

# The Nature of Nature

Alan Gijsbers

**Abstract:** What is nature? Is nature just a social construct or does nature have an objective reality in its own right? The development of the sciences in the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 17<sup>th</sup> century led to the maturation of some sciences and hence to the idea that nature is a mechanism described by set laws. The mechanistic approach led to problems explaining free will and rational thought. The dilemma of the interface between the soul or mind and the body is still with us and has a resonance with the problem of divine action in the physical universe. There are other views of nature, however. What is the role of humans in nature? Are we active participants in shaping its future or helpless bystanders? Can we discover ethics, law, and theology from studying nature or are there other ways of discovering these dimensions? Christians are convinced that encountering God is what shapes the way they view ethics, law, and theology. Finally, can experiencing nature lead people closer to God or can that only happen if they have an appropriate lens through which to see nature?

**Keywords:** doctrine of creation; natural law; natural theology; naturalism; naturalistic fallacy; nature

---

Associate Professor Alan Gijsbers (University of Melbourne) is a retired addiction physician and former head of the Addiction Medicine Service, Royal Melbourne Hospital. He is also a past president of ISCAST.

At first glance, the concept of nature seems simple—it is the natural world we observe, mountains, hills, sea, land, forests, wilderness, pastures, gardens, weather, seasons, and so on. But through what lens do we see nature? Is it “red in tooth and claw,” as Tennyson saw it?<sup>1</sup> He was grieving for his 22-year-old friend who had suddenly died of a cerebral event. The whole poem “In Memoriam AHH” is an outpouring of grief at the unfairness of it all. Through Tennyson’s grieving lens, nature was inexplicable and cruel. By contrast, Wordsworth found inspiration in nature. He says in “Lines Composed a Few Miles from Tintern Abbey”:

For I have learned  
To look on nature, not as in the hour  
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes  
The still sad music of humanity,  
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power  
To chasten and subdue.—And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:  
A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things.<sup>2</sup>

Those exalted thoughts are not confined to mother nature, however, for elsewhere Wordsworth captures the stillness and beauty of a smokeless London still asleep:

- 
- 1 A. Tennyson, “In memoriam A.H.H. obit. MDCCCXXXIII,” in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York and London: Norton, 1983), 706–713.
  - 2 W. Wordsworth, “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour; July 13, 1798,” in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 523–526.

Earth has not anything to show more fair:  
 Dull would he be of soul who could pass by  
 A sight so touching in its majesty:  
 This City now doth, like a garment, wear  
 The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,  
 Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie  
 Open unto the fields, and to the sky...<sup>3</sup>

Steam engines were just starting to be developed and their billowing smoke lay in the future. Perhaps beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and Wordsworth wears very rosy spectacles! Where did that rosy view come from? Andrea Wulf makes a convincing case that the explorer and polymath Alexander von Humboldt's writings of his travels along the Orinoco River and scaling Mount Chimborazo inspired a whole range of romantics from Goethe in now Germany, Wordsworth and Coleridge in England, and Emerson and Thoreau in the USA.<sup>4</sup> Charles Darwin had a well-thumbed copy of Humboldt's works during his voyage of the Beagle. Did Humboldt invent nature? No, but Humboldt studied nature and developed an approach integrating geography, geology, botany, and climatology. Further, it was his delight in the natural world that inspired romantics and nature lovers around the world. That inspiration included the development of natural parks, through the advocacy of John Muir to Teddy Roosevelt.

Is nature just nature or is it a social construct? Philosopher John Searle cogently argues that even social constructs are reality. He singles out money as a social construct. He moves from commodity money to contract money to fiat money. That is from gold coins to promissory notes to pieces of paper which simply state that this piece of paper is worth so much, without a gold standard to back up that claim. He wrote before the advent of the cashless society. In summarising his argument

---

3 W. Wordsworth, "Composed upon Westminster Bridge; September 3, 1802," in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 550.

4 A. Wulf, *The Invention of Nature: The Adventures of Alexander von Humboldt, the Lost Hero of Science* (London: John Murray, 2015).

that money is a useful social construct, he points out the following: “I have *money* earned as an *employee* of the *State of California*, and I have it in my *bank account*, which I use to pay *my state and federal taxes* as well as the *bills* owing to the *gas and electricity companies* and the *contractor of my credit cards*.”<sup>5</sup> All the italicised expressions are institutional terms, referring to institutional realities. These are social constructs but are also conceptual realities by which we function. So, to label something a social construct does not necessarily dismiss it as “not real.” Consider this paragraph:

[According to the volume’s editors, the authors] regard the *self* as a mere construct of western thought ... Consequently, they argue that it is not a natural entity, that it cannot be investigated scientifically, and *self-pathology* [in psychiatry], such as passivity phenomena, are pure metaphors.<sup>6</sup>

