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Rejoinder to Angus Menuge on Ramified Personalized Natural Theology

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Abstract: This is a rejoinder to Angus Menuge’s latest proposal of “a third way between standard natural theology and Gethsemane epistemology.” I contend that we do not have a stable third way, because any alternative to Gethsemane epistemology, like the arguments of traditional natural theology, neglects the distinctiveness of the evidence for the self-authenticating Christian God and does not offer a resilient defense of belief in this God. Advocates of the traditional arguments of natural theology fail to represent the ontological and evidential uniqueness of this God.

Menuge acknowledges the failure of the arguments of traditional natural theology to challenge wayward human wills in the ways the Christian God does. In particular, as I have argued previously in this series and in *The Evidence for God*¹ those arguments do not yield a personal God worthy of worship who calls people out of selfishness and into a new life of fellowship in self-sacrificial *agapē*. As a result, Menuge offers an approach in which “the standard evidence [in natural theology] for the existence of deity is supplemented with evidence decisively favoring the claim that Christ is the authentic revelation of who that deity is.”² This is part of his “ramifying” of traditional natural theology.

Given the highly diverse and multiform character of natural theology, one would do well to identify what exactly counts as “the standard evidence” in natural theology. If, for instance, a design argument or a fine-tuning argument is to be included, *which* of the many versions will be included? In addition, will the included versions be able to resist the compelling objections offered by

¹ Paul Moser, *The Evidence For God: Religious Knowledge Reexamined* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

² Angus Menuge, “The Golden Cord and God’s Economy: Reply to Moser,” 2.

Elliott Sober and others?³ I have serious doubts regarding the latter issue.³ Analogous questions arise for cosmological arguments, ontological arguments, moral arguments, and so on.⁴ This is a vastly complex area, and we cannot do justice to the complexity by talking blithely of “the standard evidence.” In addition, it will not help to invoke a “cumulative case” in this area, because if no individual argument of traditional natural theology yields a personal God worthy of worship, then we will not arrive at such a God via a simple combination of the arguments. No easy shortcut of that kind is available.

A related concern bears on Menuge’s talk of “the evidence decisively favoring the claim that Christ is the authentic revelation” of God. *Which* evidence? Is such evidence public, and is it decisive even for a shrewd agnostic? I myself have serious doubts here if the evidence is assumed to be publicly shareable in the way typical scientific evidence is and cogent for shrewd agnostics. I also would propose that we should not allege evidence to be decisive, whether in natural theology or in Christology, if we do not state clearly what that evidence is. Otherwise, we have no way of evaluating the allegation. In the present series, for instance, a number of contributors have advocated natural theology, but none of these contributors has offered an actual argument for careful evaluation. I can understand this silence, however, given that the familiar arguments are vexed with serious problems, as the relevant literature illustrates abundantly. Clearly, we do not help the case for the Christian God when we are evasive about the needed evidence. Unfortunately, parts of the apologetics industry, complete with ads, performances, and income, have latched on to natural theology in ways characteristic of an ideology; so, its influence dies hard, if at all.

According to Menuge, his proposal to supplement natural theology with (unspecified) evidence of Christology “helps because the natural man would like to redefine God in his image, but Christ is *God* showing us who God is.”⁵ Whatever this evidence actually includes (and this is very unclear), humans alienated from God do need a challenge from God to their wills. So, something further is needed, beyond arguments from natural theology and evidence of Christology. Menuge therefore proposes a further supplement, as follows: “In this case one lives through the argument so that it confronts one at a deep existential level, and not merely as a claim commending itself to intellectual assent. Of course, it is not the argument itself, but God working through it,

³ See Sober’s personal webpage for his objections:
<http://sober.philosophy.wisc.edu/selected-papers>

⁴ For a range of objections that cannot plausibly be ignored, see *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, ed. Michael Martin (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁵ Menuge, “The Golden Cord and God’s Economy: Reply to Moser,” 2.

that is the agent of change....”⁶ This proposal, however, is difficult, if not impossible, to evaluate, because Menuge does not tell us what “the argument” is.

Until we know what “the argument” is, we cannot tell what kind of evidence is to be assessed for its cogency regarding God’s reality. It is altogether unclear, for instance, how an argument of traditional natural theology, such as a cosmological argument, “confronts one at a deep existential level.” According to Menuge, however, God is “the agent of change,” and the argument itself is not. One might propose, then, that the argument from natural theology (whichever one is proposed) is actually dispensable, given that God is doing the effective work. This would save one from becoming embroiled in the well-documented inadequacies of the arguments of traditional natural theology. It would also call for renewed attention to the self-authenticating character of the Christian God.

