

[Book review] Buchbesprechungen: Ned Wisnefske: Our Natural Knowledge of God: A Prospect for Natural Theology after Kant and Barth

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Published in:
Kant-Studien

DOI:
[10.1515/kant.1996.87.1.118](https://doi.org/10.1515/kant.1996.87.1.118)

Published: 01/01/1996

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Palmquist, S. (1996). [Book review] Buchbesprechungen: Ned Wisnefske: Our Natural Knowledge of God: A Prospect for Natural Theology after Kant and Barth. *Kant-Studien*, 87(1), 118-122.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/kant.1996.87.1.118>

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BUCHBESPRECHUNGEN

Ned Wisniewski: *Our Natural Knowledge of God: A Prospect for Natural Theology after Kant and Barth*. New York: Peter Lang, 1990, 168 pages.

“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim his handiwork.” Such common assertions as this well-known passage from Psalm 19:1 have been used by countless ordinary individuals as a way of strengthening and testifying to their own religious disposition. Philosophers and theologians have often used more formal versions of essentially the same kind of statements as the foundation for what they hope will be a sound defense of the rationality of religious belief. In the latter context at least, if not also in the former, such statements belong to the controversial realm of *natural theology*.

Ned Wisniewski's book is an assessment of the extent to which such reasoning can still be regarded as having a proper place, even in light of Kant's philosophical critique and Karl Barth's theological critique of natural theology. The book is divided into five chapters: an introduction, separate chapters on Kant and Barth, a chapter outlining a fresh approach to natural theology, and an epilogue. In this review I shall concentrate mainly on Wisniewski's discussion of the implications of Kant's philosophy for natural theology. The chapter on Barth is rather repetitive, and in general not very well organized. But it does make one very significant point: the common view of Barth as the arch-opponent of all natural theology is not entirely accurate, for in his later writings Barth significantly qualifies his earlier skepticism with comments that seem remarkably accommodating to those who support an appeal to God's "handiwork" as a means of defending their faith.

The introductory chapter describes the traditional role of natural theology as that of *mediating* "between (generally) scientific knowledge of nature and the claims about nature drawn from revealed theology", and presents the book's aim as that of showing "that natural theology makes a legitimate claim to knowledge" (pp. 2–3). This claim is truly legitimate, Wisniewski argues, only when the kind of talk that gives rise to natural theology is recognized as arising out of and properly belonging to the ordinary, "practical level of living in the natural world"; Kant's attack "on natural theology as a proof resting on [theoretical] inferences" and Barth's attack on it as "an immediate religious feeling" therefore "do not reach its roots" (p. 5). Wisniewski suggests that "we can agree with much of the polemic of Kant and Barth against certain kinds of natural theology, and still maintain that they did not get to the root of our natural knowledge of God" (p. 9). Each author, he suggests, provides hints in later works that there may be "new ways of accounting for natural theology not subject to his earlier attack" (p. 9).

Chapter II begins with a description of Kant's purported "annulment of natural theology" (p. 13). After a rather straightforward discussion of the Copernican revolution and its implications for epistemology, Wisniewski calls attention to Kant's appeal to moral faith as a justification for reflecting upon transcendent realities.

Morality provides us with “good reason to believe in God”, but without extending our actual knowledge in the least: “[t]his is Kant’s ‘natural’ or moral theology” (p. 17). A brief and somewhat reductionistic account of Kant’s *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason* (hereafter *RBBR*) is then used as evidence for an overly pessimistic conclusion, according to which Kant’s position is supposed to have made natural theology appear

fruitless if not illusory ... Human understanding ... bore no witness to God ... Kant’s thinking foiled the interests of the traditional supporters of natural theology ... Kant, however, had driven those ideas [God, freedom, and immortality] to the very fringes of responsible philosophy. (p. 19)

Insofar as the interests of traditional natural theologians were based on a false, speculatively-based trust in reason’s power to gain theoretically certain answers to metaphysical questions, Kant certainly did serve as a foil. What Wisniewski ignores, however, is that Kant himself was not only a lover of metaphysics, driven by the unshakable conviction that God, freedom, and immortality are the realities that form the very *core* of true philosophy, but also constructed his entire System for the primary purpose of *reestablishing* these very ideas on solid ground.

