


# Beyond the quadrilateral: The place of nature in John Wesley's epistemology of theology

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Many writers have sought to outline Wesley's conception of how human beings obtain revelational knowledge. In this regard, the use of what has been dubbed the Wesleyan quadrilateral continues to remain widespread in both the academy and the pulpit. However, this presentation of Wesley's thought has received severe criticism from the late William Abraham, philosopher of religion and Methodist commentator. He has proposed the creation of a new subdiscipline in epistemology for examining theology. This view has prompted a handful of attempts to extrapolate John Wesley's epistemology of theology from his various writings. The present essay will contribute to this discussion by examining Wesley's approach to these questions. In doing so, it explores mainly the function and place of nature in Wesley's theological reflections. Drawing mainly upon Wesley's *A View of the Wisdom of God in Creation* (1763), this essay shows that the natural world (read: creation) played an important, neglected role in Wesley's epistemology of theology.

**Contribution:** This article contributes to a new subdiscipline in epistemology for examining theology by presenting a new perspective on John Wesley by exploring the role of nature in his thought. Offering an epistemological-theological interpretation of John Wesley, this article fits well within the scope of *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, particularly this subsection.

**Keywords:** epistemology of theology; John Wesley; nature; natural philosophy; wesleyan quadrilateral; William Abraham.

## Introduction

The term 'epistemology' refers to theories of knowledge in general. However, in recent years the late Methodist scholar William Abraham (1946–2021) has argued for the creation of a new subdiscipline for examining the 'epistemology of theology' which is used to describe the epistemological issues that arise specifically within theology (Abraham 2006:14; Greco 2017:11) Abraham's introduction to the Oxford Handbook on this subject offers the following definition and outlines the contours of this field:

It has been commonplace in epistemology [...] to explore in detail the epistemology of particular academic disciplines. The epistemology of science, for example, has received the lion's share of interest; but attention has also been given to mathematics, history, aesthetics, and ethics. The crucial warrant for these later developments goes back to Aristotle's insistence [...] *that* we should fit our epistemic evaluations in an appropriate way to the subject matter under investigation. As a result, we do not expect historical claims to be evaluated by the kind of arguments that would apply to mathematics and the natural sciences. Surprisingly – given the attention directed to theological claims and the wealth of materials in both theology and philosophy – this principle has not been systematically explored in the case of theology [...] By epistemology of theology, we mean a critical enquiry of appropriate epistemic concepts and theories in or related to theology. This involves examining and articulating what counts as appropriate epistemic evaluation in theology. The wide-ranging nature of this kind of enquiry can be seen in the following distinction. On the one hand, this volume focuses on standard epistemic concepts that are usually thought of as questions about norms and sources of theology (e.g. reason; experience; tradition; scripture; revelation). On the other hand, it explores some general epistemic concepts that can be related to theology. (Abraham & Aquino 2017:1)

In this introduction, Abraham highlights a principle which he calls epistemic fit, which holds that epistemological evaluation should be appropriate to the subject. In doing so, he is inspired by Aristotle's (c. 384–322BC) contention in his *Nicomachean Ethics* that each field of knowledge demands a different kind of precision:

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Our account will be adequate if its clarity is in line with the subject-matter, because the same degree of precision is not to be sought in all discussions, any more than in works of craftsmanship. The spheres of what is noble and what is just, which political science examines, admit of a good deal of diversity and variation, so that they seem to exist only by convention and not by nature. Goods vary in this way as well, since it happens that, for many, good things have harmful consequences: some people have been ruined by wealth, and others by courage. So we should be content, since we are discussing things like these in such a way, to demonstrate the truth sketchily and in outline, and, because we are making generalizations on the basis of generalizations, to draw conclusions along the same lines. Indeed, the details of our claims, then, should be looked at in the same way, since it is a mark of an educated person to look in each area for only that degree of accuracy that the nature of the subject permits. Accepting from a mathematician claims that are mere probabilities seems rather like demanding logical proofs from a rhetorician. (Aristotle 2004:4–5 [I.3 1094b13–28])

Guided by this principle (epistemic fit), contributors to the *Epistemology of Theology* explore what constitutes appropriate epistemological evaluation in theology by examining the work of many Christian thinkers across the centuries. In line with this approach, this article will examine John Wesley's thought with a particular focus on the role played by nature in his epistemology of theology. It will survey earlier approaches to Wesley's conception of how we obtain knowledge of God. It will also draw upon two definitive studies of this aspect of Wesley's thought, the first by William Abraham himself (2010) and the second by his former student, Douglas Koskela, who wrote a chapter on John Wesley's approach to the epistemology of theology in the handbook mentioned here (Koskela 2017).

