; rather, they can help us realize who he is: a supreme First Cause who has the freedom to create the entire universe and thus is sovereign and tremendously powerful rather than nailed down. To claim that philosophical (natural) theology is far from the God of Christian lived experience ignores the experiences of Augustine, Anselm, and other theologians and philosophers, as well as laypeople,²⁵ whose engagement with philosophical (natural) theology has led them to outpourings of prayer, thanksgiving, and worship.

25 <https://www.academia.edu/84929596/Testimonials>.

9 A reassessment of the epistemological difficulties concerning human limitation

9.1 A reassessment of the Kantian distinction between phenomena and noumena

Despite the fact that we do not know everything, many philosophers recognize that there are still some things we can know. The question, however, is how we can know these things. In the history of philosophy, there has been a long-standing debate between the rationalists and the empiricists. While rationalists claim that there are significant ways in which our concepts and knowledge are gained independently of sense experiences, empiricists claim that sense experience is the ultimate source of all our concepts and knowledge (Markie and Folescu 2023). An empiricist might ask, ‘given that I cannot see God, how can I know that he exists?’ Immanuel Kant famously claimed in his *Critique of Pure Reason* that one cannot know anything about the unknown world beyond our experiences, and he argued that one cannot know but can only believe and hope that God exists. For Kant, cosmological and theological ideas are transcendental ideas that serve only as heuristic concepts, having a regulative use for our cognition to be ‘cultivated and corrected’ within experience (A671/B699) so as to preserve its systematic unity for reason; they are ‘postulates’ rather than ‘objects’ (A509/B537). Their reality is grounded only in reason as an analogy of real things instead of a ‘thing in itself’ (A674/B702). Kant’s critical epistemology influenced Barth, who agreed with the emphasis of the *Critique of Pure Reason* concerning the impossibility of knowing God through the means of human reasoning. While many have thought that Kant’s critical epistemology made the world safe for atheists and motivated a secular worldview, Barth used Kant’s critical epistemology to argue against the attempts of religion to go beyond the realm of our experiences to reach the transcendent realm of the divine. This underlines the need for divine revelation, i.e., God’s own intervention to bridge this gap, as the only alternative.¹ However, the problem with embracing Kant’s critical epistemology is that it would undercut Barth’s own view by making it impossible to know that divine revelation has occurred and that God has intervened.

¹ <http://jcrt.org/religioustheory/2018/07/26/negative-theology-and-its-problems-barth-and-marion-lecture-3-johannes-zachhuber/>.

Critics of Kant can ask why we should think that we can only know the phenomena, and why we think that God (if he exists) cannot reveal to us through the phenomena. The fact that something cannot be given through any direct experience does not imply that we are unable to have any knowledge of it; in fact, atomic chemistry has shown otherwise (see below).

Contrary to empiricism, sensory experience (e.g., observation) is not the only source of knowledge, nor is it necessarily the most reliable; it depends on what we want to find out. Rational insight, introspection, and moral insight are some other sources of knowledge (see Section 7.1). By rational insight, we can know, for example, that there is no (indeed, there cannot be) shapeless square in any place in the universe.² We do not need to observe the entire universe in order to know that. Rather, we just need to understand the meaning of the terms ('shapeless' and 'square').

Others have argued that Kant's view is incoherent. For example, Oliver Crisp writes,

Kant's certainty that there is a Great Boundary between the phenomenal world, the contents of which we give structure to, and the noumenal world beyond this, about which we can say nothing, requires that Kant knows at least one thing about the noumenal: that we can know nothing about it. But how can he know this if he can know nothing beyond the Great Boundary of which he speaks?.

(Crisp 2009, p. 51n.30)

Note that Crisp is referring to 'cognize' when he uses the word know, and asking how Kant can 'cognize(know)' that we can 'cognize(know)' nothing about the noumena. In other words, Kant seems to be contradicting himself, for Kant is not merely claiming to 'think' about the noumena but to cognize(know) something about it and yet he says we cannot cognize(know) about it.

Likewise, Rauser (2009, p. 111) observes that 'if we can only experience and think of the phenomena, then we cannot refer to the noumenon at all. But the claim that "the noumenon is that to which none of our concepts apply" certainly *looks* like the application of a concept to the noumenon. As a result, many critics have contended that the very claim that a Kantian noumenon exists is incoherent.'³

2 Note that this statement is not just a way we talk about things, nor is it just about our own concepts. Rather, this statement is true of the things (e.g., places in the universe) which we talk about, and it is consistent with the fact that there are no shapeless squares in whichever place we observe.

3 In personal correspondence, Stephen Palmquist clarifies that many Kantian scholars routinely use the word knowledge *unmodified* to mean 'empirical cognition,' even though Kant affirms the legitimacy of other types of cognition, especially practical (or moral) cognition. Nevertheless, Kant holds that the only legitimate *theoretical* knowledge arises out of properly constructed *empirical* cognition. Kant himself distinguishes between the empirical and the transcendental (that which serves as the boundary conditions for the empirical) and affirms the legitimacy of both as different approaches to ascertaining what is true. Kant claims that the realm of the metaphysical ideas of God, freedom, and immortality goes beyond such transcendental limits and that it is necessary to appeal to practical cognition for this realm. See Palmquist (1993).

Some have replied that while Kant usually makes unqualified statements of our ignorance of things in themselves (they are ‘not cognized at all,’ A30/B45), ‘his considered view might be more qualified: we know nothing of the positive properties of things in themselves’ (Stang 2023, citing Kant: ‘it is not yet a genuine cognition if I merely indicate what the intuition of the *object* is not, without being able to say what is then contained in it’ [B149]).

But why conclude that we can only know of the negative properties of things-in-themselves but not the positive properties? Kant argues that the reason is that things-in-themselves are not spatiotemporal (not objects of our sensible intuition, namely, space and time) (Stang 2023, citing Kant A239), and he claims that we cannot know (but can only think about) the positive properties of things that are not spatiotemporal.

Now, Swinburne (2005b, p. 39) notes that the atomic theory of chemistry has shown ‘in precise detail some of the unobservable causes of phenomena—the atoms whose combinations give rise to observable chemical phenomena.’ Sudduth (2009, p. 206) likewise observes that the evolution of modern science and scientific methodology has made crude empiricism no longer sensible, citing

The success of scientific reasoning from observable states of affairs to unobservable entities and causal processes on the grounds of the explanatory power of the latter. Extra-solar planetary science infers the existence, estimated mass, size, and orbital paths of unobservable planets from observable wobbles in the planet’s parent star...

It is true that we do not yet know everything about the constituents of atoms (e.g., whether the fundamental constituents are point-like or not). Nevertheless, if one were to argue from not knowing everything to not knowing anything, that would be to commit the all-or-nothing fallacy. At the very least, we do know that there is something unobservable which has the basic features of causing the phenomena to behave in a certain way—this is the nature of the underlying reality (‘nature’ is defined as ‘the basic or inherent features, character, or qualities of something’—Oxford Languages). Starting from the phenomena of the universe—an empirical premise!—one can ask, ‘what caused this phenomena?’, and provide reasons to show that there is a First Cause of the phenomena which has the properties of being a Creator (see Section 3.2). This is consistent with Romans 1:20–21, which affirms that, even though God is invisible (which implies that we are not able to picture), humans can understand (v.20) and know (v.21) that He exists based on what has been made (v. 20), which we can see.

Concerning Swinburne’s point, a Kantian might claim that Kant would agree,⁴ for Kant said concerning ‘the cause of gravity, of magnetic power ... we do cognize in sufficient detail the laws of this cause, under determinate

4 Steve Palmquist mentioned this point to me in personal correspondence.

limitations on the conditions under which alone certain effects occur; and this is enough for a secure rational use of these powers as well as for the explanation of their appearances *secundum quid*, [i.e.,] downward to the use of these laws, in order to arrange experiences under them...' (Palmquist 2016, p. 244; citing *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*, 88n.18–28). However, Kant goes on to say in the same passage, '...even if not simpliciter and upward, in order to comprehend the causes themselves of the efficient powers according to these laws.' This is still contradicted by the fact that modern atomic chemistry has shown that we *can* comprehend in precise detail some of the unobservable causes themselves. What 21st century chemistry has shown is not merely 'the use of these laws, in order to arrange experiences under them'—which was what Kant meant by 'downward' in the passage cited above—but the internal structure of unobserved causes themselves, i.e., the constituents of atoms such as protons, neutrons, and electrons. While Kant accepted the theory of the unobservable causes of phenomena, what Kant accepted (in *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*, 88n.18–28) was the fact that we can cognize the 'downward' aspect of it. Contrary to Kant, atomic chemistry has shown that we can also cognize 'upward, in order to comprehend the causes themselves of the efficient powers according to these laws,' that is, the plurality of causes which bring about their effects in a law-like way.

The above conclusion indicates that the 'unobservable causes' of phenomena are not in principle unknowable; on the contrary, we can know many positive properties and details about these unobservable causes through deductive and inductive reasoning. In fact, in another of his writings, Kant also agrees that we can cognize the existence of unperceivable causes through perceiving their effects: 'we cognize the existence of a magnetic matter penetrating all bodies from the perception of attracted iron filings, although an immediate perception of this matter is impossible for us given the constitution of our organs' (*Critique of Pure Reason*, B273). Kant thinks that this is acceptable to his view as long as these unperceivable causes (e.g., magnetic matter) are spatiotemporal. However, Kant fails to note that the conclusion of a sound argument (i.e., a deductively valid argument with true premises) is true (i.e., known to be true, not merely thought to be true), regardless of whether the conclusion involves entities that are spatiotemporal (objects of our sensible intuition) or not. Starting from the phenomena of the universe—an empirical premise!—one can ask, 'what caused this phenomena?', and provide a sound deductive argument to show that there is a First Cause of the phenomena which has the positive properties of being a Creator God (see Section 3.2).

In summary, on the one hand, no good argument has been offered to show that the Kantian claim that we cannot know what (if any) is beyond the phenomena and non-spatiotemporal is true. On the other hand, as long as the deduction of an argument is valid and the premises are true (i.e., a sound argument), the conclusion would be true; it does not matter whether God is observable/spatiotemporal or whether the effects of God (the Divine First Cause) on other objects is lawfully discernible or not. The Cosmological Argument is

such a sound argument which has been offered to show that the Divine First Cause exists.

Following Kant, a skeptic might object that we cannot know that the universe is an effect of God, for to know that A is causally related to B, it seems that I must have sensory experience of both A and B so as to establish that they are regularly connected, but we do not have such sensory experiences of God (this objection is summarized but not endorsed by Evans 2010, pp. 151–152, citing Kant 1965, A603–14, B631–42).

Now, we should first note the distinction between affirming that there is a cause and identifying the properties of the cause. Before scientists discover the cause of (say) an explosion of a certain chemical substance, did they think that the event had a cause? They sure did on the basis of the Causal Principle (defended in Chapter 6), even though they have not specified the conditions or a universal law. Likewise, on the basis of the Causal Principle, the beginning of matter-energy must have a cause understood as a necessary condition; how to identify the cause is a different issue.

With regard to the identification of cause, the specification of regular connection ('universal law') mentioned by the Kantian skeptic can be understood as one of the ways of identifying the properties of causes; this way is inductive. However, no proof has been offered to think that it is the only way. On the other hand, other than induction, deduction is also a method of inference. A deductive argument has already been provided previously to show that the necessary condition for the beginning of the universe is uncaused, beginningless, immaterial, and possessing libertarian freedom, i.e., a transcendent Creator of the universe. (Moreover, it will be shown below that one can combine the Cosmological Argument with the Teleological Argument to show that, in order to bring about the entire universe with its fine-tuning and order, the First Cause must be highly intelligent and enormously powerful). Given this deductive argument, the inductive method is not required in this case to identify the properties of the Cause.

Kant objects by claiming that the Cosmological Argument relies on the Ontological Argument and that both stem from reason's need to find the necessary ground for existence (cf. A603–04/B631–32).

However, as can be seen in Section 3.2, the Cosmological Argument can be formulated in such a way that none of its premises depend on the Ontological Argument.⁵ The conclusion of the Cosmological Argument does not follow from reason's need to find a ground, but follows from true premises and valid deduction, and thus the conclusion is true, regardless of one's need or motivation. Moreover, the Cosmological Argument does not appeal to some form of reasoning equivalent to the Ontological Argument. The reasoning of the Ontological Argument is not based on observation at any point, whereas the conclusion of the Cosmological Argument is based on previous steps of the argument, some of which involve observation (it is an *a posteriori* argument).

5 The Ontological Argument has been defended in recent literature despite the criticisms by Kant et al. See, for example, Nagasawa (2017).

To elaborate, *a priori* reasoning by itself cannot let me know that there is a square-shaped thing on my table; I need observational evidence to know that, and following the laws of logic (which cannot be violated, see Chapter 6), I know that the square on my table cannot be a square and shapeless at the same time. Likewise, *a priori* reasoning cannot let me know that there exists a series of causes and effects in the world. I need experiential evidence to know that; for example, there is observational evidence which indicates that I came from my ancestors. Following the laws of logic, I know that the series of causes which includes my ancestors and myself cannot be both finite and infinite. Thus (given that it cannot be a closed loop, as explained above), the series either has a first member or it does not, and given the arguments against an infinite regress (see Section 6.6), it is deduced that it has a first member, i.e., a first cause. Likewise, this first cause cannot be caused and uncaused. Thus, it is either caused or uncaused, and given that it is the first, it can be deduced that it is uncaused and that it has caused an effect, i.e., the series of events leading to me. The rest of the properties of the First Cause, i.e., beginningless, has libertarian freedom, etc., are all based on deduction as explained previously. Given that the deduction is valid and the premises are true, the conclusion is true.

Kant claims that the attempt to infer from the *conceptual* impossibility of an infinite regress of causes to an *actual* first cause outside of sense confuses rational or subjective necessities with real or objective ones (cf. A605/B633). He claims that even though the Cosmological Argument has in fact not achieved anything at all and is objectively insufficient, people still find it convincing because it seems reasonable to them (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A589/B617). A Kantian might therefore complain that 'the conclusion of a Divine First Cause is just your way of thinking; you are thinking that there is an actual object called a First Cause which corresponds with your idea.'

In response, it has been shown previously in Chapter 6 that the Laws of Logic and Causal Principle are not subjective but correspond with reality and that the conclusion of a deductively valid argument with true premises is true. Hence, there is an actual First Cause with the property of being the Creator of the Universe; it is not just a way of thinking or perspective. Just as my great-grandfather (a prior cause of my existence) is not just an idea but actually existed (for otherwise I would not be here), likewise the Divine First Cause actually exists (for otherwise I would not be here).

The Cosmological Argument is not just an 'idea,' but it is an *a posteriori* (not *a priori*) argument which starts from the observation (empirical evidence) that there exists a series of causes and effects (e.g., I came from my parents, they came from my grandparents; see the formulation in Chapter 3). On the other hand, science itself is not purely empirical or *a posteriori*. Rather, it also makes use of the results of *a priori* deduction, such as mathematics and laws of logic. Modern science cannot work without mathematics and logic, and both are known *a priori*. Now it is true that *a priori* reasoning is only part of a scientific argument. However, *a priori* reasoning is likewise only part of the Cosmological Argument which starts from observation.

Kant may ask how we can know that when we talk about a being that transcends the realm of human experience, we are not just talking about an empty concept.

The answer is: by a sound argument. As explained in Chapter 6, as long as the premises of an argument are true and the deduction is valid, the conclusion is true, because a valid deduction preserves the truth of the premises. Whether the conclusion is beyond the realm of human experience or not does not affect this principle. As explained in previous chapters, the Cosmological Argument is indeed a sound argument; thus, the conclusion that the universe has a Creator is true. Such a creator is not an ‘empty concept’ because an empty concept has no causal power. However, the Cosmological Argument demonstrates that the First Cause must have causal power in order to cause the series of events that brought about our existence.

Many people today assume that for someone to claim that God created the universe is to pretend to know what we cannot possibly know. This assumption is related to the Kantian assumption that we can only know the phenomena. There is no proof for these assumptions; on the other hand, they are demonstrably fallacious, as shown by the Cosmological Argument (see Section 3.2). It would be intellectually dishonest to pretend that we are unable to know (for example) that a shapeless square cannot exist. Likewise, it would be intellectually dishonest to pretend that we are unable to know that a series of causes and effects exist, an infinite causal regress cannot exist, and that something does not come from nothing, and on the basis of these conclusions, we can know that a Divine First Cause (Creator) exists.

9.2 Addressing the problems concerning situatedness and relativism, and the lack of God’s eye view or direct observational confirmation that the universe is created by God

It is true that no human being has a ‘God’s-eye-view’ of things and that all truth-claims/standards of reasoning/theories/rationality/ethical codes/historical narratives are *situated* within particular narratives, traditions, institutions, and practices. All views are views from a particular perspective, which is influenced by our social existence and bias, and our vision of the world cannot take in the whole landscape and tends to focus on features in the immediate foreground of the field of vision (McGrath 2018, pp. 60–61, 80 citing Nietzsche’s *Will to Power*, and *Genealogy of Morals*). Thus, we have to be careful that our worldview might have subconsciously predisposed us to certain assumptions, such that we regard certain interpretations of our experiences as self-evidentially correct, while blinding us to alternative (and perhaps better) ways of understanding (McGrath 2018, pp. 5, 46, citing Wittgenstein’s claim that ‘a picture held us captive’). McGrath (2018, p. 25) observes that a person’s perception concerning the rationality of beliefs is shaped not only by natural human cognitive processes, which are generally thought to be independent of a given individual’s cultural location, but also by the prevailing cultural metanarrative.

This influences our judgements about what is to be deemed ‘reasonable’ and the evidence that is available to individuals in that specific cultural location. Karkkainen (2014, p. 4) acknowledges that ‘As a middle-aged European white male ... I not only am “perspectival” in a particular way but also carry with me limitations and prejudices, as does a young African female theologian or a veteran Asian male theologian.’

Nevertheless, it would be an over-interpretation to think that the above considerations imply that our views about reality are *merely* socially constructed or biased, that we are unable to re-evaluate and transcend our current worldviews and perspectives, or that we cannot come to a justified conclusion concerning absolute truths which correspond to the way things are, and which are independent of whether the claim is accepted by anyone (Moreland and Craig 2017, p. 120). While different groups of people have different views, ways of thinking, etc. (Descriptive Relativism), this does not imply Normative Relativism which claims that all views, ways of thinking, etc. are only true or false relative to the beliefs or valuations of an individual or group that accepts it (Swoyer 2010). The denial of absolute truths by Normative Relativism is problematic. We can ask whether it is *absolutely true* that ‘all views, ways of thinking, etc. are only true or false relative to the beliefs or valuations of an individual or group that accepts it.’ If yes, it would be self-contradictory (since Normative Relativism denies that there are absolute truths); if not, it does not exclude the existence of absolute truths. Either way, Normative Relativism cannot be established.

