PASCAL'S BIBLICAL OMISSION
ARGUMENT AGAINST
NATURAL THEOLOGY

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In the hope of clarifying the nature and role of faith and reason in the justification of the Christian worldview, philosophers and theologians have pondered the Scriptures in order to find a biblically faithful and philosophically applicable epistemology regarding the existence of God. Many have found encouragement for the project of natural theology. These thinkers reckon general revelation to be a rich, although not exhaustive, resource for theistic arguments. Others have rejected natural theology by adopting either another rational program in defense of God's existence or by favoring a more fideistic orientation.

One persistent argument against natural theology appeals to special revelation itself as prohibiting such apologetic enterprises, however well-meaning their proponents may be. Although he was an innovative and cogent apologist in his own right (and not a fideist), 2 Blaise Pascal argued in Pensees that a faithful reading of the Bible precludes the enterprise of natural theology. One of his several arguments against natural theology can be called the biblical omission argument. 3 Since Pascal advances this argument forcefully, and because variations of his approach are still advocated in various theological circles, it is appropriate to probe his argument in order to discern whether or not it renders the endeavor of natural theology inconsistent with the very faith natural theologians labor to defend.

THE BIBLICAL CASE AGAINST NATURAL THEOLOGY

Pascal is impressed by the fact that no biblical writer argues from nature to Creator. No inspired writer is a natural theologian. His observation should be quoted in full:

It is a remarkable fact that no canonical author has ever used nature to

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prove God. They all try to make people believe in him. David, Solomon, etc.,
ever said: 'There is no such thing as a vacuum, therefore God exists.' They
must have been cleverer than the cleverest of their successors, all of whom have
used proofs from nature. This is very noteworthy.1

Because the Scriptures themselves lack proofs from nature, Pascal has no need for them.
He inserts the sentence, "They [the biblical writers] all try to make people believe in him,"
to mean that certain kinds of persuasion are appropriate, but proofs from nature are not.
Pascal appears to be assuming that if the Scriptures are religiously normative with respect
to theological knowledge about God, humans, ethics, and salvation, they must also be
epistemically normative when it comes to theistic arguments.2 Pascal’s reasoning seems to
follow in this way:

1. The Bible is epistemically normative. It specifically and exhaustively tells us how
to acquire knowledge of God.

2. No biblical writer gives a theistic proof.

3. No biblical writer recommends or permits the construction of a theistic proof as
a way to acquire knowledge of God.

4. Therefore no theistic proofs are biblically sanctioned as ways to acquire knowl-
edge of God.

In other words, if God had sanctioned theistic arguments from nature, he would
have inspired a biblical writer to present one or more such arguments. We could
extend Pascal’s observation by adding that if theistic proofs were appropriate we
would expect the Scripture at least to advocate the construction of one or more of
them. But Scripture does neither, therefore, we can conclude that God does not san-
tion theistic arguments.

Pascal’s argument is valid. Its soundness is another matter because premises 1 and 3
are questionable. We should remember that Pascal does not rest his perspectibe simply
on a lack of overt natural theology in the Bible; he also believes that the stated scriptural
Teaching on sin, the fall, and redemption prohibits arguments based on natural theology,
because of the inherent corruption of human reason through sin. It is first important to
analyze Pascal’s biblical omission argument on its own merits to discern what, if any-
thing, it entails with respect to natural theology. Does this omission show that natural
theology is opposed to the very theism it purports to defend?

Concerning premise 1, no one should expect that one book—even a large book that
Christians claim as a revelation—should contain everything of epistemic significance. The
fact that the Bible lacks arguments on many disputable issues in the twentieth century is
no evidence that such arguments are beside the point. An omission need not be a prohi-
bition. But Pascal might want to argue that there is nothing of greater significance to
Christian theism than God and our epistemic deportment toward him. The concept of
belief in God is pivotal to the entire Bible and thus to Christian theology, spirituality, and
ethics. It would be legitimate, then, to expect the Bible to contain everything epistemically pertinent to acquiring belief in God. We should expect the Bible—when taken as a revelation from God to all humanity—to exemplify or encourage natural theology if the practice is legitimate. But it does not. This, Pascal could say, is no incidental omission but rather a disarming silence. Natural theologians are left without any biblically sanctioned tools.