## Problematic approaches to Wesley and the epistemology of theology

Whilst studies have been carried out on Wesley's general epistemological outlook (Long 2005:64–66; Matthews 1986) few writers have explicitly focused on examining Wesley's thoughts about the epistemology of theology. Nevertheless, long before the *Oxford Handbook to the Epistemology of Theology* was published, a strategy taken by both scholars and ordinary Methodists is referred to as the 'Wesleyan Quadrilateral' (Outler 1964:iv). According to Outler, Wesley placed scripture as a 'pre-eminent norm' but 'interfaced' this with 'tradition, reason and Christian experience' – the latter functioning as 'dynamic and interactive aids in the interpretation of the Word of God in Scripture' (Outler 1985:9–10) (Figure 1).

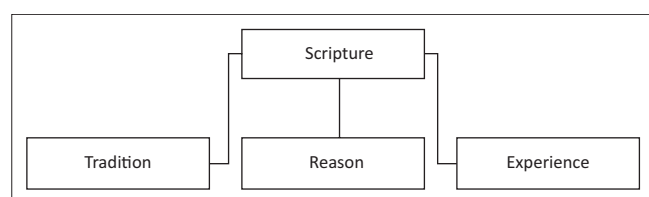


FIGURE 1: Albert Outler's Wesleyan Quadrilateral.

Unfortunately, Outler's caricature of the Anglican tradition overly simplified his understanding of John Wesley's approach (Outler 1985:9–10; Toon 2010:37).<sup>1</sup> Although the scope of the present enquiry requires us to put these historical criticisms aside, it is sufficient to say here that Outler's oversimplification obscures the nuance in Wesley's approach to these questions (Pratt Morris-Chapman 2010:3–4, 2018a:1–2).

A more detailed analysis of Wesley's approach to the epistemology of theology is found in a series of published lectures, entitled *Aldersgate and Athens*, given by Abraham (2010). However, whilst acknowledging the scripture's 'privileged position' in Wesley's epistemology of theology (2010:62), it is essential to acknowledge that in these lectures, Abraham's focus is specifically on extrapolating the epistemological themes that 'lie below the surface' of Wesley's Aldersgate experience (2010:6). As a result, he does not discuss Wesley's use of other sources for our knowledge of God. Thus, although he is highly critical of Outler's portrayal of Wesley's thought, Abraham fails to offer an alternative, general account comparable to that offered by the quadrilateral (Abraham 1995:56–58, 2002:87). Nevertheless, his examination of Wesley's powerful religious experience at Aldersgate Street does offer 'important insights into the epistemology of theology' (2010:ix). For example, Abraham argued that, at Aldersgate, Wesley (2010:5–6) 'hit upon three very interesting sources' of theological knowledge:

1. Evidence drawn from divine promises
2. Evidence of the power of God in the lives of believers
3. Evidence drawn from a personal awareness of divine forgiveness.

In keeping with the principle of Aristotelian epistemic fit outlined here, Abraham 'unpacks the logic' implicit within each of these points. First of all, (1) he argues that, at Aldersgate, Wesley personally experienced the fulfilment of what he had previously understood to be one of God's promises to the believer – namely that 'those who give up the quest for God on the basis of their own righteousness [...] and trust entirely in God's work in Christ' will experience an assurance, a 'sense of pardon for past sins'. Hence, Abraham contends that the fulfilment of this promise 'provided Wesley with evidence of the truth of the gospel'. He wrote:

The argument is inductive and experiential in spirit and informal in structure. Wesley, like many others, had come to experience for himself the fulfilment of a significant divine promise [...] We might express the issue more formally in this way: if many people have satisfied to a significant extent the conditions laid down for [assurance] and if they [...] then receive such a sense of pardon and power, this provides us with evidence for the truth of the claim that this promise was indeed made by a being [who can] make good on that promise. (2010:8)

1. As a result, Outler mistakenly believed Wesley was seeking to enhance the 'Anglican triad' which utilised scripture, reason and tradition.

