

PHILOSOPHIA CHRISTI

“... in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” Col 2.3

EDITOR

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Editor's Introduction

Welcome to another wonderful theme issue—this time on “ramified natural theology” (RNT). I won’t explain what RNT is in this note since you’ll get plenty of that in the pages that follow. But rest assured it has very little to do with ramming natural theology down the throats of crusty (and noncrusty) Barthians. I think you’ll find the concept and its deployment a little more elegant than that. And I think you will find the proponents and opponents elegant as well. Special thanks to our guest editors EPS President Angus Menuge and Executive Committee member Charles Taliaferro for their labors in bringing this marvelous collection to print, and to Richard Swinburne for blessing us with the lead article that set the stage for the discussion.

And RNT is a gift that keeps on giving. We simply could not make this issue any bigger, so we have extended the discussion of this theme to the web, with fine contributions by Stewart, Larmer, Moser, and Menuge, with more to come. You can access these essays at *blog.epsociety.org*.

As usual we have some additional articles and notes in this issue. The articles section leads with an essay by William Lane Craig on propositional truth followed by R. Scott Smith on Craig’s nominalism. To be fair, these were not written directly as a point-counterpoint engagement. Rather, we noticed the topical resonance and placed them side by side in these pages. The authors may have said things a bit differently in a debate format, so please keep that in mind when you read these important contributions to the emerging debate over abstract objects.

Here is a quick word to those of you who have submitted essays for review and possible publication. Because we have committed to publish some very important theme issues in the recent past, we are a bit backlogged on processing traditional submissions. Our plan is to attack this backlog now that the issue you are reading right now is out the door. Thank you for your patience as we work our way through the stack and forgive us for the lengthy wait. And please do contact us for an update if you’d like to know the status of your submission.

Last, some of our regular members have dropped off of our rolls recently and it strikes us that they may not know that their membership or subscription has lapsed—maybe from automatic renewal failure due to an expired credit card. So double check that you are current. We’d be happy to give you an update on your membership/subscription status if you contact us at *epsociety.org/about/contact.asp*. We don’t want you to miss a thing!

Craig J. Hazen
Biola University

Symposium on
Ramified Natural
Theology

Guest Editor's Introduction

What may be called “traditional natural theology” is widely understood as the project of establishing the existence of God and at least some of His attributes through the testimony of the senses and reason, without relying on the authority of divine revelation. Some believe traditional natural theology was dealt a mortal blow by David Hume, Immanuel Kant, and other Enlightenment thinkers. To the contrary, it has undergone a startling renaissance, as evidenced by *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology* and many other fine volumes.¹ However, even if successful, the arguments of traditional natural theology can hope at best to establish a “bare” or “generic” theism: they cannot tell us which of the competing theistic religions is most likely true. The received wisdom is that further illumination about the identity of God is only available through special revelation. This assumption is challenged by an approach that Richard Swinburne has dubbed “ramified natural theology.”² The idea is to present public evidence which discriminates between competing theistic religions because they do not all explain that evidence, or explain it equally well. While Swinburne is the most famous contemporary proponent of this approach, it has many precedents, for example in the arguments of various church fathers and of Blaise Pascal that Christianity is the true theistic religion because of its uniquely strong support by well-attested miracles and fulfilled prophecy. And Alister McGrath’s recent work may also qualify, as he develops an approach to natural theology which is both Christocentric and anchored in specifically Trinitarian theology.³

The promise of ramified natural theology is considerable. On the one hand, as developed by Swinburne, ramified natural theology is an *extension* of traditional natural theology.⁴ Thus Swinburne’s case for the truth of Christianity assumes the general background evidence for God’s existence

1. James F. Sennett and Douglas Groothuis, eds., *In Defense of Natural Theology: A Post-Humean Assessment* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2005); William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); Rodney Holder, *The Heavens Declare: Natural Theology and the Legacy of Karl Barth* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton, 2012); Russell Re Manning, John Hedley Brooke, and Fraser Watts, *The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). One could easily cite a large number of more specialized works devoted to updated versions of the ontological, cosmological, teleological, and moral arguments as well as the arguments from reason, consciousness and abstract objects.

2. Richard Swinburne, “Natural Theology, Its ‘Dwindling Probabilities’ and ‘Lack of Rapport,’” *Faith and Philosophy* 21 (2004): 533–46.

3. Alister McGrath, *The Open Secret: A New Vision for Natural Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008). What is controversial in McGrath’s approach is his contention that nature must be interpreted in an appropriate way to disclose its secrets: will this depend on presuppositions that are not neutral between competing worldviews?