After a brief discussion of Kant’s influence on the subsequent German tradition, Wisniewski suggests the best way of “enriching our view of nature” is to reject Kant’s outdated “Newtonian understanding of matter” and to focus more fully on his “important insight into the active character of human understanding” (p. 23). This would enable us to see nature as “something living, not a collection of inert objects”. Unfortunately, Wisniewski fails to appreciate the extent to which Kant himself was working towards developing just such a standpoint in his own approach to “reflective judgment” on “organisms” in the third *Critique*. Instead, after discussing the second *Critique*’s emphasis on morality, as a result of which “any connection between natural knowledge and God must be indirect”, as mere “transcendental conditions for a moral life” (p. 26), Wisniewski presents the third *Critique* in such a way as to portray Kant as having held a “barren view of nature” (p. 41). Despite a relatively lengthy discussion of issues such as the role of purposiveness and hypothetical (“as if”) reasoning in our understanding of nature (see pp. 26–50), Wisniewski remains unconvinced. His worry, apparently, is that Kant insists on regarding “reflective” knowledge of nature as never attaining quite the same status as the “determinate” knowledge examined in the first *Critique*, so natural theology can never obtain a really secure foundation. One of the brightest spots in the third *Critique*, according to Wisniewski, is therefore Kant’s insistence on grounding aesthetic judgments not only in a mysterious subjective feeling, but also in the “universal communicability” of what Kant calls our “common sense” – through which alone such judgments can be justified (p. 35). Indeed, in hopes of “turn[ing] Kant’s insights in the direction of Wittgenstein and away from Descartes”, he defends the interesting suggestion that Kant’s position may well be that the feeling of pleasure arising out of such judgments is the *result*, not the cause, of their intersubjective validity (p. 37–39).

One of the chief inadequacies in Wisniewski’s interpretation of Kant is his neglect of the perspectival character of Kant’s reasoning. Virtually every statement Kant makes is meant to be regarded as holding true only from a particular perspective

or standpoint. His apparently ambivalent attitude towards natural theology is bound to be misunderstood if this is not kept in mind. Accordingly, Wisniewski says Kant's "official position" is that the reasoning of natural theology "either leads to illusion ... or to prepare for a moral proof of God's existence" (p. 49), and then finds it inexplicable when the very philosopher who (supposedly) "sought to explain away" the common person's reliance on natural theology (p. 91) elsewhere writes as if God and nature were far more intimately connected (e. g., pp. 43, 49). Yet Kant *can* consistently allow a full-bodied appreciation of natural theology, provided we understand that such sentiments are properly rooted in the judicial standpoint, where they have their own proper foundation as judgments of feeling, as demonstrated in the third *Critique*. They are condemned as illusory *only* from the theoretical standpoint; and the practical standpoint serves as an alternative rational basis for believing in their validity. Hence, Kant's response to Wisniewski's criticism, that "natural beauty is not so much a symbol for *morality* ..., but *divinity*" (p. 48), would be that these two are *complementary* rather than mutually exclusive: they merely represent the proper expressions of the practical and judicial standpoints, respectively. After all, in *RBBR* (a book that adopts the standpoint of the third *Critique*, not that of the second) Kant *defines* religion in terms that, in effect, *raise* morality to the level of divinity (see e. g., *RBBR*, the first sentence of Book Four, Part One).

After giving an interesting critique of Barth's views on natural theology, Wisniewski develops, in Chapter IV and in the Epilogue, his own, linguistically-based account of how natural theology can survive the limitations philosophers and theologians have tended to place upon it in the wake of Kant and Barth. The key, he suggests, is to allow "a broadening of what it means to know" (p. 92), a broadening that is supposed to go "beyond the confines stipulated by Kant" (p. 93; see also p. 26). If "knowledge of nature" is taken in the technical sense of the *Erkenntnis* of the first *Critique*, then it is certainly true to say nature gives us access to far more than just this rather narrow realm. The problem is that Wisniewski appears to be unaware of the extent to which Kant himself recognized this fact, especially in the third *Critique*.

