

The Reformed-Thomism and Natural Theology of Stephen Charnock
by Travis James Campbell

Stephen Charnock (1628-1680). A tower of the Reformed tradition, Charnock has forever blessed the Church with his famous *Discourses Upon the Existence and Attributes of God*, originally published posthumously in 1682. As he begins his discourse on the evidence for God's existence, Charnock offers the following bold claim:

A secret atheism, or a partial atheism, is the spring of all the wicked practices in the world: the disorders of the life spring from the ill dispositions of the heart.

For the first, every atheist is a grand fool. If he were not a fool, he would not imagine a thing so contrary to the stream of the universal reason of the world, contrary to the rational dictates of his own soul, and contrary to the testimony of every creature, and link in the chain of creation: if he were not a fool, he would not strip himself of humanity, and degrade himself lower than the most despicable brute. It is a folly; for though God be so inaccessible that we cannot know him perfectly, yet he is so much in the light, that we cannot be totally ignorant of him; as he cannot be comprehended in his essence, he cannot be unknown in his existence; it is as easy by reason to understand that he is, as it is difficult to know what he is. The demonstrations reason furnisheth us with for the existence of God, will be evidences of the atheist's folly. One would think there were little need of spending time in evidencing this truth, since in the principle of it, it seems to be so universally owned, and at the first proposal and demand gains the assent of most men.¹

Notice several points Charnock is making here. First, we need to understand that, for Charnock, the denial of the very existence of God is merely one form of atheism. Indeed, a disavowal of divine providence, whereby one denies that God preserves the world and is involved in the events of history, is a form of atheism. Also, one is an atheist *just in case* he denies one or more of the perfections of God.² Thus, on Charnock's definition, pantheists, panentheists, and polytheists are all atheists. Second, unbelief is, at root, a moral issue. It is not a mere opinion that one may have without impunity. And the first punishment human beings receive when they reject the revelation of God, whether natural *or* supernatural, is having their thoughts become vain and foolish. Proof that atheism is foolish is the degradation that inevitably follows from it. Wickedness begets foolish thinking, which in turn begets more wickedness, until eventually the atheist is acting more like a beast than a man. Third, the revelation of God is *too clear* or *too full of light* to not get *through and into* the human mind. Like Thomas Aquinas, Charnock insists that it is virtually impossible not to know *that* God is, even if it is impossible to know *what* God is. Fourth, Charnock claims to know, with certainty, that God exists through the "demonstrations reason" furnishes to us. Notice that these are *demonstrations* that God is real, not mere "pointers to transcendence." Fifth, Charnock, like Calvin, is impressed with the universal consent of mankind

¹ Stephen Charnock, *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God* (1853 repr.; 2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 1:25-26—henceforth, *Discourses*.

² Charnock, *Discourses*, 1:24.

regarding the existence of God, noting that, once the notion of a deity is proposed sans any proof, virtually everyone grants the existence of God.

However, if it is so obvious that God exists, why bother with offering proofs in the first place? Charnock offers five good reasons we should be engaged in the task of natural theology: *First*, there is a secret atheism, or propensity to reject divine revelation, hidden within all of our hearts, rendering it practically, if not theoretically, necessary to reflect on the evidence for God's existence, and even construct proofs for his reality. Thus, Charnock writes:

The engraved characters of the law of nature remain, though they [atheists] daub them with their muddy lusts to make them illegible: so that since the inconsideration of a Deity is the cause of all the wickedness and extravagances of men; and as Austin [Augustine] saith, the proposition is always true, the fool hath said in his heart, &c.³ and more evidently true in this age than any, it will not be unnecessary to discourse of the demonstrations of this first principle.⁴ The apostles spent little time in urging this truth; it was taken for granted all over the world, and they were generally devout in the worship of those idols they thought to be gods: that age run [sic] from one God to many, and our age is running from one God to none at all.⁵

In my experience, people tend to prefer ignorance of a matter to knowledge, since responsibility always accompanies the latter. Most people tend to prefer a situation wherein God is unknowable, for if that is the case, there is no one to whom we owe allegiance, or whom we must obey, or who will make us account for our behavior on the *Day of Judgment*. And so, everyone who prefers ignorance to knowledge has a vested interest in obstructing the evidence for God's existence.

Natural theology is a way of countering the obstruction people generally place before and against the clear evidence for God's existence. Interestingly, Charnock correctly notes how cultural context determines apologetical strategy. The founders of the Church, the Apostles, did not spend any time arguing for the being of a God, not because they thought the deity's existence unprovable, but because very few in their day doubted his reality. Had the Apostles lived in a day when atheism abounded, Charnock is convinced that they would have given a full exposition of various arguments for God. We do live in such a day, says Charnock, and so we must be prepared to offer reasons for our faith.

