JOHN WESLEY'S NATURAL PHILOSOPHY: A SURVEY OF SEVERAL MISCONCEPTIONS

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The use of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, also known as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, continues to be the explicit theological method The United Methodist Church identifies in its Book of Discipline. Challengers who have questioned the accuracy of the “Wesleyan” designation have done little to slow the acceptance and repetition of this term. As a term of reference the Quadrilateral has offered its users an authorized shorthand cover for an otherwise vague and potentially complex process, and as such it has stymied our attempts to understand John Wesley’s own theological methods. Of particular practical interest is the way in which Wesley’s use of specific sources for specific uses has been obscured by this four-fold generalization. As an example of a remedy to this trend one of the resources reflected in his theological writings, books that systematically detail the natural world, will be considered in this article.

The discovery of John Wesley’s interest in the study of nature comes as a surprise to some. Many have never heard of his multi-volume publication, A Survey of the Wisdom of God in Creation: or, A Compendium of Natural Philosophy (Bristol: William Pine), first published in 1763 and directed at a popular audience. He mentioned the importance of natural philosophy for ministers of the Gospel in his, Address to the Clergy. In this pamphlet he outlined a type of continuing education program for Anglican clergy. To assist in the comprehension of Scripture, he advised clergy to read works of natural philosophy:

"Should not a Minister be acquainted too with at least the general grounds of natural philosophy? Is not this a great help to the accurate understanding several passages of Scripture? Assisted by this, he may himself comprehend, and on proper occasions explain to others, how the invisible things of God are seen from the creation of the world; how “the heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth his handiwork;” till they cry out, “O Lord, how manifold are thy works! In wisdom hast thou made them all."

Texts of natural philosophy, in Wesley’s opinion, could serve an exegetical purpose. In the above quotation, Wesley alluded to Psalm 19:1 and Psalm 104:24 as examples of biblical verses that were better understood in light of the work of natural philosophers.

1Address to the Clergy, The Works of John Wesley, ed. Thomas Jackson, 10: 483, 484.
Wesley’s contribution to the genre covers every part of the creation from the four elements to the movement of the planets. The felicitous structure of the human hand, the intricate components of an insect’s eye, even the composition of tree bark are all cursorily described in the text. After each description praise is then given to the Creator behind these and other natural wonders.

The Survey has been referenced in a number of articles and some misconceptions have arisen that need to be addressed. Logical fallacies frequently occur whenever a historical document is made to address a contemporary audience. By tackling these errors further scholarship can then suggest a more appropriate use for this publication.

I

Misconception # 1: The Survey is a product of the dialogue between religion and science. Just such a characterization can be found in articles by John English, John W. Haas, Jr., and Robert Schofield.2 This view of natural philosophy is challenged, however, by the historian of science Andrew Cunningham who emphasizes the religious argument implicit in natural philosophy, one which Cunningham asserts distinguishes it from modern science.

Cunningham has determined that the identity of natural philosophy and the role that it played in a culture were “intimately bound up” with one another. Natural philosophy was about God’s creation and God’s attributes. This was its identity. It was produced with the intention of countering the arguments of atheists. That was the role it played in the broader society. Cunningham contrasts this identity and role from that of modern science (a view of the world which does not implicitly see the natural order as the creation of God and definitely does not see its work as serving to refute atheism). As the study of the natural world became more secularized and less and less about a divine creation, science began to replace natural philosophy between 1760 and 1848 according to Cunningham.3

In light of Cunningham’s findings, it would be anachronistic to point to the material in the Survey as an indication of a Wesleyan dialogue between science and religion. The Survey belongs to a different genre, one of its time not ours.

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II

Misconception #2: There is one thing that can be definitively identified as natural philosophy. The creation of broad categories can be useful to make rhetorical distinctions between radically different practices, such as differentiating 18th-century natural philosophy from 21st-century astrophysics. When applied to attempts to understand the practices of individuals within a genre, however, these same stereotypes can hinder comprehension.

The Preface to the Survey creates the impression that Wesley’s work is just one among similar texts within the genre of natural philosophy:

What comes nearest to it of anything I have seen, is Mr. Ray’s “Wisdom of God in the Creation;” Dr. Derham’s “Physico and Astro Theology;” Nieuentyt’s “Religious Philosopher;” Mather’s “Christian Philosopher,” and “Nature Delineated.”

The Survey does fit within Cunningham’s broad characterization of natural philosophy; it is about God’s creation and God’s attributes. However, once the particulars of Wesley’s work are compared to those mentioned in the Preface, it becomes readily apparent that the Survey lacks the kind of refutation of atheism found in the works of John Ray, William Derham, Bernard Nieuwentyt, and Cotton Mather. These authors aggressively attacked atheism whereas Wesley deleted all references to it when he edited his sources.