As it turns out, Wisniewski's explanation of the details of his approach reveals it is actually *he* who has drawn the lines of Kant's perspectival view of knowledge too narrowly. For his solution ends up being almost entirely Kantian in character (p. 96): "The resort to inference [cf. Kant's theoretical standpoint] or personal experience [cf. Kant's practical standpoint] falls far short of what is fundamentally an appeal to our common humanity in its natural context [cf. Kant's judicial standpoint]." Wisniewski even explicitly recommends comparing "natural theological judgements ... with aesthetic claims [rather] than theoretical or practical claims" (p. 98) — just as Kant himself had argued. Nevertheless, in spite of his tendency not to appreciate the full extent to which Kant *supports* such views, Wisniewski's account of the implications of *work* (especially regarding our experiences of respect and thanks [pp. 100–111]) and *rest* (especially regarding our experiences of wonder and joy [pp. 111–118]), is a pleasure to read. The way he connects these phenomena with the common person's (*not* the professional philosopher's!) judgments about "the mystery of our natural life" (i. e., about "God" [p. 118]) is truly inspiring. Yet Wisniewski seems to have forgotten his previously announced intention to

show how, in apparent opposition to Kant, “judgements about God from nature” can be “valid for all” (p. 50). Instead of truly opposing Kant (and Barth) by establishing a thoroughly *theoretical* basis for natural theology, he ends up confessing “with Kant that natural theology cannot be the product of theoretical reason, but that it is a matter of natural propensities and judgements or of pragmatic reasons” (p. 122) – all of which are to be associated with the *third Critique* rather than the first, and with Kant’s desire to defend the standpoint of common humanity. The “confines” of epistemology have not been “broadened” in the least!

While Wisniewski’s way of interpreting Kant has no shortage of advocates, it rests on one crucial assumption that is certainly open to question: *did* Kant himself believe, in fact, that his criticisms of natural theology in the first *Critique* would “erase all trace of it” (p. 10), as Wisniewski claims? Moreover, *does* Wisniewski’s “pragmatic view of natural theology ... avoid the objections of Kant” (p. 10)? I believe on both counts this book adopts too uncritically an increasingly outdated picture of Kant as a philosopher who was negatively predisposed towards religion. Kant’s own Critical System, on the contrary, may have been intended to perform much the same task for natural theology as Wisniewski himself is attempting: to erase only a *false* form of natural theology, precisely in order to make room for its proper expression. To some extent Wisniewski seems to recognize that Kant and Barth are essentially on his side (see e. g., p. 11); but his appreciation of the *extent* to which this is the case is, at least when it comes to Kant, somewhat lacking.

Another inadequacy of Wisniewski’s interpretation of Kant is that it purports to discuss Kant’s view of natural *theology*, yet never considers his treatment of natural *religion* in Book Four of *RBBR*. After elaborating the necessary conditions for the rise of religion in human culture (namely, the presence of evil infecting the original goodness of human nature, an awareness of assistance from a higher power that can strengthen the individual’s ability to combat evil, and the willingness of groups of individuals to band together under the leadership of God in order to realize the ultimate victory of goodness), Kant begins Part One of Book Four by providing some definitions of different types of religion. “Natural religion”, he states, is “that religion in which I must first know that something is my duty before I can accept it as a divine injunction” (tr. Greene and Hudson, p. 143). In contrast to “learned” religion, “of which one can convince others only through the agency of learning (in and through which they must be guided)”, he further describes *natural* religion as that religion “of which (once it has arisen) everyone can be convinced through his own reason” (p. 143). The whole of Section One is then devoted to a discussion of the extent to which the Christian religion can be properly regarded as a natural religion. This is not the place to discuss the views Kant develops therein; the point is merely that Wisniewski’s presentation of Kant’s attitude towards natural *theology* could have benefited greatly by including a discussion of this text.