Here Abraham points out that it is not only Wesley's own experience of the fulfilment of this promise that is significant here but his attention to the fulfilment of this divine promise in a plethora of comparable experiences present in the Methodist revival, which is saturated by accounts of this kind of experience. Hence whilst, individually, Wesley's experience carries limited significance, the recurrence of the fulfilment of the promise of assurance throughout Christian communities across time and space provides evidence in favour of this divine promise.

Concerning the second point, (2) Abraham (2010) explored how Wesley draws theological knowledge from the manifestation of God's power in transforming peoples' lives:

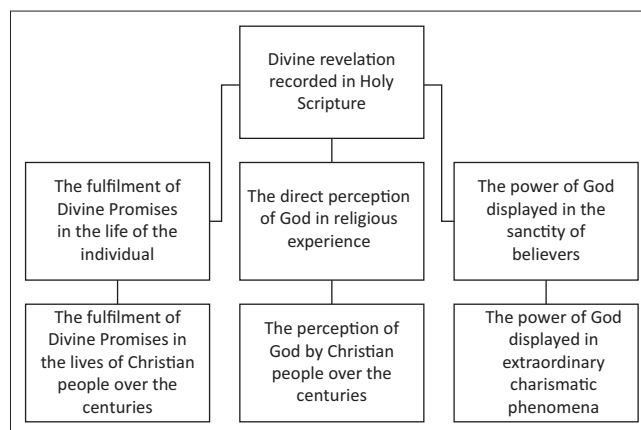
I want to explore [...] a different network of arguments from divine power, namely, an argument from conspicuous sanctity or holiness in others and an argument from what Wesley would have called the extraordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit. The evidence in this case goes beyond any signs of grace in our own lives and focuses on the power of God to produce holiness and supernatural phenomena [...] essentially it is an abductive argument to the best explanation. (p. 43)

Here Abraham contended that where Wesley encountered 'conspicuous' instances of holiness in the lives of believers or extra-special 'charismatic phenomena', he considered these to be evidence of God's reality. Hence, 'suppose we meet someone who exhibits' the kind of perfect sacrificial love found in the gospels; then 'our scepticism about God may be checked, and we may well be drawn to believe in God' (Abraham 2010:43–44).

Finally, (3) Abraham (2010) explores the significance of personal experience for Wesley's epistemology of theology:

Wesley provides an explicit theory to undergird his claim of possessing knowledge of God. He insists that what is at stake is nothing less than perception of the divine. Just by our ordinary physical senses we perceive the world around us, so by means of our spiritual senses we perceive [God]. (p. 28)

At this juncture, Abraham complements his discussion of Wesley's thought by bringing it into dialogue with contemporary writers such as Alvin Plantinga and William Alston (Abraham 2010:30; Alston 1991; Plantinga 2000). Unfortunately, this impairs Abraham's reception because he conflates Plantinga's Calvinistic rendition of the 'cognitive consequences' of sin with Wesley's thought (Plantinga 2000:184). This leads Abraham to the mistaken conclusion that, without faith, Wesley considered human beings to be incapable of obtaining theological knowledge (Abraham 2010:26–27, 58). The implications of this are significant for our purposes because it leads Abraham to the erroneous conclusion that Wesley's theological epistemology 'eschewed the help of any appeal' to nature or inferential reflection upon the natural world. As a result of this, Abraham contends that Wesley did not believe we can obtain knowledge of God from the natural world (Abraham 2010:4) (Figure 2).



Source: Abraham, W.J., 2010, *Aldersgate and Athens: John Wesley and the foundations of Christian belief*, Baylor University Press, Waco, TX

FIGURE 2: William Abraham's portrayal of Wesley's Epistemology of Theology.

