

**GOD, PHYSICS AND THE HUMAN PROSPECT**  
**Winter Term 2017**

**Term Assignment**  
**Due in class, Wednesday, January 25, 6:30 PM**

**Reading:**

Michael Buckley, “The Newtonian Settlement and the Origins of Atheism,” in *Physics, Philosophy and Theology: A Common Quest for Understanding*, R. J. Russell, Wm. R. Stoeger, S.J., and G. V. Coyne, S.J., eds. (Vatican: Vatican Observatory, 1988), pp. 81-102.

**The issue:**

“What constitutes the sciences, or any disciplined human inquiry, and how they bear upon theology are critical questions, and the variety of answers given in the history of culture have specified much of the structure and value of the theology of a particular period. The understanding of a serious intellectual discipline frames the settlement within which theology will be understood and attempted” (82).

**The question:**

**How does Newton’s work and legacy, as powerfully shaping the meaning of “science” for two centuries, “frame the settlement within which theology [was] understood and attempted”?**

**The assignment:**

In a brief essay (~**500-600** words—typed, single-spaced) provide an account of how Buckley answers that question in his essay. The essay is quite dense and demanding. To guide you in your reading, and help you frame your response, here are some additional questions that provide a kind of map of the essay:

1. Mechanics becomes the foundational intellectual discipline, displacing philosophy. From Newton’s *Two New Sciences*, Buckley abstracts three issues: “(1) the relationship between mechanics and mathematics; (2) the extension of mechanics as a *dottrina*; and (3) the appropriateness of theological considerations within that ample extension.”

- Why does Newton, in contrast to Descartes, give methodological priority to mechanics over mathematics (geometry)? What is the advantage of mechanics, according to Newton?
- What *theological* work does Newton think mechanics can do, in contrast to Descartes’ “first philosophy”?
- *How* does mechanics do this theological work? What does it disclose about God and creation?
- What does a theologian, such as Samuel Clarke, do with what Newton offers?

2. Prior to Newton and Samuel Clarke, French philosophers such as Lessius, Mersenne, and Descartes had made important moves in the relationship between theology and philosophy. How does Buckley characterize those moves?

3. Whereas Newton pursued mechanics in part to provide a foundation for theology, what do physicists such as Lagrange and Laplace do with Newton's "gift" to the theologians? How do the theologians respond?

4. How does Newton's own *theological* aim in mechanics *pave the way for atheism* in such characters as Baron Paul d'Holbach? How does atheism rather than Christian faith become the proper "scientific" *attitude*, if not conclusion?

5. An additional perspective:

"The pathos of modern theology is its false humility. For theology, this must be a fatal disease, because once theology surrenders its claim to be a metadiscourse ['God, and all things in relation to God'] it cannot any longer articulate the word of the creator God, but it is bound to turn to the oracular voice of some finite idol, such as historical scholarship, humanist psychology or transcendental philosophy [or mechanics, or contemporary physics, or social theory]. If theology no longer seeks to position, qualify or criticize other discourses, then it is inevitable that these discourses will position theology; for the necessity of an ultimate organizing logic...cannot be wished away. A theology 'positioned' by secular reason suffers two characteristic forms of confinement. Either it idolatrously connects knowledge of God with some particular immanent field of knowledge—'ultimate' cosmological causes [cf. Newton, Clarke, modern 'creationists' and 'Intelligent Design' advocates], or 'ultimate' psychological and subjective needs ['experiential' evangelicals, but also Freud, Jung, etc]. Or else it is confined to intimations of a sublimity beyond representation [Kant, some post-secular postmoderns, religious pluralists, modern apophatic mysticism], so functioning to confirm negatively the questionable idea of an autonomous secular realm, completely transparent to rational understanding." (John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, p. 1.)

6. What is the above paragraph saying? How does it shed further light on Buckley's argument?