4. Richard Swinburne, *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) and *Was Jesus God?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

(which he himself has developed in a powerful cumulative case argument), and supplements it with the evidence for the prior likelihood of the incarnation and the posterior unlikelihood of our having the evidence we do for the life, death and resurrection of Christ unless these events were the result of God's plan of salvation.⁵ On the other hand, it is by no means obvious that a ramified approach must build on evidence from traditional natural theology. At least in some cases, a ramified argument may be made *independently* of a prior case for theism. For example, as Hugh Gauch has pointed out,⁶ in the case for the Resurrection developed by Timothy and Lydia McGrew,⁷ only Bayes factors are used, dispensing with prior probabilities. More generally, using a likelihood approach, it is possible to assess the relative merits of a range of competing worldviews without presupposing any of them.

To the extent that practitioners of ramified natural theology are sanguine about traditional natural theology, they can exploit the latter's strengths by developing arguments that extend or supplement its results. At the same time, to the extent that a ramified natural theological argument is developed independently of traditional natural theology, reservations about the latter do not justify a failure to seriously consider the former.⁸ Ramified natural theology's flexible relationship with traditional natural theology gives Christian apologists valuable latitude when seeking to address the diverse epistemic states of unbelievers. For hard-nosed materialists, traditional natural theology may help provide a theistic foundation so that a case for the Resurrection (or miracles in general) has more appeal. But for many others, for whom theistic religions are among the live hypotheses, a ramified approach may be sufficient by itself to select the best worldview option. There are many new questions and exciting opportunities in this growing area, and we are confident that the nine following essays will help to develop a sense of the potential for ramified natural theology to transform Christian philosophy and apologetics.

The lead article by Richard Swinburne and the subsequent discussion in the next two articles concern Jesus's Resurrection. Swinburne's initial essay summarizes several of his book length studies and serves as a paradigm case of ramified natural theology. Using a Bayesian formulation, Swinburne shows that there is one and only one individual—Jesus of Nazareth—who

5. Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

6. Hugh G. Gauch, Jr., "Natural Theology's Case for Jesus's Resurrection: Methodological and Statistical Considerations," *Philosophia Christi* 13 (2011): 339–55.

7. Timothy McGrew and Lydia McGrew, "The Argument from Miracles: A Cumulative Case for the Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth," in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, ed. William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 593–662.

8. In a recent symposium on Paul K. Moser's religious epistemology, Moser expressed his skepticism toward the value of traditional natural theological arguments, while Kathryn Waidler, Charles Taliaferro and Harold Netland defended it, but ramified natural theology did not surface. See *Philosophia Christi* 14 (2012): 263–311.

plausibly satisfies both the prior and the posterior requirements to be God incarnate, and that since the evidence for this is so strong, God would have to be a grand deceiver (or one who permits some lesser agent, such as the devil, to perpetrate grand deception) if some other past or future figure were the messiah, but this is incompatible with God's perfect moral character.

This last claim of Swinburne's is the target of the next paper, by Robert Cavin and Carlos Colombetti. The authors claim that Swinburne's argument does not satisfy the demand for total evidence, because it overlooks the evidence for intentional human deception by false prophets (and self-deception) on a massive scale. Given their disagreements about which revelation is authentic, it is arguable that either Christians or non-Christians must have been deceived in some sense. Cavin and Colombetti conclude, contra Swinburne, that it is not improbable that the evidence for the Incarnation and Resurrection is mistaken or misleading.

In his response, Swinburne provides a close study of different kinds of deception, and argues that Cavin and Colombetti conflate God's unjustifiable permission of deliberate deception with His allowing people to hold false beliefs or to be deceived in justifiable ways. He claims that the examples provided by Cavin and Colombetti fall into the latter category, and that this is compatible with God's moral perfection. This exchange is likely only the beginning of an important dialogue on the evidential impact of "negative natural theology" on the project of ramified natural theology.

While this project is vitally important to Christian philosophers and apologists, is it something theologians proper should take seriously? Rodney Holder provides several reasons for an affirmative answer. The first is premised on the fact of religious pluralism: the many competing religions all provide internal criteria for the correctness of their beliefs, but these do not give the outsider an independent means of deciding which revelation is most likely true. Drawing on the work of Wolfhart Pannenberg, Brian Hebblethwaite, and others, Holder argues that theologians need ramified natural theology to overcome this impasse. They also need it to avoid circular presuppositionalism and to show that Christians have a faith founded on historical fact. As Holder concludes, "the traditional division between natural theology and revealed theology breaks down as soon as we ask why we should believe in a putative revelation and how we can commend our own perceived revelation to others."

Some may suspect that ramified natural theology employs an *ad hoc* procedure of argumentation, gerrymandered by religious apologists to show their faith in the best light. To the contrary, Hugh Gauch argues that like natural science, ramified natural theology functions with the most basic presuppositions of empirical method required to gain factual information about the world. Since these presuppositions are held in common between parties in disagreement, and since only public evidence and standard logic

is permitted, ramified arguments are capable of objectively discriminating between worldviews. Sound methodology is vital because, Gauch argues, “Any success and significance that ramified natural theology may have originates in, and depends on, its methodology being clear, impartial, settled, and effective.” Gauch shows in particular that this approach is ideal for investigating the facticity of miracle claims. Reinforcing Holder’s assessment, Gauch suggests that natural and revealed theology are not competitors but partners in a fruitful synergy.