Such a loaded quote requires some sorting out. As we have just seen, a social construct is not necessarily unreal, or “mere.” And, just as Searle analysed social constructs like money, we can analyse social constructs like the self by using scientific tools appropriate to the subject. What those tools might be would need to be developed by those psychologists and psychiatrists looking after patients with a distorted sense of self, or an undeveloped sense of self. We might even be able to widen the scientific method to include a study of the self that is not confined to science. For example, philosopher Charles Taylor surveys the understanding of self in history,<sup>7</sup> and historian Jerrold Seigel considers the

---

5 J. Searle, *Mind, Language and Society: Philosophy in the Real World* (London: Phoenix, 1999), 126–131.

6 T. Kircher and A. David, “Introduction: The Self and Neuroscience,” in *The Self in Neuroscience and Psychiatry*, ed. T. Kircher and A. David (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1–6, at 4. The editors refer to the chapter by G. E. Berrios and I. S. Marková, “The Self and Psychiatry: A Conceptual History,” 9–39.

7 C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

richness of our understanding of ourselves and our place in nature.<sup>8</sup> In turn, Alister McGrath argues that the concept of “nature” is a socially mediated notion, not an objective entity in its own right.<sup>9</sup> After a very useful study of the different views of nature, McGrath goes on to argue for a robust theology of creation as a corrective to the multiple meanings of nature.

What, then, of nature? Nature exists outside the life of human beings, but we see nature through lenses we have developed. As we saw above, these can be the lenses of grief or romanticism. Both constructs are a partial picture of a greater reality—the world and all there is in it.

## Studying Nature

How do we study nature? Peter Harrison makes a convincing case that the Protestant Reformation led to a change in the way the church interpreted Scripture, and that this in turn changed the way we study nature.<sup>10</sup> Prior to John Ray, natural history was an amalgam of “humane learning” which expounded the symbolic meaning of its subject. The literary, allegorical, and moral meanings of a living creature were more important than its actual life in the natural world.

With the advent of Galileo, the “book of nature” was now interpreted mathematically or, better, geometrically. In his words,

Philosophy is written in this grand book, the universe, which stands continually open to our gaze. But the book cannot be understood unless one learns to comprehend the language and read the letters in which it is composed. It is written in the language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles, and other geometric figures without which it is humanly impossi-

---

8 J. Seigel, *The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe Since the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

9 A. E. McGrath, *A Scientific Theology: Nature* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 87.

10 P. Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism, and the Rise of Natural Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

ble to understand a single word of it; without these, one wanders about in a dark labyrinth.<sup>11</sup>

So, for Galileo the language of nature is not just mathematics, but geometry. Further mathematisation of our scientific understanding of the cosmos was solidified by Isaac Newton's *Principia Mathematica*, where he applied his newly invented calculus to convert geometrical understanding of the solar system into a more algebraic form. This led to the view that nature is a mere mechanism, extrapolating from basic physics to our entire scientific understanding. This stirred Descartes to try and work out how to relate the mind to the mechanical physical body. For not only were we discovering the mathematical laws governing the basic functions in the universe, but we were also exploring a rational approach to the world.

How then does reason and the freedom of reason relate to the deterministic functions of basic laws? Such a mechanistic and mathematical approach to the basic sciences can obscure the discoveries of scientists like Linnaeus in botany, John Ray in ornithology and botany, Charles Lyell in geology, and later von Humboldt. Each developed a more descriptive approach to nature.

Nevertheless, all these scientists saw their sciences through interpretative lenses, now no longer an allegorical lens, or even a mathematical lens; but, nevertheless, lenses through which to interpret what is there. The subject would determine the scientific methodology. Thus, mathematics is appropriate to physics (as it was later called) but not appropriate to descriptive sciences like anatomy or classificatory sciences like botany. Nevertheless, in each situation the scientist (as William Whewell coined the term in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century) seeks to discover what is there rather than invent a fantasy world. This discovery of what really is—but mediated through our lens of

---

11 Galileo, *The Assayer*, 4 (republished by Standford University). Available at <https://tinyurl.com/5dsfj6ty> (accessed 7 October 2024).

understanding—and our development of theories and models, McGrath describes as a critical-realist approach to nature and to the sciences.<sup>12</sup>

## Depicting Nature

How do we depict nature? In art, the transition from symbolic to realist is usually attributed to Florence's Giotto in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Perspective, depicting three dimensions on a two-dimensional plane in painting also became more obvious and accurate. Harrison describes this as a transition from describing what is symbolised to what is “actually there.” This last clause is of course the major challenge of art. There is a lovely discussion of the nature of artistic depiction of reality in Chaim Potok's portrait of his character, Asher Lev.<sup>13</sup> Lev is an orthodox Jewish artist who is exiled from his people in New York because of his controversial crucifixion painting. Years later, he returns when his uncle dies. Lev is invited to give a talk to his daughter's class of eleven-year-olds on the nature of art.

