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The End and Purpose of Ramified Natural Theology

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Abstract: While ramified natural theology is an exciting and newly popular area of scholarly inquiry, it is also one which can very quickly get one into theological trouble. In this article I explore the necessary theological presuppositions for various views of ramified natural theology, offering two models for the possible theological place of the endeavour. Distinctions in the theological role of ramified natural theology allow one to find an appropriate place for it in apologetic discourse, either as in reach to believers or outreach to unbelievers.

The recent popularity of ramified natural theology is apparent, both from the publication of a special issue of *Philosophia Christi* (15:2 Winter 2013) and the influence of individual supporters of the project such as Richard Swinburne. The popularity of ramified natural theology, however, is also indicative of how it is viewed as a potential tool in the arena of argument against the New Atheists, and as a potential tool for apologetic evangelism. For these reasons, the presuppositions held when engaging in ramified natural theology must be examined: these tell us to what end, as well as with what effect, ramified natural theology can and is to be done. This article lays out the possible roles for ramified natural theology and exposes which presuppositions are necessary for each role. In doing so, it provides neither direct support nor direct critique for ramified natural theology, but rather indicates the necessary theological underpinnings of each role, providing a basis for critical examination of the appropriateness of each role given an individual's theological commitments.

Setting up a Problem

Richard Swinburne, at the base of his ramified natural theology, relies on what he calls “the evidence of ‘natural theology.’”¹ In his conclusion, in the same article, he notes that “unless my assessment of how probable the

¹ Richard Swinburne, “The Probability of the Resurrection of Jesus,” *Philosophia Christi* 15:2 (2013): 12 (<http://www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=109&mode=detail>).

evidence of natural theology makes the existence of god is *very* badly mistaken, it is very probable that Jesus was God Incarnate and that he rose from the dead.”² It is clear that a connection must be made between natural theology in general and a Christian ramified natural theology, if for no other reason than that the ramified arguments rely on the probability of the existence of at least a generic “God” whose characteristics are rendered probable or improbable in further arguments.

It would thus seem that the project of ramified natural theology is an extension of the project of natural theology, and it may well be subject to the same criticisms to which natural theology is subject. As ramified natural theology depends upon nonspecific natural theology, this article will assume that natural theology proper is possible, at least for the sake of examining ramified natural theology.

This amounts essentially to a claim that, as a comprehensive project, natural theology and ramified natural theology can demonstrate the significant probability of the existence of the Christian God. Thus, the comprehensive project is one of arguments for the probability of the Christian message. This probability is to be shown, as in Swinburne’s account, without recourse to special revelation such as posited in more theological accounts. We can now form a preliminary definition: The Ramified Natural Theology Project (RNTP) is the attempt to render probable the Christian message without supernatural aid.

The phrase “without supernatural aid” is understood here in a sense that precludes any action of God in special revelation, that is, that which is common to all humanity.³ According to Hugh Gauch,⁴ this is restricted to the natural ability of humans without recourse to worldview-oriented presuppositions.⁵

In objection to this, there is the possibility of expanding two parallel arguments, one of which keys on the acknowledgement of the Godhood of Christ, the other of which is simply based on the argument that a good God exists⁶.

² Ibid., 22.

³ N.B. that this does not preclude the *gracious* action of God, insofar as this is common to all humanity, e.g. common grace.

⁴ Hugh Gauch, “Natural Theology’s Case for Jesus’s Resurrection,” *Philosophia Christi* 13 (2011): 339-341.

⁵ Gauch quotes Scott MacDonald, “Natural Theology” in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* ed. Edward Craig (New York: Routledge, 1998), 6: 707-713; Gauch relies on restrictions such as “our natural cognitive resources” and “standard techniques of reasoning and facts or truths in principle available to all human beings just in virtue of their possessing reason and sense perception”, quotes from this article.

⁶ As in Swinburne’s *Existence of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1979/2004).