It could be argued that the biblical writers had no need of theistic arguments given the religious climate in which they wrote, and that this historical condition accounts for why there is no record of such arguments in Scripture. But this does not mean that theists in more skeptical intellectual environs might not have use for them. Atheism does not seem to have been a particular problem for the biblical writers, although the same cannot be said for polytheism or pantheism. John Baillie observes that "none of the Old Testament writers treats the existence of deity as if it were an open question or in any sense problematic," and the same can be said of the New Testament. Henry Sloane Coffin once preached that the Ten Commandments began with "Thou shalt have no other gods beside me," instead of "Thou shalt have at least one God."

One might counter this claim by arguing that the Bible itself admits of atheists. In Psalm 14, verse 1, the writer says that "the fool says in his heart, There is no God;" (see also Psalm 10:4 and 53:1). If the Bible cites actual atheists and refuses to engage in natural theology, this would strengthen the claim that the Bible does not sanction the practice.

This argument should not be ignored, but the use of the word "atheist" by the psalmist does not likely refer to one who denies a divine being, but rather to one who defies a divine being. This view can be established without great exegetical effort. A note in the New International Version Study Bible on Psalm 14:1 rightly calls the "fool's" view a "practical atheism." Another explanatory note in The New Oxford Annotated Bible commenting on a parallel verse in Psalm 10:4 says "They are not atheists, but deny that God is concerned with moral retribution." In other words, the Psalms speak of those who try to deny God in their actions while still knowing that he exists. This is explained by another verse in Psalm 10 that further describes the "atheist": "He says to himself, 'God has forgotten; he covers his face and never sees'" (verse 11). The "atheists" are trying to deny the moral consequences of God's existence in relation to their misdeeds. So for all intents and purposes, they live like atheists and are as such "practical atheists." John Baillie comments that these verses do not have to do with "intellectual perplexity but with sinful evasion—with wicked man's attempt to persuade himself that he can go through with his wickedness and yet escape divine judgment."

This could be likened to the cigarette addict who knows that her addiction is extremely unhealthy yet continues to smoke with abandon. When confronted with facts that prove her potentially suicidal actions, she brushes them off and refuses to take them seriously. She is thus both a naysayer about the perils of smoking (because she doesn't change her actions and refuses to admit the dangers) and a believer in these dangers nonetheless. This kind of psychological situation is not rare, and many other kinds of examples could be supplied.

Given the epistemic significance of the ancient historical situation as religious, it seems illegitimate to view Scripture as definitively circumscribing the means of acquiring knowledge of God. One can still hold that the Bible is theologically authoritative and morally
normative without holding that it is epistemically normative with respect to the specific strategic employment of theistic arguments in such a way that it therefore disallows the practice of any natural theology that it does not exemplify. So premise 1 is not clearly true and is likely false in the way stipulated above.

The absence of either theistic proofs or any direct admonition to engage in such proofs need not preclude natural theology as solutary for some Christians. It is clear that the biblical writers offer no theistic proofs (Pascal’s premise 2). But we must question Pascal’s premise 3 that no biblical writer advocates or allows theistic proofs. Several biblical texts teach that God is manifested in the natural order. If “the heavens declare the glory of God” (Psalm 19:1), one might infer that natural arguments are available to convince skeptics of this fact. On the other hand, it has been suggested that this text might be simply a confession of the believing psalmist and not an assertion that one could infer from the heavens that God made them. On this reading, the psalmist believes the heavens declare the glory of God; but the heavens give no independent evidence for the existence of God.

But verse four of Psalm 19 might challenge this view: “Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.” This universal reference may indicate that the heavens offer a worldwide testimony to God (through their “voice”) that should be recognized by earth’s inhabitants. This interpretation would mean that the evidence for God is everywhere available. Yet the critic could reply that their voice being heard simply means that all can observe the heavens, but all do not recognize the starry heavens in particular (and the universe in general) as God’s work, nor can they because they lack the conviction that God exists. Pascal seems to have held this view. In speaking of the claim that “the sky and the birds prove God,” he replies that his religion does not say so “for though it is true (that the sky and birds prove God) in a sense for some souls whom God has enlightened in this way, yet it is untrue for the majority.”

This could be likened to me hearing a Russian speaker without having a translator available. I hear his voice, but I do not understand the message.

Both interpretations have some merit, although the universal testimony view seems most consistent with the overall context of the Psalm. Nevertheless, these verses taken alone cannot serve either to license or to prohibit natural theology.

