

# The idolatry argument against natural theology: how it works and why it fails

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**Abstract:** Some thinkers in the Reformed and ‘postmodern’ traditions in theology have argued that natural theology is ‘idolatrous’. This article shows that such arguments hinge on distinguishing the object of revealed theology from the perfect being or first cause. It then shows that, on plausible analyses of worthiness of worship, the perfect being will always be more worthy of worship than anything not identified with it. Natural theology therefore has a proper place in investigating the nature of the ‘true’ God, if an object is the ‘true’ God because it is the being worthy of our worship.

## Introduction

Many modern theologians, and some theologians in the Reformed tradition, take a hostile attitude to ‘Natural Theology’, the use of philosophical methods to inquire about the existence and nature of God independently of what He’s revealed to us. In this article I want to defend Natural Theology by evaluating a family of arguments against Natural Theology – what I’ll call ‘Idolatry’ arguments. This family of arguments is defended by figures in the modern Reformed tradition, most explicitly by Brunner but implicitly by Barth and his successors, and in the ‘postmodern’ tradition following Heidegger, most explicitly by Jean-Luc Marion and Merold Westphal.<sup>1</sup>

Many objections to Natural Theology are motivated by general scepticism about our metaphysical and moral knowledge. Metaphysical and moral scepticism have received thorough treatment over the last few decades, however, so I don’t want to address such scepticism directly. For the purposes of my argument I am going to assume, controversially but not without the shoulders of giants to stand on, that programmatic objections to metaphysical and moral knowledge have been successfully dealt with.

'Idolatry' arguments come in lots of different variations, but I've abstracted two generalized versions from the many passages in Reformed and 'postmodern' theology where the term is used to attack natural theology. On other interpretations of such passages, 'idolatry' arguments tend to boil down to a confusion between theology as an investigative discipline and theology as a personal relationship,<sup>2</sup> to epistemic arguments of the kind we're not considering,<sup>3</sup> to no-true-Scotsman arguments which just stipulate that Christian theists must depend exclusively on Revealed Theology for all their information about God,<sup>4</sup> or to invalid inferences of the form 'we know Yahweh is X, but we don't know whether the object of Natural Theology is X, so we know this object is not Yahweh', without a supportive argument why Yahweh would be the 'true' God and the object of Natural Theology an 'idol'.<sup>5</sup>

First, I'm going to define the terms I'll be using in my presentations of my two generalized 'Idolatry' arguments. Then I'm going to present the first, what I call the 'Concepts' argument, and show how it depends on robust but unsubstantiated psychological hypotheses. Then I'll present the second, the 'Objects' argument, and explain why it fails to provide a reason for theologians to avoid engaging in Natural Theology.

### **Definitions**

Theology: the investigative discipline whereby we find out more about God.

God: the object of theology.

'God' is left undefined here because any definition will play a central part in arguments for and against Natural Theology. The definition of 'theology' is also deliberately broad, since the argument is precisely about what activities do and don't, or should and shouldn't, count as theology.

Revealed Theology: the discipline which investigates the nature of Yahweh, presumptively by scrutinizing events which we take to be His mighty deeds and wise words.

Yahweh: the unique individual who spoke to Abraham, freed the Israelites from bondage, raised Jesus from the dead, etc.

Natural Theology should be split into two disciplines that are distinct in virtue of the attributively defined object they each investigate. They need to be distinguished because it is at least conceivable that the two descriptions are not satisfied by the same object. Hence, Natural Theology consists in the following two subdisciplines:

Archē-ology: the discipline which investigates the nature of whatever it is whose nature and existence explains the natures and existences of everything else. The presumptive method of archē-ology is metaphysics, but some have advocated using the natural sciences as well.

Gaia: our shorthand for the object of archē-ology in this article. Let's use 'She' for Gaia's pronoun.

Aristology: the discipline which investigates the nature of whatever it is that is of supreme value or is the best possible agent, depending on whether the goodness of objects or agents is more basic in the true axiology. The presumptive methods of aristology are meta-ethics and normative ethics.

Zeus: our shorthand for the object of aristology in this article. Again suppose that there is one unique object which satisfies this description. Let's use 'It' for Zeus' pronoun.

