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LECTURE NOTES ON NATURAL THEOLOGY

Prolegomenon
The Systems of Religion
The Immortality of the Soul

PROLEGOMENON

Natural Theology¹

1. *Where does natural theology correspond with revealed theology, and where is it distinguished from the latter?*

It corresponds with revealed theology in that both have the same object—that is, God. It is distinguished from revealed theology in that its source of knowledge and method of treatment differ—that is, they are taken from nature, as indicated by the adjective “natural.”

2. *How then do you define “natural theology”?*

As a theology—that is, a teaching concerning God—that takes its content and method from nature.

3. *What do you understand by “nature”?*

All that is subject to the normal link between causes and effects, and that works according to fixed laws, from the beginning of creation.

4. *What then are the marks² of the concept of “nature”?*

Regularity and continuity (i.e., constancy and uninterruptedness).

1. DG inserts here:

“Contents of Natural Theology:

I. God’s existence and unity

II. God’s nature or attributes

III. God’s acts

IV. The immortality of the soul.”

This is omitted in V and A. The list in DG is not representative of the organization of Vos’s lectures; rather, they indicate the topics traditionally found in Reformed natural theologies. Vos’s lectures do not include sections on the unity, nature, attributes, or acts of God. See QQ. 92–204 on the existence of God and religion; see QQ. 205–224 on the immortality of the soul.

2. V and A: “marks” (*kenmerken*); DG erroneously reads: “concepts” (*begrippen*).

5. *How can you confirm this from the etymology of the word “nature”?*

Natura comes from *nascor*, “to be born.” What is born is subject to this law of regularity and uninterruptedness.

6. *Do human acts of free will likewise belong to ‘the sphere of’³ nature?*

Certainly, for regardless of what the cause of acts of free will may be, they are not unrelated to the character of the human race, and the human race is only one link in the chain of nature, and its life is bound by fixed laws.

7. *If you were to integrate this concept of nature into the above definition, what would the result be?*

“Natural theology” is a knowledge of God that takes its content and method from the world as it presents itself to us as governed by fixed laws.

8. *What is in more or less precise terms⁴ the difference between natural and revealed theology?*

‘According to the above, there is a twofold distinction’:⁵

1. Revealed theology comes to us on the basis of something that is new and unusual. Revelation is always something that enters the world⁶ anew and apart from the regular causality of nature. For this reason, revelation is accompanied by miracles to make it knowable. The consequences—i.e., the content of revelation—may remain; revelation itself—i.e., the act of revelation—is of a passing nature.
2. Revelation is something that does not remain continually, while nature continually bears witness. Psalm 19:1–4: “Day to day pours out speech abundantly, and night to night reveals knowledge.”

3. So V and A; omitted in DG.

4. V and A: “more or less precisely” (*eenigszins nauwkeurig*); DG: “precisely” (*eens nauwkeurig*).

5. So DG; omitted in V and A.

6. DG and V: “the world” (*de wereld*); A: “nature” (*de natuur*).

9. *How then do you understand “revelation” in contrast with “nature”?*

Not in the wide⁷ sense of everything that God has revealed to us about Himself, ‘since this would include nature itself,’⁸ but rather in the narrower sense as God’s special intervention whereby He in a direct way and through special means gives people a knowledge of Himself that they cannot obtain from nature as their only source.

10. *Does Scripture teach that there is a natural knowledge of God?*

Yes, in passages like Psalm 19:1–4; 94:8–10; Acts 14:15–17; 17:24–29; Romans 1:19–21. These passages also teach that this natural revelation is sufficiently clear to hold people accountable before God concerning their religion, “so that they are without excuse.”⁹

11. *What does Scripture teach about the sufficiency or insufficiency of this revelation in nature unto salvation?*

It teaches that natural knowledge is insufficient: 1 Corinthians 1:21; Galatians 2:21; 3:21; Acts 4:12; John 3:36; Romans 11:13–15.