Not unlike the above problem is Wisniewski’s aforementioned neglect of the importance of perspectival reasoning in Kant’s philosophy. At one point, for instance, he accuses Kant of holding the proud view “that humans possessed insights and abilities sufficient to realize universal brotherhood – the kingdom of God” – thus relegating God to the position of a mere “guarantor of human ends” (p. 21). A fair reading of *RBBR*, however, renders such an interpretation of Kant’s God, as a mere passive onlooker, untenable in the extreme. For one of the main points of *RBBR* is

to demonstrate that the *problem* posed by human *weakness* (thanks to radical evil) can be solved only by those who have "practical faith" in the presence of an *active* and *powerful* transcendent being — one who is capable of *responding to the insufficiencies* of those who try their best to do good. Kant's conception of the kingdom of God is very much one of *joint participation*, though such an interpretation cannot be made comprehensible apart from the recognition that, from *one* perspective we human beings must act as if everything depends on us, even though from *another* perspective we must recognize that God alone can build his kingdom on earth (see e. g., *RBBR*, p. 92).

Notwithstanding these various difficulties, as well as the need for more thorough editing (particularly with respect to grammatical and typographical style), this book is well worth reading. This is particularly the case for those who recognize the dual meaning of the word "after" in the subtitle — a detail Wisnefske only hints at (see e. g., pp. 21, 69, 91), even though it encapsulates his main argument. Its obvious, surface meaning is temporal: "subsequent in time". Yet it also seems to have a second, deeper meaning: "along the lines of". For Wisnefske's own attempt to develop a natural theology that is *after* Kant and Barth is one that ends up being *along the lines of* what these two great thinkers would probably themselves have elaborated, had they been so inclined to apply their systems so explicitly to the implications of God's handiwork.

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Martin Franken: *Transzendente Theorie der Einheit und systematische Universalontologie. Studien zur Kategorienlehre Kants und Fichtes. Fichte-Studien-Supplementa Band 2.* Amsterdam—Atlanta: Rodopi, 1993, 206 Seiten.

Frankens Dissertation deutet in drei Hauptkapiteln Kants und Fichtes Hauptschriften zur Transzendentalphilosophie als Beiträge zur Neubegründung einer ontologischen Kategorienlehre. Frankens Kernthese besteht in der Behauptung, nur eine Transzendentalphilosophie, die die wesenhafte Einheit von Anschauung und Denken (aus einem Grund) — soll heißen — deren notwendiges, *durchgängiges* Zusammenfungieren erklären könne, vermöge letztgültig die objektive Erfahrungserkenntnis und die wissenschaftliche Metaphysik zu begründen. Diese Kernthese stellt für den Autor auch das Beurteilungskriterium für die Bewertung des Überganges von der Kantischen zur Fichteschen Transzendentalphilosophie dar.

Zu Beginn des Kantkapitels entwirft Franken seine Sicht von Kants Idee der Transzendentalphilosophie. Deren Ausgangspunkt bilde die Einsicht von der Zweiheit und Irreduzibilität der Erkenntnisquellen. Keine Philosophie dürfe ihr Fundament ausschließlich auf nur *einer* dieser Grundinstanzen errichten. Die Eigenständigkeit der Prinzipien der Anschauung sei der vorkantischen, rationalistischen Schulmetaphysik gegenüber zu betonen. Die Eigenständigkeit der Prinzipien des Denkens hingegen sei gegenüber dem Empirismus etwa eines David Hume zu reklamieren. Blickt man nur auf das faktische und somit empirische Zusammenfungieren von Denken und Anschauung, so ist in jedem Erkenntnisakt das geglückte Zusammentätigsein beider Quellen zu konstatieren (auch für die bloße Möglichkeit eines ungültigen empirischen Urteils!).