

# Natural theology after Darwin



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Has Darwinian science made natural theology obsolete, as many Christian scholars now believe? In this article, the author assumes that natural theology does not take place in a religious vacuum but instead borrows its sense of god from this or that specific faith tradition. Its task is not to arrive at an understanding of the divine mystery different from that of systematic or doctrinal theology. As the author shall argue here, however, the empirical grounding essential to natural theology must be considerably more comprehensive and more profound than that provided by the natural sciences, mainly because the latter usually leave out any mention of the most striking of all natural phenomena – the human mind and its mysterious operations.

The author maintains that an exclusively Darwinian narrative cannot fully explain why your mind is restless for truth or why you should trust your mind. The point of natural theology is to ask whether nature as a whole is intelligible apart from the reality of God. The author's point is that an empirical survey of nature that restricts itself to following the modern scientific method's habitual exclusion of thought from its survey of nature cannot succeed in making nature intelligible.

**Contribution:** This article argues that evolutionary explanations alone are not enough to account for all that is happening in human understanding and knowing. In the light of evolutionary biology, we must note that even human intelligence, which formerly seemed to elevate our species to a perch above nature, now appears to be an unexceptional product of chance, deep time and natural selection. 'Thought', the name we may give to the most splendid of all evolutionary outcomes, is taken to be a product of impersonal natural selection and so also are our moral instincts.

**Keywords:** evolution; Darwin; Einstein; Lonergan; natural theology; intelligent subjectivity; human thought; wider empiricism.

## Introduction

Often it has been argued that the 'book of nature' points to the same God as the book of Scripture. But ever since Darwin, the two books have proven increasingly difficult to reconcile. Consequently, countless scientists, theologians and philosophers nowadays want nothing to do with natural theology. Natural theology in the early modern period had been most impressed with nature's physical order and complexity, especially the life-world. Today, most enthusiasm for natural theology is sustained by anti-Darwinian advocates of 'intelligent design' who argue that natural causation alone is not enough to account for the most impressive instances of ordered complexity in the sphere of life. And now that Darwinian biologists usually claim that science provides an adequate explanation of complex living design in terms of impersonal *natural* selection, one must ask whether any need exists to go beyond science in order to gain an adequate understanding of what seems at first to be the most remarkable and even miraculous of all natural phenomena, the human mind itself?

To many Darwinians, understanding either our capacity to know what is true, or accounting for the heroism in our most selfless moral action requires nothing more than purely natural explanation. If so, the long and cherished history of natural theology, at least as far as many scientifically educated people are concerned, is at last over.

And yet, if the phenomenon of thought is fully part of the natural world, then any survey of nature that avoids a close encounter with the human mind and its amazing skills cannot be considered entirely empirical. For, if it turns out that the structure and operations of human minds cannot be rendered fully intelligible in scientific (and specifically Darwinian terms), then maybe the whole universe, into which our minds are seamlessly woven, may still be wondrous enough to capture the interests of natural theologians.

**Note:** Special Collection: Johan Buitendag Festschrift, sub-edited by Andries Van Aarde (University of Pretoria, South Africa).

By 'natural theology', the author means any attempt to argue that the intelligibility of nature requires, at some point, in our attempts to understand it, that we posit the existence and influence of a Creator God as the latter has been understood in Abrahamic religions. The author shall argue here that reasonable reflection cannot grasp what 'nature' really is unless it inspects what's going on when people are experiencing, understanding, knowing and deciding. Because the only natural world of which we know, or ever will know, is the one that *in fact* has given birth to beings endowed with minds, it seems extremely shortsighted to draw up portraits of nature that leave out *careful attention* to the most arresting of all emergent phenomena in the history of nature, that of human 'thought'.

It is remarkable that what is now known as 'empirical science', which allegedly follows the mind's imperative to be attentive to phenomena, has generally failed to attend closely to the operations of those minds that undergird and give rise to the enterprise known as science. The author starts, then, with the premise that the minds of scientists, even though hidden from physical examination, are no less part of the natural world than rocks and rodents. The operations of those minds deserve closer attention and understanding than either science or natural theology has usually provided.

Modern science and philosophy have settled for a picture of nature in which cognitive activity fails to show up at all. A conventionally scientific approach to the phenomenon of thought passes over in silence the scientific knower's internal experience of being a knowing subject. This omission is methodologically appropriate, it seems, for the self-limiting discipline of physical science, but is there any good reason for excluding it from the range of data that natural theology employs as its *empirical* grounding? The author does not believe so. The author believes that natural theology if it is to survive the Darwinian revolution, must include a range of empirically available data that most contemporary philosophers and natural scientists have typically ignored.