12. *What value does natural theology still have then?*

1. Negatively, it cannot teach believers anything unto salvation that is not contained in Scripture.
2. It does, however, directly teach many things that Scripture does not so much explicitly teach as assume.
3. It teaches us to adore the wisdom of God in nature, His ways¹⁰ and His works. Psalm 104.
4. Natural theology owes its position in science to its use in apologetics, for refuting those who have rejected the supernatural revelation of God.

7. DG and A: “wide” (*wijden*); V: “widest” (*wijdste*).

8. So V and A; omitted in DG.

9. Rom. 1:20.

10. DG and A: “ways” (*wegen*); V: “essence” (*wezen*).

13. *What is the relationship between natural theology and metaphysics?*

Natural theology can be viewed also as a part of philosophy, and as such represents the transition between philosophy and theology. Metaphysics is likewise a part of philosophy. However, metaphysics treats the first principles of *being as such*, while natural theology treats them as they find their unity in God's thoughts and acts.

14. *What has the relationship between systematic theology (dogmatics) and natural theology historically been like?*

For a long time no distinction was made between these two sciences, since all systematic theology had become a kind of philosophy, that is, a natural science. Many of the church fathers sought to elevate faith to knowledge, to turn *pistis* into *gnosis*. The same holds true for the scholastics of the Middle Ages. The church fathers were always motivated in this by apologetic reasons. They were looking for a theology that they could use to convince their pagan opponents.

15. *List several arguments of natural theology that the church fathers already used.*

1. *The argument from analogy:* just like animals and people are ruled by a single individual, so it is also likely that there is a single ruler of the world. This is an argument that was directed against polytheism.
2. *Ontological arguments:* these attempt to derive the existence of God from the concept of God as an infinite, 'eternal,'¹¹ omnipotent being.
3. *Historical arguments:* these move from the orderly course of world history to the existence of God as governor.
4. *Cosmological arguments:* these ascend from the changes in the world to a first cause.

11. So V and A; omitted in DG.

16. *What difference was there in the inclination of the Greek and Latin churches when it came to the relationship between natural and revealed theology?*

The Greek church constantly sought to unite philosophy and gospel. The Latin church, and Tertullian in particular, sought to contrast the two most sharply as if they were irreconcilable.¹² This is related to each church's respective character. The Greek church was speculative, and Platonic philosophy reigned uncontested in it. This is why the Greek church addressed issues pertaining to theology proper, such as the essence of God, the Trinity, and Christology. The Latin church, however, bore the mark of Roman jurisprudence, was practical in its orientation, and therefore attempted to develop the issues relating to the justice of God, to sin, and to salvation (Augustine, Pelagius). Since for the latter issues it is the Bible alone that gives insight, while for the former group also philosophy offers some degree of insight as well, 'the Greek church preferred to view theology and philosophy as one, while'¹³ the Latin church saw them as distinct.

17. *Was there no exception to this general rule in the Western church?*

Yes, Augustine devoted extensive attention to natural theology.¹⁴ He began by proving the existence of God ontologically. It likewise bears observing here that there was general acceptance of innate knowledge of God also in the West.

18. *What was specific to the theology of Dionysius the Areopagite, the sixth-century mystic?*¹⁵

He taught in a pantheistic sense that one actually cannot know anything about God, who is exalted above all negation and affirmation, but that

12. Tertullian, *Prescription against Heretics*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 3:383–431.

13. So DG and V; erroneously omitted in A.

14. See, e.g., Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (1950; repr., New York: Modern Library, 1978), bk. 6 (pp. 182ff.).

15. See Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibhéid (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1988).

negations still come closer to the truth than affirmations do. It is easier to define God as He is not, than as He is.