One might ask, ‘couldn’t a relativist make an exception for Normative Relativism by arguing that, except for Normative Relativism itself which is absolutely true, all other views are merely relative?’

The problem with the above response is that if Normative Relativism itself can be an exception, then how is it that there are no other exceptions? Moreover, to argue for an exception for Normative Relativism contradicts the arguments offered in support of Normative Relativism in the first place (Swoyer 2010). For example, one of the arguments relativists offer for Normative Relativism is that all views are situated within particular traditions. However, the view of Normative Relativism is also situated within a particular tradition. Therefore, if Normative Relativism itself can be an exception, then ‘situatedness within particular traditions’ is not an adequate reason for embracing Normative Relativism.

Consider also the claim that ‘whatever truth claims one makes is merely a matter of his/her perspective and opinion.’ Is this claim also merely a perspective or opinion? If it is not, it is self-contradictory; if it is, it does not rule out someone claiming or arguing for something that is absolutely true, and not merely his/her perspective and opinion. In any case, this claim cannot be established.

The claim ‘All truth claims are *merely* socially constructed’ suffers from a similar problem. Is this claim also merely socially constructed? If it is not, it is self-contradictory; if it is, it does not rule out someone claiming or arguing for something that is absolutely true, and *not merely* something that is socially constructed. In any case, this claim cannot be established. (Note the

qualification ‘not merely’; I am not denying the role of social construction for truth claims; rather, I am arguing that a truth claim can be ‘socially constructed’ and yet be absolutely true.)

Likewise, for Rorty’s ‘epistemological behaviourism,’ which asserts that knowledge is ‘a matter of conversation and of social practice, rather than as an attempt to mirror nature’ (Rorty 1979, p. 171). Is Rorty’s knowledge of epistemological behaviorism a matter of conversation and of social practice? If it is not, it is self-contradictory; if it is, then it does not attempt to affirm what knowledge really is. In any case, Rorty’s view cannot be established.

Pannenberg observes that Wilhelm Dilthey’s (1833–1911) view that an awareness of historical contingencies and the relativity⁶ of our own ways of reasoning precluded metaphysical claims to absolute and definitive truth has been influential in promoting a skepticism toward metaphysical claims and a rejection of rational theology among German scholars (Pannenberg 2007). (See, for example, Heidegger’s claim in *Being and Time* that ‘every factual science is always manifestly in the grip of historizing,’ Heidegger 1927/1962, section 76: 444.)⁷ One can ask whether Dilthey’s view is also subject to historical contingencies and the relativity of his own way of reasoning, and thus it is not an absolute and definitive truth according to his own view. If yes, it is self-defeating. If not, then it implies it is possible for someone to state absolute and definitive truth despite historical contingencies and the (so-called) relativity of reasoning, and therefore it does not rule out a metaphysician stating absolute and definitive truths and thus contradicts Dilthey’s view. In either case, his view cannot be established. Moreover, as argued in Chapter 6, there are indeed absolute truths which we can know on the basis of sound arguments.

While Dilthey himself tried to answer the relativism that is entailed by his view (‘historicism’), ‘the ambiguous answer to the crisis of historicism is often underscored.... In *The Essence of Philosophy*.’ Dilthey ‘maintains that he is looking for what constitutes “always and everywhere” the essence of philosophy, he nonetheless suggests that philosophical solutions, when viewed historically, belong to a specific time and place (Dilthey, 1954, p. 25)’ (Marcotte-Chenard 2022, pp. 566, 568). Beiser observes that ‘since the historicist confounds the conditions of validity of a belief with its causal or genetic conditions, he assumes that a principle is valid only under the conditions under which it arose’

6 ‘An apparently irreconcilable antithesis arises when historical consciousness is followed to its last consequences. The finitude of every historical phenomenon—be it a religion or an ideal or a philosophical system—accordingly, the relativity of every kind of human apprehension of the totality of things is the last word of the historical world-view’ (Dilthey, 1903/1996, p. 389).

7 Despite this, Heidegger evidently thought that ‘there are many conclusions reached in *Being and Time* that putatively apply to all Dasein, for example that Dasein’s everyday experience is characterized by the structural domains of readiness-to-hand, un-readiness-to-hand and presence-at-hand ... Still, if ... the features shared by all Dasein really are supposed to be ahistorical, universal conditions (applicable everywhere throughout history), we are seemingly owed an account of just how such conditions are even possible, given Dasein’s essential historicity’ (Wheeler 2020).

(Beiser 2009, p. 14). In other words, something akin to the genetic fallacy lies behind Dilthey's reasoning and renders his conclusion against metaphysical claims to absolute and definitive truth invalid.

The above criticism of Dilthey does not deny the value of Dilthey's work in highlighting the importance of recognizing that our perspectives are influenced by our historical contexts and of considering the historical conditions under which our views are arrived at (these considerations are discussed further in the rest of this chapter). Nevertheless, it remains the case that Dilthey (and Heidegger et al.) failed to realize that, despite these historical considerations, there are limited truths which we can know and that we can formulate deductively valid arguments with these truths as premises that lead us to the (incomplete but) true conclusions concerning the existence of God, as explained in Chapters 3 and 6.

While the earlier Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (4.2) maintained that the possibility of making sense of agreement with reality is an *a priori* requirement of language, the later Wittgenstein in his *On Certainty* (para. 203) contrasts this by speaking of language games and claims that 'the idea of "agreement with reality" does not have any clear application' (para. 215). One might ask whether this claim agrees with reality. If yes, it is self-contradictory. If no, it is false. In any case, Wittgenstein's view cannot be established. A number of philosophers influenced by Wittgenstein have proposed an anti-realist approach to theology, using the word 'God' as an interpretation of experience without referring to an entity that can exist apart from human experience. For example, DZ Phillips (1976, pp. 148–150) claims that religious language does not refer to some object called God but 'makes it possible to think about human life in a certain way ... religious expressions of praise, glory, etc. are not referring expressions. These activities are expressive in character, and what they express is called the worship of God.' This view, however, is contrary to how most religious believers use religious language; i.e., they believe the mind-independent existence of God and intend the word 'God' to refer to this mind-independent entity. While an exclusively intellectualist approach to the understanding of religion is misguided (Banner 1990, p. 86), many real-life examples (including those who suffer a crisis of faith when they encounter evidence which appears contrary to their faith) indicate that for many people the truth claims of religion do matter (Banner 1990, pp. 92–93).

Some might object that, because of the finitude of our senses and the metaphorical nature of language, we cannot comprehend the way things really are. All we have are linguistic descriptions of human experiences of what is out there. One can reply by asking, 'Is your claim a true comprehension of the way things really are? If yes, it is self-contradictory; if not, it is false. In either case, your claim cannot be established.'

The objector might also claim that there is no correspondence between what we experience and express linguistically and what is the case. Again, one can reply by asking 'Does your claim correspond to "what is the case"'? If yes, it is self-contradictory; if not, it is false. In either case, it cannot be established.

On the other hand, consider the claim that ‘Mount Everest is the highest mountain on Earth in 2012.’ Even if no one believes this claim, it is still true. The truth of this claim is not merely relative to certain cultures, but rather absolute in the sense of corresponding to the way things are and independent of whether it is accepted by anyone (Moreland and Craig 2017, p. 120),⁸ even though this claim is situated in human communities. If a certain group of people had never heard of Mount Everest, and members of this group claim that another mountain (say, Mount Fuji) is the highest mountain on Earth in 2012, their claim would be absolutely false even if they think it is true (Lacewing 2009, chapter 3). Some people are obviously ignorant! Regardless of whether everybody acknowledges this or whether the standard of reasoning used is universally accepted, we know that Mount Everest is the highest mountain on Earth in 2012 and Mount Fuji is not.

Although certain groups of people living thousands of years ago might not have regarded the statement ‘the Earth orbits around the sun’ to be true, it was nevertheless true back then, regardless of what people at that time believed. The truth concerning the orbit of the Earth is absolute rather than relative, and people who denied it were absolutely wrong. ‘Items of knowledge’ such as ‘the earth orbits around the sun’ and ‘arsenic is poisonous’ are not merely linguistically, culturally, and socially constructed, but facts. These examples indicate that human rationality and perspective are not limited to the extent that we cannot know anything. On the contrary, they indicate that we can know quite a lot about reality through perception and deductive and inductive reasoning. No one who wants to get well is a relativist when it comes to taking medications!

The above examples indicate that, although our understanding is limited, we can still know quite a lot of things. The fact that we do not know everything does not imply that we do not know anything. Contrary to the fallacious Hegelian idea that one needs to know the whole, Bertrand Russell (1972, p. 745) points out that ‘if all knowledge were knowledge of the universe as a whole, there would be no knowledge.’ Thus, for example, Hegel would say that before one can understand the statement ‘John (my grandfather) is the father of James (my father),’ one must know who John and James are, and to know who John is, is to know all his characteristics. However, all his characteristics involve other people or things to which they are connected, which involve yet other people and things to which they are connected, etc. This would imply the absurd consequence that I cannot understand the statement that my grandfather is my father’s father, given that I cannot understand all the connections in the entire universe! As Russell observes, the fact is that in order to use the word ‘John’ correctly and intelligently, I do not need to know all about John, but only enough to recognize him (Russell 1972).

8 The word ‘absolute’ is used here in contrast to ‘relative’; ‘objective’ is used in contrast to ‘subjective’. ‘Absolute’ does not mean ‘necessary’, which is used in contrast to ‘contingent’; an ‘absolute truth’ can be contingent.

The relativists might retort that their views do not apply to things like mountains or medications but to religious claims, because we can have evidences concerning mountains and medications, but not concerning religious claims which demand faith. However, this objection is based on a misunderstanding of the relationship between evidence and faith, which can be evidence-based (see Chapters 4 and 7).

The relativists might object that the evidence for God and religion is of a different kind compared to the evidences concerning mountains and medications, which are scientific. However, as argued in Chapter 7, *contra* scientism, we should not insist that scientific evidence should be the only kind of evidence that we would accept and that science itself is based on philosophical and historical evidences. As McGrath (2016, p. 159) notes, ‘science offers a reliable yet partial account of reality, which requires supplementation from other sources.’

It has been argued by Merleau-Ponty and others in the phenomenological tradition that, since humans are only a part of the whole world and have a limited relative perspective on the whole (i.e., without a ‘God’s eye view’), we can never answer questions about the whole world—such as whether it has a Divine First Cause—because that would presuppose an absolute viewpoint outside the whole (Bannan 1966).

Now, on the one hand, there is no sound argument offered to show that answering questions about the whole would require an unlimited perspective or a viewpoint outside the whole. The underlying assumption seems to be an empiricist assumption that we can only know by direct observation, but this assumption is false. There are many events which we have not directly observed, but which we can know did happen by inferring from what we observe. Moreover, there are ways of knowing which are not dependent on observation. For example, I know that the statement ‘there cannot be shapeless squares’ is true, and I can know this without having to observe the entire universe to make sure that there are no shapeless squares anywhere. I just need to understand that ‘shapeless’ (no-shape) would fail in any case where there is a shape (e.g., a square). As explained previously, the laws of logic are necessarily true because a violation of the laws of logic would be non-existent. This implies that the conclusion of a deductively valid argument from true premises must be true, and I have explained in Section 3.2 that the Cosmological Argument for a Divine First Cause is deductively valid and that its premises are true.

Therefore, we do not need any confirmation by observation; i.e., we do not need to observe directly that there is a Creator who created the universe. We also do not need to have a God’s eye view of things, contrary to the postmodernist thinking that we cannot prove God exists because we are all situated in time and space and limited in our perspective. Rather, it is sufficient to have a sound argument (e.g., the Cosmological Argument) that demonstrates that there is a Creator God who created the universe. It is also important to note that the conclusion that God exists is not merely a possible explanation or an interpretation of existence, nor is it just a metaphysical speculation as Gautama

Shakyamuni (the founder of Buddhism) claimed.⁹ Rather, it corresponds with reality given that the argument is sound, which means that we can know that God exists.

Some people embrace a relativistic approach toward morality for the sake of tolerance and respect. This is a mistake. As Lau explains,

If moral relativism were really true, whether we should respect other people would also be a relative matter. Relative to some perspectives, maybe we should despise or even kill people who disagree with us. If it is objectively true that we should respect other moral perspectives, this would be an objective moral truth, in which case moral relativism is wrong! Some moral relativists might say they are only affirming toleration and respect from their own perspective. But the problem is that from other perspectives, in-tolerance might be desirable or even mandatory, and relativism does not provide a way to engage the other party in a rational discussion.

(Lau 2011, p. 163)

In summary, the rejection of arrogance and intolerance should not be taken to imply that we regard all contradictory truth claims as equally true and that none is superior. As we have seen, such a view is untenable. Rather, it should be taken to imply that we should respect the right of others to hold their religious views and to argue for them and that we should consider their arguments.

Foucault objects that universal truth claims—including those made by religious believers—are simply masks for ideology and the will to power, and he emphasizes how this ‘will to power’ influences what one thinks he/she knows and the so-called truths that one proclaims (Foucault 1977a; Foucault 1977b). Foucault’s view highlights the need to be careful about hidden motivations, but it does not imply that people cannot know or proclaim absolute truth. If Foucault thinks that it does, then we can ask whether his view itself is absolutely true. If yes, it is self-refuting; if not, it does not rule out someone knowing and proclaiming absolute truth. Regardless of whether someone has a ‘will to power,’ he/she can still know and tell others that (for example) certain medications are more effective than others. ‘Paracetamol is useful for headaches’ is true regardless of whether the discoverer of paracetamol has a ‘will to power’ to impose the use of this medication on others. Where truth is concerned, what matters is the evidence for the case rather than the motivations of the person proposing the case.

Furthermore, not everyone seeks knowledge for the sake of satisfying his/her will to power; many people truly desire to know the truth for its own sake, and they want to share what they know in order to help others. For example, when people see others suffer from a disease, many would desire to discover the cure and tell them about it. Likewise, many religious believers desire to share

⁹ See Gautama’s *The Parable of the Poisoned Arrow*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parable_of_the_Poisoned_Arrow.

what they believe with others because they think that it is true and has the power to help people. That is why they tell others about it. Any person who does not wish to live his/her life in vain and who recognizes the importance of the Big Questions (e.g., ‘Where do we come from?’ ‘What is the meaning of life?’) would want to compare different worldviews, and choose the one that offers the best answers to these questions, rather than just follow the politically correct answer or what makes him/her comfortable.

9.3 Concerning constructivism and the plurality of rationalities

It has been noted in Chapter 5 that the Barthian concern regarding the noetic effects of sin is related to philosophical and psychological issues concerning the constructive activity of the human mind in the process of observation. Barth, who was somewhat influenced by Kantian epistemology as noted previously, holds that the human mind and its activities are influenced by sin, and he would say that natural theology leads to us constructing God in our own image (as Feuerbach would say).¹⁰

It is true that there is no such thing as an uninterpreted fact and that, when we try to understand certain things, we cannot avoid the need to interpret our experiences. Nevertheless, this does not imply that one’s perspective of the matter is merely one’s interpretation and not the correct understanding of the matter. Many are concerned that the interpretative factor would affect one’s ability to arrive at the correct understanding of the matter. With regard to the viability of traditional natural theology as an independent project, McGrath raises four concerns, three of which are relevant to the discussion here (I address the fourth concern concerning the ambiguity of nature in Chapter 10). McGrath (2016, pp. 26–31) argues that traditional natural theology (1) assumes a ‘culturally invariant notion of human reason’ which ‘can no longer be maintained, except in the specific domains of mathematics and logic’ and fails to recognize (2) ‘the constructive activity of the human mind in the process of observation.’ He elaborates on ‘the critical role of values and judgments that are embedded within the social context of the thinker’ and the fact that ‘we cannot escape the condition of seeing the world from our particular insertion in it.’ The process of perception involves the creation of representations (schemas) forming mental maps through which we see and interpret the world, and which often lead us to overlook or disregard evidence because it does not fit with our existing mental schemes. Moreover, the process of observation is ‘theory-laden’ whereby observation and interpretation are interconnected in a seemingly inescapable circularity; ‘A fact under one aspect is a theory under another’; rational judgment is carried out within a particular theoretical context and is essentially dependent on it and is ‘incurably open to bias and limitation’ McGrath 2016, pp. 29–30). Arguing for (3) the importance of tradition-mediated rationalities which he thinks traditional natural theology has neglected, McGrath argues that every argument

¹⁰ I thank a reviewer for highlighting this point.

begins with premises, and the final premises cannot themselves be proved but are shaped at least in part by precommitments due to cultural forces (McGrath 2016, p. 31, citing Cobb).

While arguing that Christianity provides the best explanation of the world, McGrath also argues that we lack any neutral standpoint from which to evaluate this. Citing the work of Alasdair MacIntyre (1988) and others, McGrath concludes that human perception of nature is always already based in some tradition, stating that ‘there is no neutral standpoint, no universal viewpoint, from which a tradition-independent “natural theology” can be undertaken. Natural theology – unlike mathematics or logic – always arises within, and is informed by, a tradition of rationality’ (McGrath 2016, p. 32).

The concerns that McGrath and others have raised are important, and they can explain many observations. For example, the widespread acceptance of Paley’s natural theology (1802) in the early 19th century, and the contrary ‘immanent frame’ which inclines people not to expect the natural world to point beyond itself to a transcendent domain in the 21st century Western culture, can be explained by the cultural assumptions and biases of these different eras (McGrath 2016, pp. 30–31).

Nevertheless, McGrath himself acknowledges that, despite his concerns regarding situatedness, theory-ladenness, etc., ‘it remains important to be able to identify criteria of judgment by which the rationality of a belief may be assessed. Two of the most important such criteria are correspondence with the external world, and internal theoretical coherence’ (p. 118). Additionally, ‘the best theory is the one that is able to fit in observations and experiences most elegantly, most simply, most comprehensively, and most fruitfully’ (pp. 177–178). Indeed, McGrath is correct to acknowledge the above criteria, for otherwise the concerns he raised regarding traditional natural theology would undermine themselves because those concerns are also situated, theory-laden, etc. Moreover, the criteria concerning correspondence with the external world and internal theoretical coherence, which McGrath recognized and used for his concerns regarding traditional natural theology, are in fact also widely used by many contemporary proponents of traditional natural theology. Like McGrath, they recognize that, despite the concerns regarding situatedness, theory-ladenness, etc. which they are aware of, one can use the criteria of judgment by which the rationality of a belief may be assessed to show that the conclusions of the arguments of traditional natural theology are at least reasonable or even the best. Thus, these concerns regarding the viability of traditional natural theology are answerable.