The first argument runs as follows:

1. Premise: No one comes to the Father except through the Son (John 14:6)
2. Premise: Knowledge of the Son comes through the Spirit (John 16:13-14, 1 Corinthians 2:10)
3. df. RNTP = the attempt to render probable the Christian message without supernatural aid
4. If RNTP is possible, I can demonstrate the probability of the Christian message (3)
5. If I can demonstrate the probability of the Christian message, I can demonstrate the probability of the Godhood of Christ (3,4)
6. If I can demonstrate the probability of the Godhood of Christ, I can accept or reject this probability
7. If I accept this probability, I have justified belief in the Godhood of Christ (which just also happens to be true!) (5,6)
8. If I have justified, true belief in the Godhood of Christ, I have knowledge of the Son.
9. \square Knowledge of the Son is possible without the Spirit
10. But, Premise (2)
11. Thus, either Premise (2) is false, or RNTP is not possible

A parallel argument regarding only the Father runs as follows:

1. Premise: No one comes to the Father except through the Son (John 14:6)
2. Premise: Knowledge of God as God requires “coming to the Father”
3. df. RNTP = the attempt to render probable the Christian message without supernatural aid
4. If RNTP is possible, I can demonstrate the probability that God exists (3)
5. If I can demonstrate the probability that God exists and if RNTP is possible, I can demonstrate the probability that God is a God who saves (3,4)
6. If I can demonstrate the probability that God is a God who saves, I can accept or reject this probability
7. If I accept this probability, I have justified belief that God is a God who saves (which just also happens to be true!) (5,6)
8. If I have justified, true belief that God is a God who saves, I have knowledge of God as God.

9. □ Knowledge of God as God is possible without the Son, or is possible without coming to the Father
10. But, Premise (2)
11. Thus, either Premise (2) is false, or RNTP is not possible

One might, of course, wish to reject premise (2) in its form in either argument; both arguments are present as it seems less likely that one would wish to reject both premise (2) of the first argument as well as premise (2) of the second argument. This seems, at first glance, problematic for RNTP. What these arguments in fact do, as I shall now demonstrate, is to raise the question about the theological commitments of the individual engaging in RNTP, as well as the question about the ostensible usefulness of RNTP.

Ways Out: Option One

The simplest way to solve the problem caused by the parallel arguments is to reject my definition of RNTP. This can be done in two ways, both of which use the same term:

- RNTP_{pd} = the attempt to render probable the Christian message by use of enlightened_{pd} human reason
- RNTP_{pg} = the attempt to render probable the Christian message by use of enlightened_{pg} human reason

The distinction lies in the way “enlightened human reason” is understood.

The first option is to claim that those who are predestined from eternity to accept the veracity of the Christian message are those whose reason is “enlightened_{pd}”, that is, the noetic damage of sin is removed to the point that they can assent to the veracity of the Christian message. This is not to say that such individuals initially make a cognitive commitment to the veracity of the Christian message, as this does not necessarily follow. On this account, RNTP_{pd} becomes a matter of the convincing of those who were predestined to be convinced – whether this be an initial convincing or a matter of establishing rational grounds supporting a conviction already held. While this is claimed, for various theological reasons, not to affect the theological imperative to spread the Gospel, it does make a statement about the role of RNTP_{pd} within the given theological position. If RNTP_{pd} is the correct account, the role of RNTP_{pd} is less an apologetic one and will primarily be useful as a sense-making activity for people who are already convinced of the veracity of the Gospel message, though it is conceivable that the occasional individual will experience a subjective conversion in response to RNTP_{pd}. The theological presupposition that this prior state

depends on the choice of God necessitates that RNTP_{pd} have no objective efficacy in the conversion of the individual, though a subjective change in rational conviction may be experienced. The prior state of “chosenness” by God may be a state which the agent is subjectively aware of, in which case RNTP_{pd} serves as a discipleship tool *intra muram ecclesiae*, or the agent may be subjectively unaware of God’s choosing action prior to the conversion experience, which may well be brought about by encountering RNTP_{pd}.

The second option, RNTP_{pg}, is the claim that due to prevenient grace, all of humanity is in a state such that a prior action of God has made it possible to come to knowledge of God. All human reason is thus enlightened_{pg} on RNTP_{pg}, and one comes to knowledge of God through the Son and through the Spirit even when convinced by RNTP_{pg}. This is the solution to the problem through rejecting (3) which preserves the convincing power of the project; on RNTP_{pg} there is genuine strength in the arguments of RNTP_{pg} to convince the unbeliever to move to, or toward, belief. Prevenient grace is not, however, a universally agreed-upon fact;⁷ this solution is only open to certain theological positions. Of note is the fact that the pregifted *caritas*-grace referred to in the Catechism of the Catholic Church,⁸ though not normally referred to as “prevenient” grace, is a valid possibility for this understanding. This would seem to make RNTP_{pg} in line with the teachings of the Catholic Church, especially in light of the statements of *Dei Verbum*⁹ in the II Vatican Council.

