

USAGE STATEMENT & AGREEMENT

- **This document is the property of the author(s) and of www.epsociety.org.**
- **This document has been made available for your individual usage.**
- **It's possible that the ideas contained in this document are of a "preprint" quality. Please consult the author(s) for any updated content.**
- **If you quote from this document, whether for personal or professional purposes, please give appropriate attribution and link to the original URL whenever you cite it.**
- **Please do not upload or store this document to any personal or organization owned website, intranet, portal, server, FTP area, or any other shared space.**
- **You are permitted to store this document on your own individual, privately-owned computer or device.**
- **By opening this document, you have agreed to abide by the above stated usage policy.**
- ***We welcome your comments and interaction about the ideas shared in this document by going to www.epsociety.org!***

The Golden Cord and God's Economy: Reply to Moser

Angus Menuge
Department of Philosophy
Concordia University Wisconsin
Mequon, WI

Abstract: In this note, I briefly respond to two main challenges that Paul Moser makes to my suggestion that Ramified Personalized Natural Theology may constitute a third way between standard natural theology and Gethsemane epistemology. First, Moser charges that ramified *natural* theology is likely incoherent because ramified theology will appeal to *supernatural* premises. My response appeals to a forthcoming essay by Hugh Gauch which provides a framework in which evidence counts across competing worldviews. Second, Moser claims that the “divine personalized experience” provided by the Holy Spirit makes natural theology redundant. I appropriate Charles Taliaferro’s idea of a “golden cord,” and suggest that the evidential threads of this cord, whether natural or supernatural, provide a means by which Christ may draw us to himself.

In an earlier paper,¹ I agreed with Paul Moser about the limitations of the standard arguments of “spectator” natural theology. These arguments may provide a case for generic theism, but not for Christ, and they operate only at the level of impersonal, intellectual assent: they do not, like Moser’s Gethsemane epistemology, confront our rebellious will with Christ’s claim to be Lord of our life. However, while I do not claim that they, or any other works of man, are sufficient for faith², I suggested that the addition of two

¹Angus Menuge, “Ramified Personalized Natural Theology: A Third Way?” Available at: <http://www.epsociety.org/userfiles/art-Menuge%20%28Ramified%20Personalized%20Natural%20Theology%29.pdf>.

² Luther puts it this way in his commentary on the Third Article of the Apostles’ Creed (concerning the work of the Holy Spirit): “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.” While the Holy Spirit is the only saving agent, we know He also works through means, both to convict people of sin (John 16: 8-9), and to incorporate them into the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13).

factors could move spectator natural theology closer to Gethsemane epistemology by providing additional means through which God may call us to Himself. The first factor, emphasized by Richard Swinburne, is to go beyond “bare” natural theology to “ramified” natural theology.³ Here the standard evidence for the existence of deity is supplemented with evidence decisively favoring the claim that Christ is the authentic revelation of who that deity is. This helps because the natural man would like to redefine God in his image, but Christ is *God* showing us who God is. But this, as I agreed with Moser, still does not necessarily challenge our rebellious will to submit to Christ as Lord. What can help someone move in that direction, I suggested, is if the argument is not only ramified, but personalized. 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, that is the agent of change, but as I suggested in my earlier paper, there are people, like C. S. Lewis, whose conversion is slow and complex, so that God is at work breaching many layers of defense before the person is prepared for Gethsemane. Combining these additions to the standard approach, we get Ramified Personalized Natural Theology (RPNT).

In his response to my paper, Paul Moser offers a few concerns about the viability of RPNT.⁴ For two reasons, he is skeptical about the very idea of Ramified Natural Theology (RNT), personalized or not. First, he doubts my claim that RNT allows one to make the case that God as revealed in Christ provides “the most compelling account of reality.” He argues that enquirers simply do not agree on what qualifies as such an account due to:

- (1) differences in accepted explanatory standards (e.g., if one is an ontological minimalist, one may simply reject the triune God);
- and
- (2) differences in the evidence available to them (e.g., some people may simply lack the vital, religious experience needed to see God for who He is).

