



# EXORCISING THE GHOST OF HUME

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## **In Defense of Natural Theology: A Post-Humean Assessment**

Edited by James F. Sennett and Douglas Groothuis  
InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 2006. 336pp.

David Hume was an eighteenth-century philosopher whose arguments against religion are commonly believed to have sounded the death knell for natural theology, which can be defined as the attempt to find rational justification for a belief in God from reason and the natural world. *In Defense of Natural Theology* is offered as a direct confrontation to Hume's legacy, which the editors argue pervades all attacks on natural theology.

Even after two hundred years, Hume's objections are still haunting natural theology, and hence Hume's ghost needs to be exorcised once and for all. The editors, James Sennett and Douglas Groothuis, clearly believe that this aim has been achieved, as they conclude that "Natural theology is alive and well in contemporary philosophy; the supposed Humean refutation of the enterprise is a myth whose exposure is long overdue" (p. 15). However, throughout the volume, only a very modest form of natural theology is supported, with little sensitivity to broader perspectives on the subject.

Sennett and Groothuis, along with the

other eleven contributors to the volume, are philosophers, and this emphasis is evident throughout the book. Natural theology can be considered from a variety of perspectives, including from that of theology or the natural sciences, but this book is concerned primarily with the philosophical analysis of arguments. Indeed, the book is explicitly stated to be both a response and a contribution to a recent revival in Christian philosophy, seeking to apply the best in contemporary philosophical advancement to natural theology.

The book comprises two main sections. The first contains four chapters dealing with Hume's objections to the overall project of natural theology. This includes chapter 3, written by "Hume sympathiser" Todd Furman, which defends Hume's objections to natural theology. Another key contribution in this section is chapter 5, by one of the editors, James F. Sennett, on "Hume's stopper". This objection—that any natural theological argument, even if

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sound, simply does not prove enough—is one of the key themes of the book and is referred to time after time in the later chapters.

Part 2 defends nine different natural theological arguments against the criticisms of Hume and those who have followed in his footsteps. Only two of these—the cosmological and teleological (or design) arguments—were dealt with directly by Hume. Others, such as the moral argument and the argument from religious experience, bear directly on

Humean ideas, while the final three—the arguments from reason and consciousness, and the cumulative case argument—are contemporary arguments that postdate Hume's treatments, but to which Humean criticisms can be and often have been applied.

Of the nine arguments, the most interesting, and perhaps the most useful, is the cumulative case argument, considered by R. Douglas Geivett in chapter 14. Unlike the rest of the contributors, Geivett is arguing specifically for *Christian* theism. This is particularly important given the context in which David Hume was originally writing. He was responding to Christianity in particular, not simply theism in general. Like some of the other authors in the volume, Geivett acknowledges the limitations of individual arguments—particularly the objection known as "Hume's stopper". However, he offers the most effective solution by combining the various arguments into one cohesive argument for Christianity.

*In Defense of Natural Theology* is a useful, yet limited, book. It deals with objections both to the overall project of natural theology and the individual arguments, but the conclusion that "natural theology is alive and well" is far from clear. Overall, intended or not, this volume seems to make the case that no single argument can stand alone as justification for Christianity, though this very nicely sets up the cumulative case argument of the final chapter. While one argument may be insufficient,

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taken together and building upon one another, the intellectual support for Christianity begins to look more certain. Intriguingly, the cumulative case argument turns on the inclusion of evidence from “special revelation”, something that seems contrary to the very definition of natural theology.

There is also a failure to consider objections to the natural theological project from within the Christian philosophical community, such as those suggested by Alvin Plantinga in his reformed epistemology project. Plantinga is mentioned as part of a “marvellous resurgence in academic philosophical research and publication among Christian scholars” (p. 10) but his ideas are not seriously engaged with. Additionally, there is no mention of other forms of natural theology, such as those of Alister McGrath and John Polkinghorne. In the introduction, the editors define natural theology as “the attempt to provide rational justification for theism using only those sources of information accessible to all inquirers, namely, the data of empirical experience and the dictates of human reason” (p. 10). This is by no

means a universal definition of natural theology. However, the contributors to this collection evidence little sensitivity to the range of meanings and uses of “natural theology” and the related term “natural religion”. Historian David Pailin, for example, has identified at least eleven different meanings of “natural religion” alone in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Britain, the time when Hume was making his famous objections.<sup>1</sup> It seems premature, then, to declare that the particular version of natural theology promoted in this book is “alive and well”.

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More importantly, this book lacks a discussion of how these arguments can be put to use. Indeed, apologetics barely rates a mention until the final chapter. Geivett’s chapter on the cumulative case argument is the most focused on conversion, and thus would be of most use to those interested in apologetics.

He focuses not only on establishing the individual arguments, but on how to put them together in such a way as to lead someone to a genuine consideration of God.

The average Christian reader who picked up this book might struggle to make it all the way through, which would be a shame, as the collection does end on a high note. My suggestion would be to

read Part 1 and the last chapter of Part 2, which are of most use to Christians concerned with defending the intellectual credibility of Christianity without wishing to get bogged down in philosophical technicalities. The rest of Part 2 could be read as further detail for chapter 14—fleshing out the individual steps of the cumulative case argument. For an alternative perspective on natural theology that places more emphasis on the role of the natural sciences, I would refer the interested reader to two other books: firstly, Alister McGrath’s introduction to

scientific theology, *The Science of God* (London: T&T Clark International, 2004) and John Polkinghorne’s classic, *Belief in God in an Age of Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

In conclusion, it is worth noting that *In Defense of Natural Theology* confirms the words of Solomon in *Ecclesiastes*—that there is nothing new under the sun. While some of the supporting evidence might have changed with the developments of modern science, the arguments for and objections to natural theology are basically the same ones that have been around for centuries. This suggests a need for caution in approaching natural theology as a form of Christian apologetics, and the need to consider just how effective natural theology actually is in bringing people to the knowledge of God and, more importantly, to faith in Christ. ©

END NOTE

<sup>1</sup> David A. Pailin, “The Confused and Confusing Story of Natural Religion,” *Religion*, 24 (1994), 199-212.

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