The idea that there is a body of literature called natural philosophy works as an abstraction, but the illusion becomes harder to maintain upon closer examination. Once the particulars of the Survey are compared to the specifics found in these other texts their supposed similarities begin to disintegrate and it becomes more difficult to view natural philosophy as one singular, coherent domain of intellectual inquiry.

III

Misconception #3: Wesley wrote the Introduction to the Survey. The Thomas Jackson edition of Wesley’s Works does give the impression that the views expressed in “The Gradual Improvement of Natural Philosophy” grew out of Wesley’s own consideration of the subject. In fact, this essay is a paraphrase of the first chapter of the Johann Franz Buddeus work, Elementa Philosophiae. Wesley mentioned this book in his Preface to the Survey:

The text is, in great measure, translated from the Latin work of John Francis Buddaeus, the late celebrated Professor of Philosophy, in the University of Jena, in Germany. But I have found occasion to retrench, enlarge, or alter every chapter, and almost every section.

Wesley’s treatment of the first chapter of Elementa Philosophiae would fall under the “retrench” heading. Wesley included the same topics and fol-

\[\text{\footnotesize Works (Jackson) 14:300, par. 2.}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize Works (Jackson) 14:301, par. 3.}\]
lowed the same line of argumentation found in “Varia Inventa Incrementis,” but Wesley edited Buddeus’ fifty-five paragraphs down to a sparse twenty-four paragraph introductory text covering the development of Natural Philosophy from Biblical times to “our age.” Whether or not this is a reference to Wesley’s day or that of Buddeus is ambiguous in the text.

IV

Misconception #4: The Survey discloses Wesley’s own theological reflections on the natural world. This sentiment can be found in Luis Wesley de Souza’s essay “The Wisdom of God in Creation: Mission and the Wesleyan Pentalateral.” In addition to Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, de Souza wants to claim a place for the natural world in Wesleyan theology. Part of de Souza’s rational for this change in the Wesleyan Quadrilateral is the frequent appearance of the terms Creator, creation, and creatures in Wesley’s writings.

This focus on one motif in the Wesleyan corpus leads de Souza to conclude that creation is an “underlying presupposition” in Wesley’s theology and he cites the Survey as support for his argument. My research on the Survey reveals that this work is dependent upon Wesley’s engagement with texts not any direct encounter with the natural world. The theological reflections in the Survey are the product of Wesley’s reading and editing of books by natural philosophers like John Ray and William Derham. This means the Survey can only be cited as evidence of Wesley’s use of natural philosophy rather than creation as an “underlying presupposition” in his theology.

An example of Wesley’s borrowing can be seen in his discussion of the rotation of the planets which he adapted from William Derham’s book Astro-Theology:

Wesley: In particular, the Diurnal Motion of these Globes shews the Wisdom of the Creator. Of what prodigious Use is this! Were the Planets always to stand still, Half of each Globe would be dazelled (sic) and parched with unceasing Day, and the other half wrap in everlasting Darkness.7

Derham: Thus having taken a prospect of the Diurnal Motions of the great Globes of the Universe, that fell best under the cognizance of our Instruments, and found that many, and probably all of them have a Rotation round in a determinate time; if to this we add the Convenience and prodigious Use of this Motion to the several respective Globes, we shall find that an infinitely Wise and Kind as well as Omnipotent Being was the Orderer thereof. For were those Globes always to stand still, especially the Erraticks that owe their Light and Heat to the Sun, in this case, one half of them would be dazelled and parched with everlasting Day, whilst the other would be involved in everlasting Night and Darkness.8

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8 William Derham, Astro-Theology: Or a Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God, from a Survey of the Heavens (London: Printed for W. Innys, 1715), 80, 81.
Wesley also paraphrased sections of John Ray's *Wisdom of God in Creation* as illustrated in this example taken from the *Survey's* section on the "use, ornament and mutual assistance" of the parts of the human body:

**Wesley:** So the Eye stands most conveniently to guide the Hand, and the Hand to defend the Eye. The same may be said of the other Parts: they are all so placed, as to direct or help each other. This will clearly appear, if you suppose the Position of any of them to be changed.⁹

**Ray:** We have before shewed how the eye stands most conveniently for guiding the hand, and the hand for defending the eye, and the like might be said of the other parts, they are so situate, as to afford direction and help one to another. This will appear more clearly, if we imagine any of the members situate, in contrary places or positions.¹⁰

Similar to his editing of Buddeus, Wesley retained the thesis of another’s argument while stripping it to a minimum.