Note well that it is possible (traditional Christianity holds that it is true) that Yahweh, Gaia, and Zeus are all the same unique individual. Only the Objects Argument must deny this in order to function – and so much the worse for the Objects Argument, as it will turn out.

### **The Concepts Argument**

On the Concepts version of the Idolatry Argument, the contention is that archē-ologists and aristologists develop a concept of God, but then they end up worshipping that concept – the concept becomes their idol – instead of worshipping God. So Emil Brunner writes: 'The God who is "conceived" by thought [i.e. archē-ology and aristology] is not the one who discloses Himself; from this point of view He is an intellectual idol' (Brunner (1950), 136). Similarly, Marion claims that 'when a philosophical thought expresses a concept of what it then names "God," this concept functions exactly as an idol' (Marion (1991), 16). Both claims are ambivalent between, on the one hand, saying that natural theologians end up worshipping the wrong object – they worship Gaia or Zeus, rather than Yahweh – and, on the other hand, an alternative claim, that natural theologians end up worshipping the concept which represents Gaia or Zeus. Because it can be read in both ways, we need to address both. First we'll address the 'Concepts' version.

Put in the terms I've defined, the central contention of the Concepts Argument is the claim that the concept of Zeus which aristologists devise takes the place of Zeus itself as the object of their research – and the same goes for archē-ologists, that the concept of Gaia they devise, when thinking about the nature of Gaia, takes the place of Gaia herself as their object of research. If this really happens, then aristology and archē-ology will be bad ways of doing theology because aristologists and archē-ologists will come to be investigating their concepts about God instead of God Himself.

The main problem with the Concepts Argument is that it needs a theory about why aristology and archē-ology, but not, say, Revealed Theology or biology or other investigative disciplines, suffer from this psychological defect where concepts come to depose the original object under investigation. These theories

tend to depend on special kinds of scepticism, according to which aristology and archē-ology are particularly prone to leading researchers to make an unconscious shift from using a concept to investigate an object, to investigating that concept instead of the object. Marion, for example, seems to support this kind of scepticism with a 'false consciousness' theory about metaphysicians, rooted in Nietzsche and Feuerbach and transmitted via Heidegger (Marion (1991), 16). The thought is that archē-ologists and aristologists become passively interested in their concepts of Zeus and Gaia, to the exclusion of Zeus and Gaia themselves, and they never know that this happens: this is what he means when in *God without Being* he writes about 'conceptual idols' being 'invisible mirrors' which 'transfix' our intellectual 'gaze' (Marion (1991), 13–16).

But I just don't see how we could tell whether this false-consciousness theory is true. It's a hypothesis about the psychological tendencies associated with engaging in very particular research programmes: a hypothesis which hasn't been tested and would be extremely difficult in principle to test. One can very easily defend Natural Theology from the Concepts Argument by rejecting such hypotheses because they are so poorly substantiated by the available psychological evidence about Natural Theologians.

Notably, however, it's still possible to argue that aristology and archē-ology will lead to distracting idolatry without these 'false consciousness' claims. This is where the Objects Argument comes in, as the alternative reading of those quotes from Brunner and Marion.

### **The Objects Argument**

Put generically and informally, the Objects Argument runs something like this: Natural Theology investigates an object which might not be the same individual as the 'true' God who spoke to Abraham and was Incarnate in Christ. So if you want to know about the 'true' God, you are safer sticking to Revealed Theology. Otherwise you risk investigating an object which turns out not to be the 'true' God: an 'idol'. Natural theologians run the risk of confusing this 'idol' with Yahweh, the 'true' 'God of Abraham'.

Of course, the Objects Arguments needs to say more than this in order to have any force. There must be some opprobrium attached to investigating the objects of Natural Theology rather than Yahweh. The dialectical force of an accusation of 'idolatry' rests on the notion of *worthiness of worship*. I'm going to run the 'Idolatry' Argument using *worthiness of worship* as a proxy property for whatever is supposed to set the 'true' God apart from 'idols' such that there's something objectionable about worshipping, contemplating, or theologically investigating, some being other than the 'true' God. It's not enough to establish that Natural Theology investigates something different from God: you have to establish that if Natural Theologians investigated something other than the 'true' God, it would be a problem. If the 'true' God were different in some way from Gaia or Zeus, but

that difference didn't make Him more worthy of worship than them, it seems like it rightly wouldn't matter to the Natural Theologian whether or not the object of Natural Theology is or isn't the 'true' God. The notion of worthiness of worship does, in fact, crop up again and again in the rhetoric deployed by opponents of Natural Theology:

Man can neither pray nor sacrifice to this god [i.e. the god natural theology investigates]. Before the *causa sui*, man can neither fall to his knees in awe nor can he play music and dance before this god. (Heidegger (2002), 72)

The *causa sui* offers only an idol of 'God' so limited that it can neither aspire to worship and adoration nor even tolerate them . . . The *causa sui* says so little about the 'divine God' that to assimilate it with the latter . . . amounts to . . . blasphemy. (Marion (1991), 35)

By means of natural knowledge one knows only *that* part or 'aspect' of God which is mediated through creation and relates especially to his *being* . . . In this *formal* and *empty* God-concept we see the heart of Rome's natural theology. (Berkouwer (1979), 69–73; emphases in the second sentence mine)

Stated semi-formally, the above argument looks like this:

The Objects Argument:

- O1. Theology is the investigation of the nature of God and its entailments. (*stipulation*)
- O2. God and only God is worthy of worship. (*stipulation*)
- O3. The object(s) of aristology and/or archē-ology are not worthy of worship.
- O4. The object(s) of aristology and/or archē-ology are not God. (*from O2, O3*)
- O5. Yahweh is worthy of worship.
- O6. Yahweh is God. (*from O2, O5*)
- OC. Theologians should restrict their research to Revealed Theology.

Premises O3 and O5 are the crucial contentions upon which the soundness of the Objects Argument depends. Support for O3 and O5 will come from some information from aristology, archē-ology, and Revealed Theology which tells us about what Zeus, Gaia, and Yahweh are probably like, and combining this information with an analysis of what it takes to be worthy of worship.

### **The Objects Argument investigated: worthiness of worship**

What I want to do now is to cast doubt on the possibility of success for the Objects Argument by examining just what we might mean by 'worthiness of worship'. In my analysis of worthiness of worship I'm following a debate between Tim Bayne, Yujin Nagasawa, and Benjamin Crowe in 2006 and 2007 in *Religious Studies* which asked in virtue of what we might be obliged to worship God. I've had to select the three most promising answers they canvassed, for reasons of concision.

It seems as though worship might be the appropriate consequence of holding one of the three following attitudes:

*Gratitude:* perhaps we worship God because we are grateful to Him. He's worthy of worship in so far as he deserves our gratitude for something He's done for us.<sup>6</sup>

*Approbation:* perhaps we worship God because He is a very noble moral agent. He's terribly well behaved, and we look up to Him for His virtue. He's worthy of worship in so far as He is a good moral agent.

*Admiration:* perhaps we worship God because He is a very excellent, or valuable, being. Whatever it is that makes one thing more valuable than another, He has that to a very high degree, and so we worship Him because of his goodness. He's worthy of worship in so far as He is beautiful, glorious, etc. (whatever properties we think make something more intrinsically valuable).<sup>7</sup>

Given premise O<sub>2</sub> in the Objects Argument, in order to have the supervenient, non-degreed property *worthiness of worship*, you must at least have a higher degree of the base properties in question than any other actual beings.<sup>8</sup> The task for the defender of the Objects Argument is to show that for each base property, Yahweh is more likely to have the highest actual degree of those base properties than Gaia or Zeus. Let's consider each ground for worship in turn, assessing whether it is likely to render Yahweh, Gaia, or Zeus as most likely to be worthy of worship. Remember, we're not allowed to assess Yahweh as though we know He is Gaia or Zeus, or the Objects Argument will defeat itself.

### **Should we be more grateful to Yahweh than Gaia or Zeus?**

Who deserves our gratitude more, Yahweh or Gaia? The key point here is that Gaia is the primary cause of anything Yahweh has done for us. Yahweh promises eternal life? Gaia can trump that. She invented eternal life.

If we want to hold on to Yahweh's superior entitlement to our gratitude, then we need to accept some principle whereby the more proximate an agent-cause of some beneficence is in a chain of agent-causes, the more gratitude we owe them. But if this is so, we'll owe more gratitude, and hence more worship, to the humans involved in teaching us the means of salvation and helping us appropriate them (catechists, confessors, Eucharistic ministers, etc.), than to Yahweh. So it looks as though on pain of committing ourselves to ecclesiolatry, we should accept that Gaia is more deserving of gratitude than Yahweh.

