

# Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

---

Volume 39 | Issue 3

Article 13

---

7-1-2022

## Colin Ruloff and Peter Horban, eds., CONTEMPORARY ARGUMENTS IN NATURAL THEOLOGY: GOD AND RATIONAL BELIEF

C. A. McIntosh  
mcintosh.chad@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

---

### Recommended Citation

McIntosh, C. A. (2022) "Colin Ruloff and Peter Horban, eds., CONTEMPORARY ARGUMENTS IN NATURAL THEOLOGY: GOD AND RATIONAL BELIEF," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 39: Iss. 3, Article 13.

DOI: 10.37977/faithphil.2022.39.3.13

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol39/iss3/13>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

In this section, King discusses the differences among incontinence, continence, and virtue. He describes the importance of having suitable motivations in place for virtuous actions. He also emphasizes the means by which we can grow in virtue—namely, emulating exemplars, finding friends who can hold us accountable, and practicing the virtues. He provides recommendations for practicing specific virtues—such as embracing daunting intellectual tasks to grow perseverance and reading articles from opposing viewpoints to develop open-mindedness. Like every other chapter in the book, this one ends with an opportunity for reflection and discussion.

*The Excellent Mind* is an excellent book. It is wide-ranging, comprehensive, and generates important questions. It also fills a need in the virtue theory literature for an accessible introduction to intellectual virtues. I recommend this book for academics and non-academics alike. I also applaud King for producing a thoughtfully written, thorough resource that models carefulness, fair-mindedness, and other virtues he describes in the book.

*Contemporary Arguments in Natural Theology: God and Rational Belief*, edited by Colin Ruloff and Peter Horban. Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. Pp. x + 336. \$108.00 (hardcover).

C. A. MCINTOSH

Colin Ruloff and Peter Horban have assembled a wide range of theistic arguments in this recent volume of eighteen chapters, seven “revisiting classical arguments for the existence of God,” and eleven on “further directions in natural theology.” The former group begins with two cosmological arguments. First, Joshua Rasmussen defends a modal contingency argument based on the principle that for any fact F, if an explanation of F is possible, then an explanation of F is expectable, other things being equal. Apply the principle: every contingent state possibly has some external explanation. But that’s false if no necessary being is possible. An infinite chain of contingent states explaining other contingent states would itself be a contingent state lacking external explanation, which contradicts the original principle. So, a necessary being is possible. So, there is a necessary being. I wonder, though: if Rasmussen’s argument succeeds, God’s existence is a fact. Is an explanation of God’s existence possible? I suspect Rasmussen thinks not. God’s existence is a brute, unexplained fact. But this needs argument. Not a few theists of some repute have maintained



precisely the opposite (Anselm, Aquinas, Scotus, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Clarke, and John Leslie spring to mind). Next up is Andrew Loke on the kalam cosmological argument. Loke reformulates the argument to rule out circular causal chains, and to make the God-like attributes of the cause clearer. A chapter defending a distinctively Thomistic cosmological argument is a notable omission.

The chapters on cosmological arguments are followed by a chapter on the ontological argument, three on design arguments, and one on an argument from objective moral obligations. Most of the material here will be standard fare to those interested in natural theology. Jason Megill's chapter on the ontological argument could have had less historical review and more on contemporary developments, such as Yujin Nagasawa's maximal God thesis and recent work on reasons to favor the possibility, rather than impossibility, of God's existence. In his otherwise fine chapter on the fine-tuning argument, Michael Rota details a handful of objections to the argument, but, oddly, simply cites where replies can be found elsewhere rather than following up with written replies himself. Rota's chapter also contains an amusing production error where his instructions to the editors are seamlessly inserted in the main text (77), which had me very confused upon first reading!

As for the chapters on biological design arguments: because philosophers tend to approach such arguments with considerable timidity (if not embarrassment), it is refreshing and bold to include not just one, but two in a volume like this. That being said, both chapters could have been more philosophically rigorous. Behe clearly stays abreast of the scientific literature relevant to his argument from irreducibly complex biological structures, but doesn't interact at all with what philosophers have said about it (e.g., Draper and Plantinga). Likewise, there is a noticeable lack of engagement with the philosophical literature on intentionality and teleology in Meyer's chapter on the argument from the origin of biological information. For whatever reason, philosophers seem hesitant to offer conceptual muscle to biological arguments from design. But these arguments depend just as much on the findings of empirical science as does the fine-tuning argument. Is the specter of Darwin really that scary? Or is it directed panspermia they fear?

As for other more traditional theistic arguments, the volume includes chapters on Pascal's Wager and religious experience. Joshua Golding recommends reformulating the wager to avoid infinite utilities and to be about what we should assume for practical purposes rather than what we should believe, and Kai-man Kwan adroitly summarizes the parity between religious experience and other kinds of experience we take to be reliable.

The most outstanding feature of Ruloff and Horban's collection is the space given to lesser-known, more recent, and underdeveloped theistic arguments. I'll just say a few quick words about each.