19. *Who later continued this negative line of argumentation?*

John of Damascus, the last great theologian of the Eastern church (700–750). He assembled¹⁶ all negative elements into a single great argument so as to conclude that God exists as creator, sustainer, ruler, and artist of the universe, incorporeal, without origin, immutable, incorruptible.¹⁷

20. *How did the attempts undertaken by the fathers to rationalize theology differ from those of the medieval scholastics?*

The fathers were motivated by a practical intention, for the scholastics there was a scientific reason. The former wanted to refute their opponents, the latter to understand.

21. *Was the pursuit of the scholastics also related to their semi-Pelagianism?*

Yes, whenever the human race ‘and human reason’¹⁸ are not viewed as entirely corrupt, it becomes easier to try to build a theology on the basis of human reason alone. When Augustine’s doctrine of human corruption was revived during the Reformation, people once again became suspicious of reason and sought recourse in Scripture as the source of theology.

22. *Did all scholastics hold the same view on reason as a source of knowledge for theology?*

No.

1. Some taught that faith does not depend on reason. They already believed apart from all rational proof, but still sought rational satisfaction so as also to demonstrate *a posteriori* by reason what had already been established apart from reason.

16. V and A: “assembled” (*verzamelde*); DG: “changed” (*veranderde*).

17. John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith*, 1.3, in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, 2nd series (repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), vol. 9, pt. 2, pp. 2–3.

18. So V and A; omitted in DG.

Such demonstration was no practical necessity for them, but a theoretical pleasure (Anselm).

2. Others, like Abelard, were of the view that the truths of faith do not gain practical certainty for us until they are demonstrated on rational grounds. They were thus rationalists in the negative sense of the word.

23. *Which of the later scholastics do we explicitly need to mention here?*

1. Durandus of Saint-Pourçain (d. 1333): He seems to have been the first to distinguish explicitly between the three well-known ways for arriving at a natural theology:¹⁹ a. the way of eminence; b. the way of causality;²⁰ and c. the way of negation.
2. Raymond of Sabunde owes his importance to his work entitled *The Book of Nature or of Creatures*.²¹ He lived in the middle of the fifteenth century. He is particularly important for the clear distinction he drew between the book of nature and the book of Scripture. Raymond thus considered nature a book, that is, something designed to speak the truth. This view has in a certain sense earned him the right to be called the father of natural theology.

24. *How did Raymond view the relationship between natural and revealed theology?*

1. Natural theology must 'first'²² teach us that there is a God who exists, and in terms of necessity therefore precedes revealed theology.
2. Revealed theology can then teach us what God says about Himself.

19. DG: "natural theology" (*Theologia Naturalis*); V and A: "natural knowledge of God" (*Natuurlijke Godskennis*).

20. DG and A: "causality" (*oorzakelijkheid*); V: "necessity" (*noodzakelijkheid*).

21. Raymond of Sabunde, *Theologia Naturalis, sive Liber Creaturarum* (n.p.: Martinus Flach, 1496).

22. So V and A; omitted in DG.

3. In terms of extent as well, natural theology teaches us everything that is comprehended in the Bible, although we do not first need to believe everything on the basis of reason.

25. *Was the Reformation favorable to the development of natural theology?*

No, for it opposed the Roman Catholic doctrine of tradition as well as the semi-Pelagianism of the Roman Catholic Church. For that reason, it preferred to stick to Scripture alone and wanted people not to rely on their own powers for their knowledge of God or to seek Him by their own means, but rather simply to believe in God.

26. *What is the unusual position that Calvin holds in this matter?*

Although he accepts an irradicable, innate desire for God in humankind, he still places less emphasis on the objective testimony that nature bears toward God, and he seems to think that it is only when nature is connected to our innate idea of God that it gives us an intelligible testimony—which even then is more serviceable to the practical adoration of God’s wisdom than it is to theoretical ends.²³

27. *What was Melancthon’s position on natural theology?*

In the first edition of his theology, he did not use any of the arguments derived from reason or nature.²⁴ Later on he offered a somewhat confused list of relevant issues in his doctrine of creation. By the 1543 edition, however, his treatment [of natural theology] had become careful and ordered, although it remained incomplete and still appeared to be of secondary importance.