One of the extraordinary differences between contemporary natural theology and the natural theology of previous centuries is the former’s integration of the rigorous formalisms of deductive logic and probability theory. Timothy McGrew and John DePoe seek to show how these technical breakthroughs provide sometimes surprising insights into what does and does not count as a strong argument of natural theology. On the cautionary side, they show that common intuitions about the probability of deductive arguments are often wrong. Yet they also show that an important implication of Bayes’s theorem for ramified natural theology is that the combination of many individually weak pieces of evidence can yield a cumulative case argument of great certainty. They further point out that there are many possible goals of natural theological arguments, and that the value of the argument will often depend on the epistemic state of its audience.

The remaining articles illustrate the wide range of potential application for a ramified approach to natural theology.

Lydia McGrew uses a Bayesian approach to show that Jesus was the prophesied Messiah. Her argument nicely illustrates the fact that even if each piece of evidence raises the probability of a hypothesis by a modest amount, their combination can yield a powerful cumulative case argument. She further argues that if we consider the remarkable fact that this Messiah is prophesied both to die and also to have a glorious future, the Resurrection is much more probable. This essay thus provides some further support for Swinburne’s conclusion that Jesus was God incarnate and was raised from the dead.

The moral argument for God is a staple of natural theology and many have undertaken to establish the existence of a good God from the apparent facts of moral obligation. In their paper, David Baggett and Ronnie Campbell seek to extend this argument by showing how Christianity provides superior resources to account for what it means to be a good God, particularly if it has been shown that such a being must be essentially loving. This is because the Trinity does real explanatory work in showing us what it means for God to be loving in His own nature. The authors point out that not only does this approach favor Christianity over non-Christian theistic religions, it also provides a reason to prefer some denominations over others on account of their portrait of God’s character. They dub this intra-Christian inquiry

“doubly ramified natural theology.” This matters not only to the Christian seeking the true church, but also has an impact on non-Christians, as they may reject the faith because some denominations offer a distorted picture of what God is like.

In a similar vein, Travis Dumsday argues that once we consider evidence such as visions and miracles which may favor Christianity over its rivals, it is an unavoidable possibility that some of this evidence will favor some denominations over others. Dumsday argues that ramified natural theology is, in any case, already at work in interdenominational debate, since philosophical and historical arguments are used to defend or critique confessional positions, for example, on baptism, predestination, and whether scripture can coherently be claimed as the sole source and norm of Christian doctrine. Dumsday points out that these arguments are typically not decisive as, for example, evidence may be rejected as the result of demonic delusion, yet there are limits to how far a Christian can reasonably (and charitably) pursue this dismissive strategy. In all this, he urges a posture of “cautious, critical open-mindedness.”

We hope that this special issue of *Philosophia Christi* helps to clarify the nature and purpose of ramified natural theology. We believe that ramified natural theology should be of interest to both Christian and non-Christian philosophers and theologians, and those in religious studies and biblical studies. It is our hope that, soon, ramified natural theology will have a prominent place in any survey of philosophy of religion. To that end, we edited this symposium in order to stimulate further work, whether this involves a defense, critique or proposed improvements of extant arguments, or the creative application of a ramified approach to a neglected source of evidence. For example, the following is an incomplete list of cases which would benefit from a distinctively ramified mode of investigation (in some cases, excellent, initial forays have been made into these areas):

- (1) The problem of evil.
- (2) Contemporary miracle claims.
- (3) Aesthetics and the imagination as a guide to plausibility and truth.
- (4) The psychology and neuroscience of religious experience.
- (5) Near-death experiences.
- (6) Metaethics and moral ontology.
- (7) Revisiting the ontological, cosmological, moral and design arguments from a Christocentric perspective.
- (8) The existence of the soul and the mind-body problem.
- (9) The nature of information and language.
- (10) The ontology of knowledge.
- (11) The argument from reason.
- (12) The nature of truth.
- (13) The status of abstract objects.
- (14) Existential *angst*.

The promise of the ramified approach suggests that the neglect of natural theology (and apologetics more generally) in many seminaries is founded on an unduly limited perception of the scope of natural theological arguments. So long as “natural theology” is taken to be synonymous with “bare natural

theology,” natural theology has limited interest to the theologian because it does not tell us who God is or help us to decide which revelation is correct. Yet this is precisely the target of ramified natural theology, and increased recognition of this fact should spur seminaries into a reconsideration of the role of natural theology in their curricula.

In closing, the beauty of a ramified approach to natural theology is that it calls Christians to take seriously scripture’s claim that Christ is present throughout reality, holding all things together (Col. 1:15–20). If we really believe this, then we should expect that a Christocentric (rather than a merely theocentric) mode of inquiry will ultimately be the most rewarding.⁹

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9. Thanks to Hugh Gauch, Justin McGeary, and Daniel Murphy for their comments on two earlier drafts of this introduction.