



## **Is There a Presumption of Atheism? Natural Theology as a Rebuttal of Naturalism**

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The new atheists hold the “first sin” of religious belief to be irrationality. They assume an “evidentialist” account of belief, in which reasonable beliefs should be based on adequate evidence, and they argue that adequate evidence for belief in God is lacking. Although some philosophers (“Reformed epistemologists”) have recently offered telling criticisms of evidentialism, a traditional response to the charge the religious belief is irrational is to engage in “natural theology,” and offer evidence for the existence of God, such as is found in traditional arguments for God’s existence. In this paper I offer a reinterpretation of natural theology, and try to show it has great value in responding to evidentialist objections.

The paper makes four main points: (1) The criticisms of natural theology offered by theologians such as Karl Barth and philosophers such as Paul Moser, who argue that knowledge of God should be based on God’s self-revelation rather than philosophical arguments, contain sound and important insights. However, even those who accept these criticisms can recognize the problems posed by an atheistic, naturalistic view of the universe. Natural theology can still be valuable as giving us “anti-naturalistic” arguments, even if it fails to give us adequate knowledge of the true God. Such natural theology points us beyond the natural world to a mystery, even if it does not dispel that mystery. (2) There is no special burden of proof that lies on the believer in God. The argument between theists and atheistic naturalists is not about whether there is “one more entity” in the universe, but about the character of the universe. Naturalists, just as much as theists, need to think about the reasonableness of their view of the universe. (3) If there is a God, we would expect the evidence for God to have two characteristics: the evidence would be both widely available but also easily resistible. A kind of evidence that would satisfy these “Pascalian constraints” would be “natural signs” that point to God’s reality without coercively producing belief. (4) There are such natural signs that are present in human experience, and some of them lie at the core of the traditional theistic arguments: The experience of “cosmic wonder” lies at the core of the cosmological argument, and the experience of “purposive order” lies at the core of the teleological argument. Our sense that we are morally accountable beings, and that humans have intrinsic worth and dignity, also embody natural signs that point to a transcendent reality beyond the natural world. There is therefore strong evidence for a reality beyond the natural order, even if that evidence does not provide us with “proof” of God’s reality.