## Intelligent subjectivity

The name the author shall give here to that ignored field of data is 'intelligent subjectivity'. By intelligent subjectivity, the author means (with Bernard Lonergan) the acts of attending, understanding, judging and deciding that are taking place now, for example, as you are reading this article. This set of data is immediately available to your attention. Furthermore, there can be no reasonable doubt that these four operations by intelligent subjects, such as yourself, are just as much part of nature as the blowing of the wind and the rushing of water. Yet the whole set of intelligent operations typically gets left out of representations of nature by empirical 'science' (see Wallace 2000). Most scientists are tacitly aware of their own intelligent subjectivity, but more often than not, they talk and write as though their own mental functioning is not part of the natural world. They seek to understand the universe without closely attending to or understanding their own

intelligent subjectivity. As a result, they diminish the natural world by portraying it as fundamentally mindless.

This omission has allowed modern thought to assimilate nature readily to a materialist or atomist metaphysics, according to which a primordial subatomic sea of mindlessness is taken to be the origin, substance and destiny of all being – including what the author calls thought. Nevertheless, as the mathematician and philosopher A. N. Whitehead (among others) has famously observed, our own inner, subjective or mental world and activity fall among the constituents of nature, requiring that wide and rich empiricism include this activity along with the 'outside' aspects of nature, in its representation of the universe. Whitehead insists that 'the sharp division between mentality and nature has no ground in our fundamental observation'. 'We find ourselves living within nature', he says, so 'we should conceive mental operations as among the factors which make up the constitution of nature' (Whitehead 1968:156). The same great thinker allows that it may be methodologically permissible for natural scientists, strictly speaking, to attend only to what is physically knowable. In that case, however, a wider, richer and more attentive empiricism that is more in touch with the region of nature the author is calling intelligent subjectivity to be called upon to retrieve data that the physical sciences inevitably overlook. To claim, as materialist cognitive scientists do, that intelligent human subjectivity (as well as the sentient subjectivity of non-human organisms) is not objectively real, is a self-subversive proposition. It logically undermines every claim that the materialists' minds are making (see Churchland 1995).

## A wider empiricism

Consequently, the author proposes that natural theology after Darwin espouses what the Jesuit philosopher Bernard Lonergan has called a *generalised empirical method* (Lonergan 1967):

Generalized empirical method operates on a combination of both the data of sense and the data of consciousness: it does not treat of objects without taking into account the corresponding operations of the subject; it does not treat of the subject's operations without taking into account the corresponding objects. (p. 141)

This method of inquiry refuses to bracket out the knower's cognitive operations as though they are separate from nature. A generalised empirical method includes visible data and the subjective mental operations that make the phenomenon of thought, including the whole enterprise of natural science, possible in the first place. For natural theology to be grounded empirically, it must be attentive to 'intelligent design' as detected by objective science and the 'intelligent subjectivity' that seeks intelligibility and truth. Natural theology, therefore, must not begin its quest for the universe's intelligibility by removing from its portrait of nature the 'inside' experience of attentive, intelligent, critical and responsible subjects. The author must emphasize that

intelligent subjectivity is just as natural as thunderstorms and snowfall. However, to say that consciousness is entirely natural does not mean that a complete understanding of it can be given in naturalistic terms. The point of natural theology is to ask whether nature as a whole is intelligible apart from the reality of God. The author's point here is that any empirical survey of nature that restricts itself to following the modern scientific method's habitual exclusion of thought from its survey of nature cannot succeed in making nature intelligible.

The author is in no way downplaying the legitimacy of scientific, including evolutionary, accounts of life and mind. But the author is questioning whether natural selection can by itself account fully for two of the most notable operations of the human mind: Firstly – if the author may speak to you the reader directly – there is your mind's *restless concern for truth*; and, secondly, there is your undeniable *trust* in the capacity of your mind to understand and know what is true. The author invites you to include these two attributes of your intelligent subjectivity among the data for a natural theology grounded in what the author calls a generalised empirical method. The author maintains that an exclusively Darwinian narrative cannot *fully* explain why your mind is restless for truth or why you should trust your mind. However, without these two instances of trust, thought cannot function or even exist.

To clarify the author's point, the author invites you to notice that your mind unfolds invariantly in four functionally distinct but complementary cognitive acts: experience, understanding, judging and deciding (see also Lonergan 1988:205–221). These four cognitive acts come into play because your mind – in a way you may never have noticed – spontaneously issues four corresponding cognitive imperatives: Be attentive! Be intelligent! Be critical! Be responsible! (In what follows, for the sake of clarity, let us put aside the fourth imperative and focus only on the first three.)

