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## On Ramified Natural Theology: Reply to Menuge

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**Abstract:** Acknowledging the deficiency of traditional natural theology, Angus Menuge seeks an alternative in “ramified personalized natural theology.” I share his sense of the deficiency of traditional natural theology, but I raise some doubts about his proposed alternative, and suggest a more direct approach to the evidence for God.

Angus Menuge seeks “a worthy place for both natural theology and an evangelistic call to a personal encounter with the living Lord.” More specifically, he seeks “a chastened natural theology which provides a *lived dialectic*, a ‘ramified personalized natural theology’.” He adds:

There is an approach to natural theology which overcomes its tendency to be an impersonal, spectator sport: it offers not mere propositions, but a *lived dialectic*. Recognizing the value of both ramified natural theology (making the case for Christ, not merely a deity) and of being brought to a personal encounter with Christ’s claim of Lordship that deeply challenges our rebellious will (Gethsemane epistemology), my proposed rapprochement is “ramified personalized natural theology.”

Menuge thus acknowledges that traditional natural theology is deficient in not offering a volitional challenge from God to inquirers. It therefore needs to be, in his language, “ramified” and “personalized.”

Menuge proposes that “at the intellectual level, we need to show why it is [that] God as revealed in Christ ... provides the most compelling account of reality.” He adds: “Ramified arguments that target the fulfillment of prophecy, the resurrection and Christocentric solutions to the problem of evil are all examples of this approach.” I have some concerns about these two claims.

Regarding the first claim, what “provides the most compelling account of reality” will be highly controversial among inquirers for at least two reasons. First, inquirers do not all share a common standard for (what it is to be) “the most compelling account of reality.” Second, inquirers do not all share a common basis of evidence relative to which an acknowledgment of the Christian God can be “the most compelling account of reality.” Some inquirers will seek explanatory standards that are ontologically minimalist (in a way that an acknowledgment of a triune God is not), and some inquirers will lack the experiential evidence needed to endorse the Christian God as integral to “the most compelling account of reality.” These are two major obstacles to the cogency of the first claim for a wide audience.

Regarding the second claim, about “ramified arguments that target the fulfillment of prophecy, the resurrection and Christocentric solutions to the problem of evil,” we need to ask how such arguments are to proceed. If they are to be arguments of *natural* theology, they will have to rely on premises involving only *natural* realities and evidence. Otherwise, they would be arguments of *supernatural* theology and hence outside the category of “natural theology.” It is difficult to see, however, exactly how premises involving only natural realities and evidence will cogently yield a conclusion about *God* (a supernatural being) as fulfilling prophecy, raising Christ from the dead, or solving the problem of evil via Christ. I doubt that such premises are available, because I doubt that there is purely natural evidence for God, at least if such evidence is to be cogent for any group of people uncommitted about God’s reality. The history of failed attempts by natural theology does not inspire hope.

If we seek “personalized” evidence that challenges a human will by God’s will, as Menuge rightly does, we will need to move beyond any evidence for “the fulfillment of prophecy, the resurrection and Christocentric solutions to the problem of evil.” One could accept the latter evidence as indicating the factuality of “the fulfillment of prophecy, the resurrection and Christocentric solutions to the problem of evil,” but still be without any volitional challenge from God. Accepting the facts in question does not automatically bring one any challenge from God about the direction of their will. So, the evidence suggested by Menuge does not suffice for “personalized” evidence that includes a divine challenge to one’s will. We need to look elsewhere, then, for such evidence.

We do well to consider possible evidence closer to God's actual moral character, as represented directly by God's intervening Spirit. Once we acknowledge the importance of divine personalized evidence that challenges human wills, the arguments of natural theology lose any crucial role in knowing God. In that case, divine self-authentication via divine self-manifestation comes to the fore as God's mode of supplying evidence of divine reality.<sup>1</sup> In such a manifestation of God's moral character, humans receive a personal challenge to conform to God's will. The model for us is the experience and the response of Jesus in Gethsemane: "Abba, Father, ... not what I want, but what You want" (Mk. 14:36, NRSV). Jesus thereby experienced the direct challenge of God's perfect will and complied with it. We humans should follow suit.

The experiential evidence of Gethsemane can be found in human conscience as we attend to God's challenging call to become and to live as children of God. This is not "spectator evidence," because it challenges our will to conform to God's perfect will. Likewise, it differs from what Menuge calls "ramified arguments that target the fulfillment of prophecy, the resurrection and Christocentric solutions to the problem of evil." The relevant Gethsemane evidence goes beyond any factual evidence about "the fulfillment of prophecy, the resurrection and Christocentric solutions to the problem of evil." It includes a challenge from God, in human conscience, to put God's will first, just as Jesus did in his earthly ministry. So, ramified natural theology misses the mark.

The "Gethsemane epistemology" that underlies Christ-shaped philosophy is irreducible to any arguments of natural theology, and it makes do without reliance on any such arguments. It acknowledges that God's Spirit can, and does, supply evidence for God's reality directly in human conscience, and that this evidence can, and does, include a volitional challenge to humans. We can put the challenge bluntly: become Christlike, that is, relate to God in faithful obedience as Christ did and does. The power of God's Spirit to self-manifest, and thereby to self-authenticate, God's reality is widely neglected in the philosophy of religion and is obscured by natural theology. Natural theology typically moves our attention from an I-Thou interaction between God and humans to impersonal, merely *de dicto* arguments. We now can see

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<sup>1</sup> For some biblical support, see my forthcoming paper: Paul Moser, "God without Argument," in *Is Faith in God Reasonable?*, ed. Corey Miller and Paul Gould (London: Routledge, forthcoming 2014).

that Gethsemane epistemology gives a proper role to the sacred power of God's intervening Spirit in a way that natural theology, even ramified natural theology, does not. The outstanding question for us inquirers is now whether we are willing to yield ourselves to this life-giving power. We do well to remove all obstructions and distractions.

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