Second,

The existence of God is the foundation of all religion. The whole building totters if the foundation be out of course: if we have not deliberate and right notions of it, we shall perform no worship, no service, yield no affection to him. If there be not a God, it is impossible there can be one, for eternity is essential to the notion of a God; so all religion would be vain, and [it would be] unreasonable to pay homage to that which is not in being, nor can ever be. We must first believe that he is, and that he is what he declares himself to be, before we can seek him, adore him, and devote our affections to him. We

³ I.e., "The fool has said in his heart, there is no God" (Psalm 14.1).

⁴ I.e., it is necessary to make a case for God's existence, who is the first principle of all contingent reality (i.e., a principle without principle).

⁵ *Discourses*, 1:26.

cannot pay God a due and regular homage, unless we understand him in his perfections, what he is; and we can pay him no homage at all, unless we believe that he is.⁶

There are people living today who glory in their religious atheism.⁷ Charnock would undoubtedly call such people fools; for if God is not, he never will be, for only an eternal, uncreated, being is worthy of worship. If God does not exist, then no theistic religion is true; and if that is the case, then Christianity is false. In short, we cannot believe in Christ if we do not at first acknowledge the existence of God.

Third, genuine evidence is a necessary precondition for an authentic faith. Charnock writes: “It is fit we should know why we believe, that our belief of [or in] a God may appear to be upon undeniable evidence, and that we may give a better reason for his existence, than that we have heard our parents and teachers tell us so, and our acquaintance think so. It is as much as to say there is no God, when we know not why we believe there is, and would not consider the arguments for his existence.”⁸ Of all the insights one can find on natural theology, this is one of my personal favorites. For notice, first of all, how “modern” this statement is. Indeed, many in our day tend to look at the 17th century as ancient history; and, it is often believed, the antediluvian creatures living at that time just took it for granted, by pure, unquestioning, and unreasoning faith, that God is real. Anyone who has read any ancient philosopher, from Plato to Aristotle to Cicero and countless others knows this caricature is simply not fair. But many think it just the same.

Another, equally intriguing, aspect of Charnock’s third point is that he has turned the tables on a common idea often taken for granted by certain pietists of our day—namely, if one has evidence, then one does not have faith. Charnock is saying just the opposite—i.e., if one does *not* have evidence, then one does not have faith. For what, really, is the difference between saying you believe in God, even if you cannot state why you believe, and saying that you believe in aliens, even if you have no evidence for such creatures? Those who say they believe in aliens, but have no evidence for their existence, may entertain the thought of their reality from time to time, but such will never make a genuine impact on their lives—to wit, what they think has no impact on how they live. The same goes for God. If one says he believes in God, and yet cannot offer any kind of reasonable evidence for his existence, he will no doubt attend worship services, or talk about God, or even pray from time to time—at least, if he needs something; but such a

⁶ Charnock, *Discourses*, 1:26.

⁷ Cf., e.g., Frank Schaeffer, *Why I am an Atheist Who Believes in God: How to Give Love, Create Beauty, and Find Peace* (Create Space Independent Publishing Platform, 2014). To be sure, Schaeffer is not a theoretical atheist; but he does deny many of God’s attributes, and so as far as Charnock would be concerned, he is one kind of atheist.

⁸ Charnock, *Discourses*, 1:26-27.

person's life will not be truly impacted by such a faith. He will not truly commune with God in prayer. He will not strive to honor God in all that he does. He will not live as if, at each moment of his life, he exists *coram deo*.

Fourth, due to our sinful disposition, which negatively affects the way we act, feel, and think, all of us are prone to embrace atheism. Charnock writes:

It is necessary to depress that secret atheism which is in the heart of every man by nature. Though every visible object which offers itself to our sense, presents a deity to our minds, and exhorts us to subscribe to the truth of it; yet there is a root of atheism springing up sometimes in wavering thoughts and foolish imaginations, inordinate actions, and secret wishes. Certain it is, that every man that doth not love God, denies God; now can he that disaffects him, and hath a slavish fear of him, wish his existence, and say to his own heart with any cheerfulness, there is a God, and make it his chief care to persuade himself of it? he would [rather] persuade himself [that] there is no God, and stifle the seeds of it in his reason and conscience, that he might have the greatest liberty to entertain the allurements of the flesh. It is necessary to excite men to daily and actual considerations of God and his nature, which would be a bar to much of that wickedness which overflows in the lives of men.⁹

Human beings like the *idea* of God—a being who is loving and caring and sustaining and giving. But we don't like the *real* God—a being who is truly good, which means that he is loving and just, merciful and exacting, comforting and afflicting. As C. S. Lewis once wrote:

By the goodness of God we mean nowadays almost exclusively His lovingness; and in this we may be right. And by Love, in this context, most of us mean kindness—the desire to see others than the self happy; not happy in this way or that, but just happy. What would really satisfy us would be a God who said of anything we happened to like doing, “What does it matter so long as they are contented?” We want, in fact, not so much a Father in Heaven as a grandfather in heaven—a senile benevolence who, as they say, “like to see young people enjoying themselves,” and whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of each day, “a good time was had by all.”¹⁰

This propensity we all have to see God as a “grandfather” rather than “the Father” turns God into a the “fun fellow” who gives commands but does not expect us to obey, who praises us but never criticizes us, and who yearns for our pleasure but never desires that we feel pain. And so, when the pains *do* come, when the prayer is *not* answered, or when playtime ends *and* we're expected to work and struggle with the vicissitudes of life, our propensity is not to reorient our understanding of God—from merely loving to fully good; from mere lawmaker to the righteous Lawgiver, Executor, and Judge; from a slow-witted grandfather to the all-wise Father. No, we rightly call our false idol of “a senile benevolence” a myth, but wrongly throw away our childish notion by replacing a *mere* theoretical “God of all” with an even more irrational “no God at all.”

Charnock's point, then, is that an important way of depressing the atheistic tendency of our heart—i.e., the disposition to create false idols in our minds, even if not in a temple, which

⁹ *Discourses*, 1:27.

¹⁰ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 39-40.

sometimes results in us rejecting the idea of God altogether—is to ponder the evidence for his existence. We must move from a *mere theory* of a grandfather of all to *the true and living God the Father over all*. By engaging in natural theology, we remind ourselves of what we already know: God is not a myth, but he is real; God is love; God is just; and one day we must face him to give an account of our lives. If every human being were to fully embrace the idea that God’s existence is provable *and proven*, then the mere instinct of self-preservation would, in most cases, move them to seek out how to best serve and love God.

Fifth, natural theology is a great help to those who already believe. One of the most wonderful truths of the Christian faith is that a child, even a toddler, can come to know the God of the universe through faith in Christ. The knowledge he possesses and the relationship he has with the living God is no less sure and no less secure than that possessed by even the most erudite theologian who has ever lived. Indeed, perhaps on many occasions it is even more so! However, the four-year-old is destined to grow up, and as he does so is bound to encounter objections to his God. One common objection is that there is no way to know whether such a being exists, and so it is a waste of time to try to live for him. Now, of course, the inference here is irrational; for even *if* we should assume that God really is unknowable, wouldn’t it actually be wise and prudent to seek God with all of one’s heart on the outside chance that he is there?¹¹ In any case, for the one who already believes, but has been challenged to produce some evidence for the reality of his God, the rational proofs of people like Aquinas become a wonderful help to a weak faith. Thus, natural theology is not merely for the unbeliever, but the believer. The arguments for God strengthen faith, rebut those who object, and even lead the faithful into a richer understanding of their God. Or, as Charnock states: “Nor is it unuseful to those who effectually believe and love him; for those who have had a converse with God, and felt his powerful influences in the secrets of their hearts, to take a prospect of those satisfactory accounts which reason gives of that God they adore and love; to see every creature justify them in their owning of him, and affections to him: indeed the evidences of a God striking upon the conscience of those who resolve to cleave to sin as their chiefest darling, will dash their pleasures with unwelcome mixtures.”¹²

¹¹ This, of course, leads us to the famous “wager” of Blaise Pascal (1623-1662). That is to say, God either exists or he doesn’t; if he does, and I do not believe in him, then I may find myself in hell; if he does not exist, and yet I do believe in him, when I die I die, and will not encounter his righteous judgment. It seems, then, that I have nothing to lose and everything to gain if I believe; and everything to lose and nothing to gain if I do not believe. Therefore, I should believe. For a modern defense of “Pascal’s Wager,” see Peter Kreeft, *Christianity for Modern Pagans: Pascal’s Pensées Edited, Outlined, and Explained* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993).

¹² *Discourses*, 1:27.

Does Charnock embrace a natural *theology*, or merely a natural *revelation*? The answer is that he affirms *both* natural revelation *and* natural theology. He explicitly tells us that he thinks one can prove the existence of God through reason *alone*. He states:

I shall further premise this, That the folly of atheism is evidenced by the light of reason. Men that will not listen to Scripture, as having no counterpart of it in their souls, cannot easily deny natural reason, which riseth up on all sides for the justification of this truth. There is a natural as well as a revealed knowledge, and the book of the creatures is legible in declaring the being of a God, as well as the Scriptures are in declaring the nature of a God; there are outward objects in the world, and common principles in the conscience, whence it may be inferred.¹³

This is a remarkably bold claim; for Charnock is here telling us that those who do not have a Bible, or who will not listen to it or read it, nevertheless possess reason, which testifies to the reality of God. God is known through natural knowledge (i.e., creation) and revealed knowledge (i.e., holy writ). The world, which Charnock, in continuity with the rest of the Augustinian and Reformed traditions, calls “the book of creatures,” is *just as reliable* in showing *that God is* as the Scriptures are in showing *what God is*. Indeed, Charnock is suggesting that it is as easy to infer the Creator from creatures as it is to read a book and infer certain necessary conclusions from what has been written. Charnock, then, did not bifurcate natural theology from natural revelation, but, along with the Reformed tradition as a whole, affirmed both.