Abraham's reception is shaped unduly by a desire to bring Wesley's thought into dialogue with the work of Reformed epistemologists such as Plantinga. Unfortunately, this leads him to neglect Wesley's conception of 'preventing' (later called 'prevenient') grace (Campbell 2008:173).<sup>2</sup> Although Wesley acknowledged the devastating consequences of the Fall, he believed preventing grace 'extended to the entire work of God'. This preventing grace refers to:

All that is wrought in the soul [...] all the drawings of the Father [...] all] the desires after God, which, if we yield to them, increase more and more; – all that light wherewith the Son of God 'enlighteneth every one that cometh into the world'. (Wesley 1872b:2)

Furthermore, this preventing grace is not limited to the prevenient work of God in the heart and mind of the sinner. It is shed abroad in the world: 'all the light of nature so called' including the 'general knowledge we have by the light of nature' flows 'from preventing grace' (Wesley 1763:238). Therefore, although Abraham offers a rich analysis of Wesley's Aldersgate experience, his failure to incorporate this concept, coupled with his Plantingian reading of Wesley's understanding of the 'noetic' effects of the fall, leads him to conclude that 'human beings in their sin are devoid of true knowledge of God' (Abraham 2010:30–31, 2018:232).<sup>3</sup> Koskela gives a similar interpretation.

In a chapter entitled 'John Wesley' in *The Oxford Handbook to the Epistemology of Theology*, Koskela outlined Wesley's understanding of our knowledge of God. Nevertheless, it is essential to emphasise that Koskela's study is not intended to provide an account of Wesley's general epistemological position – which would entail 'areas of knowledge such as history, mathematics or the natural world'. On the contrary, like Abraham, he focused on providing an account of the epistemological implications of Wesley's 'explicitly theological claims'. He wrote:

<sup>2</sup>This notion of God's preventing grace extends beyond the concept employed by the reformers (Campbell 2008:173).

<sup>3</sup>A detailed account of Abraham's own approach to the epistemology of theology may be found here (Pratt Morris-Chapman 2018b).

The fact that he made unique moves with respect to knowledge of God attests to the value of the epistemology of Theology as a distinct arena of epistemological enquiry, to which this volume bears witness. In fact, once we follow Wesley's line of argument, we detect a very bold suggestion: there is an entire dimension of reality that humanity is unable to know by reason or experimentation this invisible world of God and spirits is only accessible as a free gift of God. (Koskela 2017:460)

Here Koskela emphasised the central role of faith, or what might be termed the appropriation of divine revelation, in Wesley's epistemology of theology. Thus, unless someone has faith, they cannot know God. Proceeding from this premise, Koskela outlined what he considers to be Wesley's epistemology of theology (Koskela 2017:466).

Koskela argued that Wesley grounded our knowledge of God in divine revelation and testimony because he believed that we do not have access to this knowledge unless God reveals himself (Koskela 2017:463).<sup>4</sup> He considered that God's revelation in Christ is paramount for Wesley. Nevertheless, the witness of this revelation in the divinely inspired holy scriptures testifies to what God has done and gives us knowledge so that we can be saved from sin and death (Koskela 2017:464). Whilst Koskela categorises scripture as a form of divine testimony, he clarifies that this source of theological knowledge is not superseded by other forms of testimony that, although playing an important role, are equal to the divine testimony found in 'Holy Writ' (Koskela 2017:464). Nevertheless, Wesley does consider that human testimony, although inferior to divine testimony, can help clarify the meaning of the Bible. Moreover, whilst he gave pride of place to the Bible, Koskela acknowledges the vital role of Christian corporate testimony in Wesley's thought (Koskela 2017:465). He wrote:

We can observe this in Wesley's esteem for the writings and example of the early church [... *his*] acknowledgment of doctrinal standards of the church of England [... *and*] the mediatory role ... he understood his own published sermons to function in the lives of others [...] To put it another way the church mediates the content of the faith to each generation. (Koskela 2017:464–465)

In addition to the vital subsidiary role played by the faith of the church in mediating the divine revelation,<sup>5</sup> Koskela (2017) enumerated three distinct stages in an individual's appropriation of divine revelation (the gift of faith):

Throughout his life Wesley recognized three basic dimensions of faith: assent to the cognitive contents of Christianity, trust in Christ alone for his salvation, and (drawing on Heb 11:1) the perception of [God]. (p. 466)

Of these, Koskela deems religious experience, which he terms the direct perception of God, to be the most significant. Wesley's direct perception of God at Aldersgate

4. Here Koskela is right to observe that although Wesley has often been interpreted as conflating divine revelation with scripture, he did recognise that the incarnation of God in Christ offers the most complete knowledge of the divine reality.