In response to the objection that “since a cause cannot be demonstrated by an effect not proportionate to it, it seems that the existence of God cannot be demonstrated,” Thomas Aquinas says, “On the contrary. The Apostle says: The invisible things of God are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made (Rom. 1:20).” Thomas continues, “This could not be unless the existence of God could be demonstrated through the things that are made. For the first thing we must know of anything is whether it exists.” Thomas thinks it is required that we be able to know through argument that God exists in order for Paul’s statement to make sense. Thomas is not arguing that Paul provides such an argument (Paul only gives an assertion), but that if his statement is true (as Thomas claims it is), such a theistic argument is both needful and possible—since revelation will never contradict reason. This challenges Pascal’s premise 3 that proofs are not recommended in Scripture. Thomas thinks they are required if the Romans passage is to make sense.

Thomas’ inference rests on two notions. First, he assumes that if God can be known
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"by the things that are made," such knowledge must be proved by rational argument in which "the things that are made" serve as a premise or evidence for the argument. But some, such as Calvin and Alvin Plantinga, have argued that while one may know God through creation, one needs no argument to do so. God’s existence can be known as an intuitive truth or a properly basic belief not inferred from anything else. Seeing a flower may occasion the belief that God made that flower, and serve as the "grounding" for that belief; but, according to Plantinga, the existence of natural objects does not provide evidence for the deity.¹³

Second, Thomas interprets the passage to mean that "the invisible things of Him are clearly seen" by humanity as a whole; that is, the creation reveals the Creator to every sentient person. This interpretation has a long and substantial history and seems to fit Paul’s overall argument of Romans chapters 1 through 3 to establish the guilt of the entire human race. But R.T. Herbert has argued that Paul is speaking of pagan polytheists, not of humanity as a whole (which includes atheists). Therefore, God’s existence is not rationally demonstrated to all humans through creation. Rather, if one is a polytheist, it would be rational to reduce one’s theology to one God. But this doesn’t imply that the text in Romans teaches that a rational argument from creation is available to persuade the atheist to become a theist.¹⁴

Paul’s statements certainly indict polytheists as idolaters who should know better. Yet Paul levels his charges against the ungodliness of all who suppress the truth in their wickedness, against all who fail properly to worship the one true Creator. This reference seems universal in scope (including humanity as a whole), whatever metaphysics one holds and not limited to the particular ungodliness of polytheists, especially given the fact that Paul bases his arguments on the universally accessible fact of the material creation. Therefore, atheists, polytheists, and any other nontheists are responsible for their comprehension of God, which is available through nature.

We cannot definitively settle this interpretive question here, but it will suffice to say that in light of this controversy the biblical evidence is not clearly against natural theology. No texts directly prohibit natural theology; neither do any passages seem to unambiguously demand natural theology; yet some seem to permit or even encourage it.

One could argue that the task of Christian philosophers in more skeptical times could include constructing arguments that alert unbelievers to the manifestations of God in nature so as to persuade them to believe in God. These arguments, if inspired by Romans chapter one, could be a posteriori arguments of the cosmological or teleological type since they argue from an observance of nature (or natural premises) to the existence of God. Or appeal could be made to an a priori ontological argument. The natural theologian might cite the Apostle Peter in favor of natural theology for a skeptical time: "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Peter 3:15). If the atheist asks for a reason why the believer believes in God, he should be given one—and this shouldn’t in principle preclude theistic proofs (although other kinds of reasons might be given). The natural theologian could grant that no theistic arguments per se are given in Scripture but still challenge Pascal’s notion that the Scriptures do not allow such theistic argumentation in any circumstance.

Thomas Morris has put the matter well in speaking of philosophical theology in gener-
al (which includes natural theology):

From the fact that the biblical documents, written as they were to deal with burning practical questions of the greatest personal significance, do not address all the possible philosophical questions which can also, in their own way, be of the greatest intellectual significance, it does not follow at all that these more theoretical questions are illegitimate, or that they are unimportant.15

He goes on to suggest that any person asking philosophical questions about religious matters should do all in his power to find answers to these questions, even if they are not directly answered by the Bible itself. To do otherwise would be to deny an important aspect of one's identity.16

Morris is speaking broadly of philosophical theology that includes much more than theistic proofs, and it might be the case—although he does not make this claim—that only matters pertaining to the coherence of theism (its conceptual integrity), rather than the existence of God, are the proper subject of his remarks. That is, the believer or unbeliever can legitimately engage in philosophical theology by reflecting on divine intelligibility and compatibility of the divine attributes, but not try to construct proofs for God's existence. But this limitation would apply only if some other reason can be given for rejecting the proofs besides the fact that the Bible omits them. Morris believes that an omission may not be a prohibition, especially if the raw materials—if not the finished arguments—for philosophical theology are available in Scripture itself.