What argument does Charnock give to prove his point that the Creator can be easily inferred from the creature? Among other lines of evidence, he offers nothing short of a Thomistic-style cosmological proof:

Every skeptic, one that doubts whether there be anything real or no in the world, that counts everything an appearance, must necessarily own a first cause. They cannot reasonably doubt, but that there is some first cause which makes the things appear so to them. They cannot be the cause of their own appearance. For as nothing can have a being from itself, so nothing can appear by itself and its own force. Nothing can be and not be at the same time. But that which is not and yet seems to be; if it be the cause why it seems to be what it is not, it may be said to be and not to be. But certainly such persons must think themselves to exist. If they do not, they cannot think; and if they do exist, they must have some cause of that existence. So that which way soever we turn ourselves, we must in reason own a first cause of the world.... Without owning a God as the first cause of the world, no man can give any tolerable or satisfactory account of the world to his own reason.¹⁴

And what sort of God is this first cause of the world? Charnock insists that this uncaused cause is self-existent, necessary, and perfect: “Nothing can make itself, or bring itself into being; therefore there must be some being which hath no cause, that depends upon no other, never was produced by any other, but was what he is from eternity, and cannot be otherwise; and is not what he is by

¹³ *Discourses*, 1:27.

¹⁴ Charnock, *Discourses*, 1:51.

will, but nature, necessarily existing, and always existing without any capacity or possibility ever not to be.” In the very next line he tells us that this being must “be infinitely perfect.”¹⁵

Thus, we see Charnock here not merely endorsing the cosmological argument, but even affirming the classical attributes of the deity. Indeed, his two-volume work is a grand exploration and defense of classical theism. Charnock even explicitly defends the “big four” attributes of the classical-view of God. For example, he, as we have seen, affirms the full perfection and aseity of God. He also affirms God’s timeless eternity: “He was before the world, yet he neither began nor ends; he is not a temporary, but an eternal God; [he] takes in both parts of eternity, what was before the creation of the world, and what is after; though the eternity of God be one permanent state, without succession...”¹⁶ Still later he says: “Eternity is a negative attribute, and is a denying of God any measures of time, as immensity is a denying of him any bounds of place.”¹⁷ And, because his eternity transcends time, being wholly without succession, we must conclude that, in Charnock’s words, “God is unchangeable in his essence.” For “Mutability belongs to contingency.” And so, “in God there can be no alteration, by the succession of anything to make his substance greater or better, or by diminution to make it less or worse.” Indeed, “He who hath not being from another, cannot but be always what he is: God is the first Being, an independent Being; he was not produced of himself, or of any other, but by nature always hath been, and, therefore, cannot by himself, or by any other, be changed from what he is in is own nature.”¹⁸ Hence, we should not be surprised to see Charnock endorse the divine impassibility: “God is not changed, when of loving to any creatures he becomes angry with them, or of angry he becomes appeased. The change in these causes is in the creature; according to the alteration in the creature it stands in a various relation to God...” Thus, “God always acts according to the immutable nature of his holiness, and can no more change in his affections to good and evil, than he can in his essence.”¹⁹ Finally, Charnock’s God must be simple; for “God” cannot be “the most simple being if he were not immutable. There is in everything that is mutable a composition either essential or accidental; and in all changes, something of the thing changed remains, and something of it ceaseth and is done away....” Hence, “God, being infinitely simple, hath nothing in himself which is not himself, and therefore cannot will any change in himself, he being his own essence and existence.”²⁰

¹⁵ Charnock, *Discourses*, 1:51.

¹⁶ Charnock, *Discourses*, 1:278.

¹⁷ Charnock, *Discourses*, 1:281.

¹⁸ Charnock, *Discourses*, 1:319.

¹⁹ Charnock, *Discourses*, 1:345.

²⁰ Charnock, *Discourses*, 1:352,353.

Summary and conclusion. We have devoted a significant space to Charnock for the simple reason that his work is one of the few explicit and sustained works within the Reformed tradition dedicated to answering the question of whether or not there is a God and, if so, what is his nature. Charnock explicitly answers the question by leaning on his Reformed forebears, and even the classical Christian tradition as a whole. His answer is meant to be rational, traditional, and above all scriptural, as he articulates and defends the classical proofs for the God of Western theism. In short, there is good reason to believe that Charnock was a classical theist—*probably even a classical Reformed-Thomistic theist.*

Reformed Natural Theology