Let us now assume that you are an evolutionary scientist. As a scientist, notice how your method of inquiry begins with sense *experience*, in obedience to your mind's first imperative to be attentive. This imperative turns your attention towards phenomena you will try to understand scientifically. The imperative to be attentive, that is, to be open to what is given by your senses, is the same imperative that should lead the natural theologian to practice a generalised empirical method: Be open to *all* the data given to your experience of the natural world, including your intelligent subjectivity. Still assuming that you are an evolutionary scientist, you are obeying the second cognitive imperative, to be intelligent. This imperative leads you, as Darwin did earlier, to express your understanding of life through the theory of evolution by natural selection. But, then, the third imperative – to 'be critical!' – leads you (and Darwin) to keep testing the theory, to determine whether the theory corresponds to experience. The third imperative leads you to entertain the possibility that the theory of evolution by natural selection may not be able to explain every aspect of living phenomena. The author invites you now to be more fully attentive to the

imperatives of your mind than ever before; to seek deeper and more exact understanding of these imperatives, ask why you are obedient to them and ask whether your understanding of intelligent subjectivity is *right* understanding.

As a scientist, you spontaneously trust the first three imperatives of your mind. You have a tacit and spontaneous confidence – you may call it *faith* – in the three imperatives of your mind. You may doubt this claim, but in doing so you are being obedient to the three imperatives of your mind. So, you cannot escape them even if you try. The phenomenon of thought exists only because it has been activated by the silent imperatives to be attentive, intelligent and critical. Attend now to the fact that in reading this article, you have spontaneously been *attending* to the author's claims, striving to *understand* them and *critically* asking whether they are true.

Now, the author invites you to *understand* your intelligent subjectivity. Explain, for example, why you have trusted in the three imperatives of your mind. But, even more, ask (critically) whether your trust in the imperatives of your mind is *justifiable*. You may find an appropriate place for a widely empirical natural theology in asking and answering this question.

The author needs to repeat here that your attentive, intelligent and critical subjectivity is fully part of the natural world – as Darwin, Whitehead and Lonergan all agree. But can Darwinian evolutionary science *fully* account for your intelligent subjectivity and its three imperatives? No doubt there is a sense in which your capacity for thought is an adaptive product of natural selection, no less than your ears, eyes and hands are. But does it follow that thought is nothing but the product of blind natural selection? The wider empiricism, the deeper understanding and the serious critical reflection the author is encouraging you to undertake here do not rule out anything that biology and neuroscience may discover in their scientific attempts to understand the phenomenon of thought. And because your mental functioning does not take place outside the natural course of events, it is grist for the scientific mill. Your mental functioning *is* nature, in the same way that storms and supernovae are nature. If you insist with some hyper-Darwinians that your mind or your thought is *nothing more* than an outcome of blind, impersonal and unintelligent natural selection, however, you will have failed in your attempt to be attentive, intelligent and reasonable about the most remarkable of all natural phenomena. Behaviourism is perhaps the most flagrant instance of science's refusal to attend to the interior or subjective states of mind.

Is your understanding of intelligent subjectivity right understanding? Evolutionary explanations are valid and fascinating as historical accounts but taken alone they only lead inquirers back to what evolutionary naturalists have taken to be an originally dead, silent and meaningless universe. Chasing the chain of unintelligent causes that led up to your mind's emergence further and further

back into that murky mindlessness, through endless ages of blind evolutionary experimentation, may be narratively informative. But by itself, this narrative traces your mind back in time, deeper and deeper into the realm of scattered subatomic units.

Scientific analysis alone, therefore, can never offer a sufficient reason for your putting the kind of confidence in your own intelligent functioning that you are doing right now. The story that evolutionists tell about the physical foundations and senseless evolutionary fashioning of the human mind may lay out a sequence of steps in the genesis of mind. But if you want to *justify* the confidence you already have in your mind's imperatives, you must look to a set of reasons more encompassing than that given to us by evolutionary biology.

Perhaps, you might reply, the fact of your tacit cognitive trust is just a fluke of nature. Maybe it is what Steven Jay Gould and Niles Eldridge have considered a blind by-product (spandrel) of natural selection. Yet this 'explanation' will hardly suffice to explain why you long for truth or why you should have faith in your intelligent subjectivity at all. As long as you try grounding your own intelligent and critical activity *solely* in either blind natural selection or in a series of cosmic accidents, or perhaps both, have you done anything more than listed some reasons why you should *not* trust your mind's imperatives?