³ Richard Swinburne makes the distinction between “bare” and “ramified” natural theology explicitly in his “Natural Theology, Its ‘Dwindling Probabilities’ and ‘Lack of Rapport,’” *Faith and Philosophy* 21(4): 533-546 (2004). Ramified Natural Theology is the topic of the Winter 2013 issue of *Philosophia Christi* (see: <http://www.epsociety.org/events/news.asp?pid=108&mode=detail>).

⁴ Paul K. Moser, “On Ramified Natural Theology: Reply to Menuge,” available at: <http://www.epsociety.org/userfiles/art-Moser%20%28Ramified%20Natural%20Theology-ReplyToMenuge%29.pdf>.

Second, Moser doubts that RNT is really a coherent idea because he thinks that some of the premises deployed in a “ramified” argument will go beyond natural theology by making supernatural claims. In other words, there may be “ramified” theology, but it won’t be ramified *natural* theology.

Is Ramified Natural Theology possible?

These concerns are legitimate and I am quite sure that a proponent of RNT could fall into either of these traps. But I am not convinced that this is inevitable. This is because, as Hugh Gauch argues in a forthcoming paper,⁵ it is possible to couch RNT arguments in terms that appeal solely to public evidence and the most basic assumptions of the empirical method. These assumptions are not absolutely neutral, since some worldviews reject them (e.g. Eastern mysticism dismisses empirical evidence as *maya* or illusion and not a guide to objective reality), but they are neutral between Christianity and most of its principal competitors, including rival theistic religions and naturalism. And the fact that the premises of RNT arguments *mention* the supernatural is certainly insufficient to show that they are not really natural theology. In a correct RNT argument, all of the evidence must be public, natural evidence, but using a likelihood approach, one can compare the merits of supernatural and naturalistic *hypotheses* to explain that evidence. So long as none of the facts are supernatural, and none of the presuppositions of method assume supernatural realities, the argument can proceed. Furthermore, the presuppositions of the method Gauch appeals to are basic, not only to science, but even to common-sense investigation (even the Eastern mystic uses them to avoid being run over), so they cannot be accused of assuming at the outset some tendentious thesis about permissible ontology. In fact, on Gauch’s model, it is the ontological minimalist that Moser describes who is guilty of doing this, since ontological minimalism is not required by the empirical method itself.

Notice as well that since the proper evidence of RNT is public evidence, it is by definition available to everyone, so (2) should not be a concern. Of course, the case of religious experience is tricky because the object of such experience is often directly accessible only privately (there are exceptions, such as a congregation’s collective experience of being united by Christ). Still, one may provide good public evidence *that* other people have had some remarkable private experiences, both from presumptively reliable testimony and from what

⁵ Hugh Gauch, “The Methodology of Ramified Natural Theology,” *forthcoming* in the special issue of *Philosophia Christi* on Ramified Natural Theology (Winter 2013), which I am coediting with Charles Taliaferro.

appear to be powerfully transformative effects on the lives of those claiming such experiences.

Of course, a doctrinaire presuppositionalist may claim that the evidence is always conditioned by some worldview or other. But in Gauch's model, since the only presuppositions permitted are those required by the empirical method itself, the evidence *counts across* all of those worldviews that accept this method. I will say no more about this, but do commend Gauch's essay and the other fine contributions to the special issue on ramified natural theology.

Aside from these matters, 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, 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. In this way, the argument is, in fact, a dialogue, not a monologue, even if the divine conversation partner is not consciously recognized. Surely it is possible that the Holy Spirit works through an RPNT argument: properly executed, the argument may, like Pascal's revelation of our paradoxical wretchedness and greatness, help to show our deep need for Christ as savior, while the Holy Spirit can also directly acquaint us with Christ's claim on our life. 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.

Moser emphasizes that what really challenges a person's will is not the evidence of natural theology, but the special kind of evidence produced by the Holy 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."⁶ 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

⁶ Paul K. Moser, "On Ramified Natural Theology: Reply to Menuge," pg. 3.

theology is absolutely necessary for a person to recognize Christ as Lord. But it still doesn't follow that natural theology has *no* value, for three reasons.