He depicts a ram three ways, in a childish, realist, and abstract style. He discusses how the artist expresses emotion in her depiction and how each is a different interpretation of what is seen. He further draws a subject in the styles of Matisse, Modigliani, and Picasso, as an illustration of the richness of different ways of seeing the world, analogous to the different commentators of the Torah. The whole story is a wonderful illustration of issues in aesthetics—on the nature of beauty and the depiction of the world.<sup>14</sup>

Singapore's Gardens by the Bay contains Indian, Malay, Chinese, and colonial gardens. The first three express the different aesthetics of these cultures, but the colonial garden illustrates how the colonists exploited rubber, cocoa, and oil palm for profit. This is a highly biased but understandable view of the colonial world, which ironically

---

12 A. E. McGrath, *A Scientific Theology: Reality* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 195–244.

13 C. Potok, *The Gift of Asher Lev* (London: Penguin, 1990), 129ff.

14 See S. L. Feagin, “Aesthetics,” in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. R. Audi, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 11–13.

is depicted in one of the most built-up cities in Asia. The history of gardens in the west is much richer than that. Gardener Monty Don's informative video series on the history of gardens in Italy, France, and the United Kingdom is much more nuanced. His series starts with the rigid formal gardens of the Italian aristocracy and moves on to the more "natural" approaches of Capability Brown. Once again, we don't just see nature; humans shape it, but this time we actively shape it as gardeners.

To do so is to fulfil humankind's first profession, to till the earth, to subdue it, and to have dominion over it (see Genesis 1:26ff). The word "dominion" has undergone a complete metamorphosis, from ruling the earth like a tyrant, to caring for it as a servant leader and as stewards of creation accountable to God for our care.<sup>15</sup> There is a wonderful *Punch* cartoon of 1934, shared by Colin Russell. The vicar encounters Wilkes the gardener in his garden:

Vicar: "it is wonderful what the hand of man can do to a piece of earth, with the aid of divine providence, Wilkes."

Gardener: "You should 'ave seen this piece, Sir, when Divine Providence 'ad it all to itself."<sup>16</sup>

Can nature just be nature or does it need the guiding hand of *Homo sapiens* for it to flourish? I have had many discussions with my forestry brother and fellow ISCASTian, Richard, who has tried to come to terms with the tension between agriculture, silviculture, and eco-romanticism. The current mood of society is to leave forests "in their natural state" and to stop old growth logging. Forests should be replaced by Natural Parks. But can they? Or will we in the future be confronted with uncontrolled wildfires because the forests have not been managed

---

15 B. R. Reichenbach and V. E. Anderson, *On Behalf of God: A Christian Ethic for Biology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995).

16 C. Russell, *The Earth, Humanity and God*, The Templeton Lectures Cambridge, 1993 (London and New York: Routledge, 2021; first edn 1994), 48.

well? Even eco-romantics may advocate for “cool burning” practiced by First Nations people, though how such a strategy can be applied to the vast swathes of Australia’s forests would be a challenge. Can we just let the natural world be itself? Clearly, Tasmanians relish the natural wilderness of the South-West corner of their island, and it seems to be in a stable equilibrium, but there are other parks around the world which require ongoing human care to maintain their naturalness.

Nor is this always easy. Nature in the British Isles is much more tame than that in fiery Iceland or earthquake-prone Japan. Whereas in Britain Victorian optimism allowed humans to think that wild nature could be tamed, the Japanese on their geological fault lines have had to learn to live with earthquakes, fires, and tsunamis. Even in Australia we have become more modest in our attempts to live with rather than to dominate nature. Nevertheless, as stewards of the earth on behalf of God, on the one hand, and on behalf of future generations, on the other hand, we have a responsibility to care for nature and ensure it is not damaged by thoughtless exploitation.

According to Psalm 19, the heavens declare the glory of God. The psalm focusses on the voiceless proclamation of day and night and the rising and blazing of the sun. It is interesting how the last line of verse 7 is interpreted differently between translations. The KJV’s “and there is nothing hid from the heat thereof” is reflected in the ESV’s “and there is nothing hidden from its heat.” By contrast, the NIV’s rather benign “nothing is deprived of its warmth,” could only have been so interpreted by translators not used to the fierce heat of the mediterranean sun. Jewish translator Robert Alter comments on this passage as follows: “The Hebrew conceals a neat pun, for the word that means ‘heat,’ *hamah*, is also another name for sun. The sun here is a fierce blazing orb, ‘nothing can hide from its heat.’”<sup>17</sup> So, our experience of nature can colour the way we read and interpret Scripture! In short, nature tells us of the flaming glory of God.