Menuge wants to retain arguments of natural theology on the ground that “it is possible to couch RNT [ramified natural theology] arguments in terms that appeal solely to public evidence and the most basic assumptions of the empirical method.”⁷ He adds: “since the proper evidence of RNT is public evidence, it is by definition available to everyone.”⁸ Three problems emerge immediately. First, talk of “the empirical method” begs for clarification, and risks the kind of over-simplification found in older textbook talk of “the scientific method.” I doubt that there is any such widely received thing as “the empirical method,” even if there are various empirical methods employed by inquirers from different disciplines. (Likewise for the textbook talk of “the scientific method.”) Second, we need to know exactly how the evidence of ramified natural theology is supposedly public, and what specific evidence can serve this public purpose. Must every educated human be in a position to receive this evidence as “decisive”? If so, where exactly is the evidence that can meet this bold standard? Third, Jesus portrays his Father as “hiding” some defining features of his ministry and status from people who suppose they know better than God (Lk. 10:21 and Matt. 11:25). I doubt, then, that a Christian approach to the evidence of Christology can wield or meet Menuge’s standard of “public evidence [that] is by definition available to everyone.” This is no loss, however, because the distinctive evidence for the Christian God has a redemptive aim that is sensitive to the volitional direction of human agents. We overlook this key lesson when we disregard divine hiding as portrayed in the Old and New Testaments.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 3.

⁸ Ibid.

Menuge makes the case for his *personalized* approach to ramified natural theology as follows:

Moser is concerned that even if one can give a sound RNT argument, it won't be enough to reveal Christ's personal claim on our will. Of course, I agree, and that is why I had suggested that a more potent approach is when RNT arguments are presented as what C. S. Lewis called a "lived dialectic." So I don't disagree when Moser points out there is a gap between RNT and RPNT [ramified personalized natural theology], but I would suggest that if an RNT argument is one that a person lives through, rather than merely entertains intellectually, it can be a means God uses to take a person close to Gethsemane. It certainly seems that Augustine, Pascal, C. S. Lewis, and many others, lived through arguments in this way. For example, each of them did not merely come to see intellectually that Christ is the most credible savior from sin, but also discovered existentially, that Christ is *my* savior from *my* sin. No doubt it wasn't *only* argument that did this, because God works *in* and *through* the argument.... So I would suggest that RPNT and Gethsemane epistemology can work in tandem with the former a preparation for the latter rather than either redundant or a competitor.⁹

By way of elaboration, Menuge quotes my following remark: "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."¹⁰ He responds as follows: "In many ways, a biblically informed Christian must agree. God can and does bring people to faith without natural evidence. One may hear the Gospel and the Holy Spirit may work through that Word alone to create personal faith in Christ. So no form of natural theology is absolutely necessary for a person to recognize Christ as Lord. But it still doesn't follow that natural theology has *no* value...."¹¹ Menuge does not specify the intended target of the previous sentence. Perhaps he mistakenly thinks that I hold the view in question.

Of course, God *can* use arguments, even bad arguments of natural theology, to aid in bringing people into new life in the divine kingdom. Likewise, God can and does use defective people for redemptive purposes on a regular basis; some of us can testify to this firsthand, even with gratitude. Perhaps a bad argument of natural theology has some positive *psychological* value

⁹ Ibid., 4.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 4-5.

for a person, and God uses this feature of an argument to lead the person into new life. My own perspective on Gethsemane epistemology, in *The Severity of God*¹² and *The Evidence for God*¹³ allows for the psychological value of the arguments of natural theology for some people. Similarly, God can speak through demons (Mk. 5:7; cf. Matt. 16:16–23) and donkeys (Num. 22:28–30; cf. 2 Pet. 2:16), but it does not follow that we should include demons and donkeys in our case for the Christian God or in our Christian apologetics. Here we must be more selective, because not everything with occasional instrumental value belongs in a Christian philosophy or apologetics.