5. It should be acknowledged here that Wesley's reverence for the Church of England vacillated during the course of his ministry; his decision to ordain Thomas Coke offers a powerful example of this (Maddox 1994:424).

offered him a tangible confirmation and assurance of what he already knew conceptually (Pratt Morris-Chapman 2021:23). This indicates that Wesley valued direct religious experience very highly. Nevertheless, he also considered secondary experience in the testimony of others to play a role in confirming the knowledge we have in the divinely inspired record of holy scripture (Koskela 2017:468). Thus, what may be considered a direct perception of God for one person becomes a testimony for another person, including testimonies to conversion, conspicuous sanctity, charismatic phenomena and miracles. All of these testify to fulfilling what is promised in Scripture (Koskela 2017:468).

In summary, Koskela considers that Wesley prioritised divine revelation, God's testimony (Old and New) recorded in the divinely inspired scriptures, the corporate faith of the church, the direct perception of God in religious experience and the testimony of Christian people to God's power over the centuries (Figure 3).

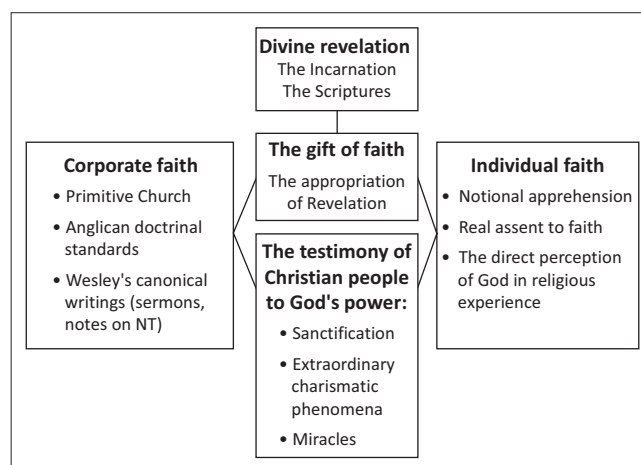


FIGURE 3: Koskela's portrayal of Wesley's Epistemology of Theology.

Thus far, we have illustrated Koskela's understanding of the central sources for Wesley's epistemology of theology. However, whilst wanting to affirm much of Koskela and Abraham's account, their analyses are fundamentally deficient as they fail to incorporate the role played by nature in Wesley's thought. It is to this aspect that we now turn.

## The compendium of natural philosophy and Wesley's epistemology of theology

### Introduction to the work

Many commentators have recognised the important place of science and reason in Wesley's theological thought (Felleman 2004; Long 2005; Matthews 1986; Oord 2009; Pratt Morris-Chapman 2019a).<sup>6</sup> Many of these studies draw upon Wesley's *A View of the Wisdom of God in Creation or*

6. There has been a tendency within Wesleyan scholarship to emphasise Wesley's affinities with the High Church and Evangelical streams within the Anglican tradition (Danker 2016:233; Hammond 2014:201). Whilst Wesley was certainly influenced (and indeed shaped) by these features of Anglicanism, it is important to recognise that, like many Anglican churchmen of the period, Wesley possessed both altitudinarian and latitudinarian tendencies (Gibson 2007:28).