It should be noted that the fact that we are situated (‘we cannot escape the condition of seeing the world from our particular insertion in it’) and view the world from a particular perspective (‘view from somewhere’) does not imply that our view is merely a perspective and not the truth of the matter. On the contrary, McGrath himself acknowledges that, despite our situatedness, ‘view from somewhere,’ theory-ladenness, etc., we are able to recognize ‘the culturally invariant notion of human reason in the specific domains of

mathematics and logic,' noting that mathematics and logic belong in a class of their own, transcending the boundaries of history and culture (p. 34). Now the laws of logic (which I have also defended in earlier chapters) imply that the conclusion of a sound argument (i.e., a deductively valid argument with true premises) is true. As I explained in Section 3.2 and Chapter 6, the Cosmological Argument uses mathematics and logic to formulate a deductively valid argument using premises which (based on their undeniable immediate seemings) people from various historical background and cultures know are true (e.g., the immediate seemings of the beginning of existence of changes/events in conscious experience). Thus, the argument does indeed fit the requirement of using 'principles undeniable by any rational person and therefore independent of all ... social and cultural particularities' (cf. McGrath 2016, p. 32, citing MacIntyre). Likewise, the key premise of the Teleological Argument that our phenomenological world (including our seemings concerning the natural world) manifests a high degree of order is undeniably true as well. Moreover, the Cosmological and Teleological Arguments which reason from these true premises are deductively valid (i.e., they are sound arguments, see Loke 2022a, 2023), which means that the conclusion can be known to be true, despite the fact that the constructive activity of the human mind is involved in the process of observation and formulating the argument.

While it is true that every argument begins with premises (cf. McGrath 2016, p. 31, citing Cobb), not all premises need to be proved; some are properly basic beliefs which can be known to be true just by being aware of them or by understanding them (see the discussion on Foundationalism in Chapter 6). Our other beliefs can be justified by being grounded in these properly basic beliefs which are not dependent on other beliefs for justification. In this way, the problem of 'seemingly inescapable circularity' which McGrath mentions concerning observation and interpretation can be overcome.

Moreover, the power of interpretation is limited. For example, in certain circumstances, taking a cyanide pill would kill a person, no matter how the person interprets his/her experiences. While we reason from a particular perspective, we have the capacity to self-reflect and self-criticize, establish a range of alternative interpretations, and make assessments between different interpretations and rationalities (Welsch 1996). The neo-Kantians whose thought Barth became familiar with while studying in Marburg went so far as to claim that reality is entirely constructed by the knower in the knowing process (Hart 2000, p. 39). However, no one who is sick and wants to get well would say that whatever drug he/she takes is merely socially constructed by the role of values and judgments of the social context of the thinker. While what we think we know about medications and other things does involve the creation of representations (schemas) and mental maps influenced by social factors and bias, which can lead us to overlook or disregard evidence, this does not prevent us from knowing the facts by following the evidences. Many claims (e.g., taking pesticides is harmful) are plainly facts as shown by the evidences, regardless of

whether the person claiming them has bias or not. Moreover, bias can be overcome, and a person can change his/her views in light of the evidences.¹¹

It is true that our observations of the world are theory-laden; i.e., they presuppose concepts and categories in terms of which we make sense of the flux of experience. Nevertheless, it would be an over-interpretation to think that the content of experience is fully determined by these concepts or categories (Kitcher 1998, pp. 38–39). While the content of our experiences is structured by mental concepts and paradigms, that does not imply that our experiences have no causal relations with extra-mental entities. On the contrary, the existence of such causal relations is indicated by those facts (e.g., cyanide pill kills) which cannot be interpreted away by our intra-mental activity. This indicates that there is a reality ‘out there’ that is in some ways resistant to our powers of interpretation. We recognize, as Polkinghorne (2005, p. 4) says,

The unexpected character often stubbornly displayed by nature. Far from its behaving like epistemological clay in our pattern-seeking hands, capable of being moulded into any pleasing shape that takes the fancy, the physical world frequently proves highly surprising, resisting our expectations and forcing us to extend, in unanticipated ways, the range of our intellectual understanding.

Polkinghorne (2011b, p.30) observes that

The counterintuitive ideas of quantum physics are perhaps the most striking example of this phenomenon. Who would have supposed that the apparent ambiguity of wave/particle duality was a rational possibility without being driven to it by the stubborn facts of the observed character of light?

At the same time, we must also acknowledge that the only access we have to this reality ‘out there’ is through the human mind involving reflection, interpretation of information through a grid of psychological states such as expectations, memories and beliefs, and the expression and accommodation of that reality with tools such as mathematical formulae or mental models (hence, critical). This position is known as critical realism (McGrath 2003, Ch. 10). Affirming that the human mind is involved in the manner described by critical realism does not deny that we can have properly basic beliefs as explained above, nor does it deny the validity of deduction. In other words, critical realism is compatible with epistemological foundationalism and with affirming that we can know some important theological conclusion(s) to be true based on sound argument(s) of natural theology. The Barthian claim that natural theology leads to humans constructing God in our own image (as Feuerbach

11 For example, skeptic Albert Ross (pseudonym Frank Morison) set out to refute Jesus’ resurrection, but changed his view after examining the evidence and wrote a book defending the resurrection (Morison 1930).

would say) fails to answer the question of where did humans ultimately come from. As explained in Section 3.2, we (and the universe) ultimately came from a First Cause Creator God, as shown by the Cosmological Argument which is a sound argument. Thus, the conclusion that ‘God exists’ is true (rather than constructed in our own image) (the other issues concerning the noetic effects of sin have already been addressed in Chapter 5; see also Section 9.7).

9.4 Concerning incommensurability

The emergence and significance of the notion of multiple situated rationalities has been noted by scholars (McGrath 2018). Some radical postmodernists might apply this concept to religion and claim that each worldview has its own rationality. Concerning incommensurability, they would argue that no common scale or measure is available for us to decide which worldview is true. They think that this explains why people from different religions can talk with one another and yet not come to the same conclusion.

However, the latter is not always the case. While disagreements often persist, there are also cases where knowledgeable people from one religion come to agree that another religion is more reasonable and convert.¹²

With respect to Lyotard’s view on incommensurability, this may exist in certain respects between language systems. Nevertheless, as Wittgenstein observes, for the most part

we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing ... which constitute trans-contextual bridges ... in many cases a trans-contextual frame of reference for meanings can be found in “the common behaviour of mankind” (Wittgenstein and Anscombe 1981, Part I, pp. 66, 206). Thus, in most circumstances, we can decide what the best interpretation is and communicate this to others. When I read Derrida, I know that his intention is to undo the author’s intention. Derrida would not say that “we cannot decide whether the medical evidences indicate that taking paracetamol is helpful for patients with mild headaches while taking pesticide is harmful.”

If he takes the wrong thing, he will realize that pesticides are harmful and that this is not merely a language game or convention.¹³ As explained in previous chapters, we can arrive at true claims about who or what God is by using sound arguments such as the Cosmological Argument, which shows that God is the First Cause with libertarian freedom, etc.

¹² See, for example, the testimony of Paul Williams mentioned in Chapter 2.

¹³ Geisler (2011, chapter 6) notes that there is an important difference between a conventionalist theory of symbols and a conventionalist theory of meaning: while most symbols are conventionally relative (different languages have different names for the same referents), this is not the same as claiming that the meaning of a sentence is culturally relative.

Concerning Kuhn's view on incommensurability, it highlights the possibility that the thought patterns of different groups of people might indeed be incommensurable in certain respects. Nevertheless, as argued previously, laws of logic are necessarily true. Moreover, where different cultures and religions are concerned, they all require the same sources of acquiring knowledge, such as sensory experiences, introspection, etc. (see Section 7.1). We can use laws of logic and these sources of knowledge, as well as observations (e.g., of causal order) which different cultures recognize, to formulate arguments for conclusions that will demonstrate the truth of one worldview over another. For example, we can formulate and defend the Cosmological Argument which demonstrates that the universe has a Creator (see Sections 3.2), and this would help us evaluate the worldview of Buddhism which denies that the universe has such a Creator and the worldview of Christianity which affirms that there is. (Kuhn's view concerning paradigm shift is discussed in Chapter 7.)

9.5 Concerning the objection that arguments are open to revision

Against natural theology, Kuhn might object that the history of ideas is marked by one argument or theory being replaced by another, and therefore we can never be sure about what the real answer is. Wittgenstein (1979, p. 336) comments that 'What men consider reasonable or unreasonable alters. At certain periods, men find reasonable what at other periods they found unreasonable. And vice versa.'

However, the fact that many theories have been replaced does not imply that all theories will be replaced or that they are all completely fallacious. Neither does it imply that every theory is merely as good as another. Clearly some theories are better than others because the former are based on better arguments, and we have to examine the details of each theory and argument on its own merits and on a case-by-case basis. While there are examples of theories (e.g., geocentrism) which have failed and are no longer defended in leading academic publications, there are examples of success stories as well, such as the heliocentric theory. Additionally, there are examples of arguments which have stood the test of time. Take, for example, the Cosmological Argument for the existence of God and the historical argument for the resurrection of Jesus. These arguments have been around for millennia and are still being defended today in leading academic journals and monographs (see Chapter 3).

In an article published in the *Scientific American* titled 'Why Doubt Is Essential to Science,' the author claims that 'doubt in science is a feature, not a bug. Indeed, the paradox is that science, when properly functioning, questions accepted facts and yields both new knowledge and new questions—not certainty' (Grjebine 2020). Shouldn't we doubt her claim, given her view that doubt is essential to science? Grjebine's view is self-refuting and cannot be established. It is another example of empty philosophy, published in a highly influential

science magazine.¹⁴ What can be established (e.g., the Earth rotates around the Sun) is based on sound arguments, and various arguments of natural theology (e.g., Loke 2022, 2023) are indeed such arguments as I have argued.

Grjebine's view is in line with a post-Enlightenment tradition that is built on the principle of critique of any kind of claims of ultimate certainty—whether scientific, religious, or otherwise—that purports to be the final say of the matter, and which therefore would not accept the proof structure of the traditional arguments of natural theology.¹⁵ This principle is appealing to many people because it seems to exemplify intellectual humility and open-mindedness. Nevertheless, it suffers from the following problems.

The first problem is that this principle itself also implies a 'final say' as well: i.e., accepting 'the principle of critique of any kind of claims of ultimate certainty that purports to be the final say of the matter' as the final say of the matter. In other words, 'we are ultimately certain that we cannot be ultimately certain,' which is self-defeating.

Second, the principle is based on human fallibility (that humans can make mistakes in their claims concerning reality), and in order for the principle to be valid, it has to assume the fact that we are certain that we can make mistakes in order to reject any claim of certainty. However, this implies that the principle is self-defeating (rejecting certainty by assuming certainty) and contrary to fact, viz. the fact that we are certain that we are fallible. Additionally, the fact that we are fallible (we can possibly be wrong) does not imply that, in actuality, we can never be certain that we are correct. On the contrary, we can be quite certain of the fact that we are fallible, that the laws of logic correspond with reality (see Chapter 6), that we would probably die if we jump down from ten stories unprotected, etc.

Third, while the principle appears to exemplify intellectual humility and open-mindedness, it is in fact arrogant in denying the possibility of an omnipotent God revealing to humanity in a decisive way (see the critique of Heidegger in Section 8.4) through the evidence of his creation (such as the highly ordered laws of nature mentioned previously). Additionally, it is closed-minded in the sense of being closed to the possibility of producing a proof that gives a certain result, without even considering the evidence or rebutting the premises or the validity of the deduction of the argument. Note that there is a distinction between open-mindedness (willingness to follow the evidence where it leads) and the principle of critique, which is actually a form of closed-mindedness. The former is necessary for scientific reasoning and critical reflection and for discovering the wonders of our world (e.g., the Earth rotates around the Sun), whereas the latter is self-defeating as explained above.

Proponents of the principle of critique would argue that, in the history of science, many scientific theories (e.g., phlogiston chemistry) have been falsified

14 I personally know of an eminent scientist who was misled by Grjebine's view, until I pointed out its fallacy of self-refutation to him.

15 I thank Rene Rosfort for helpful discussion on this point.

and that the conclusions of science are always provisional, open to revision and possible rejection in light of new findings.

However, being in principle open to revision and possible rejection does not mean that in actuality we do not have good reasons to accept some conclusions as true; e.g., it is true that the Earth rotates around the Sun. No non-suicidal proponents of the principle of critique would jump down from ten stories unprotected because of their reasoning that many scientific theories have been falsified.

Most of those post-Enlightenment thinkers who oppose natural theology would accept the above-mentioned findings of science concerning heliocentrism, gravity, etc. and concede that over the past 500 years the natural and life sciences have helped us understand the world better.¹⁶ However, they fail to realize that the argumentative structure by which science comes to help us understand the world better is similar to that of the Cosmological and Teleological Arguments formulated in Chapter 3. See the example concerning the confirmation of the prediction of quantum physics in Section 7.1, which illustrates the point that science itself requires the true principle concerning deductive reasoning, viz. that the conclusion of a sound argument (i.e., an argument with true premises and valid deduction) is true. Valid deduction preserves the truth of the premises because that is what deduction means. Thus, if the premises of the Cosmological and Teleological Arguments are true and the deduction is valid (i.e., a sound argument), the conclusion that the Creator (God) exists would follow. Thus, it is inadequate for skeptics to dismiss that the Cosmological Argument is speculation or claim that post-Enlightenment philosophers play by other rules or that their playing field is different. Rather, they would need to rebut the premises or the validity of the argument, but this has not been accomplished (as noted in previous chapters).

The above conclusion indicates that scientific argumentation which is valued by the Enlightenment actually supports rather than contradicts traditional religious view that there is a Creator God, which is one of the reasons for thinking that an important aspect of the Enlightenment critique of religion (which is assumed by many post-Enlightenment thinkers such as Kierkegaard) has in fact failed.

Against the arguments of natural theology, Pascal (2005, pp. 55–56) objects that ‘the metaphysical proofs of God are so remote from men’s reasoning and so complicated that they make little impression. And when they are of service to some, it is only for the instant during which they see this demonstration. But an hour later they fear they have been mistaken.’ Along these lines, it might be asked whether the proponent of (say) the Cosmological Argument may be missing something in the proof which might be discovered by somebody later.¹⁷ After all, the argument is not as straightforward as (say) the argument for the *cognito* or for why a shapeless square cannot exist. Moreover, new books on the

16 See response to Thomas Kuhn in Section 9.4.

17 I thank Wesley Wildman and Oliver Davies for suggesting this.

arguments are frequently being written, which is an indication that the previous formulations of the proofs have missed something and are in need of being updated and replaced, and it is likely that the formulations in the new books themselves will be replaced in the future as well. Because of such considerations, which seem to indicate that one cannot find certainty in rational arguments, many have sought refuge in the apparent certainty and immediacy of personal religious experience rather than abstract metaphysical arguments.

The following points can be made in response.

First, concerning certainty, one should distinguish between epistemic certainty and psychological certainty. What a person regards as psychologically certain by personal religious experience might be false (e.g., it might be explained by psychological states rather than spiritual entities). However, what is epistemically certain is true; for example, as explained earlier, if the premises of a deductively valid argument are true, then the conclusion is true. It has also been explained in Section 7.1 that philosophical reasoning is capable of yielding items of knowledge which we can be even more epistemically certain about than the conclusions of science. The metaphysical proofs may be remote and complicated, but they are useful for providing a rigorous response to the sophisticated objections to theism which have been offered, and there are many throughout history who have found them persistently (not just instantly) helpful (see Chapter 2). Most high-quality scientific studies or clinical trials are likewise too remote and complicated for non-specialists, but hardly any people would deny the value of their rigorous arguments. The fear of being mistaken can happen with or without proof; the advantage of having proof is that the fear can be allayed by going through the steps again.

Second, concerning missing something in the proof, it is not only one person who has gone through the steps and checked the proof. The Cosmological and Teleological Arguments (for example) have existed for thousands of years since Plato, and many people have checked them. They have been scrutinized and defended by some of the most brilliant minds throughout history, and while objections have been raised (e.g., by Hume and Kant), they have been shown to be mistaken again and again (see Loke 2017b, 2022a). The arguments have stood the test of time, and they remain defensible today.

Third, the essential idea of the Cosmological Argument is not that complicated. The deduction is fairly straightforward and the key premises of the argument—i.e., ‘whatever begins to exist has a cause’ (in layman terms, ‘something does not come from nothing’) and ‘an infinite regress of causes is impossible’ (‘it cannot be turtles all the way down’; see Section 3.2)—are easy to understand and are very plausible (at least more plausible than their denials). Likewise, the key premise of the Teleological Argument that our phenomenological world manifests a high degree of order is easy to understand and undeniably true. This premise remains unrefuted, and it has been enhanced by the discoveries of modern science, as noted in Chapter 3 (see also the discussion of Einstein’s view in Chapter 9).

The reason why it often takes a whole new book to explain and defend these arguments is that throughout history, many complicated but ultimately mistaken objections (e.g., objection based on confusion of potential and actual infinite, objection based on quantum physics, Kant's First Antinomy [see Section 9.7]) have been raised. The earlier formulations of these arguments by Plato et al. did not take into account these objections raised by later generations. Thus, new books need to be written to explain in detail why these objections are mistaken, to give supporting arguments to demonstrate that the key premises are indeed true, and to discuss modern scientific discoveries such as quantum mechanics and the Big Bang that were not known to Plato et al. As explained in previous chapters, these new discoveries do not actually indicate that the Cosmological and Teleological Arguments are flawed; on the contrary, they have provided additional evidence to support these arguments. In the process of writing new books, the version of the Cosmological Argument presented in this book refines the previous formulations by providing a clearer and more organized presentation of previous arguments, such as making explicit the implicit reasoning for the premises and synthesizing some viewpoints. Nevertheless, the basic premises (e.g., something does not come from nothing, the impossibility of infinite causal regress, the first cause has libertarian freedom) have remained unchanged over the centuries, and they have been shown to be true, as noted in Chapter 3. Since the premises remain unrefuted and the deduction is valid, the conclusion remains unrefuted; that is, the universe has a Creator. The Cosmological Argument presented in this book preserves those parts of the argument which are unproblematic and which have stood the test of time. Thus, one does not need to worry that it will be refuted in the future, even though it may be refined in the future to address new objections, and thus be 'replaced' by newer formulations in this sense.

Fourth, the supporting arguments for each of the premises of the Cosmological Argument are not only one, but three or four (Loke 2017b, 2022a), including some newer supporting arguments which have been developed in recent decades (e.g., the Grim Reaper Paradox in Koons forthcoming; and the New Hilbert Hotel Argument in Loke and Haitov 2025); this also explains why newer books and articles are being written. Thus, even if one is mistaken about one supporting argument, the argument can still stand on the others.