The relevant question is whether the arguments of natural theology are not only logically sound, but also *cogent for a wide audience*, including shrewd agnostics. I have argued elsewhere (in *The Evidence for God*, for instance) that the arguments in question do not yield a personal God worthy of worship, even if they yield a lesser god. As a result, these arguments fall short of the Christian God, whatever value they may have in other connections. In addition, we have no easy repair for the deficiency in question, even if we combine the inadequate arguments in a cumulative package. Evidence for a personal God worthy of worship will not emerge just from the combining of the arguments in question. This failure, however, does not undermine or even detract from the distinctive evidence for the Christian God (as characterized, for instance, in *The Severity of God*). God can self-authenticate divine reality via self-manifestation (of the sort noted in Rom. 5:5, 8:15–17, 10:20) even if the arguments of traditional natural theology fail. God’s distinctive evidence, in other words, has no need of such inadequate arguments, and those arguments often become a distraction from the profound evidence and Good News characteristic of the Christian God.

Menuge seeks refuge in what he calls a “golden cord response,” as follows: “Some proponents of natural theology would dismiss the kind of personal encounter Moser prizes as subjective or untestable. And Moser might say that the evidence of natural theology does not deeply challenge our will to become obedient to Christ. But in fact, the threads are part of a single, seamless cord, and what holds them together is not any intrinsic similarity between the threads themselves, but Christ himself who is present and at work in every one of them.”¹⁴ Clearly, however, we are not presented with a “single, seamless cord” in this context. Menuge himself has stated that “One may hear the Gospel and the Holy Spirit may work through that Word alone to create personal faith in Christ. So no form of natural theology is absolutely necessary

¹² Paul Moser, *The Severity of God: Religion and Philosophy Reconceived* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), see chapter 3.

¹³ Moser, *The Evidence For God: Religious Knowledge Reexamined*, see chapters 3-4.

¹⁴ Menuge, “The Golden Cord and God’s Economy: Reply to Moser,” 5.

for a person to recognize Christ as Lord.”¹⁵ As a result, natural theology is *not* seamless with the direct intervention of God’s Spirit, as described, for instance, in Romans 5:5, 8:15–17. There is a clear distinction between the two, and the latter does not depend on the former. Menuge and I evidently agree here, and therefore we should drop the misleading talk of a “single, seamless cord.”

Menuge and I can agree on the following: “Christ can work through intrinsically insufficient means (a person’s voice, water, bread and wine etc.) to create faith. For there is not one God of creation and another one of redemption: Christ is both creator and redeemer.”¹⁶ The disagreement arises with his questionable inference from the previous remarks: “So Christ himself connects natural theology and Gethsemane epistemology, despite their intrinsic differences.”¹⁷ This does not follow, deductively or inductively. The first problem is that we are not told *which* argument of natural theology is supposedly connected to Gethsemane epistemology by Christ. Surely not *every* argument of natural theology can be given a pass in this easy manner; some are dubious even by the lights of many natural theologians. So, Menuge’s proposal lacks needed specificity.

The second problem is that we have no evidence anywhere indicating that Christ has approved the arguments of natural theology and connected them with Gethsemane epistemology. Certainly he has not done this in our New Testament evidence of his teachings. On the contrary, at the key places where he might have introduced an argument of natural theology as a preliminary to his Good News, he does not do so. For instance, he has no place for the arguments of natural theology in any of his dealings with the Gentiles he confronts on his way to crucifixion in Jerusalem. There is an important lesson here if Jesus is our model for presenting, teaching, and defending the Good News. (I cannot think of a better model.) In addition, we have the following relevant passage in John’s Gospel: “[Some skeptical Pharisees] said to him, ‘Where is your Father?’ Jesus answered, ‘You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also’” (John 8:19, NRSV). Jesus does not respond to skepticism about his divine Father with arguments from philosophy or natural theology, although he *could* have, in principle. Instead, he highlights the importance of *personally knowing him and his Father*, rather than simply knowing *that God exists* even as a preliminary to the former. Likewise, in his reply to Nicodemus in John 3:8, Jesus makes no use of an argument from philosophy or natural theology. The best explanation of his behavior is that Jesus trusted the Spirit of God enough *not* to digress to

¹⁵ Ibid., 4-5.

¹⁶ Ibid., 7.

¹⁷ Ibid.

lesser, needless preliminaries, such as argument from natural theology. This fits with Gethsemane epistemology, and it is needed medicine for philosophers and other academics, especially because we often lack the trust in God's Spirit that Jesus exemplifies. We often prefer to make our own way, and the result is at best questionable. Accordingly, many advocates of natural theology are unmoved by the fact that no New Testament writer depends on an argument of natural theology. (Clearly, Paul is not giving an *argument* from design in Romans 1; he is simply reporting that God can self-manifest *through* nature. It would be quite a different view, and an implausible view, to suggest that nature in itself reveals God.)