*A Compendium of Natural Philosophy* (1763), which shows that he did not neglect this natural source of theological knowledge.<sup>7</sup> Here we will focus specifically on how this work illustrates the role played by nature in Wesley's epistemology of theology. Whilst there are no references to this work in Abraham or Koskela's analyses, several writers have engaged with this work since its publication. However, its reception has tended to focus on relating Wesley's survey with ongoing developments in science (Collier 1924; Hargitt 1907; Mills 1893). However, Felleman points out the problematic nature of these comparisons, given that the methodology deployed by the natural philosophers of Wesley's day differs considerably from the scientific method (Felleman 2006a:68–71; Schofield 1953:331). Indeed, drawing upon the writings of natural philosophers, Wesley intended to show that knowledge of God can be obtained by analysing the creation (Cunningham 1991:380). Wesley (1763) himself states that:

I wished to see this short full plain Account of the visible Creation directed to its right End: Not barely to entertain an idle, barren Curiosity, but to display the invisible things of God, his Power, Wisdom and Goodness. (p. iii)

Here, Wesley considers that a knowledge of God's goodness, wisdom and power is visible in the natural world (Wesley 1872). However, whilst Wesley uses the writings of natural philosophers to show how the natural world can provide us with knowledge about the creator, his approach is grounded in an antecedent commitment to the Christian faith. Thus, the knowledge obtained from nature is illuminative as it offers further insights and confirmation and assurance about what is already believed by Christians (Felleman 2006:71; Wesley 1763:15).

Before commencing a discussion of the survey, it is essential to recognise that in this work, Wesley often abridges, paraphrases and edits other sources to suit his purposes.<sup>8</sup> He generally incorporates ideas from natural philosophers of this period without crediting them whatsoever (Bonnet 1790; Brydone 1773; Derham 1750; Hales 1731; Hervey 1761; Pluche & Humphreys 1750). Therefore, whilst references to the survey will be placed alongside references to Wesley's original (undocumented) sources, it remains challenging to precisely isolate which ideas belong to John Wesley and which to the authors he redacted (Felleman 2006:72–73). However, this pattern is not unique to this work. For example, although Wesley's writing about slavery similarly uses sources, commentators deem this critical essay to represent Wesley's views on the subject (Pratt Morris-Chapman 2019b). Moreover, as Felleman and Maddox point out, Wesley's abridgement of other sources may legitimately be seen as an endorsement of them in this case (Felleman 2006b:173; Maddox 2009:26).<sup>9</sup> Therefore, whilst there is little that might

7. Anyone who actually picks up these hefty volumes can obtain empirical evidence that Wesley believed the created, natural world furnishes Christians with a knowledge of God.

8. This is true in many of his publications (Pratt Morris-Chapman 2019b).

9. Wesley's decision to publish these volumes (three times) demonstrates his interest in the natural world and, moreover, his redactions indicate that these writings are reflective of his own opinions.

be considered original in Wesley's foray into natural philosophy, his venture offers insights into the role played by nature in his epistemology of theology.

## Wesley's digressions

In the introduction to his compendium, Wesley (1763) clarifies that what may appear to be theological digressions are a central part of the work:

I must apprise the Reader that I have sometimes a little digressed by reciting both uncommon Appearances of Nature ... And yet this is not properly a Digression from the main Design I have in view. For surely in these Appearances also the Wisdom of God is displayed. (p. v)

Here, Wesley clarifies that the purpose of this work is to present a summary of the available knowledge concerning the natural world and illustrate how this reveals knowledge of God. As a result, Wesley states that he will unashamedly engage in what appear to be digressions throughout this work precisely because he intends to give *A View of the Wisdom of God in the Creation* (1763), as the original title of this publication indicates. Several examples serve to illustrate this point.

## A view of the wisdom of god in the human body

Wesley begins in volume one with contemplation of how the human body reflects the wisdom of God. Here he finds it displayed in the body's 'remarkable' design (Wesley 1763:19). For example, the ear is 'formed with exquisite wisdom for the reception of sounds' (Wesley 1763:32). Likewise, concerning the mouth, 'what less than an infinitely wise God could conceive of so fine an organ' since it is 'so susceptible of every impression that the sense of hearing have [*sic*] occasion for' (Wesley 1763:35). Moreover, he sees God's wisdom displayed in the great diversity present within the human race. Our 'faces', our 'voices' and even our 'hand writing' testify to the wisdom of the creator who 'has taken care' to distinguish us from one another uniquely and specifically (Wesley 1770:89). Reflecting upon this, Wesley cannot help but 'acknowledge the consummate wisdom wherewith' the body is formed (Wesley 1770:37). In addition, he also finds a confirmation of the scriptural record in the body's design, because he believes it affirms 'our noble original' state before the fall of humankind (Wesley 1763:61). Likewise, from our 'mortal' condition, he finds support for the veracity of the same portion of scripture:

How admirably has God secured the Execution of his Original Sentence upon every Child of Man Dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return. From the moment we live we prepare for Death. (Wesley 1763:89)

Here, in his reflection on the human body, Wesley finds confirmation of the creation narrative and obtains insights concerning God's character from the creation. However, before closing this section, it is essential to highlight that Wesley also acknowledges the limits of human reason. For example, in his discussion of human conception, he admits

that how 'seeds' whether 'male or female' grow in the womb 'abundantly transcends the highest reach of human understanding' (Wesley 1763:95). Thus, whilst he believed knowledge about God is obtainable from the creation, he repeatedly stressed the limitations of this knowledge.

### A view of the wisdom of god in the natural world

Wesley proceeds from here to discuss how the four fundamental elements, 'earth, water, air and fire illuminate the character of God' (Wesley 1763:93). Wesley's reflections illustrate how each offers confirmation of the revelation already revealed in the scriptural record and an insight into the creator's character (Wesley 1777:314). Drawing upon the work of the natural philosopher (and clergyman) William Derham, Wesley finds the 'wisdom' of God displayed in the movement of the Earth and the orbit of the planets. Hence, whilst he recognises the gravitational power of the Sun, it is the 'Creator' who has set the planets in motion. This not only reveals God's 'power' but discloses the 'Almighty[s]' intimate concern for the world (Derham 1750:41; Wesley 1777:309).

Wesley obtains similar insights from the abundant provision of water through rain, rivers and seas. Citing the natural historian Noël-Antoine Pluche, he reflects upon how the course of a river illustrates the character of God's love. For example, the generosity and provision of God is emphasised when the 'All wise' creator 'showers' the earth with water. From the mountain tops to the valleys below, this brings life by providing water and increasing food production. This system's abundance, provision and harmony should assure believers of God's 'gracious' character (Pluche & Humphreys 1750:111; Wesley 1763:41). A similar idea is found in discussing the movement of fish in the oceans. Here God's love is discerned in the bountiful provision of fish, which come close to the shore when they are in their prime, offering humankind a rich supply of food (Wesley 1763:52). Citing James Hervey's (a member of the Holy Club at Oxford) reflections on the natural world, the 'indulgent' nature of God's provision for humankind is discerned (Hervey 1837:384; Wesley 1763:52). God's grace is even discerned in the tiniest of sea creatures – for whom the creator has provided shells for protection. This again illumines God's loving character (Wesley 1777:70).

In addition to the illumination of God's great mercy and generous love, Wesley also discerns the extraordinary greatness of the almighty in the waves and movements of the tides. Concerning the former, he notes how waves 'surge from world to world' in a 'spectacle of magnificence and terror' which fills the 'mind and amazes the imagination' with an awe for the 'almighty', who in his 'wisdom' controls them all with a 'power absolutely incomprehensible' (Wesley 1777:68). A similar theme occurs in Wesley's reflections on Patrick Brydone's (a writer and member of the Royal Society) description of Mount Etna, whereby volcanic fire offered an insight into the nature of hell and judgement (Brydone 1773:196; Wesley 1777:111). However, in addition to this, Wesley also discerns God's generous and abundant provision,

for volcanoes promote fertility in the soil and act as God's 'great plough' (Wesley 1777:123). In a similar vein, the generous character of God is perceived in the 'abundant' provision of oxygen throughout the creation (Hales 1731:312; Wesley 1777:180). As before, Wesley considers that the 'whole universe is a picture in which are displayed' God's perfect wisdom and love (Wesley 1763:284–286).

Figure 4 offers a picture of the role played by nature in Wesley's thought.