Therefore, while the Cosmological Argument is not as straightforward as (say) the argument for the cognito, the situation is mitigated by having more supporting arguments for the premises, the evident truth of the premises, and the argument having stood the test of time. After many centuries, the argument is still being defended today in leading academic peer-reviewed publications (as noted in Chapter 3). The argument is at least as good—if not better—than any other reason (such as those offered by Pascal) which have been offered for believing that God exists. Moreover, the Cosmological Argument is not the only argument of natural theology. As noted in Chapter 3, there are a number of other arguments which can be defended independently of the Cosmological

Argument, and these arguments are also still being defended today in leading academic peer-reviewed publications. Thus, even if one is mistaken about the Cosmological Argument, this does not imply the failure of the other arguments nor the failure of the project of natural theology.

Finally, the value of natural theology does not depend on demonstrating the epistemic certainty of the conclusions of the arguments. Stephen Davis (1997, pp. 189–190) distinguishes between the following five purposes of the arguments of natural theology:

- (1) To show that theism is rational.
- (2) To show that theism is more rational than atheism.
- (3) To show that theism is more rational than agnosticism.
- (4) To show that theism is as rational as many things that atheist philosophers often believe in, e.g., the existence of ‘other minds.’
- (5) To show that it is irrational not to believe that God exists.

One should be careful to avoid the false binary choice of either having undeniable evidence or no evidence at all (Kojonen 2021). The arguments of natural theology may at least demonstrate that belief in God is *rationally permissible*.¹⁸ Now, the Cosmological Argument warrants a stronger conclusion than that, because the soundness of the argument implies the certainty of the conclusion and that belief in a Creator God is *rationally obligatory*. However, this does not imply that demonstrating the certainty of the conclusions of the arguments of natural theology is a necessary condition for believing that God exists. Rather, demonstrating that God’s existence is at least as good as (or better than) the currently available alternative naturalistic hypotheses would have sufficed to show the rational permissibility (or reasonableness) of believing that God exists. Evans (2010, p. 8) notes that the main goal of natural theology ‘may be simply to make belief in God a “live option,” to use William James’s term, by removing intellectual barriers to faith. In the contemporary Western intellectual world, a naturalistic world view is often taken for granted.’ (For further responses concerning the issues of uncertainty, provisionality, and agnosticism, see Loke forthcoming a.)

9.6 Concerning the God of the gaps objection

Another reason for thinking that the Cosmological Argument, the Teleological Argument from the high degree of order, and the Moral Argument will not be refuted or rebutted in the future is that these arguments are not based on ignorance or gaps in our knowledge which may be filled in and replaced by other explanations later. Rather, they are based on undeniable phenomenological experiences and/or reasons such as mathematical truths, logical deduction, and

¹⁸ I thank Ang Tong for clarifying this point.

the essential characteristics of the possible hypotheses, as explained in previous chapters and in Loke (2022a; 2022c; 2023).

For example, the Cosmological Argument is not saying, ‘because we still do not know how to explain the origin of the universe, therefore there must be a Creator.’ Rather, the argument is saying

because there are reasons (mentioned in Section 6.6) for thinking that an actual infinite causal regress is impossible and that a closed causal loop is viciously circular; therefore, there must be a First Cause. It is because there are reasons for thinking that whatever begins to exist has a cause; therefore, this First Cause must be beginningless, etc..

The rest of the properties—initially changeless, having libertarian freedom, and enormously powerful—are likewise derived on the basis of reasons rather than ignorance, as has been explained previously in Chapter 6. There is no gap in the arguments, and hence it is not a god-of-the-gaps argument—unlike some forms of Paley’s watchmaker argument, where there were gaps which were later filled by Darwin’s theory.

A common objection to the Cosmological Argument is that scientists are still trying to find out more about the universe and working on the issues concerning ultimate origins, including whether there could be multiple universes. Therefore, we should not conclude that God exists in the meantime. It has also been objected that, if one starts with the existence of the universe and works backward to prove the existence of God, we will need to show the whole process of how each step is brought about, but we have not found out the whole process yet. Scientists are still trying to discover many things and they have not worked out all the steps; therefore, they think that we cannot conclude that God exists.

However, the above objections are based on fallacious reasonings. For example, I can start with my existence and work backward to prove the existence of my parents, grandparents, etc., without having to show the whole process of how they brought me about (it could be by normal procreation, IVF, or whatever). All I need to know is that I did not begin uncaused but was caused (by my parents). I do not have to know the details of the whole process of how they caused me in order to conclude that I came from my parents.

Likewise, we do not need to show all the steps of how the universe came about in order to know that it came from God. What we need is the Causal Principle ‘whatever begins to exist depends on a cause,’ which is proved using a *modus tollens* argument (see Section 6.5). We can then deduce that an infinite regress of dependent events (an event is something that has a beginning) is impossible and that there must be a first cause, regardless of what intermediate steps there are (e.g., whether there was a Big Bang or not, there must still be a First Cause, as explained in Chapter 6). We can then deduce that this First Cause is something that has libertarian freedom, which shows that it is a creator. That is how we can prove that God exists; we do not need to know or to show the whole process of

creation; we can leave scientists to find out the details of the process, i.e., whether the process involves a multiverse or not. We only need to know that the conclusion of a sound argument is true; the Cosmological Argument is a sound argument, and therefore its conclusion is true (regardless of what scientists find in the future).

Wilkinson (2024, pp. 15–16) raises the concern that the Cosmological Argument in temporal form faces the danger of being a ‘God of the gaps’ argument, ‘where God becomes the easy answer to current scientific mystery. Hawking’s work is a reminder that, if a quantum theory of gravity is found, such a god is pushed out of the gap into irrelevance.’ He cites Hawking’s claim that

It is possible for space-time to be finite in extent and yet have no singularities [...] at which the laws of science broke down and no edge of space-time at which one would have to appeal to God or some new law to set the boundary conditions of space-time.

(Hawking 1988, pp. 135–136)

Wilkinson notes that Hawking’s theory is still unproven, as a quantum theory of gravity has not yet been found. However, Wilkinson fails to note the following two points.

First, Hawking’s theory is contrary to scientific evidence and based on metaphysical nonsense. For example, Hawking’s theory ignores the ‘zero-point energy’ of quantum mechanics. When the ‘zero-point energy’ is considered, we see that, according to the proposal, the initial state of the universe would be a tiny oscillating Big Bang universe that oscillates between Big Bangs and Big Crunches. ‘It is metastable, so this oscillating universe could not have existed forever: after a finite half-life, it is likely to decay.’¹⁹ In other words, the initial state would be unstable and cannot have been beginningless. Moreover, the concept of imaginary time which is used by Hawking’s theory is something that has no concrete meaning, just like an imaginary number such as the square root of negative one. Imaginary time ‘is introduced only for computational convenience.’²⁰ This means that Hawking’s no-boundary proposal does not correspond with any concrete reality that could have brought about the events that led to the formation of our universe. Indeed, Hawking himself later admitted that his own personal view of physical theories is that he did not think of them as corresponding to reality.²¹ Thus, those who think that Hawking’s theory could have potentially

¹⁹ Gott and Li (1998, p. 38).

²⁰ Vilenkin (2007, p.182).

²¹ ‘I ... am a positivist who believes that physical theories are just mathematical models we construct, and that it is meaningless to ask if they correspond to reality, just whether they predict observations.’ (Hawking 1997, p. 169).

removed the need for a Divine First Cause who brought about physical reality have been misled.

Second, even if a quantum theory of gravity is found, this does not imply that the question concerning the ultimate temporal origins of quantum entities and gravity, as well as the events involving them, is thereby solved. While citing my work (Loke 2017b), Wilkinson did not engage with my argument in Loke (2017, chapter 6) that Hawking's proposal fails to consider the issue of how the First Cause could have brought about the first event. As I explained in Loke (2017, pp. 171–177) and Loke (2022a, chapter 6), we can deduce from the premises of the Cosmological Argument (which I have established in previous chapters) that there is a First Cause which is beginningless and initially changeless and that it must have libertarian freedom to bring about the first event from the initially changeless state. This means that the First Cause is a personal agent, i.e., a Creator God, rather than (say) an impersonal no-boundary state. Thus, the fact that there are scientists such as Hawking who accept the Big Bang but are atheists does not show that there are viable alternative (non-theistic) explanations for the Big Bang, given their failure to answer the relevant considerations which are demonstrated by the Cosmological Argument.

The Cosmological Argument is not a 'God of the gaps' argument because the argument does not offer God as the easy answer to current scientific mysteries. Rather, the conclusion that God exists is arrived at via valid deduction from premises the truth of which is already established in earlier chapters. This implies that the conclusion is true, since if an argument is deductively valid and the premises are true, the conclusion is true. Finding a quantum theory of gravity by itself does not answer how did the First Cause cause the first event, for scientific theory and laws of physics describe natural processes involving a series of events, whereas a beginningless and initially changeless First Cause cannot be a process since being initially changeless implies the absence of events. Moreover, physics is the study of physical things, and according to quantum physics, physical things are constantly changing.²² The First Cause being initially changeless therefore implies that it is not a physical thing; it is not something that follows the laws of quantum mechanics, and therefore it is not a quantum system. Rather, it is an immaterial entity. Additionally, to bring about the first event from the initially changeless state, it is required that the First Cause has libertarian freedom, i.e., an immaterial personal Creator (see Loke 2022a; 2023).

The argument from the viciousness of dependence regress explained in Chapter 6 also implies that the First Cause is unsustained in existence and necessarily existent, for if it is sustained in existence by something else or contingent on something else, it would be dependent on something else and hence would not be the independently existing First Cause. Thus, the reason why God does not need to be explained, whereas the universe needs to be explained, is because the uncaused First Cause can be deduced by the Cosmological

22 <https://www.damtp.cam.ac.uk/user/tong/whatisqft.html>.

Argument to have the properties of being a personal Creator rather than an impersonal physical universe, as explained in previous sections of this chapter. Note that the Cosmological Argument does not start by assuming without independent reasons that God does not need to be explained (that would be begging the question and special pleading [an informal fallacy wherein one cites something as an exception without justifying the special exception]). Rather, the Cosmological Argument starts from things we observe (e.g., there exists a series of causes and effects) and deduces that there is a First Cause that does not need to be explained, and then deduces that this First Cause has the properties of a personal Creator God. Such a divine First Cause does not need to be explained and cannot be explained, since it is beginningless, and also unsustained, independently existing (not dependent on anything else), and necessarily existent. Since this conclusion is arrived at via a non-circular argument which does not start by assuming that God exists, there is no begging the question. And since the conclusion is justified by the argument, which is a sound argument as explained previously, there is no special pleading.

It would therefore be meaningless to ask why there is a Divine First Cause rather than nothing (or why the First Cause has no beginning, etc.), because there cannot be an explanation for such a First Cause, since this First Cause (God) has properties which logically terminate the question.²³ Therefore, this First Cause is the answer to the question ‘Why is there something rather than nothing?’

Thus, a personal Creator God cannot be pushed out of the gap into irrelevance. Rather, he is the answer to the metaphysical question ‘where do the laws of physics such as this come from.’ As Wilkinson himself noted, ‘to ask where the laws of physics themselves come from is not “god of the gaps”, rather it is a question which goes beyond science’ (p. 16).

Hence, the Cosmological Argument and Teleological Arguments from the laws of nature (high degree of order) do not suffer from the problem of reducing God to an external agent in competition with natural processes (Alcalde 2019), for these arguments explain why these natural processes exist in the first place, a question which cannot be answered by these processes themselves. Fergusson (2009, pp. 43–44) observes that

The intelligibility of a universe that conforms to the interdependent laws of science is itself something that science must assume. It cannot explain adequately why the universe is so rational and amenable to powerful scientific description such as big-bang cosmology or neo-Darwinian science. In this respect, the design hypothesis ... cannot be made redundant or ruled out of court by the advance of science ... It is not so much that the world exhibits one particular structure or shape that requires explanation. Instead its conformity to scientific description, whatever this may turn out to be, is what is to be explained by natural theology.

23 Note that these properties do not explain why the First Cause exists; rather, these properties explain why the First Cause does not and cannot have an explanation.

Consider also the following point made by Einstein, one of the greatest scientists in history. He writes:

Well, *a priori*, one should expect a chaotic world, which cannot be grasped by the mind in any way ... Even if man proposes the axioms of the theory, the success of such a project presupposes a high degree of ordering of the objective world, and this could not be expected *a priori*. That is the “miracle” which is being constantly reinforced as our knowledge expands. *There lies the weakness of positivists and professional atheists* who are elated because they feel that they have not only successfully rid the world of gods but “bared the miracles”.

(Goldman 1997, p. 24)

What Einstein is trying to say is this: suppose you have never observed the world before, and you just think about what the world might be like (that is the implication of ‘*a priori*,’ which refers to what we can know prior to experience). You can imagine all kinds of possible worlds. For example, it could be the case that if you let go of a pen, it drops this way, flies another way the next moment, flies yet another way the next moment, etc. There is a potentially infinite number of alternative possibilities which we can think of. To expect this pen to fall in a particular ordered way consistently by chance every time you let go of it would have been very unlikely given that this is only one possibility out of so many alternative possibilities in which the world is chaotic. That is the reason why Einstein says that, *a priori*, we should expect a chaotic world, which cannot be described by the mind in any way (merely replying that ‘if the world is not highly ordered we wouldn’t be here to observe it’ does not answer why we [and the highly ordered world] should exist in the first place; see Loke 2022a, p. 168).

Einstein goes on to say that, even if man proposes a scientific theory using the language of mathematical equations, in order for the language to successfully describe the world, the objective world itself must have a high degree of ordering in order that the theory can successfully describe the world.

Steiner (1998, pp. 24–26) observes that, in order for mathematics to be applicable for predicting observations of physical entities, the properties of physical entities must remain reasonably stable over time. For example, there are four coins in my pocket. After removing two coins, I should have two coins left, but if the coins are unstable such that they disintegrate very quickly, I would not observe two coins when I check my pocket. ‘The number of coins in my pocket ... stay constant long enough for humans to count them ... The coins in my pocket are usually the same whether or not I walk around the house, put candies in my pocket, too, and so forth’ (p. 26). What explains this stability over time? Various properties of a particle, for example, could have changed so quickly that it makes mathematical predictions impossible. While one might suggest that there could have been various constraints that prevent the existence of the alternative disordered schemes, the question remains as to why the constraints should exist in such a well-ordered way that resulted in the

mathematically describable behavior of the universe. Genuine randomness is extremely improbable as a causal explanation for this order, in view of the fact that one could conceive of a potentially infinite number of alternative ways in which the behavior of mindless physical entities is disordered.

That is why Einstein notes that this high degree of ordering of the objective world cannot be expected *a priori*, that is, apart from observation. So why is it that when we observe the world, we find that the world is highly ordered? Einstein says that it is a miracle.²⁴ Some may think that Einstein is using the word ‘miracle’ metaphorically, but this metaphorical interpretation is contradicted by the context of Einstein’s statement which indicates that he is offering an argument against atheism, which implies that he is arguing for the conclusion that the high degree of order is the work of God, i.e., a literal miracle.

To elaborate on the context, observe Einstein’s next statement, where he says that this miracle is constantly being reinforced as our knowledge expands, and there lies the weakness of positivists and professional atheists. This context indicates that Einstein is giving an argument against those who use the claim that God cannot be verified as an argument against believing that God exists (the positivist is someone who claims that only things that can be empirically verified are meaningful; proponents of this view typically claim that ‘God’ cannot be verified and is meaningless). Einstein is saying that positivism and atheism have a weakness: they cannot explain why the world is so highly ordered. Science can discover and describe this order in terms of laws of nature and models, but science cannot explain why the mindless physical entities should constantly follow this order. We shouldn’t expect a highly ordered world if there is no God; that is Einstein’s point (which is true as shown by the deductive Teleological Argument explained in Section 3.2), and therefore the fact that we discover our world is highly ordered is evidence that God exists.

It is very remarkable that Einstein goes on to say that this miracle is constantly being reinforced as our knowledge expands. What Einstein is trying to say is that the more we know about science, the more equations of the laws of nature we discover, and the more this reflects a high degree of ordering of the objective world, the more evidence of God we discover. Therefore, the more we study science, the more we should believe that God exists, i.e., the One who caused ‘the miracle which is constantly being reinforced as our knowledge expands,’ whom he defines elsewhere as the ‘superior mind that reveals itself in the world of experience,’ the mind which explains ‘the rationality or intelligibility of the world.’²⁵

Now this is a very remarkable conclusion, because it goes against what a lot of atheists think. If you ask atheists on the street, many of them will tell you

24 I have shown in Loke (2022a) that all the alternative categories of hypotheses, viz. chance, regularity, combination of chance and regularity, and uncaused, do not work and that there is no good reason against design.

25 Einstein (1960, p. 262). Einstein was probably a deist rather than a pantheist, atheist, or theist; see the view in Loke (2022a, pp. 186–187).

that science has replaced God: the more you study science, the more you do not have to believe that God exists, because the more you can explain things naturally without appealing to miracles. That is why Einstein observes that they are elated because they feel that they have successfully rid the world of gods and explained away miracles. However, Einstein argued for the opposite conclusion. Einstein argued that the more you study science, the more you should believe that God exists, because in order for the natural explanations to work, a highly ordered world is required, and the highly ordered world indicates that there is a divine Mind who ordered the world. In other words, the more natural laws we discover, the more evidence of God we discover, and so the more we study science, the more we should believe that God exists.

Einstein's argument, therefore, provides yet another (independent) response (in addition to the Cosmological Argument explained earlier) that the conclusion that God exists is not based on gaps in our knowledge that can be pushed out into irrelevance by future scientific discoveries (such as that concerning the quantum theory of gravity). While the progress of science would generate newer understandings of the laws of nature as explanations for the phenomena we observe, it would not replace a First Cause Creator and Designer as an explanation for the existence of all things, including the laws of nature themselves.

The above point can be illustrated by considering the development of the theory of evolution. While this has often been thought to pose a challenge to belief in God, it has been argued by others that the theory of evolution has provided additional evidence to show that the Creator exists. Consider Charles Kingsley's response to Darwinian evolution. While many have thought that the theory of evolution has removed the need for a Creator, Kingsley argued the opposite. As Kingsley (1874, xxvii) explains, 'our understanding of divine activity had been enhanced by Darwin's theory; it indicates a God so wise that he could make all things make themselves.'