28. *How did natural theology develop after the Reformation?*

1. Neither the Reformed churches nor the Lutheran churches viewed natural theology as anything more than an apologetic

23. Cf. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845), 1.3.1.

24. Cf. Philip Melancthon, *Common Places: Loci Communes 1521*, trans. Christian Preus (St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia, 2014); Melancthon, *Loci Theologici Recens Recogniti* (Wittenberg: Petrus Seitz, 1543), fols. E1ff.

means against unbelievers. They also did not grant that natural theology represents an introduction to revealed theology for Christians.

2. Among the Lutherans ‘in particular,²⁵ theology was considered to be the doctrine of salvation, that is, soteriology. Nature teaches nothing about salvation. Therefore, it can produce no true theology.
3. In their Christology and teaching on the Lord’s Supper, the Lutherans also had other reasons to ‘despise and²⁶ disregard the testimony of reason and the natural senses. This explains why there is greater aversion to natural theology among them than there is among the Reformed.

29. *Who first brought improvement to this situation?*

Alsted, who in 1615 published his *Natural Theology*. He speaks of an internal book of nature (the conscience, etc.) and an external book of nature (the ‘objective²⁷ testimony of creation).²⁸ Later on the latter was increasingly lost from sight, to the detriment of natural theology.

30. *How can the predilection for and treatment of this innate idea of God be explained?*

By the influence of Cartesian philosophy, in which the idea of God plays an important role. Descartes (1596–1650) needed the idea of God to guarantee certainty for the reliability of the rest of our²⁹ knowledge.³⁰ It is only if God exists that I can be certain that my reason and my senses are not deceiving me. He therefore did not use this idea of God for religious

25. So V and A; omitted in DG.

26. So V and A; omitted in DG.

27. So V and A; omitted in DG.

28. Johannes Heinrich Alsted, *Theologica Naturalis* (Frankfurt: Antonius Hummius, 1615).

29. V and A: “our” (*onzer*); DG: “his” (*zijner*).

30. René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress, 3rd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), Meditation 3 (pp. 24–34), Meditation 5 (pp. 42–46).

or theological reasons, but for purely philosophical considerations. As a result, natural theology became the maidservant of philosophy.

31. *Was this servitude altogether fruitless?*

No, a host of treatises on natural theology appeared in both the Reformed and Lutheran churches.

32. *Was the relationship between natural and revealed theology always accurately described?*

No, some claimed that reason and the natural theology derived from it had to serve to demonstrate the divine origin 'of the Scriptures and'³¹ of divine revelation in the narrower sense, and that our faith in both in the end depends on reason.

33. *What influence did Leibnizian-Wolffian philosophy have on natural theology?*

People took their rationalizing even further and attempted to derive all theology from formal, abstract principles, especially in an ontological sense. At first they restricted themselves to the innate idea, but later proceeded entirely from logical concepts. This development was joined by the strictly geometrical method. Science was no longer governed by the object, but by the method. This explains Wolff's demand that every treatment of natural theology restrict itself to a single argument.

34. *Who brought an end to all these rationalistic speculations?*

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Initially a rationalist from the Leibnizian-Wolffian school, he remained one in the deeper sense of the term. His most important works are: 1. *Critique of Pure Reason*, 1781; 2. *Critique of Practical Reason*, 1782; 3. *Prolegomena*, 1783; 4. *Critique of Judgment*, 1790.³²

31. So DG and V; omitted in A.

32. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Kant, *The Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, trans. Gary Hatfield, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University