---

17 R. Alter, *The Hebrew Bible*, vol. 3: *The Writings* (New York: Norton, 2019), 61.

But does nature teach morality? C. S. Lewis has some rather caustic comments debunking Wordsworthian romanticism. According to Wordsworth:

One impulse from a vernal wood  
May teach you more of man,  
Of moral evil and of good,  
Than all the sages can.<sup>18</sup>

This is not how Lewis learnt moral philosophy. Studying nature does not necessarily lead to a good moral outlook. For Lewis, studying nature can only lead to “‘the dark gods in the blood’; not although, but because, sex and hunger and sheer power operate without pity or shame.”<sup>19</sup> Lewis goes on to say that nature will teach you exactly what you want to learn. If you want beauty, she will give it, but if you want darkness, it is also there. He further argues, “nature never taught me that there exists a God of glory and of infinite majesty. I had to learn that in other ways. But nature gave the word glory a meaning for me.” Lewis articulates that we do not find God in nature, but that, knowing God, nature illustrates for us what we know. In more theological terms, we articulate nature in the light of a theology of creation through the lens of a theology of redemption.<sup>20</sup>

## Understanding Nature

To understand what nature is a little more clearly, let’s look at some dichotomies. If we contrast natural to artificial, that sounds like nature

---

18 Wordsworth, “The Tables Turned,” available at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45557/the-tables-turned> (accessed 7 October 2024).

19 C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, Signature Classic Edition (London: HarperCollins 2012; first edn 1960), 23ff.

20 See A. J. Gijsbers, “Towards a Theology Integrating Creation, Providence and Redemption in Our Daily Work, Rest and Family,” *Luke’s Journal* (01/03/2021), available at <https://tinyurl.com/5c3s3cb8> (accessed 7 October 2024). See also A. E. McGrath, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation*, chapter 4 in *A Scientific Theology: Nature*, 135–191.

is good and artificial is bad, but if we contrast natural with refined, or purified, good and bad can be understood differently. Refined sugar is allegedly bad for you, but natural sweeteners carry an artificial connotation. Refined medicines are essential to modern pharmacology. For instance, William Withering, a student of the foxglove flower, found he could cure dropsy. One of the causes of dropsy is heart failure, and Withering found by careful observation that while the extract of foxglove could relieve the condition, in toxic doses it could be fatal. The gap between effectiveness and toxicity, the so-called therapeutic window, is small. As student physicians (as the term is used in the United Kingdom and Australia) we gained useful experience in treating heart failure and recognising digitalis' toxicity. Foxglove is now purified into digitalis. Dosing the purified form is much easier than in its native or natural state. That is the difference between naturopathy and pharmacology, though there are those who prefer naturopathy to allopathic medicine.

We encounter similar problems in understanding nature if we contrast natural with civilised. This is the contrast between native and refined, primitive and developed. Each of these polarities could be spun to sound good or bad. Jean-Jacques Rousseau believed that civilisation created masks which obscured the real person and called civilisation back to nature.<sup>21</sup> He did so not merely in his novels but also in his rather sad, ascetic, withdrawn, and even paranoid life, as recorded in his *Confessions* (well analysed by Seigel, referenced above). The encounter of the vicar and the gardener referred to by Colin Russell above spins the dichotomy in the opposite direction. Untamed nature needs the civilising hand of human beings. Of course, the civilising process also needs to respect the natural world, caring for it, so that nature continues to be sustainable.

---

21 See B. Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000; first edn 1946), 651ff. Rousseau's views were not unique at that time. For an interesting take on this issue and the role of Genevan Pastor Lambergier, see J. Seigel, *The Idea of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 210ff.

Another dimension of interest is the natural versus supernatural, or the natural and the transcendent. We, Christians, believe in God Almighty, maker of all things, visible and invisible. The natural world is the world God made, the sphere of God's creative, providential, and salvific activity. Accordingly, we pray that God's will in heaven will become his will on earth. The first miracle was when God commanded light to be, and so it was—and it was good. Then God commanded the heavens and the earth, day and night, land and sea to exist. God then filled these regions with celestial bodies, birds of the air, fish of the sea, and plants and animals. For Christians, nature's origin is supernatural. In turn, those who deny the supernatural are described as naturalists. For them, what humans see and perceive is all there is.<sup>22</sup> This is known as ontological naturalism.