The Golden Cord

First, there is a danger of fixating on the particular thoughts, reasons and experiences of man and showing their local insufficiency. Of course, each and every thing that we do is insufficient to save anyone, because God alone saves. But God works through all of our efforts in ways that transcend our understanding because of the parochial limitations of our creaturely perspective. A helpful analogy is suggested by Charles Taliaferro's image of a golden cord.⁷ I will use this image rather broadly to include *any* evidence which Christ may use to draw us to him, whether natural theology or the "divine personalized evidence" of Gethsemane epistemology. Suppose we modify the myth about Theseus and the minotaur a bit. Let Theseus be the natural man and let the minotaur be Satan. Theseus has no hope of slaying this minotaur, but there is a golden cord through which Christ is drawing Theseus out of the labyrinth and to himself. As the labyrinth has many twists and turns, Theseus can only see very short sections of the cord at any one time: call these golden threads. One problem is that Theseus might think that the particular thread he can see is especially meritorious. Lacking God's vision of the entire cord, which shows how all the threads are connected, Theseus might dismiss the relevance of other threads. Thus 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. This is because there are *many* things God may do by way of preparing Theseus for his direct encounter with Christ's claim to be Lord of his life. In Lewis's case both his imagination and reason offered "strongholds," and "arguments" and "lofty opinion," which had to be destroyed, before his thoughts could be taken "captive to obey Christ" (2 Corinthians 10: 4-5, ESV). The fact that only the last "Gethsemane" thread resulted in Lewis's submission to Christ does not show that the earlier threads, which included natural theology operating on his imagination and reason, were not important preparation.

⁷ Charles Taliaferro, *The Golden Cord: A Short Book on the Secular and the Sacred* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2012).

On the other hand, if Theseus were theologically astute, and had read Moser's work on Christ-shaped philosophy, his complaint might not be that only some threads have value. Instead, he might complain that none of the threads is sufficient to bring him to Christ, and for that matter, even the entire cord is not Christ himself. Whether the evidence is natural theology or divine personalized evidence, it is only evidence. Even if the Gethsemane thread provides Theseus with infallible access to a personal encounter with God, via the self-authenticating presence of the Holy Spirit, the infallibility of that evidence does not make Theseus infallible. Infallible evidence is still open to interpretation and a (wrongheaded) person can certainly doubt it provides access to God. And besides, people can resist the Holy Spirit (Acts 7: 51). Whether it is cognitive or volitional impairment (or both) that is to blame, the Holy Spirit may not create saving faith in a person. Suppose that the Gethsemane thread is the experience of Christ calling Theseus directly by the Spirit, and if he would only trust and follow that thread, the rest of the cord would be unnecessary. But, being a "stiff-necked person," he does *not* trust the voice; perhaps he even fears that it is the minotaur acting as an anti-Christ by doing a fiendish imitation of Christ, good enough to deceive the elect, if that were possible (Mt. 24: 24).

So Theseus is one for whom a direct Gospel appeal is like casting pearls among swine (Mt. 7: 6). So what happens next? Theseus might wait for *another* experience like the self-authenticating one, which, if it breaks through, would make the threads of natural theology otiose. But maybe Theseus is aware of no such experience or is in a stiff-necked, blocking mode. Still he might say to himself, "Well, I don't want to die in the labyrinth, and these other threads *might* lead somewhere." Suppose he takes this path, and as he explores each thread, a remarkable thing happens. At first, all he discerns is that the thread is making a point that commends itself to his intellect. Perhaps like Thomas Nagel he concludes that materialism simply fails to make consciousness and the norms of theoretical and practical reason such as to be expected. But, because this is a lived dialectic, the existential force of the argument *changes* Theseus as a person. At some point he *discovers* that the thread has become interwoven into his being and has pulled him closer to God. No doubt this is because God Himself is at work in the argument. So Theseus does not merely note: "Well, that overcomes one major obstacle to believing in God." Instead, he discovers that he can for the first time see the world as inherently teleological. Likewise, living through further arguments (threads that become attached to him) draws him further along until he find himself like Antony Flew, and sees the world as the creation of a transcendent god. Still further threads may lead Theseus to discover that he has violated the moral law of a personal lawgiver, that he needs

a savior and that the lawgiver and the savior are one and the same. At each stage, it is not merely that he has acquired a new belief; he also has a fundamentally different view on the nature and meaning of the world. Though still lacking saving faith, he may say, “Now I know there is something beyond this natural world,” or “Now I see that there is a moral law, I have transgressed it, and there is nothing I can do to remedy this situation,” or even “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from the body of death?” (Romans 7: 24, ESV).