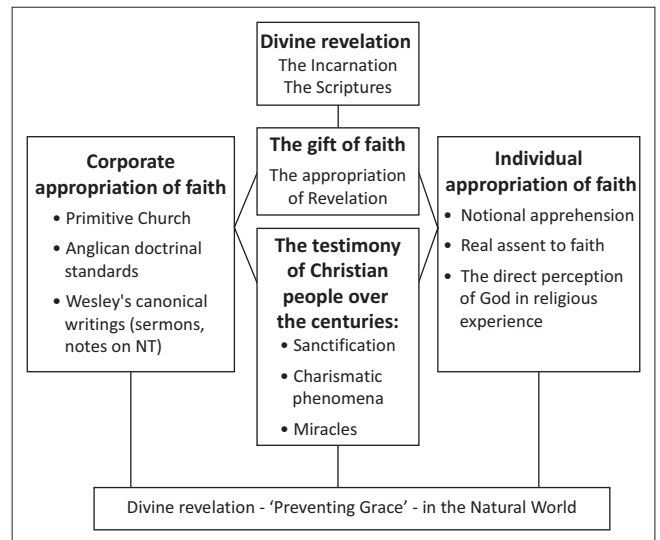


FIGURE 4: The Wesleyan hexalateral.

The given *hexalateral* illustrates Wesley's approach as he perceives the 'wisdom', 'goodness', 'love' and generous 'care' of God to be displayed in the natural world. This knowledge is confirmatory because it illumines the faith he antecedently possesses and offers further insights into the character of God (Wesley 1777:210–211). However, in saying this, it is essential to clarify that, for Wesley (1763), the gift of revelation through faith is paramount:

The relation we bear to God as our creator which was partly discovered by the light of nature is made nearer yet and more dear and engaging by that entirely new distinction in the One God revealed to us under the different characters of Father Son and Holy Ghost and by the unspeakable blessings we derive from their several offices and operations. This distinction utterly incomprehensible in itself could never have been known to men but by revelation. Nor could we have conceived it in any degree had it not been discovered to us under the semblance of such relations as are familiar among men as that of a Father and a Son and the Spirit of a man which is in him. (p. 231)

Here Wesley (1763) is emphatic that Trinitarian faith is inaccessible to us unless we have divine revelation. He continued:

Since both reason and Revelation show there is but one God we can own and worship but one. And since that one God is set forth to us in scripture under three distinct relations and accordingly represented by distinct personal names and characters and operations and offices therefore we worship but one God with this distinction of his own making not of ours. (p. 233)

In sum, whilst Wesley believes knowledge of God is possible from nature, it is through the 'gospel revelation' that a complete theological 'knowledge' is obtained (Wesley 1763:235). However, whilst Wesley is clear on this point, he ends the work with a sharp challenge to those who would 'imagine all enquiry of this kind to be vain'. Equally, he critiques those who give too much emphasis to nature so that their theology ceases to be 'consistent' with revealed 'religion' (Wesley 1763:238). Thus, for Wesley, the gift of revelation is primary. Nevertheless, given that he considers 'all the light of nature so called to flow from preventing grace' then it is clear that 'the general knowledge we have by the light of nature' is also a result of divine revelation in the created order. Hence, all the information gleaned from the natural world exists because of God showering grace and truth upon the world. Thus, whilst Wesley believes the 'relations' within the godhead, and indeed the 'relations we bear to God and God to us', are entirely 'undiscoverable by the light of nature', it is evident that nature does play a role in his epistemology of theology.

## Conclusion

In the given discussion, it is clear that Wesley does afford a role to nature in his epistemology of theology. Perhaps the best possible summary of his position is found in the preface to this work: the natural world 'display[s] the amazing Power Wisdom and Goodness of the great Creator to warm our Hearts and to fill our Mouths with Wonder Love and Praise' (Wesley 1763:6). Whilst Wesley does not overestimate its epistemic force, he nevertheless considers that this source of information illumines the character of God, assuring believers and providing them with insights into the concern that God the Father has for them and the world (Felleman 2007:189–190). Therefore, contrary to the position held by Abraham and Koskela, nature plays a confirmatory and assuring role for believers in a Wesleyan approach to the epistemology of theology.

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