Ontological naturalism asserts that if a phenomenon cannot be explained by the laws of physics, it does not exist. Protagonists often ask the rhetorical question, by what laws of physics can the world of ideas impinge on the everyday world? This question assumes that the laws of physics are completely known to us. But how can we be certain? The scientific enterprise can only go forward if we assume that the world is a closed system and that cause and effect operate only within that system. Just because we cannot explain the relation between the natural and the supernatural—causally or otherwise—does not mean that there is no link, nor that the supernatural does not exist. By contrast, methodological naturalists would assume naturalism in their scientific pursuits. That is, when running experiments or studying phenomena, they would not include the supernatural world in their study. Most scientists who are Christian would be practising methodological naturalists, but they would also think and pray, thus moving in the interface between the world of ideas, the unseen world, and the seen world of everyday life. This integration is not without downsides when it comes to less educated believers.

---

22 D. Papineau, "Naturalism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2023 Edition), ed. E. N. Zalta and U. Nodelman. Available at <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/naturalism/> (accessed 10 December 2024).

For Christians, there is indeed a close link between natural and supernatural, but the two can be sadly confused, as a recent court case in Toowoomba, Australia, illustrates. Here, Pentecostal parents of an eight-year-old child who had type I diabetes mellitus believed that they should show faith in God by hoping she would be healed. They would demonstrate their faith by withdrawing her life-saving insulin. Sadly, she died six days later. God's good gift of insulin, obtained and refined by secular drug companies, was only natural and the parents genuinely believed supernatural healing trumped natural healing.<sup>23</sup> Such a false dichotomy is one of the challenges facing Christian medical practitioners especially, whose patients struggle to live a life of faith in this natural world.

The final dichotomy is between the natural and the spiritual. The KJV renders 1 Corinthians 2:14 as "the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God." This has shaped so much conservative thinking, where faith eschews nature, and therefore science. The NRSV renders the term "natural man," *psychikos anthropos* as "unspiritual" with a footnote to say that the term is "natural." The NIV renders it as "the man without the spirit." Paul uses the same phrase in 1 Corinthians 15:44 to contrast the natural (*psychikos*) with the spiritual (*pneumatikos*), when he puts forward that the natural body will be sown in weakness and rise again in power as the spiritual body. Back to 1 Corinthians 2, Paul is critical of the person who lives purely in the horizon of this life, understood as material, and does not comprehend spiritual things. Only when we are enlightened by the Spirit of God will we understand the things of God. What a tragedy that such an understanding misled the decisions of the Pentecostal parents mentioned above. Paul has a much more positive view of glorifying God in our physical bodies (see, for example, Romans 12:1–2).

Scientists study nature. Hence their reference to their trade as *natural* science, *natural* philosophy. In the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 17<sup>th</sup> century,

---

23 "Murder accused faced 'constant religious push' to adopt belief that God could cure daughter's diabetes, court told," *The Guardian*, 22 July 2024. Available at <https://tinyurl.com/3n3rk553> (accessed 8 October 2024).

following from the cosmological thinking of Galileo Galilei and Isaac Newton, they assumed that the heavens could be described by defined laws of mechanics, that the universe is as predictable as a mechanism, for example a clock. What, then, of free thought, reason, and the emotions? This was Descartes' dilemma, where he explored the relation between the mind and the body, not completely satisfactorily.<sup>24</sup> The relation between the natural and the supernatural, the unseen world and the seen world, the world of the mind, or spirit, and the natural world, is a problem still with us. For example, the Templeton initiative that studied divine action in the natural world spawned five projects that considered quantum cosmology, chaos theory, molecular and evolutionary biology, neuroscience and the mind/body problem, and quantum physics and quantum field theory.<sup>25</sup> These projects have not led to a resolution either of the overarching problem of divine action in the world, nor of the hard mind/brain problem,<sup>26</sup> but they have given the problem a thorough airing. The divine action problem has analogy with the mind/brain problem, but the two are not entirely synonymous.

When it comes to ethics and theology, both natural law and natural theology have had a hard time. The concept of natural law has been around since antiquity. As one author has it, Greeks and Romans claimed that there were "eternal laws directing the actions of all rational beings and built into the very structure of the universe. Roman lawyers developed a doctrine of law that all civilized people would recognize ... [these] principles of morals could be known by reason alone, without revelation."<sup>27</sup>

---

24 See B. Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy*, 542ff.

25 See R. J. Russell et al. (eds), *Neuroscience and the Person: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action* (Berkeley, CA: Vatican Observatory and Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, 1999), ii.

26 D. J. Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

27 J. B. Scheewind, "Natural Law," in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 599–560.

Schneewind goes onto a discussion of natural law in the works of Aquinas—a differing view from Hugo Grotius, who believed natural law was not directed to our good but to set limits on our personal aims. Since then, there are those who subscribe to natural law either from a theist position or an atheist stance. Such views argue that good is rationally perceived and that all right-thinking people would subscribe to such a position. If only humans were so rational!