No doubt, you *do* trust your mind to give you understanding and truth. Otherwise, you would not have kept on reading this article. But the trust you have in your cognitive integrity can be justified fully only if your intelligent subjectivity has already been grasped by what is indestructibly meaningful, true and good. Evolutionary explanations can tell you only why your mind is adaptive, not why it can give you right understanding? So, once again, the author does not deny the importance of evolutionary or cultural explanations in closing the gaps in our historical understanding of thought's emergence in our universe. The author even encourages multi-level scientific research in laying out the series of natural events that led up to the birth of intelligence and the time-conditioned cultural factors that have given thought its various shades. But – the author persists – can you find in such accounts alone a sufficient reason for your longing for truth, which can at times be very nonadaptive? And can purely Darwinian accounts tell you why you are willing, at least in your noblest moments, to sacrifice your reputation and maybe even your life for the sake of your love of truth? Arguing that your exceptional acts of moral courage are the mindless product of gene selection lead into the same incoherence as materialist explanations: Why should the author pay any attention to your clever theory of kin selection if the mind that came up with it is merely adapting rather than seeking right understanding. In that case, it would be hard to prove that your love of truth can be accounted for fully on the basis of its reproductive survival value (including that of your human kin). And, in any case, evolutionary

science alone cannot tell you why at this moment you are placing such firm trust in your own mind's capacity to understand and judge whether or not what the author is claiming here is either right or wrong.

The author's proposal – and this is where the author would locate his approach to natural theology after Darwin – is that your longing for truth and your cognitive trust can be explained and justified adequately only if you also understand your intelligent and critical subjectivity – along with the natural world out of which it has emerged – as being drawn towards the horizon of Infinite Being, Meaning, Truth and Goodness that theistic faiths call God.

*Ultimately* the mind's imperative to be open or attentive is awakened to a state of (potentially) limitless wonder by the infinite horizon of Being-Itself in which all particular beings participate. *Ultimately* the mind's imperative to seek understanding of that to which it has attended is aroused by the limitless Meaning (Logos) that gives intelligibility to the world and thus makes human inquiry possible and exciting. *Ultimately* the mind's imperative to be critical is stirred to reflection by the pull of Infinite Truth that makes minds restless for deeper communion with *what is*. And *ultimately* the imperative to be responsible (Lonergan's fourth imperative, which for simplicity's sake, the author has left out until now) is lured into the state of moral aspiration by the Infinite Goodness that all finite beings reveal, each in its unique way. Only the existence of such an open and infinite transcendental horizon can ultimately explain why we are critically intelligent beings and why we are justified in trusting our minds.

Of course, one can always deny verbally that there is anything 'more' involved in intelligent and critical subjectivity than its material and evolutionary constitution. The evolutionary naturalist will insist that minds, like everything else in life, are *really* just 'simplicity masquerading as complexity', as scientist Peter Atkins claims (Atkins 1994:200). However, any such declaration is self-subverting because it implies logically that the complex mind that makes such a claim is itself *really* nothing more than the mindless stuff from which it arose. And if the ultimate roots of Atkins's own mind are nothing more than mindless states of physical stuff, one can only ask how he came to possess, and how he can now justify, the unquestioned *trust* he has in his own cognitive powers. Given his explanation of all evolutionary outcomes as 'simplicity masquerading as complexity', why should we pay any attention to any product of Atkins's own mind?

No doubt, it is useful to lay out the long series of temporal moments and physical events that led to the activation of Atkins's mind. But by retracing the chain of occasions back to the dumb silence of the early universe or reducing his cerebral organism and its exploits to the subatomic cloud at the base (allegedly) of all being, only leads our minds back to the abyss of incoherence to which Atkins gives the label 'simplicity'.

The mind's passion for meaning cannot be quieted if thought allows itself to be dragged down into the sheer plurality and elementality out of which the cosmic path towards complexity originated temporally speaking. The universe, as both Teilhard De Chardin and Michael Polanyi have rightly pointed out, becomes intelligible to human thought only as we look *from* the incoherent monads of the cosmic past *towards* the anticipated horizon of future unity (Polanyi 1967). Only by looking from the past towards the future can the world become intelligible to minds that natively anticipate fuller being, unity, truth, goodness and beauty. (A point that Teilhard De Chardin [1999] makes throughout his works).

## Conclusion

A *sufficient* ground for trusting your mind's imperatives cannot be found exclusively by scientifically digging back to the world's elemental physical makeup, exposing its invariant physical habits or, in the case of the life story, its evolutionary past. Although earlier physical stuff and energetic routines have been essential to the emergence of mind, they cannot alone account for the mind's instinctive trust in its capacity to reach right understanding. Of course, we must discover and narrate the evolutionary story of how the phenomenon of mind came into the history of nature. However, a physical and historical specification of the chain of events leading up to the flowering of thought cannot alone justify our spontaneous obedience here and now to the imperatives to be attentive, intelligent, critical and responsible.

A rich starting point for natural theology after Darwin is the fact of an awakening universe, a datum unavailable until after Darwin and Einstein. To attain a fuller understanding of your intelligent subjectivity, the author suggests you place it inside our nascent universe whose dramatic meaning is an ongoing *awakening* to infinite Being, Meaning, Truth, Goodness and Beauty. In collaboration with this universal awakening, you may justifiably trust your mind's imperatives.

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