Another of Pascal's assertions could be challenged by those who allow, encourage, or practice natural theology. Pascal remarks that none of the biblical writers gives proofs—which is true—but he also says "they must have been cleverer than the cleverest of their successors, all of whom used proofs from nature." By this he seems to mean that if the best and brightest canonical authors deemed theistic proofs unworthy or unnecessary, then we ought to imitate their philosophical omission. But even an orthodox view of the inspiration of Scripture need not affirm that the biblical writers were "the cleverest of the clever"—the most intelligent theologians of all time. All that need be affirmed is that each writer was infallibly inspired by God to write as he did for the purposes at hand.17 If God's existence did not need argumentation in the cultural milieu of the biblical writers, this doesn't imply that someone clever enough to construct theistic arguments might not come along at a later time when skepticism should render them necessary. It could be that Thomas Aquinas, philosopher extraordinaire, was, in fact, "more clever" than Solomon or David or any other biblical writer with respect to natural theology; but this would not imply that the biblical writers were not divinely inspired or that Aquinas was so inspired.

All it would imply is that a Christian philosopher designed to use reason in service of faith in a different way than that of the canonical writers.

Theological Assistance from Bavinck?

An argument that fits the spirit of Pascal's rejection of natural theology was also given by Herman Bavinck, a Dutch theologian favorably cited by Plantinga partially to substantiate his claim that natural theology is not needed for an epistemically credible Christian belief.18
A distinct natural theology, obtained apart from any revelation, merely through observation and study of the universe in which man lives, does not exist.... Scripture urges us to behold heaven and earth, birds and ants, flowers and lilies, in order that we may see and recognize God in them. "Lift up your eyes on high, and see who hath created these" Is. 40:26. Scripture does not reason in the abstract. It does not make God the conclusion of a syllogism, leaving it to us whether we think the argument holds or not. But it speaks with authority."

Bavinck thinks that the reason Scripture lacks theistic proofs is that any syllogistic reasoning, however cogent, is incompatible with biblical authority. By this he seems to mean that if proof for God's existence were derivative of natural premises and inferential reasoning, then biblical authority would be compromised. God's existence, for Bavinck, is not established by arguments based on non-theological premises, but by biblical revelation alone. The Bible tells us to see God as Creator and nature as God's creation: it does not tell us to see nature as evidence for God.

Bavinck's argument is similar to Pascal's biblical omission argument in that it regards biblical revelation as epistemically authoritative, and rules out extrabiblical means of acquiring knowledge of God—that is, natural theology. In logical form, Bavinck's argument runs as follows:

1. Whatever speaks with the highest authority allows no external corroboration (implied).
2. The Bible speaks with the highest authority (about the existence of God).
3. Therefore, the Bible allows no external corroboration (with respect to the existence of God). There is no efficacious natural theology.

This argument is valid, but its first premise will be disputed.

Bavinck attempts to give a reason why the Scriptures lack theistic proofs, although the Scriptures themselves give no reason. So he cannot speak with the direct authority of revelation on this issue, although he believes his argument is based on the overall testimony of Scripture. We need to look more closely at the nature of authority to see if Bavinck's premise is true.

Whatever speaks with authority—at whatever level—must be viewed by others as having authority, if it is to be recognized as authoritative. This almost tautological observation can be used against Bavinck. A text on biology may be the definitive statement on the subject and thus have the highest scientific authority. Yet this authority would not be damaged by those who refuse to view it as authoritative out of ignorance, perversity or disagreement. Neither would it demean the authority of the text if someone were to defend its credentials to skeptics whom the defender wishes to convince. It could still have the highest authority as a biology text even though its authority needed to be corrobated through various means. The means used to certify the authority are simply what constitutes its credentials as an authority. Credentials do not undermine authority.
they establish it.

We could imagine God making use of natural theology—by creating brilliant natural theologians such as St. Thomas or Richard Swinburne for this purpose—to accredit himself as existing for certain sceptical types. Since God would be viewed as creating the very means by which natural theology accredits him, the use of natural theology need not diminish the authority of God's Word, the Bible; it would rather complement biblical authority. The intrinsic authority of Scripture would not be dependent on the arguments of natural theology, but God's existence would be demonstrated through such arguments for those people who aren't content to rely on the biblical evidence alone. The statements of the Bible would receive their epistemic credentials through natural theology and thus be shown as having the highest authority.