To illustrate Kingsley's point: if someone can create a thumb drive and a laptop computer, you would think that he is pretty intelligent. But if he can create a thumb drive that can evolve into a laptop computer, that would provide even more evidence of his (super) intelligence, because that would be something more difficult to accomplish (indeed, such a thumb drive would be more high-tech than what any computer engineers have created so far).

Likewise, consider the hypothesis that our universe could have come from a singularity which began to exist and then evolved to form the various kinds of highly ordered systems (quantum systems, biological systems) of our universe. Such a hypothesis might be used by Oppy (see Section 9.7) to reply to the objection that it is ridiculously improbable (indeed, more ridiculously improbable than the examples explained in Section 7.4) that our highly ordered universe began uncaused. That is, Oppy might argue that the universe could have come from a simpler singularity which began uncaused and which then evolved into the highly ordered universe. However, the hypothesis that the universe evolved from a singularity is even more ridiculously improbable, because such a singularity

would need to be extremely highly ordered in order to evolve into a highly ordered universe, as indicated by Penrose's calculation that the initial state of the Big Bang must have extremely low entropy, as noted above in Section 7.3. It would therefore be even more ridiculous to think that such a singularity began uncreated or uncaused compared to thinking that the highly ordered universe or my laptop computer began uncaused, just as it would be ridiculous to think that the above-mentioned high-tech thumb drive began uncaused, since such a highly ordered device would require a superintelligence to create it. (The hypothesis that the singularity began uncaused is also refuted by the Modus Tollens argument presented in Chapter 6, which shows that whatever begins to exist depends on a cause(s).)

It might be objected that the low probability of a hypothesis by itself is not sufficient to reject a hypothesis; rather, we need to compare it with the alternative hypotheses which may be of even lower probability. My novel deductive formulation of the Teleological Argument (see Chapter 3) takes care of this objection by formulating a logically exhaustive list of all possible hypotheses and demonstrating that, while there is good reason to think that all the alternatives to design are improbable, there is no good reason to think that design is improbable, and hence the conclusion is design.

Now, the theory of evolution does not explain how the first life came into being or where the laws of nature come from. As explained previously, the Cosmological and Teleological Arguments show that they ultimately came from a First Cause which is uncaused, beginningless, has freedom, intelligence, and power, i.e., a Creator God.²⁶ The theory of evolution has provided additional evidence for the existence of this Creator, by showing that the First Cause is so wise that he could bring about a series of events that resulted in the formation of the first life that evolved into various kinds of creatures (butterflies, dogs, dolphins, eagles, etc.), including human beings whose brains are more amazing than laptop computers. (The human brain consists of 86 billion neurons and over 100 trillion synaptic connections. It is a huge system forming a network of Internet-like complexity, with trillions of networking connections assimilating information through our senses of vision, hearing, touch, smell, and taste to create an image of the world, and enabling us to think, reflect, and feel, something which my laptop computer cannot do. 'Sitting on your shoulders is the most complicated object in the known universe'—Physicist Michio Kaku.)²⁷ Therefore, the more we study biology, the more we should worship God.

26 Loke (2022a) . For the compatibility between creation and evolution, see Loke (2022e).

27 <https://neulinehealth.com/the-most-complicated-object-in-the-universe-and-why-recognizing-the-complexity-of-the-brain-illuminates-the-conversation-around-researching-diseases-such-as-alzheimers-and-epilepsy/>.

9.7 Concerning the lack of consensus

Many are skeptical of the idea that one can conclude that God exists on the basis of the arguments of natural theology, because the debate concerning the question of God's existence has lasted for a long time and is still ongoing (Insole 2024, p. 180). By contrast, there is hardly any debate concerning whether (say) taking a pesticide is harmful. Kant's Antinomies of Reason have been used to claim that, when reason seeks to logically answer questions about the ultimate totality of physical reality—such as whether the spatial-temporal world has a beginning—it runs into the problem that reason *consistently* points us in two opposite directions, and thus such debates will never end.²⁸ Kojonen (2017) observes that although Kant allows that arguments can be presented in favor of beliefs about things that are beyond experience, he argues that in such cases an equally plausible argument can always be given for the contrary view. Kant's First Antinomy, for example, tries to show that one can formulate a sound argument to prove a beginning of the world in time,²⁹ and one can formulate a sound argument to prove that this is not the case. The point of Kant's Antinomy is that Kant thought that reason inevitably falls into contradiction with itself when it endeavors to 'think the whole (world),' and this point is relevant as an objection to the Cosmological Argument. While Kant draws the conclusion from this antinomy that reason is in our head, Hegel concludes that the fact that reason develops those contradictions *on its own, without our heads to help it*, shows that reason and those contradictions are not just in our heads, but in the objective world itself (Maybee 2020, citing Hegel 2010, p. 35). In what follows, I shall show that both Kant and Hegel are wrong.

To begin, various scholars have argued that while Kant's argument that there cannot be an infinite regress of events is sound (Loke 2022a, chapter 5),³⁰ his argument for the antithesis is in fact unsound (Craig 1979). To elaborate, Kant (1965, A466/B494) argues in the antithesis of the Antinomy against the idea that the world has a beginning by claiming that, if the world has a

28 I thank Steve Palmquist for highlighting this point.

29 Craig (1979) notes that Kant conceives of time in an absolute, Newtonian sense as a continuum in which events exist, but which itself exists independently of events.

30 Kant also thinks that the arguments of the thesis and antithesis are only *apparently compelling* because they overlook the transcendental idealist possibility that space and time exist only dependently of the human mind (Stang 2023). Russell (1972) objects that transcendental idealism fails to explain why the human mind orders the raw material of sensation in a certain way and not otherwise. 'In regard to time this difficulty is even greater, because of the intrusion of causality. I perceive the lightning before I perceive the thunder; a thing-in-itself A caused my perception of lightning, and another thing-in-itself B caused my perception of thunder, but A was not earlier than B, since time exists only in the relations of percepts. Why, then, do the two timeless things A and B produce effects at different times? This must be wholly arbitrary if Kant is right, and there must be no relation between A and B corresponding to the fact that the percept caused by A is earlier than that caused by B.' Moreover, regardless of whether space and time exist only dependently of the human mind, the existence of change in our phenomena world is undeniable, and the premises of the Cosmological Argument and hence its conclusion remains unrefuted, as explained in Chapters 3 and 6.

beginning in time, there will be an empty time before the beginning of the world, and no coming to be of a thing is possible in an empty time 'because no part of such a time possesses, as compared with any other, a distinguishing condition of existence rather than of non-existence; and this applies whether the thing is supposed to arise of itself or through some other cause.' Craig has shown that this problem can be resolved by deducing that the world has a timeless First Cause with libertarian freedom, and such a First Cause freely brought the world into existence (Craig 1979. It should be noted that such a timeless God would be beginningless in a different sense compared with an infinite regress of events which Craig rejects, for in the former case there is no problem of infinite regress; see further, Loke 2022a, chapter 6). In short, a personal Creator (First Cause with libertarian freedom) can freely bring about the coming to be of the universe, whether 'in time' or 'with time.' Thus, Kant's First Antinomy fails given that (contrary to Kant) there is in fact no antinomy and no contradictions. Contrary to Hegel, ontological contradictions cannot exist in the objective world as shown in Chapter 6; this indicates that reason does correspond with the objective world itself.

One needs to consider other possible reasons why the debates on God's existence have continued. Theists might reply that, unlike the case of making a wrong decision about taking a pesticide, the consequence of which is quite immediate and determinate, the consequence of making a wrong decision about God does not seem to be immediately obvious for many people. For example, many who left their religions do not seem to have been punished by God immediately. Likewise, the consequences of misinterpreting ancient texts or the arguments of contemporary scholars concerning these texts are also often not immediately obvious. Thus, it is more difficult to achieve consensus when the consequences of mistakes are not immediately obvious. People are often busy with more 'pressing' issues concerning their daily livelihood; as a result, the continuation of discussions on metaphysical issues is often delayed ('too busy now, no time to reply,' 'give me some time to think about this') or broken off before the misunderstandings are cleared and a consensus is reached.

However, there is one more complaint that an objector can make, namely, that the case for/against God is not as simple as the case concerning medications or mountains. The arguments for/against God, as well as the supporting arguments and counterarguments to the arguments, are so many and so varied that it is very easy to focus on some arguments and overlook others, and which one chooses to look at can be affected by one's bias. Furthermore, unlike the case of medications and mountains concerning which experts agree, experts disagree concerning whether God exists. Thus, it seems that the evidence for God is ambiguous at best. Pannenberg (2004, p. 95), for example, claims that 'In view of the debatability of the existence of God that comes to expression in the attempts to offer proofs, one can hardly maintain that this revelation is already convincingly present in the fact of the world.' King and Kelly (2017) observe that some have argued that awareness of disagreement about religious questions should lead a theist to lose confidence in his or her own religious

convictions, claiming that these disagreements are indications of (a) misleading evidence supporting their beliefs or (b) non-misleading evidence assessed inappropriately. Many of the grounds offered on behalf of religious views are difficult to assess. There is disagreement about the character and quality of the arguments offered for and against various religious claims. Even those who are very well-informed of evidence and arguments relevant to religious claims do not possess even close to all of the relevant evidence, and many people would have held different attitudes if they had been born at another time or somewhere else and exposed to different bodies of evidence (King and Kelly 2017, pp. 318–319).

I agree that the case for/against God is not as simple as the case concerning medications or mountains; the reason for previously mentioning medications and mountains is merely to illustrate that we can, in principle, know absolute truths on the basis of evidence. The arguments concerning God are many; we would need to focus on the most important ones and be careful in our assessment of the supporting arguments and counterarguments. As explained previously in Section 9.3, there is no inherent epistemic barrier that makes it impossible for bias to be overcome.

Whether the disagreements among experts are indications of (a) misleading evidence supporting their beliefs or (b) non-misleading evidence assessed inappropriately would depend on an assessment of the soundness of the arguments. It may be that there are sound arguments, but other factors result in the disagreement (see below). While some of the grounds offered on behalf of religious views are difficult to assess, there are arguments (e.g., the Cosmological Argument) the truth-indicative quality of which can be assessed by criteria by which arguments ought to be assessed (see the criteria of sound arguments in Chapter 6). While no one possesses all the evidence, this does not deny the possibility that there is already sufficient evidence which indicates that the arguments are sound.

Moreover, it can be argued that rampant disagreement about whether God exists is *not* surprising on the theistic hypothesis given the reasons for partial divine hiddenness (King and Kelly 2017, p. 321; see Loke 2022b). Indeed, according to Christian theology, human cognitive faculties have been marred by sin so that one might very well expect humans to be prone to suppression of truth and religious disagreement, and thus disagreement may actually tend to confirm Christian theism over its rivals (King and Kelly 2017, p. 322).

It is sometimes thought that a ‘proof’ needs to convince someone holding an opposing view, for otherwise it does not prove anything.

However, this is a misunderstanding. Antony Flew, who was one of the world’s leading atheist philosophers before his ‘de-conversion’ because of the evidence against atheism, points out the crucial distinction between ‘producing a proof’ and ‘convincing a person.’ He writes,

The attempt to show that there is no philosophical knowledge by simply urging that there is always someone who can be relied on to remain unconvinced is a common fallacy made even by a distinguished

philosopher like Bertrand Russell. I call it the ‘But-there-is-always-someone-who-will-never-agree’ diversion. Then there is the charge that in philosophy it is never possible to prove to someone that you are right and he or she is wrong. But the missing piece in this argument is the distinction between producing a proof and persuading a person. A person can be persuaded by an abominable argument and remain unconvinced by one that ought to be accepted.

(Flew and Varghese 2007, pp. 40–41)

Thus, even if person X fails to convince person Y regarding the soundness of the argument, this does not mean that the argument is therefore useless. On the contrary, the argument can still serve the function of helping X know that what he/she believes is true. Moreover, when Y is not convinced, X can ask, ‘why not?: which premise do you disagree with, and why?’ A person’s refusal to be convinced does not imply that a sound argument which ought to be accepted cannot be produced. People can remain unconvinced for all kinds of psychological reasons, such as cognitive bias and the Cosmic Authority Problem that philosopher Thomas Nagel talks about (see below), but these psychological reasons have no bearing on the truth of the matter and they do not rebut the sound arguments which do have a bearing on the truth of the matter. To say that ‘your “proof” needs to convince me, otherwise it does not prove anything’ would be like saying that Galileo did not prove anything because the Pope was not convinced, which is, of course, false. As we all know, Galileo did prove that the Earth rotates around the Sun with scientific arguments, even though the Pope was not convinced.

The objector might ask the following three questions.

- (1) What are some of the reasons why brilliant intellectuals such as Professors Stephen Hawking and Richard Dawkins might remain unconvinced—or refrain from indicating that they are convinced—by an argument for God that ought to be accepted?
- (2) If there is a knock-down argument for the existence of God, shouldn’t there be a broad consensus on the issue, just as there is a broad consensus concerning well-confirmed scientific theories?
- (3) Might it be arrogance to think that highly intelligent people such as Hawking are wrong?

Concerning the third question, many people in the world do not agree with the objector—or, for that matter, with Hawking et al.—and many of them are just as intelligent as these people. That would make the objector’s view to be, on its own terms, arrogant and hence self-defeating (Keller 2008, pp. 11–12).

Concerning the first and second questions, this could be due to various factors:

- (1) Sometimes it may be due to various misconceptions.

One's assessment of particular pieces of evidence is affected by one's background knowledge. Two individuals who hold different background theories might disagree about whether the evidence confirms the theory; for example, someone who knows that Koplik spots are evidence of measles is in a position to diagnose patients in a way that someone who is ignorant of that fact is not (Kelly 2016).

One might think that misconceptions are unlikely among experts, who are supposed to be thoroughly acquainted with all of the relevant available evidence. One might then ask why many highly intelligent cosmologists who should be well aware of (say) the Cosmological Argument show little sign of being convinced by it.

However, when we look more carefully at what highly intelligent cosmologists have been saying about the Cosmological Argument, it becomes apparent that many cosmologists are in fact badly mistaken about the argument, and many are also badly informed about philosophy and theology and hold to the fallacious philosophy of scientism (see Chapter 7). For example, cosmologist Stephen Hawking erroneously claimed that 'philosophy is dead,' yet he engaged in (bad) philosophical and theological reasoning when he claimed that the absence of time before the Big Bang implies that there is no possibility of a creator, 'because there is no time for a creator to have existed in' (Hawking 2018, p. 38). This claim falsely assumes that God requires physical time in order to exist and reveals Hawking's embarrassing ignorance of the fact that reasons have been offered by many philosophers and theologians throughout history to show otherwise.³¹

The misunderstanding of the Cosmological Argument among philosophers is quite prevalent as well. For example, Feser (2013) documents numerous philosophers, such as Bertrand Russell, Daniel Dennett, and Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, who have mistakenly stated the first premise of the Cosmological Argument as 'everything has a cause' and on the basis of that mistake they wrongly concluded that the question 'who created God' cannot be answered by the Cosmological Argument. Feser observes that no philosopher who has defended the Cosmological Argument has ever stated the first premise this way.³² Craig (1980), for example, states the first premise of the Kalam Cosmological Argument as *whatever begins to exist* has a cause. Now, if something is without beginning and unsustained, then it has existed for eternity and therefore was not brought into existence. Such a thing can be uncaused, which implies nothing created it. The Cosmological Argument demonstrates that

31 Professor Martin Rees, former Astronomer Royal and Hawking's colleague at Cambridge University, had earlier remarked concerning Hawking's view on God that 'I know Stephen Hawking well enough to know that he has read very little philosophy and even less theology, so I don't think we should attach any weight to his views on this topic.' <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2011/apr/06/martin-rees-templeton-prize-god-wars>.

32 It might be objected that Holder (2021, pp. 11–12) makes a similar mistake; however, Holder is not a philosopher (he is an astrophysicist).

there cannot be an actual infinite regress of causes and that there is a First Cause which is uncaused, unsustained, beginningless, has free will, and is enormously powerful, i.e., an uncaused Creator God of the Universe. Hence, the question 'who created God' does not arise for God.

The debates concerning the existence of God are examined in-depth in the field of philosophy of religion rather than philosophy in general. Therefore, properly speaking, philosophers of religion, rather than philosophers in general, are the relevant experts when it comes to assessing the arguments of traditional natural theology. Quentin Smith (2001), an eminent *atheist* philosopher of religion, acknowledges that many philosophers who are not specialists in philosophy of religion offer inferior arguments compared to those specialists. He writes,

If each naturalist who does not specialize in the philosophy of religion (i.e., over ninety-nine percent of naturalists) were locked in a room with theists who do specialize in the philosophy of religion, and if the ensuing debates were refereed by a naturalist who had a specialization in the philosophy of religion, the naturalist referee could at most hope the outcome would be that 'no definite conclusion can be drawn regarding the rationality of faith,' although I expect the most probable outcome is that the naturalist, wanting to be a fair and objective referee, would have to conclude that the theists definitely had the upper hand in every single argument or debate.

In the history of philosophy, most philosophers up to the 18th century did think that the existence of God can be proved (this is also an authoritative view within the Roman Catholic church as affirmed by the papal encyclicals; see, for example, the discussion on the Declaration of the First Vatican Council in Chapter 1). Since the extensive critique of the traditional arguments of natural theology for the existence of God mounted by Hume and Kant in the 18th century, many have thought that these arguments have been refuted and that God's existence cannot be proved. This led to the rise of skepticism, agnosticism, and atheism in the academia.³³ Since then, the academia has become very specialized and the discipline of philosophy is now highly subspecialized, and academics who do not specialize in philosophy of religion may not be aware that the objections by Hume and Kant have already been shown to be fallacious³⁴ and that the traditional arguments of for the existence of God are still

33 Hume and Kant were not atheists, and it was probably not Kant's intention to promote atheism; however, others have interpreted and utilized Kant's critique of the arguments of natural theology in a way which resulted in the promotion of atheism or at least agnosticism.

34 See, for example, Richard Swinburne's responses to David Hume's criticism of the Teleological Argument in Swinburne (2004, Chapter 8), and the response to Immanuel Kant's First Antinomy (which bears on the Kalam Cosmological Argument) in Craig (1979, pp. 553–567).

being defended today in journals and monographs published by world-leading academic publishers, as noted in Chapter 3.

The demonstration that atheism is irrational does not imply that atheists are irrational, for a person may rationally accept a view that is ultimately irrational because he/she is not aware of the arguments that demonstrate that the view is irrational. I have personally known highly intelligent senior philosophy professors who thought that Kant had already refuted the Cosmological Argument, without being aware that Kant's objections have been shown to be fallacious (e.g., Craig 1979). Even among philosophers of religion, some do not specialize in the Cosmological Argument or Teleological Argument, and they may not be aware that the objections have already been answered (e.g., Loke 2022a, 2023). Meanwhile, many other scholars have been misled by other kinds of bad philosophical reasoning which developed after Hume and Kant, such as the examples mentioned in Sections 9.2 and 9.5 and elsewhere in this book.