God’s Economy

This is because the thread, though it is intrinsically only evidence (whether “natural” or “supernatural”) functions as a *means of communication* between God and man: *in fact*, Christ is on the other end, and the Holy Spirit is at work even *in* this frail means. Each thread, and even the cord as a whole, is *intrinsically* insufficient to draw Theseus to Christ. Even the evidence of the Holy Spirit is not the Holy Spirit, and people can resist the calling of the Spirit. But because that cord is attached to Christ and because he draws Theseus by the Spirit working through the cord, like an angler, Christ may still draw Theseus to himself. So the golden cord is in and of itself incomplete: any evidence, natural or not, is insufficient to bring us to God. But in God’s economy, the golden cord may still be a means Christ uses to bring us to acknowledge him as Lord.

Another way to see this is that Christ is at work everywhere, and just as God can work through human evil actions to accomplish his providential ends (Gen. 50: 20), 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. So Christ himself connects natural theology and Gethsemane epistemology, despite their intrinsic differences:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all

things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. (Colossians 1: 15-20, ESV)

An implication of this is that we have to be careful in saying that there is no connection between natural theology and redemption. From the perspective of human power, this is true: there is only a gulf. Human reason provides nothing to bridge the chasm between deity and personal savior. Yet, this is a case where “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (Mt. 19: 26, ESV). Christ himself, as creator and redeemer, is the bridge between natural theology and Gethsemane. Christ is not the golden cord, but he is present *in* that cord and can work *through* it. So the insufficiency of natural theology to bring us to Christ does not imply an inability of Christ to use natural theology and (to be sure) other means (especially God’s Word) to bring people to him

Second, even though someone can be saved without any natural evidence, 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,”⁸ 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. Thus, in his first epistle, John writes:

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already. (1 John 4: 1-3, ESV)

What helps us know whether a spirit is of God is what that spirit says and since the spirit works through people, this is manifested in observable behavior, which falls into the realm of natural theology. Thus, if Hans goes through a powerful spiritual experience, which seems to him like an overwhelmingly real encounter with the Holy Spirit, but then discovers that the

⁸ Paul K. Moser, “On Ramified Natural Theology: Reply to Menuge,” pg. 3. Available here: <http://www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=174&mode=detail>.

spirit moves him to confess that Vince Lombardi is God, Hans should conclude that it was only the spirit of Lambeau. 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.

Third, another way to think of the golden cord is not as a collection of evidence and experience, but rather as the aggregate of all human works through which God draws a person to himself. Again not one of these works is sufficient to save someone, and neither is the whole aggregate. But that is not a limitation on God. Paul makes this clear in his first letter to the church at Corinth:

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building. (1 Corinthians 3:5-9, ESV)

Notice that even though what Apollos and Paul did was insufficient to save anyone (for it is “only God who gives the growth”), it is still true that Apollos and Paul were “Servants through whom you believed.” They were channels and avenues of God's saving work. And if we look at Paul's actual ministry, we see that his message included some standard natural theology (e.g., Acts 17; Romans 1-2) and some ramified additions (e.g. Acts 26: 26; 1 Corinthians 15: 3-8) as well as Gospel proclamation. All of his insufficient actions seemed to play some role in God's economy. Even though they do not hold together in themselves, “in him all things hold together,” because he “gives the growth.”

Angus Menuge is Professor and Chair of Philosophy at Concordia University Wisconsin in Mequon, WI, and he is also the current President of the Evangelical Philosophical Society