Bavinck may be thinking that the authority of the Bible's pronouncements on God's existence are not simply true—that God exists, that he is the ultimate Judge and Redeemer, etc.—but that these pronouncements are self-attesting or self-authorizing and so in need of no outside corroboration. Self-attesting or self-authorizing here means not that the statements are tautologically true or must be seen as true by any attentive thinker—statements such as "the whole is greater than the parts" or "no object is bigger than it is." What is meant is that they appeal to no other human source for their credibility. A better way to put it might be to say that the Bible's pronouncements on the existence of God are "God-attested" because God alone certifies their truth value in the Scripture without any external, evidential support.

In this sense, to speak with authority means to need no assistance or extrinsic authorization, as when a father says to a three-year-old child, "No dessert tonight because you misbehaved today." That's the final word. To enlist a sociologist to concur would be absurd.

One may choose to view Scripture's authority in this way, but it doesn't seem forced upon us, unless—as we have denied—specific texts forbid natural theology. Further, many orthodox natural theologians have not viewed the Bible in this manner. Even if one holds, as did Bavinck and Pascal, that the Bible alone is the inspired Scripture, this need not imply that God is limited to this medium to convince skeptics of his existence.

The idea that the Bible is the ultimate and final witness to or revelation of God's existence need not necessarily eliminate the idea that there are independent reasons that could convince skeptics that God exists. Thus Bavinck's first premise seems false. If this is so, his criticism loses its force and his affix to Pascal is nullified.

To pursue this debate on natural theology in any more depth would take us beyond the scope of our inquiry. We may, however, safely conclude that for Pascal (or Bavinck) to make the case that theistic arguments are inappropriate, he needs to look further than the biblical omission argument. It may well be that theistic arguments should be deemed illegitimate by believers for a variety of other reasons, and that believers should adopt a moderate theological non-naturalism. But the mere fact that theistic proofs are not overtly stated in Scripture is an inconclusive argument against their felicity. To rely on this fact alone would appear to commit the fallacy of the argument from silence. When Pascal says that the absence of natural theology in Scripture is "very noteworthy" he means, I think, that its absence bespeaks a host of other factors about the limitations of human rea-
son, the noetic effects of sin, and the nature of God as infinite that render such proofs illegitimate. A discussion of these factors, however, would take us beyond the biblical omission argument proper.

AN INCONCLUSIVE ARGUMENT

This paper has considered the biblical omission argument against natural theology and has argued that although it raises interesting issues deserving of further attention, it is insufficient to invalidate natural theology. The fact that no biblical author offers a specimen of natural theology does not necessarily imply its illegitimacy, although it does raise the question as to why there is an omission. This could be because no arguments were needed during the time the documents were written, although such arguments might be needed at a later point. Therefore, whatever other arguments may be marshalled against natural theology, the absence of theistic arguments in the biblical text itself does not provide a sufficient argument to abandon its employment by extra-biblical apologists.²⁰

NOTES


2. For an extended discussion of Pascal’s rejection of natural theology see Douglas Groothuis, To Prove or Not to Prove: Pascal’s Rejection of Natural Theology (Ph.D. dissertation, 1993).

3. Blaise Pascal, Pensées (New York, N.Y.: Penguin, 1985) 463-243. This edition uses the Lafuma enumeration of fragments, which are listed first in the reference. The second number is the older Brunvog system.

4. I owe this distinction to Professor Keith Yandell.

5. The biblical writers do, though, argue against idolatry as illogical. A finite, inanimate idol cannot a universe make. See Isaiah, chapters 44-45.


7. Ibid.


10. Baillie, 120.

11. Pascal, 3/44.

12. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, I, 2, 2; emphasis added.

13. See Alvin Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God,” in Faith and Rationality, Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, eds. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 16-93.


16. Ibid.

17. The Old Testament says that Solomon was the wisest man living, but this need not mean that he had the highest intelligence, since, according to the biblical writers, more is involved in wisdom than mere intellect.

18. Bavinck goes further than Plantinga in saying that an efficacious natural theology is impossi-
ble. Plantinga's guarded defense of a modal ontological argument shows that he finds this version of natural theology to be plausible, even if not strictly needed for the believer to be within his epistemic rights in believing in God as a properly basic belief.
19. Plantinga, 64.
20. I wish to thank Professor R.T. Herbert for his comments on an earlier version of this paper.