In a widely cited survey, it is shown that, among general philosophers, 72.8% accept atheism, 14.6% theism, and 12.6% others. However, among philosophers of religion, 30/47 (63.8%) accept theism, 9/47 (19.1%) accept atheism, 4/47 (8.5%) lean toward theism, 2/47 are agnostic/undecided, and 2/47 (4.3%) reject both.³⁵ The much higher proportion of theists in the subspecialized field of philosophy of religion compared to the field of philosophy in general is consistent with the observation by Quentin Smith concerning expert knowledge noted above. However, others have offered an alternative explanation that the majority of philosophers who chose to specialize in philosophy of religion are theists, and therefore there is selection bias. Mannino (2015) notes that the explanation of Expert Knowledge and Selection Bias is not mutually exclusive—it could be both. He claims that consideration of 'how exposure to philosophy of religion changes the theists to atheists ratio' favors the conclusion of selection bias, noting the 'overall shift toward atheism/agnosticism of 3.7%.' Nevertheless, 3.7% is quite small, and it may be explained by the above-mentioned observation that, even among philosophers of religion, some do not specialize in (say) the Cosmological Argument, and they may not be aware that the objections have already been answered. Moreover, Mannino has not excluded the possibility that many theists in philosophy of religion remain theists due to better arguments for theism or the lack of better arguments for atheism.

It might be objected that, while the above misunderstandings which plagued Russell, Dennett et al. may explain why there is a lack of consensus among philosophers concerning the Cosmological Argument, not all philosophers (especially those in the specialized subdiscipline of philosophy of religion) who disagree with the argument made such silly mistakes as claiming that the argument says that everything has a cause.

It is true that leading contemporary objectors in the subdiscipline of philosophy of religion such as Oppy do not make such silly objections. Nevertheless,

35 See <https://philpapers.org/surveys/results.pl> for fine-grained results.

their alternative hypotheses are wildly implausible. For example, Oppy objects that one can avoid the conclusion of a Creator by postulating that the initial state of reality began uncaused. This view has already been refuted by the *modus tollens* argument explained earlier in Chapter 6. Additionally, as explained in Section 9.6 (citing Kingsley's view), it is ridiculously improbable that our highly ordered universe began uncaused.

- (2) Sometimes it may be due to peer pressure and fear of discrimination in the academia. Many of the points made in the following paragraphs about scientists may also be applicable to philosophers and historians in secular academia. The interviews done by Ecklund (2010) reveal that scientists often practice a closet faith because of the fear of discrimination by their peers. This indicates that discrimination against religious believers is a real perception within certain scientific communities, and it can explain the observation noted in an earlier study that more non-religious people choose to become scientists compared to religious people.³⁶ Among philosophers, some may be influenced by the consideration to sound humble (rather than appearing arrogant) and/or politically correct (for fear of offending atheist colleagues, including atheist scientists), and they may be consciously or subconsciously affected by the zeitgeist that claiming that we can prove the existence of God would sound arrogant and politically incorrect. A well-known philosopher told me in email correspondence that it would be a wonder that there are any intelligent atheists at all if there is a sound argument for the existence of God. Thus, he dismisses the idea that there are such arguments without looking into the details of the argument and the responses which have been offered to objections.³⁷ However, as explained in this section, the objection that there shouldn't be any intelligent atheists around if there is a sound argument for the existence of God is an invalid objection because it overlooks other possible explanations (such as the Cosmic Authority Problem, see below). It also overlooks the fact that there are numerous intelligent people who have been misled by fallacious objections, as illustrated by the examples mentioned previously. Therefore, the present objection is guilty of dismissing the argument because of (invalid reasoning concerning) the lack of consensus without rebutting the premise or the validity of the argument. In other words, it is yet another example of bad philosophical reasoning held by scholars, which contributes to the lack of consensus among scholars.

36 Ecklund and Scheitle (2007, pp. 289–307). They note that people from certain backgrounds (the non-religious, for example) disproportionately self-select into scientific professions and that the oft-discussed distinction between the natural and social science fields was inconsistent and weak.

37 See, for example, Loke (2023), which explains how those philosophers who have tried to rebut the Cosmological Argument have committed errors of reasoning.

- (3) Sometimes it may be due to private experiences which may or may not be veridical. King and Kelly (2017 p. 315) note that ‘many religious believers claim that their religious convictions are grounded at least in part on religious experiences or incommunicable insights, token events that cannot literally be shared in the same way that arguments can.’ Therefore, even if (say) a Buddhist is presented with the arguments of natural theology which contradict his/her belief that there is no Creator, he/she might still choose to reject the conclusion of these arguments and hold on to Buddhism on the basis of his/her private religious experience.
- (4) Sometimes it may be due to a fear of religion or lack of character traits which have been identified as important for knowledge by recent work in virtue epistemology (Abraham and Aquino 2017, p. 3), such as attentiveness, open-mindedness, intellectual courage, and moral humility (Baehr 2017, p. 221). I shall argue below that this lack of character traits can affect both non-theists and theists.

To begin, consider the testimony of Nobel Prize Laureate physicist Yang Chen Ning, who has repudiated his earlier atheism and accepted the conclusion that there is a Creator of the universe because of the scientific evidence concerning the high degree of order of the physical world which physics has discovered, such as the example concerning the Dirac equation mentioned at the beginning of this book.³⁸ As noted in Section 9.6, Einstein had earlier argued that the more we study science, the more we should believe that God exists, because in order for the natural explanations to work, a highly ordered world is required, and the highly ordered world indicates that there is a divine Mind who ordered the world. Yang said that he was not willing to admit this conclusion in his younger days because of his arrogance—an illuminating confession which indicates that a person’s attitude can prevent him/her from recognizing the truth, which can partly explain why not all scientists believe there is a God, despite the overwhelming evidence that Einstein spoke about. Humility and intellectual honesty are important for our quest for truth and meaning.

In opposition to moral humility, ‘human pride,’ which is characterized by (1) self-righteousness, (2) self-sufficiency, (3) radical autonomy, and (4) epistemic invulnerability, leads to resistance to criticisms, defensiveness, rationalizations, recalcitrant to external authority (e.g., God) and to the unwillingness to accept the view of humanity as broken, morally impoverished, and in need of redemption (Baehr 2017, pp. 222–225). As Thomas Nagel, a leading atheist philosopher at New York University, confesses

I am talking about something much deeper – namely, the fear of religion itself. I speak from experience, being strongly subject to this fear myself: I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of

38 See his interview at National Taiwan University. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVxAUlaas4&t=2732s>.

the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that. My guess is that this cosmic authority problem is not a rare condition and that it is responsible for much of the scientism and reductionism in our time. One of the tendencies it supports is the ludicrous overuse of evolutionary biology to explain everything about human life, including everything about the human mind.

(Nagel 1997, pp. 130–131)

Rota (2013) observes that

a genuine response to God often involves a redirection of one's life and a renunciation of various cherished desires, including the desire to run one's own life in just the way one pleases. Faith can require a radical change of heart, and this fact has implications for human receptivity to the divine initiative. In the words of philosopher Laura Garcia..., "not everyone will be eager to know the truth about God, since it calls for a kind of radical conversion to which most of us will find some level of internal resistance."

The cosmic authority problem which Nagel acknowledges may be taken as evidence of the noetic effects of sin, which is indicated in various Scriptural passages (see Chapter 5).

A person characterized by human pride is 'likely to struggle with engaging in honest and open inquiry about God'; he/she would 'have a vested interest in avoiding evidence that tells in favour of God's existence,' 'feel compelled simply to avoid questions about the existence of God, to be dismissive of religious standpoints and assertions,' or to keep distance (physically and psychologically) from more intelligent and thoughtful religious believers, etc. (Baehr 2017, p. 226). It might lead him/her to distort or misrepresent evidence that would otherwise support or confirm certain theistic beliefs, to miss important logical connections or to misjudge their strength, or avoid reflecting (or to reflect only fleetingly) on the evidence, or prevent one from *acquiring* some theistic evidence in the first place (Baehr 2017, p. 227). This may cause some of them to dismiss the arguments for God without considering them carefully, and hence they remain unconvinced. (The above-mentioned factors may be further aggravated by the problem of self-deception, which is prevalent; see Sahdra and Thagard 2003.)

A book on Dawkins et al. published by Oxford University Press notes that Dawkins, for example, is aware that he has been criticized, but he has ignored these criticisms and continued to defend his position with 'the same blinkered tenacity that characterizes the very fundamentalists he despises,' and it also highlights that Hawking has ignored critics who point out his philosophical

ignorance (Giberson and Artigas 2007, pp. 55, 88). Therefore, it could be the case that the lack of consensus is not because there are no good arguments for the existence of God, but because many highly intelligent ‘experts’ like Dawkins and Hawking have chosen to ignore the supporting arguments as well as the criticisms of their positions. This kind of attitude can affect how people form their beliefs and thereby affects the content of their beliefs, as Pascal and others have argued concerning the problem of self-deception (see Wood 2013).

Of course, not all atheists are like that. There have also been atheists who are willing to change their minds, as indicated by the examples of Antony Flew and Yang Chen Ning. It might also be the case that some atheists who do not change their minds now may do so later. However, not everyone has this kind of attitude, and sometimes to admit that one is mistaken can be the most difficult thing to do.

Hence, with regard to the second question, the view that it is as easy to achieve consensus concerning an argument that involves God as it is concerning a scientific theory—as if human attitude toward science and toward God is the same—is too naive a view of human nature. As the book *Oracles of Science* and the confession by Nagel have illustrated, there are people who do not want to believe in God. Rasmussen and Leon (2019, p. 277) note that

The problem is not that truth is impossible to see. The biggest barriers to truth, I think, are the many other things we can seek instead of truth. There are many things to seek. In a debate, we can seek being right, being seen as reasonable, or winning the debate. We can even seek good things instead: when we seek noble ends, like justice, peace, or good news, seeking these ends is not the same as seeking truth. Sure, we can seek truth while also seeking other good things. But if we seek other things instead of truth, then we are less likely to find truth.

The various possible factors mentioned above—and different people might be affected by different factors—can explain why many people remain at the stage of being unconvinced—or refuse to indicate that they are convinced—even if (as Flew states) there are evidences for God that ought to be accepted.

The factors mentioned above can also apply to theists. For example, at times theists may also misunderstand atheists and not express their arguments appropriately to them. Misconceptions, fear of discrimination, intellectual difficulties, the influence of emotions, wish fulfillment, and pride can affect a theist as well. Indeed, these factors probably account for much of the disagreements among Christians and also among Christians and non-Christians. Thus, both theists and atheists can be affected by these factors; I am not arguing that they affect atheists only. What I am merely trying to show is that, given these factors, the claim that ‘if there is indeed an argument for or against God that ought to be accepted, then there wouldn’t be so many highly intelligent philosophers who remain unpersuaded by it’ is false.

In view of the (surprising) number of misconceptions which exist among those professional philosophers who reject the Cosmological Argument (Feser 2013, p. 157; see above; see also Loke (2022b)) as well as other considerations noted previously, the lack of consensus among philosophers concerning this argument is not a good reason to doubt that there exists any version of this argument which is sound. Kojonen (2017) notes that, at the end of the day,

what matters is not how people perceive the evidence, but how good the evidence and arguments of natural theology actually are, even if some people are prevented from perceiving the strength of the evidence by factors such as the influence of bad philosophy in Western culture or the bad noetic effects of human sin.

Moreover, if the Christian God exists, it is unlikely that the proud would find him, for ‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble’ (1 Peter 5:5–6). Coakley insightfully observes that the task of understanding theology should not be separated from the task of the purification of desire and the pursuit of holiness which is related to contemplative prayer. This contemplation involves ‘an undertaking of radical attention to the Real’ and ‘an attentive openness of the whole self (intellect, will, memory, imagination, feeling, bodiliness) to the reality of God and of the creation’ in ‘an ongoing journey of purgative transformation and change’ (Coakley 2013, pp. 88–92).

I have shown that there are various confounding factors, such as misconceptions, fear of discrimination, intellectual difficulties, wish fulfillment, and pride, which may explain why many atheists—or theists—remain at the stage of being unconvinced—or refuse to indicate that they are convinced. As long as they remain in that stage, they will continue to express their objections, and hence debates about God will continue. But this does not imply that the arguments for (or against) God which have been offered are therefore unsound. The crucial issue is whether the arguments themselves are sound arguments, i.e., one which has deductively valid inference and true premises (see Chapter 6), and not whether there is continuing debate or not (For a defence of this Right Reasons View in the philosophical literature on disagreement, see Titelbaum 2015; 2018). Evans (1996, p. 325) notes that

Anyone acquainted with the history of philosophy would know that it carries little rational weight that a large number, even a majority of philosophers, at a particular time hold a certain view. In the 1950s, for example, the majority of philosophers in England and America probably thought some positivist form of the verifiability theory of meaning was correct, but today such a view is almost abandoned.

Truth is not based on consensus or agreement. Rather than looking for consensus or agreement, it is more important to assess the soundness of the arguments they offer by examining the evidence for the premises and the validity of the arguments. It is evident that there are experts on both sides of the God

question. For example, there are leading scientists (Polkinghorne, Yang, et al.) who believe that the best explanation for the universe is God, and there are others (Hawking, Krauss et al.) who disagree. The more interesting question is *why* they disagree, i.e., what reasons do they offer for their positions? One should try to compare the reasons from both sides and see which side has the better reasons in support.

One might object, 'but surely the problem shown by the refutation of (say) the verifiability theory of meaning is that what people assess to be sound argument might turn out to be unsound? If even the majority of philosophers in the 1950s can be wrong in their assessment that the verifiability theory of meaning is sound, how can anyone be sure of his/her assessment?'

This objection assumes that the majority of philosophers in the 1950s thought that they had demonstrated that there is a sound argument for the verifiability theory of meaning, which later turned out to be unsound. However, it is not clear that a rigorous formulation of such an argument and a rigorous examination of its assumptions had been attempted. The consensus in the 1950s might be due to confounding factors and the zeitgeist of that era, involving philosophers who were overawed by the successes of empirical science which seem to favor such a verifiability theory. Thus, the lesson to be drawn from the failure of the verifiability theory is not to doubt the importance of assessing the soundness of arguments, but rather the converse.

9.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, a number of epistemological objections related to human limitations have been considered. Concerning the Kantian distinction regarding phenomena and noumena, no good argument has been offered to show that the Kantian agnostic claim that we cannot know what (if any) is beyond the phenomena and non-spatiotemporal is true, or that the laws of logic only apply to the phenomena but may not apply to the noumena. On the other hand, it has been explained in previous chapters that the laws of logic cannot be violated (there cannot be something like a shapeless square in the noumena world) and that as long as the deduction of an argument is valid and the premises are true (i.e., a sound argument), the conclusion is true. Starting from the phenomena of the universe, one can ask, 'what caused this phenomenon?', and provide sound deductive Cosmological and Teleological Arguments to show that there is a First Cause of the phenomena which has the properties of being a Creator God.

McGrath (2016) notes that, despite his concerns regarding the situatedness of our standards of reasoning and theories within particular traditions, theory-ladenness, etc., 'it remains important to be able to identify criteria of judgment by which the rationality of a belief may be assessed. Two of the most important such criteria are correspondence with the external world, and internal theoretical coherence' (p. 118). Additionally, 'the best theory is the one that is able to fit in observations and experiences most elegantly, most simply, most comprehensively, and most fruitfully' (pp. 177–178). I explain that it is in

principle possible for contemporary proponents of traditional natural theology to use these criteria to show that the conclusions of the arguments of traditional natural theology are at least reasonable or even the best. Thus, McGrath's concerns regarding the viability of traditional natural theology are answerable. Moreover, McGrath acknowledges that we are able to recognize the culturally invariant notion of human reason in the specific domains of mathematics and logic (p. 34). The laws of logic imply that the conclusion of a sound argument, i.e., a deductively valid argument with true premises, is true. I have explained that my formulations of the Cosmological Argument and the Teleological Argument based on the high degree of order of the physical world (summarized in Chapter 3) use mathematics and logic to formulate deductively valid arguments using premises which (based on their undeniable immediate experiences) people from various cultural backgrounds know are true. Thus, these arguments do indeed fit the requirement of using 'principles undeniable by any rational person and therefore independent of all ... social and cultural particularities' (cf. McGrath 2016, p. 32, citing MacIntyre). Moreover, these arguments are sound, which means that the conclusion can be known to be true, despite the fact that the constructive activity of the human mind is involved in the process of observation and formulating the arguments. I have also shown that these arguments are not susceptible to the god-of-the-gaps objection or the objection that arguments are open to revision.

The lack of consensus among scientists and philosophers concerning whether God exists does not imply that the arguments for or against God are unsound, for it could be due to other factors such as misconceptions concerning the arguments, fear of discrimination, emotional factors, wish fulfillment, and pride. Multiple examples have been offered in this chapter to show that numerous leading scientists and philosophers have indeed been affected by these factors. The crucial issue, therefore, is whether the arguments themselves are sound (i.e., with true premises and valid inferences), and not whether there is continuing debate concerning the existence of God. In the previous chapters, I have explained why the Cosmological, Teleological, and Moral Arguments are indeed sound arguments which show that God exists.

Part IV

Conclusion



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10 The starry heavens above and the moral law within

Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and steadily we reflect upon them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me—Immanuel Kant.¹

10.1 Summary of important conclusions from previous chapters

Centuries after Kant wrote the famous epigraph, the progress of science and philosophy has filled the mind with more cause for admiration and awe concerning the starry heavens above and the moral law within. Scientists have discovered that the sun is merely one of the hundreds of billions of stars in the Milky Way. Even if one could travel at the speed of light—about 300,000 kilometers per second—it would take around 100,000 years to travel from one end of the Milky Way to the other. More astounding still is the fact that the Milky Way is merely one of the hundreds of billions of galaxies of our currently observable universe. And wherever one looks, one discovers law-like regularities of physical entities which can be described by high-level mathematics, instead of (say) particles moving in billions of alternative directions at every moment. This presupposes a high degree of ordering of the physical world which is being described, such that the mathematical equations in physics can be treated by physicists as expressing a kind of software of the universe (Heller 2013, p. 594). Moreover, contemporary cosmology has discovered that ‘the fundamental structure of the universe is “balanced on a razor’s edge” for the existence of life’ (Collins 2009, p. 202). Meanwhile, the unspeakable horrors of human atrocities such as the Holocaust continue to testify to the existence of objective evil. The latter presupposes the existence of objective morality, including objective moral obligations which have a law-like character (Evans 2013, pp. 12–16), and which (despite the progress of science and philosophy) remain resistant to being ultimately explainable in terms of physical, chemical, or biological facts (Baggett 2018).