Both the views of Aquinas and Grotius—and any other system of right/wrong discerned autonomously—are radically rejected by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who argues that the desire to discern good from evil autonomously was the first temptation of Adam and Eve; humankind suffered ever since from the consequences of eating that fruit.<sup>28</sup> He further argues that the Pharisees of Jesus’ time were guilty of that very issue—of always defining right from wrong—and that Jesus presented a new and very different way of understanding ethics, in terms of discipleship and relationship.

The naturalistic fallacy, that you cannot infer an *ought* from an *is*, is attributed to philosopher David Hume. Just because something is so does not mean it ought to be so. Just because humans eat meat does not mean they ought to eat meat. I first came across this idea in studying psychology as a second-year medical student, where human behaviour was under scrutiny. The attempt there was to make the study of human psychology “value-free” in order to be scientific. A similar discussion took place in trying to define illness and disease—especially mental illness—in “value-free” terms. As Fulford rightly claims, this is not possible.<sup>29</sup> Values are part of the fabric of our assessment of function and dysfunction, of health and disease. Philosopher Rachel Cohon has a very helpful article on Hume’s view of moral sentiments.<sup>30</sup> She

---

28 D. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, Touchstone edn (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995; first edn 1949), 21–51.

29 K. W. M. Fulford, *Moral Theory and Medical Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

30 R. Cohon, “Hume’s Moral Philosophy,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, available at <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/hume-moral/> (accessed 10 December 2024).

points out that he uses many evaluative terms, indeed his discussion is about moral epistemology and where these evaluative terms come from. Do they come from reason, divine revelation, conscience, reflection on one's (or others') impulses, and emotional responsiveness, or from sense and "taste"? Hume argues for the development of "moral sentiment" that will then evaluate moral behaviour. He divides such moral sentiment into "natural," that is without cultural intervention, and "artificial," which depends on the need for common rules from society.

G. E. Moore, we are told,<sup>31</sup> coined the term "naturalistic fallacy" of the *is/ought* distinction, trying to find some basis for goodness; disappointingly, he could not define good in any other way other than that good is good, a category in its own right, much like yellow is yellow. Critics of Moore, like A. C. Grayling, point out first that the naturalistic fallacy is not a fallacy. In his words, "It might be wrong to identify the good with some natural property or state, but it is not a contradiction or logical mistake to do so—and it is not restricted to naturalistic candidates for explaining the good."<sup>32</sup>

Charles Taylor offers a discerning evaluation of the *is/ought* distinction, pointing out that we as social beings have many evaluative terms. As he points out, "Our language of deliberations is contiguous with our language of assessments, and this with the language in which we explain how people do and feel."<sup>33</sup> So, words like dignity, courage, and brutality are indispensable and cannot be readily fitted into a neat *is/ought* dichotomy. Rather than evaluation being an added category, for Taylor, evaluations are built into the very structure of our language and describe our relationship to ourselves and to others in society. Christians come to the natural world with our own faith and moral perspective. We see nature through that lens, as believers and disciples, not as dispassionate objective observers.

---

31 See E. D. Klemke, "G. E. Moore," in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 582–583.

32 A. C. Grayling, *The History of Philosophy* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2019), 366.

33 Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 53–90.

## Natural Theology

A similar problem occurs with natural theology. With the advent of the discovery of the laws of nature and the orderly universe, it was thought that God could be inferred from nature. This spawned a number of lectures and treatises in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, such as the Boyle Lectures in England, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Gifford Lectures in Scotland, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the Bridgewater Treatises in England, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. All thought to examine our understanding of God in nature as a means of exploring the glory and grandeur of God, and of defending the faith against infidels. McGrath describes a whole series of authors who chose to use their scientific discoveries as evidence of a wise, good, and powerful God.<sup>34</sup> Thus, we have William Paley's watchmaker argument—that if you find a watch in a field you would assume such an intricate mechanism must be the result of an intelligent watchmaker.<sup>35</sup> Unfortunately, the design of humans is somewhat flawed, there are aspects of our makeup which are not good—think of the menstrual cycle or the propensity of female bladder infections. And the course of the pudendal nerve right through the prostate gland is not the best way of innervating male genitalia. The argument of God from design does not lead directly to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, but our knowledge of God helps us make sense of the world.