Perhaps as a last resort, Menuge looks for a practical role for natural theology, as follows: "the threads of natural theology are still valuable epistemically, because, with so many competing faith claims, we need a means of adjudicating between them. To appeal solely to the 'power of God's Spirit to self-manifest, and thereby to self-authenticate' is insufficient. Intrinsically, the Holy Spirit is utterly authoritative. However, the person who has a spiritual experience that seems to be real may still require independent evidence that the spiritual force *is* the Holy Spirit and not some other spirit."¹⁸ This line of reasoning is much too quick, and unconvincing too. It entails that God is not actually self-authenticating, contrary to a recurring theme of the Old and New Testaments. According to various writers of the New Testament, God is self-authenticating in being self-manifesting and self-witnessing regarding God's and Christ's reality and moral character (see, for instance, Rom. 5:5, 10:20, Jn. 14:23). This kind of self-authenticating fits with central Biblical idea of God's confirming his own reality for humans, given that God inherently has a morally perfect character and cannot find anyone or anything else to serve this purpose of authentication (see, for instance, Gen. 22:16–17, Isa. 45:22–23, Heb. 6:13–14). So, Menuge runs afoul of an important Biblical view about God's authenticating divine reality for humans. In doing so, he dismisses, by implication, God's self-authentication in the face of competing religions during the time of Elijah (see 1 Kings 17–18, and note that Elijah does not resort to any argument of natural theology).

A related problem emerges for Menuge's practical role for natural theology. If we need natural theology to adjudicate between different religious claims, why does the New Testament not make *any* use of the arguments of natural theology? The silence of the New Testament on such arguments is the elephant in the room for Christians who deny God's self-authenticating power in order to advocate natural theology. In addition, many deists and medieval Arabic theologians, among other non-Christian theists, make us of arguments

¹⁸ Ibid., 8.

of natural theology. So, it seems misleading at best to suggest that natural theology yields the Christian God in a way that can “adjudicate between” competing religious views. From a historical point of view, this looks like special pleading for a Christian’s admiration of natural theology. We seem to have priority given to the apologetics of Aquinas over that of Jesus and the New Testament writers. This is a recipe for trouble, from a Christian point of view. A Christ-shaped philosophy, in contrast, will keep the self-authenticating Father of Jesus front and center, and will not allow the dubious arguments of natural theology to divert attention from this unique God.

Menuge seems to back off the non-Biblical view under consideration, with the following remark: “Although the Holy Spirit in no way requires natural theology in order to be intrinsically authoritative, still natural theology can be relevant to testing whether it *is* the Holy Spirit working.”¹⁹ This remark evidently contradicts the previous claim that “to appeal solely to the ‘power of God’s Spirit to self-manifest, and thereby to self-authenticate’ is insufficient” with regard to assessing competing religious views. The weaker claim that “natural theology can be relevant to testing” falls far short of the previous suggestion that God cannot be self-authenticating in the mix of competing religious views. Even so, Menuge does not tell us *which* argument of natural theology will serve to test competing religious views; nor does he tell us *how* the argument will do so. As a result, we have at most a promissory note, and not a (sketch of a) theory able to be assessed. Given the troubled, highly controversial history of natural theology, we should not accept any such promissory note. I therefore find no real challenge here to Gethsemane epistemology or to the resilient approach to divine self-authentication in the Old and New Testaments.

Finally, I agree with Menuge that we need to leave room for a “lived dialectic” between the living God and humans. This dialectic, however, does not obscure God’s power with tenuous arguments from natural theology. Instead, it includes an I–Thou encounter where the living God self-manifests God’s moral character of *agapē* and thereby self-authenticates God’s reality for humans. This God can and does hide from people who are unwilling to cooperate with God’s self-sacrificial moral character, and this divine hiding can be for their own good, until they are ready to interact with God in a redemptive manner. So, the living God is not a static commodity whose existence can be captured by the arguments of natural theology. In addition, this God has shown over a long period of time that divine self-authentication does not depend on such arguments, and the Old and New Testaments witness clearly to this reality. In this respect, at least, the living God is not the god of the

¹⁹ Ibid., 9.

philosophers. Advocates of Christ-shaped philosophy do well to accommodate this important lesson, even if the lesson is at odds with the guild of philosophers of religion.

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