J. P. Moreland argues that theism is the only explanation of genuine, non-physical mental states. Moreland's deductive formulation of the argument from consciousness seems needlessly ambitious, since it requires refutation of all non-theistic alternative explanations. Furthermore, arriving at a theory by process of eliminating alternative explanations tends to muffle considerations about the actual conceptual connection between the theory and the phenomenon (in this case, theism and consciousness), which is really the heart of the matter.

Brian Riberiro presents the argument from beauty, but thinks it suffers from an explanatory regress problem. Supposing beauty is explained by artistic intent and there is natural beauty, the artistic intent of God is a good explanation of natural beauty. But then, he wants to know, what explains the beauty of God's artistic intent? But it seems false to me that God's artistic intent is itself an instance of beauty (at least in the same sense). Even if it is, why not think of it as paradigmatic in the same way God's moral character is the paradigm of moral goodness?

Greg Welty argues that the existence of abstract objects implies the existence of God, while Katherine Rogers argues *our knowledge of* abstract objects implies the existence of God. Not only does the nature of propositions seem distinctively thought-like, but our very knowledge of certain propositions, such as "1+1=2," seems to require a causal connection between us and non-causal, necessarily existent mathematical objects. Propositions therefore are best construed as the thoughts of God (Welty), who in turn can be the causal explanation of our knowledge of them (Rogers). Though their writing and argumentation styles are quite different, I think the essence of Welty's and Rogers's arguments are similar enough to have warranted including just one or the other. The same can be said about the chapters on the argument from desire (William Lauinger) and the meaning of life (Stewart Goetz), where the same dialectic between the author and Erik Wielenberg's arguments is replayed.

William Lane Craig's chapter on the argument from the applicability of mathematics is a real gem. It is an original (as formulated explicitly as an argument for theism) and very subtly argued piece that deserves careful attention, since there are several ways of easily misunderstanding the argument. The argument's power lies in not depending on realism about mathematical objects. Realist or anti-realist, Craig argues, the theist has a better explanation than the naturalist for why the structure of the physical world is so amenable to mathematical description.

Jonathan Matheson's chapter on the argument from common consent effectively demonstrates that the argument, far from being a simple fallacy, is a highway through an array of fascinating topics in epistemology, evidence, and the social sciences, and is ripe for further exploration. Matheson makes the case so well for, then against, then for the argument again that I found myself accepting, rejecting, and then suspending judgment on the argument! But given how little there is in the

contemporary literature on this argument, I was surprised to see no mention of Zagzebski's and Dobrzeniecki's work on it.

The volume closes with "the argument from ramified natural theology" by Sandra Menssen and Thomas Sullivan. It's common to appeal to alleged revelation, such as inspired texts or miracles, only *after* a case for generic theism has been made, as if starting by investigating revelation would be improper. But Menssen and Sullivan issue a correction here; you don't have to establish "God exists" before establishing "x is God's revelation," since if you can establish the latter, you get the former along with it. So why not start with the latter? And this they do by considering the "fittingness" of the incarnation. As a solution to the human condition, the idea that God would himself take on humanity—meet us where we are, as it were—is so aesthetically and logically perfect that it deserves our consideration as being *true*. There is much to admire about this approach, and it deserves much more attention.

So much for the individual chapters. The volume as a whole has a few shortcomings. First, there is a certain lack of unity throughout that raises questions about the intended audience. Some of the chapters are philosophically rigorous, and others more introductory. Some were heavy with historical review, and others more cutting-edge. Some were critical of the titular argument, and others were neutral, and others enthusiastic defenses. A clearer editorial vision I think could have been instituted here. Another shortcoming, already alluded to above, is the amount of content overlap between a handful of chapters. Given that the editors aimed at producing "a comprehensive field guide to the practice of natural theology" (2), perhaps a more careful selection would have freed up space for other theistic arguments not represented in the volume, such as a nomological argument, or argument from free will, or from linguistics, or from reason, and so on. But perhaps the biggest shortcoming is the neglect of any discussion of metaphilosophical issues relevant to natural theology, such as what natural theology is, exactly, and what should count as a good theistic argument (there is brief discussion of this last question in Evans and O'Neill's chapter on the moral argument). Ruloff and Horban's own characterization of natural theology as avoiding appeals to divine revelation or supernatural sources of information is arguably at odds with both the argument from religious experience and Menssen and Sullivan's argument from ramified natural theology. So, more on the nature and aims of natural theology would have been a nice addition, especially because the meaning of the term "natural theology" has shifted over the years.

These shortcomings aside, all of the chapters have excellent bibliographies, which will be a valuable feature of the volume as a whole for those interested in natural theology generally, or in any of the individual arguments in particular. I therefore agree with Ruloff and Horban's own judgment that *Contemporary Arguments in Natural Theology* "vividly illustrates the creative depth and philosophical breadth of the work being done by some of the very best practitioners of natural theology today" (2).