The limits of natural theology have been well explored in chapter six of McGrath's *Scientific Theology*. We are much more modest about its place. It is interesting that in the revived Boyle Lectures, in 2024, the topic of discussion was, "Is religion natural?"<sup>36</sup> But the very fact that that question is evaluated by theologians and philosophers indicates that we are invited to see nature through an interpretative grid. For Christians, such a grid is coloured by their encounter with the divine,

---

34 McGrath, *A Scientific Theology: Nature*, 241–305.

35 W. Paley, *Natural Theology*, Oxford World Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008; first edn 1802).

36 D. Ferguson, "Is Religion Natural?" ISSR, 2024 Boyle Lecture, available at <https://tinyurl.com/2ezcnm2n>, (accessed 24 October 2024). It includes a response from Fiona Ellis.

especially as seen through the lens of the other book of God, Scripture, the book of the Word that helps interpret the book of the world. McGrath has convinced me that a Christian doctrine of creation gives us a much clearer lens through which to see nature rather than trying to develop a Christian philosophy of nature. Job's rich encounter with God in nature is a salutary lesson in dealing with some of the deepest dilemmas as believers. In seeking to find vindication and justice in a world which for Job had gone badly wrong, Job seeks his day in court. In the words of William Cowper, struggling with his depression:

Blind unbelief is sure to err, and scan his works in vain;  
God is his own interpreter, and he will make it plain.<sup>37</sup>

But Cowper died in his melancholic depression, hopefully with some eschatological vindication. Job's day in court occurred when God entered into dialogue with him, showing him the wonder and grandeur of creation. For the rational Christian this is profoundly unsatisfactory as it does not make any of the reasons for Job's trials plain. The mystery of creation remains beyond human comprehension, and Job repentantly accepted that. And yet encountering raw nature as God's creation can be profoundly healing in nonverbal ways. It puts our own little lives into the larger perspective of God's grandeur, glory, and beauty. This is oddly healing in nonverbal, nonlogical ways.

A pale imitation of this occurred when I recently encountered new signs in Birrarung Park in Templestowe Lower, Victoria, Australia. These were calls on walkers to stop and become mindful of the beauty and healing of nature—if we would but stop and pay attention. It was part of a NatureFix program and one can even get an app for this.<sup>38</sup> It sees positive health benefits in spending time in nature and reflecting on nature. Ironically, one of the signs calls on us to express gratitude

---

37 W. Cowper, "Light Shines Out of Darkness," in *The New Oxford Book of Christian Verse*, ed. D. Davie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981; paperback reissued 2003), 198–199.

38 See <https://www.naturefix.life/> (accessed 15 October 2024).

without identifying to whom we should be grateful. Without being cocky, we could use the words of the Apostle Paul, “what you worship as something unknown, I am going to proclaim to you” (Acts 17:33). The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ helps us make sense of the natural world. As the poet has it—

Summer and winter and springtime and harvest,  
Sun moon and stars in their courses above  
Join with all nature in manifold witness  
To thy great faithfulness mercy and love.<sup>39</sup>

## A Theology of Creation

What would a theology of creation look like? I can only sketch a summary from two very useful sources—Alister McGrath in his *A Scientific Theology* and Tom McLeish in his *Faith and Wisdom in Science*. I have already referred to seeing the story of creation in the light of redemption, but both writers go further and point to the logocentric view of creation. In the beginning was the *Logos*—the Word of God who became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:1–18). By him and for him all things were created and find their coherence in him (Colossians 1:13–20). By his word, light shone in darkness, order came out of chaos. All that is, seen and unseen, is made by him. By his command, God separated light from darkness, day from night and land from sea. By him the skies, the sea and the land were filled with God’s bounty and human beings, male and female, made in the image of God were commissioned as regents to fill the earth, subdue it, and have dominion over it. God’s creation is good, it is real, but it is *creation*, neither eternal nor divine. It is contingent, with its own rationality which the vice-regents can explore with the gifts of divine reason given by God.

---

39 T. O. Chisholm, “Great Is Thy Faithfulness” (1923), available at <https://tinyurl.com/yupb845k> (accessed 15 October 2024).

McGrath quotes Barth to point to his central theme that creation is a covenant commitment of God to humankind, a covenant which the disobedience of Adam and Eve did not negate, and which was renewed with Noah after the judgment of the flood—"seed time and harvest, cold and heat; summer and winter, day and night will never cease" (Genesis 8:22). So, creation is the sphere of divine providence. McGrath underlines von Rad's comment that the First Testament is mainly a book about the divine history of God in the lives of God's people, that God is the God of history, not just Jewish history but the history of the whole earth. Even with the mechanisation of our understanding of the natural world, God is still active, and we are not deists believing God started the world and left it to run on its own.

McLeish also emphasises that the doctrine of creation is not found only in Genesis 1 but in other Scriptures. The prophets appeal to nature for us to understand the grandeur and awesomeness of God (see Isaiah 40) and God's providence (see Psalm 104), and to learn from the wisdom of the farmers to cooperate with nature (see Isaiah 28:23–29). The "Writings" relish the wisdom by which the world was made (see Proverbs 8:22–31). This wisdom is a delight and creates joy. Meditating on raw nature in the end confronts Job with the mystery of his suffering and causes him to recognise that God's ways are past finding out.