¹ *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5: 161.33–6.

In the previous chapters of this book, I have offered an up-to-date and 'Big Picture' reassessment of a traditional Christian view of natural theology and the doctrine of general revelation and explained that the Cosmological, Teleological, and Moral Arguments demonstrate that the 'laws of nature' and the 'laws of morality' are ultimately explained by a Divine Lawgiver. I have argued in Section 1.3 for a traditional definition of natural theology which refers to what can be known, rationally believed, and/or demonstrated about God by observing and thinking about the natural world, without using the doctrines of a particular religion as premises. The main conclusion of this book, however, does not depend on this definition, but on the responses which I have offered in the preceding chapters to the objections against the project that is associated with this definition. This definition is in line with the classical Christian approach which responds to the objections against the claims of traditional Christianity by offering arguments from external evidence for these claims. I have compared and contrasted this approach with other non-classical approaches, such as (Barthian) Radical Fideism, (Frame's) Presuppositionalism, and reformed epistemology, and shown that

- (I) The authoritative sources of Christian Theology (Scripture and tradition) affirm traditional natural theology which can be regarded as the first of a two-stage classical approach; this avoids the criticism that natural theology would lead to Deism and the denial of special revelation (Chapters 4 and 5).
- (II) This approach avoids the problems with alternative non-classical approaches (such as the fallacy of begging-the-question and failing to adequately answer why they think that the Christian claim is true while other contradictory religious claims are false) (Chapter 1).
- (III) The project of traditional natural theology is viable and can be defended against various objections (Chapters 3, 6 to 9). In particular, I have offered more rigorous formulations of the Cosmological, Teleological, and Moral Arguments in Chapter 3 and showed that these arguments are sound and that they can be defended independently of one another (although they can also be used to complement and strengthen one another. For replies to objections to these arguments, see also the documents on my academia.edu website). Therefore, even if one of these arguments is rebutted, the existence of God can still be demonstrated on the basis of the other arguments.

While other recent defenses of traditional natural theology have ignored many objections from Barth, Webster, Moore, Moser, Wright, McDowell, and those influenced by Heidegger et al., this book has comprehensively replied to these objections. These objections include

- (A) Theological objections concerning the epistemic authority for the Christian faith, the noetic effects of sin, *Sola Gratia*, the work of the Holy Spirit, etc. (see Chapter 5).

- (B) Epistemological objections concerning foundationalism, epistemic circularity, the challenge of scientism and verificationism, the implications of probabilistic reasoning for faith, the relationship between faith and evidence (see Chapters 6 and 7), and the problem of divine transcendence and human limitation. The latter include objections based on divine knowability/provability, the use of religious language and apophatic theology, the accusation of anthropomorphism and ontotheology, the Kantian distinction concerning phenomena and noumena, and problems concerning human situatedness, the culturally variant notion of human reason, the constructive activity of the human mind in the process of observation, the lack of consensus among experts, as well as the objection that arguments are open to revisions and the god-of-the-gaps objection (Chapters 8 and 9).

Throughout this book, I have provided original contributions to the individual supporting arguments of each chapter. For example, in Chapter 5, I engaged with the objections by Webster (2004) and Marshall (2000) concerning the issue of epistemic authority and divine Lordship (these objections have been neglected by Swinburne et al.). I offer an original analysis of their objections to argue for the view that both reason and Christ are equally the highest and ultimate standards of truth by distinguishing between ‘beliefs that are central to a belief-system’ with ‘reasons for accepting the veracity of this system’ and the different starting points for each and by explaining how the results can in principle converge. In Chapter 6, I provided original defenses of various foundationalist arguments that are based on the laws of logic, the content of our perceptual and memory seemings, and the arguments of natural theology, as well as original analyses of the radical skeptic’s hypotheses to show that the conclusion of the Cosmological and Teleological Arguments cannot in fact be avoided by the radical skeptic’s hypothesis and can be used to argue against the radical skeptic’s hypothesis. In Chapter 8, I provided an original analysis of various apophatic theologians’ concerns based on divine transcendence and McGrath’s concerns regarding the limitations of human reason and observation. My analysis demonstrates how these concerns can be answered by the Cosmological and Teleological Arguments which use mathematics and logic to formulate a deductively valid argument using premises which the undeniable immediate experiences of people from various historical backgrounds and cultures can know are true. While I do agree with McGrath, Wright et al. that naïve realism should be rejected in favor of critical realism, I do not think that their intellectual concerns regarding situatedness, theory-ladenness, etc. warrant a rejection of traditional natural theology (I have replied to these concerns in earlier chapters). Saying this does not deny the value of their alternative projects on natural theology. On the contrary, I think that the results of their projects (which seek to re-frame natural theology in light of our contemporary intellectual situation) do have additional insights to offer (I mentioned some of these insights in various parts of this book). Nevertheless, I think that traditional natural theology remains viable as well

(and has some strengths over the alternative approaches, as explained in previous chapters), and the way I have defended it constitutes another unique and original contribution to contemporary discussions on natural theology.

10.2 Addressing the limitations of the arguments of natural theology

It is true that the truths that we can know in this life are at best discrete fragments of the totality of truths (Insole 2024). Nevertheless, the fact that we do not know everything does not mean that we do not know anything (such as knowing ‘it is true that the truths that we can know in this life are at best discrete fragments of the totality of truths’). Moreover, the fact that we may never be able to achieve consensus (which can be explained by various socio-psychological factors explained in Section 9.7) does not mean that no demonstration is possible or that any answer is as good as another. On the other hand, if an argument is deductively valid and the premises are true (i.e., a sound argument), the conclusion is true, because valid deduction preserves the truth of the premises and thereby guarantees the truth of the conclusion. It has been explained in the previous chapters that, based on the limited truths we do know, we can formulate deductively valid arguments with true premises that lead us to the (incomplete but) true conclusions concerning the existence of God (even though deductive reasoning does not lead to complete descriptions, it can nevertheless lead to true descriptions). We do not need to observe directly that there is a Creator who created the universe in order to confirm this conclusion. Rather, all we need is a sound argument. For example, it has been shown in this book that the Cosmological Argument is deductively valid and that its premises are true, i.e., a sound argument.

A lot of people today would say that ‘God is a possible explanation for the existence of the universe and the argument sounds reasonable, but it may not be the true explanation.’ This is a misunderstanding. The conclusion is not merely a possible explanation; it is the true explanation because it is based on a sound argument.

Some may object that the above statements are making too strong a claim. Such a claim, however, is found in the Christian tradition (see, for example, the discussion on the Declaration of the First Vatican Council in Chapter 1 and Section 9.6) and is warranted by the strength of the arguments. While one must be careful not to overstate the case, one should not understate the case by denying what is obviously true and can be proven to be true. Merely objecting that the claim is too strong does not rebut (say, for example) the validity of the Cosmological Argument nor its premises which are obviously true and can be proven to be true. In particular, it is obviously true (and can be proven to be true using a sound *Modus Tollens* argument; see Chapter 6) that *something does not come from nothing* and that whatever begins to exist *depends* on a cause(s). It is also obviously true (and can be proven to be true; see Chapter 6) that *a causal dependence regress is a vicious regress*. Based on these premises, which are obviously true and which can be proven to be true, it can be deduced that there must be an *independently* existing First Cause which is uncaused, beginningless, transcendent, immaterial, and has libertarian freedom—a Personal Creator (God).

It has been objected that the conclusions of the arguments of natural theology do not imply that God exists. For example, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant grants that the Teleological Argument *succeeds* in proving that the universe has a Designer. ‘Reason..., by one glance at the wonders of nature and the majesty of the universe – ascending from height to height up to the all-highest’ (A624/B652). However, Kant thinks that the problem is that the Teleological Argument can at most prove the existence of some sort of ‘architect’ of the universe; it cannot lead to the conclusion that the Designer is *God* (a ‘Supreme Being’) unless it is linked up with the cosmological and ontological arguments which Kant claims are flawed. Following Hume, Kant et al., Dawkins (2006, pp. 101–102) complains that the Cosmological Argument does not prove that this First Cause has other properties which many people associate with God, e.g., morally perfect, and it does not prove that there is only one Creator or that the Creator is the God of Christianity. Wright (2019, p. 191) raised the concern that, starting with the natural world (without considering Jesus or the Bible), one would not reason to the God of the New Testament but

to an Epicurean divinity, aloof, detached, uninvolved. You might, as many have, reason your way to the ‘Unmoved Mover’ or the gods of pantheism and panentheism. You might well end up with some kind of Platonic divinity, though the question of whether this being is really ‘God’ or something less personal—“the divine”, perhaps—would remain open.

He complains that the Cosmological Argument does not show ‘how, in biblical theology, heaven and earth are designed for one another,’ while the Teleological Argument does not recognize ‘the biblical insight that the ultimate design looks forward to the still-future world’ (p. 252).

Moser (2024, p. 87) objects that many natural theologians work with an indefinite conception of ‘God’ and that ‘if our concept of God requires that God is, inherently, worthy of worship and thus perfectly morally good, we have a definite constraint on our pertinent evidence for God’s reality. We then will need evidence for God’s reality to be evidence of the reality of a morally good intentional agent, that is, an intentional agent with a morally good will.’ In a similar vein, Hauerwas (2001, p. 15) objects to the arguments of natural theology by claiming that they ‘cannot help but “prove” the existence of a god that is not worthy of worship.’

In reply, it has been shown in previous chapters that Kant’s objections to the Kalam Cosmological Argument (KCA) are unsuccessful and that the Teleological Argument can be combined with the KCA (KCA-TA) to yield the conclusion that an uncaused First Cause intelligent personal Creator exists, without requiring the Ontological Argument. Craig observes that believing that there is a single unified First Cause is very reasonable, for it is consistent with the widely accepted and probabilistically warranted scientific principle (Ockham’s razor; see Section 6.4) that causes should not be multiplied beyond

necessity. Atheists use this principle too; for example, they think that thunder can be explained by natural law; therefore, there is no need to postulate an additional thunder god to explain it. Likewise, one Creator is already enough to explain the origin of the universe; therefore, there is no need to postulate additional creators. The ‘Multiple-Creators Hypothesis’ is not as simple and elegant as a single Creator who alone is sufficient to explain the existence of the universe (Craig and Sinclair 2009, p. 192).²

Additionally, the unity of order throughout the universe—such as the universal applicability of the law of gravity throughout the universe—is evidence for a single cause of this order. If we postulate a single Creator, we would expect to find the same fundamental physical laws governing the behavior of objects over vast distances of space and time in the universe, which is indeed what scientists discovered (Sudduth 2009, p. 210).

It has been shown in Chapter 6 that the Cosmological Argument demonstrates that there is a transcendent First Cause with libertarian freedom who created out of goodness, love, and generosity rather than selfishness—this answers Moser’s objection concerning demonstrating an intentional agent with a morally good will and worthy of our worship.

Moreover, the Cosmological Argument and Teleological Argument can be combined with the Moral Argument. Together they yield the conclusion that there exists a First Cause of the universe that is uncaused, beginningless, immaterial, possessing libertarian freedom (i.e., personal), highly intelligent, enormously powerful, transcendent, necessarily existent, eternal, and morally perfect Creator.³ Such a good and perfect Creator is worthy of worship.

Even if the Moral Argument fails and traditional natural theology by itself is not able to show that a perfectly good God exists, nevertheless the Cosmological Argument by itself is still able to show that there is a God understood as the Creator of the cosmos (cf. Genesis 1:1; Romans 1:20). The apparent imperfections in the natural world do not undercut the Cosmological Argument, because the deduction of the argument is valid and the premises of the argument (i.e., the Causal Principle, the impossibility of an infinite regress of causes and events) can be shown to be true (see Loke 2022a) regardless of whether the natural world is perfect or not. Thus, the conclusion of the argument still follows; i.e., there is a Creator God. (I show in Loke 2022a that the apparent imperfections in the natural world also do not undercut the argument-by-exclusion formulation of the Teleological Argument.) Traditional natural theology can thus refute naturalism, atheism, agnosticism, and certain religious traditions such as Buddhism and Daoism without having to

2 It should be noted that this argument does not exclude the possibility that we could have other reasons (e.g., historical evidence of divine revelation) for thinking that the single ‘First Cause’ is a Tri-unity of Persons, i.e., a single First Cause in which there are three Persons.

3 Against the Moral Argument, Moser (2024, p. 160) claims that the existence of objective moral facts ‘give no indication of an intentional agent with a morally perfect character.’ I answer this objection in Loke (2022c).

presuppose the ideas of Christian theology, and this is not a trivial result given the widespread acceptance of naturalism, atheism, and agnosticism in Western academia and Buddhism, Daoism, etc. in the East.

Even if Moser does not wish to call such a First Cause God, he should at least call the First Cause the Creator, given that the First Cause is personal and the First Cause of all things in our universe. In any case, there are good reasons for calling such a First Cause Creator ‘God,’ given that hardly any atheist (a person who affirms that there is no God) would acknowledge that there is such a Creator of the universe and still remain an atheist. Likewise, even if Kant thinks that Teleological Argument by itself does not prove the existence of a ‘Supreme Being’ but only of an ‘Architect,’ there is still good reason for calling such an Architect ‘God,’ given that hardly any atheist would acknowledge that there is such an Architect/Designer of the universe and still remain an atheist.

The Cosmological Argument, Teleological Argument, etc. are not intended to prove that there is a First Cause which has all the properties Christians commonly attribute to God (e.g., Triune), nor are they intended to tell us about the relationship between heaven and earth and the future world. Nevertheless, they do seek to demonstrate that a Creator of the universe exists. This would be a highly significant conclusion, for the Creator of the universe is the One whom Christians refer to when they worship God (e.g., Rom. 1:20, Acts 14). As explained in Section 8.3, we can refer to God with a true description, even if the description is an incomplete description. (Just as a husband can refer to his wife with a true description ‘my wife,’ even if it is not a complete description, e.g., it does not include the description that ‘she visited UK in 2010,’ but it does not exclude this description either. Likewise, the arguments of natural theology do not demonstrate the Triune description of God, but they do not exclude the Triune description either; see Section 5.5). The Cosmological Argument shows that this Creator God exists, i.e., a First Cause which is uncaused, beginningless, initially changeless, transcendent, immaterial, has libertarian freedom, and is highly intelligent and enormously powerful is the Creator of the Universe. Such a Creator is not a thing/empirical object in the world, but a transcendent Creator of the world who is absolute and unconditioned (i.e., does not depend on another reality for it to exist), and who created the universe and is distinct from the universe.⁴ This addresses Wright’s concern about reasoning to Pantheism or an impersonal deity.⁵ The description of this Creator can be filled out by considering further evidence (just like one can describe ‘the wife visited UK in 2010’ by considering historical evidence of her visit). I have

4 Goff (2019, 2023) proposes an alternative view (constitutive cosmopsychism) which postulates that the universe itself is a conscious subject. For response, see Loke (2022a, chapter 8).

5 A number of ancient Greek natural theologians have likewise reasoned to a personal Creator. As Keener observes, ‘Although earlier Stoics spoke of a less personal cosmic personification of providence, Musonius Rufus, one of Paul’s most influential Stoic contemporaries, affirmed a personal and caring God. Epictetus, a Stoic in the late first century, insisted that the first principle of philosophers is the existence of God and his provision for the cosmos’ (Keener 2015, pp. 2642–2643, citing *Mus. Ruf.* 17, *Epict. Diatr.* 2.14.11).

argued elsewhere that there is historical evidence that the Creator God has acted in the person of Jesus Christ and revealed some of the other properties he has, such as Triunity (Loke 2017a, 2020). In other words, the arguments of natural theology are compatible with the view that God (the Creator) has revealed them through special revelation (see the two-stage approach explained in Chapter 5).

Evans observes that ‘it is not the purpose of natural theology to give us ... complete understanding of God. Rather, natural theology is designed to show us the inadequacy of a naturalistic world view, and open us to the possibility of a special revelation that will give us the knowledge of God that is needed’ (p. 80). Moser’s and Hauerwas’ objection fails to appreciate this value of the arguments and is guilty of an all-or-nothing fallacy (either the arguments give us all the properties of a God worthy of worship, or they are of no value at all).

One might ask whether the Cosmological Argument or the Teleological Argument proves that the Divine First Cause still exists today. (Moser 2024, p. 158 claims that the first cause in question, so far as our evidence goes, could have ceased to exist long ago.)

As noted earlier, these arguments are not intended to prove that the First Cause has all the properties that Christians commonly attribute to God (including his existence today). Nevertheless, they do provide some indications for thinking that the Divine First Cause still exists today. For example, it is unreasonable to think that a beginningless First Cause whose existence does not depend on anything else and who had such power and wisdom to originate the universe that exists until today would cease to exist after creating the universe. (Contrasts with humans who die because their existence is not independent; rather, their survival is dependent on many factors, such as the supply of oxygen to their brain cells). The continual existence of the Divine First Cause can also be argued for by combining the Cosmological Argument with the Moral Argument, the latter showing that the divine ground of objective moral principles is a necessary existent (see Loke 2022c) and hence would not cease to exist. (One might also use arguments other than the arguments of natural theology to show that there are evidences that God did miracles in history, such as by resurrecting Jesus, after creating the universe (Loke 2020), which imply his continuing existence after creating the universe).

Affirming that the arguments of natural theology establish the conclusion that a Creator God exists does not deny Wright’s observation that ‘the resurrection reaffirms the goodness and God-giveness of the original creation’ (p. 199). As explained in Chapter 5, the Cosmological Argument, Teleological Argument, etc. (if established) would increase the plausibility of the Biblical affirmations concerning the attributes of God (the Creator) who miraculously raised Jesus from the dead, the relationship between heaven and earth and the future world, etc. Moser’s (2024, p. 163) claim that evidence from apparent design and first cause will not increase the probability of the God of Christianity fails to consider that the existence of an intelligent First Cause (Creator God) refutes a naturalistic worldview and thus helps to address an important objection to miracles. One can then proceed to argue that there is historical evidence

of a miracle (resurrection of Jesus) which indicates that the Creator God has revealed himself in history in the person of Christ as a God who is worthy of worship (Loke 2020, chapter 8). Thus, the arguments of natural theology do not deny Hauerwas' (2001) point concerning the importance of the church's witness to the truth but can contribute to it (see Section 5.2).

