

A Historical Examination of the Rise of Science

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In his work *The Proslogion*, Anselm attempted to provide a proof for the existence of God by utilizing pure logic which has come to be known as the “ontological argument.”

Douglas Groothuis has observed that Anselm’s work actually contained two similar, yet slightly different versions of this argument. One began with the idea of God as the greatest possible being whereas the other used the idea of God as a necessary being. From there, however, both versions claimed that from that idea we could conclude that such a God must exist.¹ However, as James Hannam observed, “For Anselm faith was prior to understanding and based on the mystical experience of God through meditation and prayer.”² Anselm did not doubt that our rational faculties were bestowed upon us by God. Therefore, through the use of these faculties we should be able to understand what we believe. But for Anselm, faith was always primary.³

Abelard also believed that reason was a gift from God. If there appeared to be a conflict between the conclusion drawn from an argument and our faith, then a mistake must have been made in the argument.⁴ However, according to his students he also stated, “nothing can be believed unless it is first understood,” thereby placing reason before faith.⁵ During his lifetime, Abelard’s contributions regarding the role of reason were obscured by his many highly questionable personal choices as well as some poor decisions in his published works that were

¹ Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2011), 187-88, 194-95.

² James Hannam, *The Genesis of Science: How the Christian Middle Ages Launched the Scientific Revolution* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2011), 38.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 49.

⁵ Ibid., 43.

sure to raise questions (such as his most famous work, *Yes and No*, which pointed out several apparent contradictory statements made by the Church fathers but made no attempt to reconcile them).⁶ However, once he passed his ideas became prominent in Christian scholarship.⁷

Together, these two scholars laid the groundwork for the acceptance of the use of reason in the field of natural philosophy, which would later develop into what we now refer to as “science.” As Hannam will more fully develop in later chapters, the Christian church was a major contributor toward developing the foundations of modern science, but one of the first necessary steps was the acceptance of the compatibility of reason and faith.

William of Conches sought to reconcile Plato’s natural philosophy with that in the book of Genesis. As a starting point, he viewed both Plato and the Bible figuratively.⁸ William recognized a tension between a God who intervenes in the world and the need for nature to enjoy autonomy in order for natural philosophy to take place. In other words, if everything that happens is God’s will, then how can we distinguish between something that happens by His direct action and something that occurs due to the laws of nature?⁹

William’s solution to this dilemma was to posit primary and secondary causes. As explained by Hannam,

According to William the primary cause, the ultimate reason why anything happens, is God. ... However, the natural philosopher can also ask in what way God has attained his aims. This is the secondary cause of an event. Nature obeys

⁶ Ibid., 49-50.

⁷ Ibid., 52.

⁸ Ibid., 54-55.

⁹ Ibid., 55-56.

the laws that God ordained when he created the world. These ‘natural laws’ are the secondary causes that God usually employs.¹⁰

Because God is loving and consistent, we can expect the natural laws He created to remain consistent. Thus, William sought to preserve not only the sovereignty of God, but also the regularity of nature in order to make its investigation worthwhile.¹¹

William’s attempted reconciliation is not without difficulties, but it also contains some valuable insights. First, if his reconciliation efforts had to start out by assuming both Plato and Genesis were purely figurative, then he was not really reconciling them at all. By making them both figurative he enabled himself to shape them in a manner he would deem necessary in order to make them compatible, but his interpretation would likely not be the same as that of the original authors.

Second, William’s description of the natural laws as something that God merely set up at creation, as if from that point on they merely ran automatically, is not in line with how the Bible describes the operation of the universe. In fact, Christ is constantly at work holding the operation of the universe together, which would seem to include at a minimum ensuring that the so-called “natural laws” continue to operate consistently. Why do the natural laws remain constant? There does not seem to be any naturalistic necessity that they do so. But Hebrews 1:3a says, “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, *sustaining* all things by his powerful word.”¹² Colossians 1:17 states, “He [the Son] is

¹⁰ Ibid., 56.

¹¹ Ibid., 57.

¹² Heb. 1:3a (NIV) (emphasis added).

before all things, and *in him all things hold together.*”¹³ If Christ is holding all things together, “all” things would include the natural laws.

However, the notion of primary and secondary causes also brings with it significant contributions. For example, if God is the sole cause of everything in creation, does that make Him the author of evil? While God may be the primary cause of everything in creation, our free choices are a secondary cause that results in the evil acts. Evil is not God’s will, but freedom is. Freedom is certainly a good, but true freedom will result in some evil being done.

Given the insight that God the Son is actively holding the laws of nature in consistent operation, it may not even be necessary to refer to events which occur via those laws as “secondary causes.” After all, they are occurring pursuant to God’s ongoing, direct action in keeping the universe operating in the same, consistent manner. This does not mean that we cannot effectively engage in scientific endeavors, however. All that is necessary for science to be worthwhile is for the operation of the universe to be (in the normal course) consistent. This is guaranteed by God’s consistent nature and the fact that He continues to ensure the consistent operation of the universe. We still have all the guarantee we need to engage in science on a Christian worldview. This is an example of where the Christian worldview provides adequate grounding for a necessary presupposition of science whereas an atheistic worldview does not.

Euclid’s *Elements* and Ptolemy’s *Almagest* were and are almost universally recognized as some of the finest works to come out of ancient Greece. Euclid was able to produce a step-by-step study of geometry and Ptolemy established a mathematical description of the heavens making it possible to calculate the position of the planets.¹⁴ Western Christians felt they were

¹³ Col. 1:17 (NIV) (emphasis added).

¹⁴ Hannam, *The Genesis of Science*, 60, 63.

missing out on a large body of knowledge that was available to the Arabs and Byzantines. Not wishing to be left behind, they began a translation movement which involved taking these works by force and translating them into Latin so they could be understood in the west.¹⁵ The translation of these works helped western scholars to build upon them in later years and develop even more robust systems of mathematics and astronomy.

As with any contributions from pagan sources, caution is warranted for the Christian. Both Christians and non-Christians exist in the same world. Further, Romans 1:20 strongly suggests that even pagans will be capable of understanding certain truths about the operation of the universe such that they are “without excuse.”¹⁶ Thus, we should not automatically discard all information merely because it comes from a non-Christian source.

At the same time, however, our interpretation of data gathered from the natural world will inevitably be influenced by the lens through which we view it. An atheist, for example, will by default attach naturalistic explanations to all phenomena, regardless of how adequate those explanations may be, because their worldview allows nothing else. A theist is open to both natural and supernatural explanations for the data. Thus, while there is nothing wrong *per se* with listening to what non-Christian sources have to say, we must be aware that they are approaching the data with a different worldview and therefore should be extremely cautious about any conclusions they draw and always test everything against Scripture.

¹⁵ Ibid., 61-62.

¹⁶ “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.” Rom. 1:20 (NIV).