**V**

Misconception #5: John Wesley composed the *Survey's* Appendix. This bit of misinformation can be found in the 1970 article by Harold Fox, "John Wesley and Natural Philosophy."¹¹ Actually, Wesley credited another with this essay on reasoning. Instead of retrenching, enlarging, or altering Part Six of *Elementa Philosophiae* ("de spiritibus, tum creatis, tum increato, seu Deo") Wesley deleted it all together and ended the *Survey* with a summary of Peter Browne’s *The Procedure, Extent and Limits of Human Understanding*. Therefore, the Appendix is another example of Wesley’s role as editor and not a treatise on Wesley’s epistemology as Fox suggests.

**VI**

Misconception #6: The *Survey* is a proto-Intelligent Design text. This claim has not been asserted... yet. If such a paternity were to be alleged, however, it would be an ironic twist in the historical use of the *Survey*. From 1893 to 1928 six publications appeared, each arguing Wesley would have positively received the theory of evolution. This conclusion was based on Wesley’s use of a text by Charles Bonnet in the 1777 edition of the *Survey*, not one by Charles Darwin, whose controversial thesis was written long after Wesley’s death. Bonnet’s theory of evolution in *The Contemplation of Nature* bore no resemblance to that of Darwin, but the mere appearance of the term in the *Survey* appears to have been enough to encourage some Methodists that the attempt to reconcile a scientific theory with their faith was anticipated by their founder.

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⁹*Survey* (1763) 1:55, sec. 50.


The notion that the current debate between evolutionists and creationists could provoke another round of “Wesley tug-of-war” is not inconceivable and the following comparison of the Survey with the book, Intelligent Design, is made in the hope of forestalling fantasies of a Wesleyan intellectual patrilineage.¹²

Natural philosophy, according to Wesley’s Preface, should serve one purpose — “to display the invisible things of God, his power, wisdom, and goodness.”¹³ The Survey makes repeated references to these three attributes of God. No matter what natural feature is being described the conclusion is always the same—the creation displays that the Creator is wise, powerful, and good.

William Dembski’s goal in Intelligent Design: The Bridge Between Science and Theology is different. This book tries to unseat naturalistic explanations for life by revealing the flawed logic on which these theories are based. The theory of Intelligent Design is presented as a more adequate and logical explanation for the complexity and specificity found in nature. The theory does not attempt to describe the Intelligence behind the design. Indeed, according to Dembski, “intelligent design is under no obligation to speculate about the nature, moral character or purposes of any designing intelligence it happens to infer.”¹⁴ The purpose envisioned for natural philosophy by Wesley is completely contrary to the aims and intentions of Intelligent Design. Dembski’s popularization of Intelligent Design theory does not claim to be drawn from Wesley’s popularization of natural philosophy, nor should the Survey be cited as proof of Wesley’s presentiment of the Intelligent Design thesis.

VII

The study of Wesley’s interest in natural philosophy can yield insights that help us situate him within the context of his time and identify the intellectual resources he found useful in his ministry. This kind of careful attention to history may make Wesley feel more remote from the context and resources of our own time, but this result is not ultimately a negative one. True, our ability to predict a trajectory by plotting the optimal development of Wesleyan theology from the 18th century to the 21st century is now understood to be largely inferential, but the fact that we face different challenges armed with different tools need not lessen our enthusiasm for the inventive way Wesley put state-of-the-art educational resources to work in the service of his ministry.

¹²See the Introduction to Laura Bartels Felleman, “The Evidence of Things Not Seen: John Wesley’s Use of Natural Philosophy,” (PhD Diss, Drew University, 2004) for a critique of the pro-evolution arguments.
¹³Works (Jackson) 14:300, par.1.
This viewpoint gives us one more framework through which to evaluate Wesley’s writings. By seeing him as a part of the intellectual community of the 18th century, Wesleyans and Methodists have a more accurate sense of their heritage. Through this kind of study we can reconstruct the occasions when he proposed applications of Scripture based on interests that need to be understood in far greater detail than the guidance offered by the Quadrilateral. When, as his followers, we acknowledge our need to do likewise, we should be prepared, as Wesley was, to explain and defend the relevance, usefulness, and orthodoxy of extra-canonical sources.

The material presented in the Survey may be outdated, but by studying the argument made in this document and comparing it to the books Wesley borrowed from in its composition, we gain insight into Wesley’s theological methods. As long as The Book of Discipline harkens back to Wesleyan precedence in the section on “Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Task,” the study of his writings will continue to hold significance for the doctrinal identity of The United Methodist Church.