What about whether Yahweh is more worthy of gratitude than Zeus? To answer this, we would need to decide whether a perfect being is omnipotent and a moral agent, and whether It has in fact done more for us than Yahweh – it could be that Yahweh is partial to us, and has given us favours which an impeccable being would not.

The best strategy for defending Yahweh's pre-eminent desert of gratitude, however, is to argue that Gaia and Zeus might not be agents. If they aren't moral agents, neither can be subjects of gratitude whatsoever. I take this to be the worry that lies behind objections to classical theism in figures like Moltmann: the First Cause and Perfect Being looks, if you read Aquinas in a certain way, more like an abstract entity than a lord and saviour.

Put more conservatively, the objects which satisfy the descriptions for Gaia and Zeus could turn out, on further investigation, not to be agents. Yahweh, on the other hand, is necessarily an agent given how we defined Him in terms of 'the one who spoke to Abraham, etc.' For scorekeeping's sake, then, let's concede that since there is an epistemic possibility that Gaia and Zeus aren't agents at all, we should let Yahweh creep into first place since Yahweh is necessarily an agent. It doesn't matter which of Gaia and Zeus comes in second and third place.

### **Should we approve of Yahweh more than Gaia or Zeus?**

The argument that Gaia is more deserving of gratitude than Yahweh will pretty much carry straight over here to show that She's more deserving of admiration than Yahweh. Whatever good things we admire Yahweh for doing, we should admire the One more for making these things possible.

Is Yahweh more approvable than Zeus? If Zeus is an omnipotent moral agent, It's pretty clearly more approvable than Yahweh. Any good Yahweh could or would do, an omnipotent, impeccable moral agent could and would do better. Even if Zeus is not omnipotent, It will still be more approvable than Yahweh since the only reason Zeus hasn't done better than Yahweh is because It didn't get the chance.

The same strategy can be applied here, too, however. We can hand first place to Yahweh on the grounds that it's epistemically possible that Zeus and Gaia aren't agents at all, and one has to be an agent to carry out actions deserving of approbation. So let's hand Yahweh first place in this heat, but bear in mind how He got there.

### **Should we admire Yahweh more than Gaia or Zeus?**

There is a case to be made that, as far as we know, Yahweh could be more admirable than Gaia. Perhaps the First Cause is just a sort of abstract pinpoint, tediously eternal and incorporeal. Perhaps Gaia has no 'great-making properties' at all. Then Yahweh will be more valuable than Gaia.

Without a doubt, however, Zeus is more admirable than Yahweh. You can't be the Perfect Being without having all the properties that make something good to the maximum possible degree. So Zeus is definitely more worthy of

admiration than Yahweh. So Zeus will be the most admirable, then Yahweh, and then Gaia.

### Conclusion of survey

What are we to make of the above analysis? The following table charts our victors in the three competitions.

	Yahweh	Gaia	Zeus
Gratitude	1 (if Gaia not an agent)	2 (only probably an agent)	3 (not partial to us if agent)
Approbation	1 (iff Gaia/Zeus not agents)	2 (only probably an agent)	3 (possibly not an agent)
Admiration	2 (if Good not an agent)	3 (may not possess)	1 (by definition)

We are left, then, with Yahweh triumphant in the gratitude competition, just so long as Gaia is not an agent, and in the approbation competition, just so long as Zeus isn't an agent. I don't want to adjudicate between whether approbation or admiration is the better candidate for being the true grounds of worship. Rather, I want to extend the gratitude and approbation analysis to suggest why we should abandon the gratitude view, and why, on the approbation view, perfect being theology is going to return 'by the back door'.

The problem with making gratitude the grounds for worship is that it is indexed to our desires. On the gratitude metric, the demons in Hell are fully entitled to worship Satan, because Yahweh doesn't do anything for them anymore, but Satan at least promises ice-cold revenge and smoking-hot sinners. On the gratitude metric, you could plausibly decide what object is most worthy of worship for you by altering your desires. If all I really wanted was cake, I should worship bakers. So a gratitude-based account of *worthiness of worship* is not going to attach the relevant opprobrium to investigating Gaia or Zeus instead of Yahweh. If you make gratitude indexed only to moral desires, it collapses into approbation.