35. Give a brief overview of Kant's system.³³

1. In their knowledge, human beings are receptive and spontaneous, at once passive and active. They are receptive in terms of the content which they receive through sensible impressions. They are spontaneous 'or active'³⁴ in terms of the form in which they grasp and process these impressions. The forms are twofold, namely forms of intuition and forms of understanding.
2. Since the forms are not in the things outside of us, but are applied by us to the impressions which we receive from things, those things do not appear to us as they are in themselves but as we make them by distortion. What we know are only phenomena, not the things as they exist in themselves. Our knowledge is phenomenistic.
3. However, since these forms do not differ between [person] A and [person] B, they do achieve a certain agreement in the knowledge of all people. Science must always be something certain and common. Until that time, the scientific character of our knowledge had always been located in its agreement with reality. Kant now located it in the agreement which our knowledge has with the forms of intuition and understanding. This is called the immanent concept of truth.
4. The forms of intuition and understanding relate to experience alone and are intended only for it. Yet human beings have within their mind a natural and 'inevitable'³⁵ inclination to apply these forms to something that lies beyond our experience, that is, to the totality of things. This ability is what Kant calls "reason," in distinction from "understanding." He therefore has intuition, understanding, and reason. Reason forms the ideas, which are three in number: the idea of the soul as

Press, 2004); Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

33. Cf. James McCosh, *The Prevailing Types of Philosophy: Can They Logically Reach Reality* (New York: Scribner, 1890), 18–36.

34. So V and A; omitted in DG.

35. So V and A; omitted in DG.

a permanent substance; the idea of the world as an endless chain of causes and effects; and the idea of God as the most perfect Being. Since the content of these ideas lies beyond all experience, they have no theoretical validity. The idea of the soul is based on a psychological paralogism, since the unity of the self-conscious *I* is exchanged for the unity and absolute permanence of a soul substance. The idea of the world leads to mutually destructive antinomies. The idea of God, as it is demonstrated in rational theology,³⁶ rests entirely on sophisms. The ideas do have practical value, however, inasmuch as they contain a collateral testimony for what practical reason teaches.

5. The fundamental law of practical reason is that the good must exist and that there must be correspondence between the good and happiness, that is, the good must be happy. According to Kant, this law presumes three things: (a) I must, so I also can = freedom of the will. (b) In my pursuit I only attain the morally good infinitely slowly; if I am to attain the morally good, my life cannot be finite = I am immortal. (c) Even though I am moral, I cannot guarantee my happiness, meaning that there must be a higher being that accomplishes it = God exists. As such, Kant reconstructs using practical reason what he had torn down in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. These three—i.e., God, freedom, and immortality—are called the postulates of practical reason.
6. According to Kant, religion is in its entirety an element and tool of morality. Religion is the fulfillment of our duties as God's commands.³⁷ Kant understood doctrines allegorically, thereby turning them into means of morality.

36. V and A: "rational theology" (*rationale theologie*); DG: "natural theology" (*Theologia Naturalis*).

37. The sentence is not identified as a quotation by V, DG, or A, but part of the sentence appears in Q. 191 (V and DG) with quotation marks around the predicate. Cf. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 107–8: "In this way the moral law leads through the concept of the highest good, as the object and final end of pure practical reason, to religion, that is, to the recognition [Ger., *Erkenntnis*; Vos translates as "fulfillment"] of all duties as divine commands" (italics in the original).

36. *What was the outcome of Kant's critique?*

The common proofs for the existence of God were severely discredited. So, too, the pantheistic development of German philosophy after Kant robbed theology of its right of independent existence.