The key creation theme in the New Testament, apart from bringing creation's Word of God into focus as the Word made flesh, is the hope of a renewed cosmos, when the current groaning futility of creation (Romans 8:22) will find its fulfilment with the second coming of Christ. The New Jerusalem will come down from heaven and there will be a new heaven and a new earth, in which God will dwell with God's people from every tribe and tongue and people and nation (Revelation 21).

## Implications of the Christian Doctrine of Creation

There are certain consequences to the doctrine of creation that are relevant to this discussion. First, John Polkinghorne and others argue

that Christianity provided a unique set of metaphysical beliefs which were necessary to allow science to flourish. The early scientists were Christians who believed the world was rational, reflecting God's rationality; that it was ordered, reflecting God's faithfulness; that it was free to be itself and hence it was contingent, so that what it was could only be discovered by experiment and not merely by rational reflection; and that it was not sacred and hence could be analysed by mere mortals.<sup>40</sup> There is some substance to this claim but it can be overstated. Other civilisations had their sciences, though it is not clear why the Chinese, Indian, and Muslim worldviews did not spawn the sort of sciences developed in Europe. Nor is it easy to work out why Judaism did not spawn the sciences as we now understand them, even though there are many Jewish Nobel Prize winners—out of proportion compared to other nations.

Second, a doctrine of God the creator and sustainer of the universe, whose Son entered our world through the incarnation, makes an enormous statement about the importance of the created order. Christians are not Platonists who believe in the transience of the seen world and the reality of the world of ideas. Christians incarnate their behaviour and spirituality in the seen world of the everyday. At its bluntest, implicitly, doctors honour God when they care for the body, which is a spiritual act whose significance exceeds discursive theology. Theology itself must be rooted in concrete action, for faith without works is dead. This dual understanding, of the medical act as spiritual and of theology as embodied in deeds, challenges the idea that doctors save bodies while preachers save souls—that the body is transient

---

40 He put these four outcomes together in a lecture in Melbourne, but I have been unable to find them together in his writings—the nearest are orderly, contingent, worthy of study, and secular (without using these terms), in J. C. Polkinghorne, *Quarks, Chaos and Christianity: Questions to Science and Religion* (London: SPCK, 1994), 18, and rational and contingent in his *One World: The Interaction of Science and Theology* (London: SPCK, 1986), 1. Others have a slightly different quartet. Rhodes describes orderliness, intelligibility, reliability of human reason, and a belief in causality. See F. H. T. Rhodes, “Christianity in a Mechanistic Universe,” chapter 1 in D. M. Mackay (ed.), *Christianity in a Mechanistic Universe and Other Essays* (London: IVF, 1965), 18.

but the soul is eternal. Humans are body and soul, amphibians, as it were, standing in the interface between the seen world of nature and the unseen world of God and his spirits. Of course, the seen world of nature is also God's world, and the milieu of divine action.

Further, third, nature (or creation) is the theatre made by God in which humans were cared for by God, commissioned by God, disobeyed God, were judged by God, and will be redeemed by God. I have explored this aspect elsewhere.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, fourth, an understanding of nature and humanity's role in nature leads us to take seriously the human responsibility to God for the care of this world. This of course is not just a challenge for Christians but for all of humanity, and calls on Christians to cooperate with all human beings who care for the earth, confronting those who simply see the world as a resource to be exploited. This is a spiritual battle, in which Christians—like Daniel and his colleagues in the Babylonian court—must witness on the one hand to the God they worship and on the other to seek the peace and prosperity of the city in which they live in exile (see Jeremiah 29:7). What this will look like is a “wicked problem” and a challenge for all ISCASTians in their daily work.<sup>42</sup>

## Acknowledgement

It is only when I finished this essay that I started to appreciate fully the richness of Alister McGrath's contribution to my thinking. As I referred back to my well-underlined copy of his impressive *A Scientific*

---

41 A. Gijsbers, “Towards a Theology Integrating Creation, Providence and Redemption in Our Daily Work, Rest and Family,” *Luke's Journal* 26:1 (2021), <https://tinyurl.com/5c3s3cb8> (accessed 16 February 2025).

42 For further exploration of this difficult challenge, see my report on ISCAST's day conference of 7 September 2019, in A. Gijsbers, “Wicked Problems and the Hope of the Kingdom: Summing up the Issues from the Victorian Symposium,” ISCAST (5 December 2019), available at <https://tinyurl.com/y7esjrm5> (accessed 16 February 2025).

*Theology*, I realised how much of his ideas I had imbibed. His ISCAST Conference on Science and Christianity, on Reality, in 2007, added to that richness, and I am profoundly grateful. Tom McLeish's *Faith and Wisdom in Science* also has been a wonderful resource in reflecting on the nature of science and the joy and wisdom of creation. I follow a long way behind.

*The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.*

Received: 15/10/24 Accepted: 12/02/25 Published: 08/05/25