10.3 The problem of evil and the ambiguity of nature

The problem of evil has traditionally been seen as the strongest objection against belief in God. Because of the presence of evil (as well as other epistemological concerns discussed in previous chapters), McGrath (2009, p. 80) argues for a Theology of Nature rather than traditional natural theology, stating that the latter can only reflect the ambiguity that results from the observation of what can only be interpreted as beauty and ugliness, joy and pain, and good and evil. He writes, 'On the one hand, nature seemed to bear witness to the beauty and ordering of God's creative power; on the other, it seemed chaotic and lawless, threatening to overwhelm human beings through its unpredictable forces' (McGrath 2016, p. 73). Because of this apparent ambiguity, McGrath argues that, in the absence of special revelation, one cannot conclude that a good God exists; 'perhaps there is no God at all. Or perhaps there are two gods, one good and the other evil. Or perhaps there is only one God, with questionable capacities and intentions' (McGrath 2016, p. 73, citing Browning and Hume). Concerning Paul's appeal to creation as the basis of a knowledge of God, McGrath (2008, p. 201) observes that, 'although insistent that God can be known through the creation (Romans 1:20), Paul speaks of the creation "groaning" (Romans 8:22). The created order is in transition, from what it once was to what it finally will become.' He argues that traditional natural theology which does not draw on the resources of specifically Christian doctrines of the fall of creation from its original state and the hope of the future renewal and restoration of creation end up projecting the contradictions within the realm of nature onto the concept of God (Romans 8, pp. 203–204). Like McGrath, Wright objects that if natural theology brackets out Jesus—in particular his death and resurrection (2019, p. 243)—then it is unable to answer the problem of evil satisfactorily; 'in the face of imperfections in creation God appears like an underachiever' (p. 10).

I have replied at length to the problem of evil and ambiguity in my book *Evil, Sin, and Christian Theism* (Loke 2022b), where I explain that the apparent ambiguity can be explained by the reasons for partial divine hiddenness,⁶ which

6 Rea (2018, p. 13) notes that what philosophers mean by divine hiddenness is quite different from what many theologians such as Barth meant by divine hiddenness. For example, Barth writes: '[t]he hiddenness of God is the inconceivability of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; of the one true God, our Creator, Reconciler, and Redeemer, who as such is known only to Himself and is therefore viewable and conceivable only to Himself and alone capable of speaking of Himself alright' (Barth 1957, p. 197). I address Barth's view elsewhere in this book.

may be important for moral testing and the moral values of actions of creatures, for fostering certain virtues (e.g., truth seeking), and for connection building (see Collins 2013).⁷ Thus, ‘God maintains a delicate balance between keeping his existence sufficiently evident so people will know he’s there, and yet hiding his presence enough so that people who want to choose to ignore him can do it’ (Moreland 2000, p. 189).⁸ Hence, divine hiddenness does not imply that God does not leave behind any evidence whatsoever. On the contrary, one might argue that God has kept his existence sufficiently evident by creating the natural world in such a way that even atheists like Dawkins would acknowledge the impression of design (with its implication of a divine Designer), and that the conclusion that a Designer/Creator exists can be defended by arguments (see Section 3.2). On the other hand, God has hidden his presence sufficiently by allowing for the possibility of objections against these impressions, arguments, and his existence to be raised. One can argue that, while these objections are refutable, the refutations are not as clear as (say) $2 + 2 = 4$.⁹ Thus, Evans (2010, p. 64) goes too far when he claims that ‘given the nature of a theistic natural sign, it is only to be expected that any attempt to convert the argument into a conclusive proof will fail.’ Evan’s conclusion does not follow. There may be conclusive proof, but it may not be as straightforward as $2 + 2 = 4$. Moreover, it is consistent for natural theologians to ‘accept the ambiguity of the evidence, and yet believe that evidence is valuable for belief in God’ (Kojonen 2017; for further discussions on divine hiddenness and responses to objections by Schellenberg and others, see Rea 2018; Loke 2022b, chapter 7; Loke forthcoming b). Moser’s (2024, p. 157) objection that the evidence for the

7 Likewise, Swinburne (2021, p. 341) argues, ‘[God] could of course set aside the laws of nature and write the truths permanently in the sky. But, since fairly evidently only God could set aside the laws of nature and write in the sky, that might make it so obvious that God had revealed these truths that it would remove from humans the choice of trying to find out for themselves whether God had revealed truths, or not bothering to do so, and the choice of helping others to come to know these truths, or not bothering to do so.’

8 Moreland goes on to connect this with freedom of choice. O’Collins (2016, p. 44) cites the theme of sufficient but not overwhelming light which characterizes Pascal’s *Pensées* (nos. 394, 427, 429, and 461) and claims that ‘The factor of relative concealment allows cognitive freedom to persist ... we have enough light to make us responsible but not enough to take away our freedom.’ It might be objected that divine hiddenness is not necessary for freedom of choice. For example, a Christian might object that the initial angelic sin seems to have occurred when the angel was still in heaven in the presence of God, and a person who recognizes that his parents exist could still have freely chosen not to love his parents. However, it might be replied that perhaps God did hide Himself in some ways from angels in heaven at some stage, and that the case of loving parents is not analogous to the case of God on this point given Kant’s point concerning the majesty of God (see Section 7.4) which is not applicable to human parents.

9 While a person might not be aware that there is conclusive evidence for Christianity, there are conditions under which committing to faith without examining further evidence is superior to postponing one’s commitment until more evidence comes in. For example, the subject already has a lot of evidence in the matter of p and on its basis she is fairly confident that p ; the subject believes that any evidence she might find will not conclusively tell against p ; and postponing her commitment would be costly (Buchak 2012).

existence of God offered by natural theologians is static and does not fit with the Biblical portrayals of ‘God’s hiding and seeking relative to humans for their redemption’ confounds God’s revelation of the evidence of his existence with God’s revelation of his experiential presence and deliverance.

Concerning the problem of evil, I have explained in detail in Loke (2022b) that, first, even if the argument from evil is sound, it does not refute the existence of God, but only the existence of an *omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent* God (as affirmed by Perfect Being Theism). It does not refute the cosmological and Teleological Arguments explained in previous chapters, which show that God exists (this point also applies to the divine hiddenness argument; see Loke forthcoming b). In other words, there must still be ‘Someone up there’ who transcends the universe and created the universe. One can then proceed to argue that, given God’s transcendent power and knowledge, he might know of good purposes for allowing evil and divine hiddenness, even if we do not know what these purposes are and/or how these purposes might be accomplished (see the discussion on skeptical theism below). Hence, the argument from evil and the argument from hiddenness against Perfect Being Theism fail as well.

Second, there are other reasons for thinking that the argument from evil is unsound. The conclusion that the Creator of the universe is imperfect (‘an underachiever’) or that there is an evil god does not follow from the presence of imperfections such as evolutionary evils and other forms of evil in the universe, because there are various alternative explanations which have not been ruled out. See, for example, the detailed defense of the Free Will Defence, Cosmic Conflict Theodicy, Adamic Fall Theodicy, Connection Building Theodicy, Soul Making Theodicy, and Afterlife Theodicy and the issue concerning the burden of proof in Loke (2022b) (in response to objections by Draper, Sterba, Tooley, and others; for the problem of evolutionary evils and animal suffering, see also Sollereeder 2018).

On the other hand, the argument that the Creator God is good is not merely based on ‘the goodness or beauty of nature’ (cf. McGrath 2016, p. 76). Rather, the goodness (indeed, the moral perfection) of God has also been argued for using the Moral Argument which myself and other scholars have defended elsewhere (see Chapter 3), and which is evidenced by the moral law written in the human heart, as mentioned in Romans 2 (the Cosmological Argument also provides an indication of the goodness of the Creator as well: see the discussion on Clayton’s view in Section 6.6).

The goodness or beauty of nature is, nevertheless, another indication of God’s goodness mentioned in Acts 14:14-17 and understood as such by many from ancient times onward. Keener (2014, p. 2171) comments that “‘filled with food and gladness” indicates God’s benevolence even toward those who do not worship him’ and that Luke’s audience ‘recognized the one true God as giver of fruitfulness,’ citing Xenophon who affirmed that the gods supply diverse foods for human enjoyment (Mem. 4.3.5-6; 3:2). Consider also Dawkins’ expression of gratitude for the Milky Way and the Grand Canyon which he

sees ('I am grateful to be alive to appreciate these wonders' [Dawkins 2009]). Now, Dawkins does not attribute his experience of such goodness to a Creator God because he thinks that the existence of God is implausible in view of the 'who made God' objection, which he regards as the strongest objection against the 'God delusion' (Dawkins 2006). However, this objection has already been refuted using the Cosmological Argument, which shows that an uncaused (and therefore not-made) First Cause Creator God exists (see Section 9.7). Hence, the experience of the goodness and beauty of creation, which is indicated by Dawkins' expression of gratitude, should be regarded as a perception of the evidence of God's goodness manifested in creation.

Wright emphasizes the problem of suffering as illustrated by the Lisbon earthquake for 'an optimistic variety of "natural theology" which had tried to read off divine benevolence from the course of historical events' (2019, pp. 5–6). However, as he notes, 'that is not the only, or even the normal, meaning of "natural theology"' (Wright 2019, pp. 5–6). As explained above, the Moral Argument does not read off divine benevolence from the course of historical events, but rather it is based on the Moral Law written in human hearts. It should also be noted that Wright's critique of the Moral Argument is based on multiple misunderstandings. For example, Wright (2019, pp. 235–236) objects that we cannot derive objective morality from nature, especially given the presence of evil in the world; moreover, sceptics would argue that our moral intuition may just be a psychological projection. Proponents of the Moral Argument can agree with Wright that we cannot derive the 'ought' from what 'is' the case in the natural world. Nevertheless, as Wright himself admits, we are still able to recognize that evil exists in the world. For example, we recognize that it is objectively wrong for someone to torture babies for fun. As argued in Loke (2022c), the existence of such evils implies that objective morality does exist, and it is not merely a psychological projection. One can then argue that the existence of objective morality is best explained by the existence of a morally perfect God (for details, see Loke 2022c and the sources cited there). The above reasoning indicates that objective goodness (grounded in God) is more fundamental (i.e., more ultimate) than objective evil. Moreover, it has been explained previously in Chapter 6 that the Cosmological Argument also provides an indication to show that God (i.e., the uncaused First Cause who is the Ultimate Reality) is good. It has also been explained in Loke (2022a, chapter 8) that, following Ockham's razor and the evidence of unity of order throughout the universe, one should believe that there is only one (rather than multiple) Ultimate Reality. Thus, traditional natural theology is able to justify the belief that there is one good God (rather than 'two gods, one good and the other evil' [McGrath 2016, p. 73], citing Browning and Hume).

The increased rejection of Christianity after the Lisbon earthquake was related to unwarranted optimism and sociopolitical factors, not to the use of the arguments of natural theology per se. To elaborate, Wright suggests it may be that the optimistic proponents of a postmillennial Utopia had been inclined to suppose that the spread of the gospel would eradicate volcanoes and

earthquakes as well as human sinfulness (p. 6). On the other hand, sociopolitical factors such as memories of the Thirty Years' War and other intra-religious conflicts and the corruption of the French church had caused many people to have reasons for wanting Christianity to be untrue (p. 7). These people then seized the epistemological tools of skepticism and the Lisbon earthquake to reject mainstream Christianity and to embrace a revival of ancient Epicureanism.

Wright notes that the contemporary challenges to natural theology include the claims that there is no God who is involved in this world (p. 9), and that even if there is a God, why didn't he stop evils such as the Lisbon earthquake, etc. (p. 29).

It is somewhat surprising that as a biblical theologian Wright did not engage with the Book of Job in his discussion of the problem of evil and suffering. There God asked Job a series of questions which pointed Job to the wonders of God's creation (Job 38-42). Job was thus able to rest assured in the knowledge that there is a Creator God whose wisdom far exceeds ours.¹⁰ Hence, even though we may not know the reason why God allows certain instances of suffering, that does not mean there is no good reason which is known to God, and that in itself is an important response to the problem of evil and suffering, as I have explained above. The Cosmological and Teleological Arguments point to the existence of such a God who created the universe and thus provide the premise to this response.

It has been objected that the above so-called skeptical theism response (defended in detail in Hendricks 2023 and Loke 2022b) undermines the arguments of natural theology. For example, Ekstrom writes

Consider the case of a theist who bases his belief in God on a Teleological Argument, so that God is viewed as the best, or part of the best, explanation for the order, apparent design, and functionality in the universe. This theist considers his belief in God to be justified at least in part by thoughts about how God would act, of what God would do in forming the universe. But if this theist is a skeptical theist, then on the matter of explaining the seemingly pointless terrible aspects of the world, he is agnostic or thinks that no one has justified beliefs attributing pointlessness. He claims justified belief in the first matter, but skepticism concerning what explains the rotten features of the world, so he has an explanation for the good features, but not for the apparently pointless bad ones. It seems reasonable to think that this stance of ignorance or skepticism is in tension with his affirmation of belief in the case of the explanation of the order and functionality in the universe.

(Ekstrom 2021, pp. 123–124)

10 The nature of Job's response to God has been disputed by scholars; for a defense of the traditional view that Job repents of his accusations against God, see Newell (1984); Longman (2012).

There are at least two problems with Ekstrom's reasoning.

First, Ekstrom does not consider the Cosmological Argument for the existence of God, which (as explained in Chapters 3 and 6) deduces the existence of God from the existence of the cosmos, without requiring knowledge or assumptions about how God would act or what God would do in forming the universe (Loke 2022b).

Second, with regard to the Teleological Argument, I argue in Loke (2022a) that one can argue from exclusion without requiring knowledge or assumptions about how God would act or what God would do in forming the universe. To illustrate, if one were to discover in the midst of a jungle a factory which has the capacity for making motorcars, one would reasonably conclude that it was designed, even if some of the equipment in the factory were imperfect. The reason is that it is unreasonable to think that the components of the factory were brought together and assembled by Chance, Regularity, or Combinations of Regularity and Chance, or that the factory began to exist Uncaused, and as argued in Loke (2022a), the only remaining explanation is Design. The fact that we do not know what reasons the designer may have for allowing for the imperfections in the equipment in the factory does not refute the conclusion of Design, nor is there other good reason for thinking that design is unlikely. Likewise, the stance of ignorance concerning the reasons God may have for allowing suffering is compatible with the affirmation that the best explanation of the order and functionality in the universe is God (the Designer), for as I argue in Loke (2022a) the alternatives of Chance, Regularity, Combinations of Regularity and Chance, and Uncaused can be ruled out, and there is no good reason for thinking that design is unlikely.

Going back to Wright's view concerning natural theology, it should be noted that the response to the problem of evil and suffering in the Book of Job does not include the death and resurrection of Jesus. Indeed, the response in the Book of Job does not need to presuppose the specific doctrines of any religion, for as explained above the response is based on the wonders of creation, i.e., traditional natural theology. Likewise, the responses to the problem of evil and ambiguity which I have offered can be made based on various reasonings without having to depend on the doctrines of Christian Theology (indeed, the above responses can be made by a Muslim as well).

Now, I do not deny that the response can be supplemented and strengthened by the death and resurrection of Jesus, which indeed provide a compelling demonstration that God so loved the world that he is involved in the world even to the extent of giving His only Son, whose resurrection provided the foundation of an important eschatological perspective concerning the Lisbon earthquake, etc. which Wright explained so well. I also do not deny that our understanding of nature can be enriched by specifically Christian doctrines of the fall of creation from its original state and the hope of the future renewal and restoration as explained in Romans 8 (McGrath 2008, pp. 203–204; see also McGrath 2016, pp. 64–65, who connects the suffering and pain of the natural order with that of Jesus of Nazareth). Indeed, I agree with McGrath

that the case for Theism would be even more compelling if we do so. Nevertheless, what I have argued above is that traditional natural theology does not need to draw on the resources of specifically Christian doctrines in order to avoid projecting the apparent contradictions within the realm of nature onto the concept of God, and that the issues McGrath and Wright raised pose no insurmountable problem to traditional natural theology. This is consistent with Paul's point in Romans 1-2 which implies that people who have not previously encountered Judeo-Christianity can nevertheless know that a Creator exists to whom they are morally accountable in virtue of the moral law written in their hearts.

10.4 Concluding remarks

In conclusion, the project of traditional natural theology remains viable and has stood the test of time. In particular, the Cosmological, Teleological, and Moral Arguments show that there exists a First Cause of the universe who is uncaused, beginningless, immaterial, possessing libertarian freedom (i.e., personal), highly intelligent, enormously powerful, transcendent, necessarily existent, eternal, and morally perfect Creator God. As explained in Chapter 9, the Cosmological, Teleological, and Moral arguments are not susceptible to the god-of-the-gaps objection, and thus their conclusion can never be refuted by future progress in knowledge. In particular, with regard to the Teleological Argument, it has been shown in previous chapters that, while current scientific theories may be replaced by other scientific theories in the future, what does not change is the conclusion that there exists a high degree of order of the physical world which is necessary for the theories to work in the first place (see Einstein's point in Section 9.6). This high degree of order indicates the existence of a Creator God and manifests His wisdom and power.

As explained in Chapter 6, this Creator chose to create not for his own sake but for the sake of creatures, doing so out of what we can only regard as sheer generosity and love for the creatures (Clayton and Knapp 2011, p. 38). This confirms the words of the Scripture that 'The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything' (Acts 17:24-25). The conclusion that the existence of God can be logically demonstrated is compatible with the view that one can know and encounter God in a personal way through Christ via knowledge by acquaintance, which cannot be fully expressed in words. 'Love makes you see the very essence which is beautiful beyond comprehension; love leads you beyond' (Nowak 2024, p. 236).

The above conclusions resonate with the quotation from Richard Dawkins which was cited at the beginning of this book. Even atheists can feel a sense of gratitude for the awesome beauty of the Milky Way and the Grand Canyon, and the arguments of natural theology show that there is indeed Someone to be grateful to—the Divine First Cause. This provides another indication that

the Divine First Cause is a good God. We are grateful to the Giver for good things, which indicate that the Giver is good. He is the 'Maker and Father of all' (Plato, *Laws* 10.893b–899c); the source of blessedness (Augustine, *City of God* 8.10.2). To know him is the greatest blessing, for which we can be eternally grateful.

The conclusions of this book indicate that, even though the natural world and our perception of it are no longer in an ideal state because of the presence of sin and evil, people can still perceive and infer that 'the heavens are telling the glory of God' (Ps. 19:1) who has revealed himself through his creation. People will continue to encounter this loving and generous Creator when they contemplate the stars and galaxies, the mountaintops and treetops, the marvels of the equations of physics, and the amazing structures of biological systems. As our study of the natural world continues to yield new discoveries to be reflected upon by the natural theologian, one can predict (as Kant did) that it will continue to bring about ever new and increasing admiration and awe for the starry heavens above and the moral law within, while the beauty and majesty of the natural world continue to evoke feelings of adoration and gratitude toward the divine.

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