37. *What was the main form in which natural theology was treated in England?*

The English largely devoted themselves to physico-theology, which is the investigation of the order in nature so as to arrive at the existence of a creator of order. The year 1802 saw the appearance of William Paley's famous *Natural Theology*.³⁸ This trajectory was likewise favored in the Bridgewater treatises.³⁹ See also Thompson's *Principles of Natural Theology* (1857) and his *Christian Theism*.⁴⁰

38. *What is the title of the important work that has recently appeared in Germany?*

Ulrici's *Gott und die Natur*.⁴¹

39. *What unusual method does O. Zöckler follow in his Theologia Naturalis, published in 1860?*⁴²

He attempted to demonstrate that nature is governed by the same laws which Scripture holds forth to us in the spiritual realm. On the basis of this agreement, he then attempted to prove the existence of God

38. William Paley, *Natural Theology or Evidence and the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, Collected from the Appearances of Nature*, ed. Matthew D. Eddy and David Knight (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

39. A series of eight treatises "On the Power, Wisdom, and Goodness of God, as manifested in the Creation" funded in the last will and testament of Francis Henry, Earl of Bridgewater, on which see J. Topham, "Beyond the 'Common Context': The Production and Reading of the Bridgewater Treatises," *Isis* 89, no. 2 (1998): 233–62.

40. Robert Anchor Thompson, *Principles of Natural Theology* (London: Rivingtons, 1857); Thompson, *Christian Theism: The Testimony of Reason and Revelation to the Existence and Character of the Supreme Being*, 2 vols. (London: Rivingtons, 1855).

41. Hermann Ulrici, *Gott und die Natur* (Leipzig: I. D. Weigel, 1862).

42. Otto Zöckler, *Theologia Naturalis: Entwurf einer Systematischen Naturtheologie* (Frankfurt: Herder & Zimmer, 1860).

teleologically as the one who effected this agreement, as well as the reliability of the revelation in Scripture.

40. *What factor has recently returned to the foreground in the treatment of natural theology?*

The philosophy of history, meaning that people are attempting to demonstrate that an orderly development can be discerned in history, that it witnesses guidance and a purpose. Since human beings themselves have reached no such agreement for order but each person works without a prior agreement with the others, we must assume that this plan is being executed by a higher, all-governing mind—that is, that God governs history. This is thus a specific application of the teleological argument to the social and historical life of the human race.

41. *Is this an old view?*

Traces of the argument from history can be found in Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Augustine, and others. However, as a distinct discipline, the philosophy of history is a product of modernity, since people in former times were not in a state where they could obtain a sufficiently wide overview of world history and were forced to restrict themselves to specific groups by the gaps in their knowledge of language and geography. A more comprehensive view first began to emerge with Herder (*Ideën zur Philosophie und zur Geschichte der Menschheit*, 1784), Hegel (*Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*), Bunsen (*Gott in der Geschichte*, 1852–1858), and Guizot.⁴³

43. Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Ideën zur Philosophie und Geschichte der Menschheit* (Leipzig: J. F. Hartknoch, 1841); G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte* (Leipzig: Philipp Reclam, 1982); Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Christian Karl Josias Bunsen, *Gott in der Geschichte* (Leipzig: F. U. Brodhhaus, 1858); Bunsen, *God in History; Or, the Progress of Man's Faith in the Moral Order of the World*, 3 vols. (London: Longmans, Green, 1868–1870); François Guizot, *Méditations sur l'essence de la religion chrétienne* (Paris: Michel Lévy, 1864); Guizot, *Méditations sur l'état actuel de la religion chrétienne* (Paris: Michel Lévy, 1866); also Guizot, *Meditations on the Essence of Christianity, and on the Religious Questions of the Day* (London: John Murray, 1864).

42. *To what extent can we say that theology's modern transformation into a science of religion has had a negative impact on natural theology?*

The so-called science of religion does not concern itself with what corresponds to the object of religion (i.e., God), but with religion as a subjective phenomenon in the human race for which it seeks a natural explanation. Even apart from the fact that the science of religion is therefore no theology but rather belongs to psychology, of everything that constitutes the content or subject of natural theology, it can treat only the part that is in human nature.⁴⁴

44. V: "that is in human nature" (*dat in d. mensch. natuur is*); DG and A are both incomplete here: "that in the human" (DG includes ellipses to reflect the error here: *dat in de menschelijke... ..*; A ends abruptly and illogically: *dat in de menschel.*).