The problem with approbation as grounds for worship is this. Given premise O<sub>2</sub>, it's not enough for Yahweh only to have actually done more good deeds than any other actually existing being. Everything Yahweh has done must have been the best action He could have done in those circumstances: otherwise any sinless creature – the angel Gabriel, say – would be more worthy of worship than him. If Gabriel failed to redeem mankind because Gabriel is merely an angel, but Gabriel would have redeemed mankind if he had only been able to, then he'll be at least as virtuous as Yahweh. In addition, Yahweh must be such that anything He would do, in unrealized circumstances, would be the best He could do. In other words, maximal approbation depends on the impeccability of the subject of



approbation. So, Yahweh will only be maximally deserving of approbation if He is impeccable.

The problem here is that aristology is the discipline which investigates, using normative and meta-ethics, what an impeccable being would be like. So, to render Yahweh worthy of worship, in order to make Him God, we had to make Yahweh identical with the best possible moral agent. But the best possible moral agent is the object of aristology, so aristology will be a good way of investigating Yahweh. So Natural Theology is back. The Objects Argument fails because in order to run it needs to claim that, 'O<sub>3</sub>: The object(s) of aristology/archē-ology is not worthy of worship' and it also needs to claim that 'O<sub>5</sub>: Yahweh is worthy of worship.' But in order to defend premises O<sub>3</sub> and O<sub>5</sub>, it needs a plausible analysis of *worthiness of worship* that renders Yahweh more likely to be worthy of worship than Gaia or Zeus. Unfortunately, the only available such analysis, the approbation view, only generates this result if Yahweh is identified with an impeccable moral agent – but the object of aristology is this agent, so the argument then defeats itself.<sup>9</sup>

Fundamentally, 'Idolatry' arguments against natural theology operate by defining theology as the discipline which investigates God, but by defining 'God' so as to include Yahweh (the 'God of Abraham . . .') as theology's proper object but exclude the First Cause and Perfect Being. To do this these arguments must regard Yahweh as distinct from the First Cause or Perfect Being. Since we can show that the Perfect Being, if not also the First Cause, is more worthy of worship than anything which is neither of these, any theology without Natural Theology will be more 'idolatrous' than Natural Theology, the discipline which investigates the First Cause and Perfect Being.

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### Notes

1. One of the central difficulties of interpreting the writings of these authors is discerning when some claim is meant as a premise in, or conclusion of, an argument (or when an apparent inference is really supposed to support such a conclusion) as opposed to when claims and inferential language are intended as persuasive rhetoric ancillary to the proper support for the proscription on Natural Theology. It is therefore possible that there are no genuine idolatry arguments, but that the 'real' arguments are always epistemic arguments of the kind I have bracketed out of what follows. Nevertheless, the opponent of natural theology can retreat to rhetorical tropes when their argument has been defeated, unless those tropes have been shown to offer no substantive support for their position, so it's worth showing that.
2. See, for example, Sudduth's reconstruction of Brunner's argument against natural theology (Sudduth (2009), 125).
3. See, for example, Brunner (1950), 133–135, and Lecerf (1949), 245.
4. This is an uncharitable, but natural, interpretation of many of Barth's remarks. See, for example, Barth (1936), 89–97, where he seeks to argue that 'dogmatics is the servant of preaching' (*ibid.*, 92). Either Westphal or Marion, or both (Westphal (2001), 39) seem to take the view that (philosophical) methods of investigating God other than Revealed Theology (or just refusing to investigate Him altogether) are idolatrous since 'developed atheistically', but all that means is that those methods don't assume that a set of historical truths about Yahweh's activities are truths about God.
5. See, for example, Barth (1957), 79–84; Berkouwer (1979), 69, and Lecerf (1949), 243–244.
6. See Crowe (2007), 471; I haven't addressed divine command accounts of worthiness of worship since it seems obvious that Yahweh's commands couldn't constitute moral obligations by themselves unless He were Gaia, Zeus, or both.
7. See Bayne & Nagasawa (2006), 306–309.
8. See Gwiazda (2011).
9. Arguments that perfection of this kind is required for worthiness of worship can be found in Findlay (1955), 48, and even more proximately to my purposes here at Morris (1987), 20.