Ways Out: Option Two

The second solution to the problem is to reject that the term “belief” in (7) and (8) are univocal with the sort of belief that one has when one claims Christian faith. This is to define RNTP by the resulting knowledge which

⁷ N.B. that this is not a criticism of this view. As the concern here is to examine necessary theological underpinnings, this merely illustrates that one must accept prevenient grace in the given sense in order to interpret RNTP in such a manner – that is, to redefine (3) such that common grace enables the rational individual to render probable the Christian message, even in the absence of special revelation. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for demonstrating the need for this gloss.

⁸ CCC #1997.

⁹ “As a sacred synod has affirmed, God, the beginning and end of all things, can be known with certainty from created reality by the light of human reason (see Rom. 1:20); but teaches that it is through His revelation that those religious truths which are by their nature accessible to human reason can be known by all men with ease, with solid certitude and with no trace of error, even in this present state of the human race. (7)” from http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html (accessed March 4 2012).

comes from the project. This can be done in two ways: that of the medieval and postreformation church,¹⁰ or in the categories of Karl Barth. The traditional categories would redefine RNTP as follows:

RNTP_{notitia} = RNTP proper brings propositional knowledge about God, or that X is the fact about God.

RNTP_{assensus} = RNTP proper brings one to the point of subjective intellectual assent to objectively true propositions about God

RNTP_{fiducia} = RNTP proper brings one to a saving faith in which one relies fully on God.

This solution then rejects RNTP_{fiducia} in favor of either RNTP_{notitia} or RNTP_{assensus}. It seems that the scholastic distinction between *notitia* and *assensus* is not so useful today; it is hard to imagine that one genuinely has knowledge of a true proposition without the component of belief that it is true. Thus RNTP_{notitia} and RNTP_{assensus} seem to melt together. If this is the sort of knowledge which RNTP brings, it raises the question, to what end does one engage in RNTP?

This sort of knowledge, when not salvific, can either be seen as irrelevant in regard to the individual's relationship with God, or it can form a sort of pre-step to salvific faith, moving one closer on a scale.¹¹ If it is generally useless, it seems equally useless to engage in an activity which produces useless knowledge, so this iteration is not a satisfying solution to the problem. The concept of a scale can, however be equally problematic, in that it seems to make a distinction only of degree between the salvific action of God and the nonsalvific action of man.¹² While this might be a more acceptable solution, given certain theological presuppositions (but see below!), it is again not universally acceptable, and solutions of this nature are arguably the reason for the Swiss "*Nein!*" in the middle of the last century.

The categories of faith provided by Karl Barth provide another manner of looking at the knowledge provided by RNTP. Barth defines faith as: *Anerkennen*, an acknowledgment of the Godhood of God; *Erkennen*, a recognition of the nature of God revealed as God; and *Bekennen*, the

¹⁰ Cf. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie III* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1993): 172-173.

¹¹ There may be some other, temporal use to nonsalvific knowledge of God; this other possibility is intentionally ignored in this article as the emphasis is on the salvific veracity of the Christian message.

¹² Cf. Isaak August Dorner, *System der Christlichen Glaubenslehre Band I* (1886): 167-168, 191-194 for an example of the results of such an action.

confessional change of life in the individual as a result of God.¹³ Thus the Barthian categories for RNT would look as follows:

RNTP_{anerkennen} = RNTP proper results in knowledge whereby one acknowledges the Godhood of God and the right of lordship over the life of the individual

RNTP_{erkennen} = RNTP proper results in knowledge whereby God is recognized as God in self-revelation

RNTP_{bekennen} = RNTP proper results in an ontological change in the individual.

It is to be assumed that one would not wish to assert that RNTP would result in RNTP_{bekennen}, at least insofar as one can assume that one wishes to remain within the bounds of orthodox Christian faith – for otherwise (9) in both of the original arguments is unproblematic.

From a strictly Barthian perspective, RNTP_{anerkennen} is prior to RNTP_{erkennen}, and for this reason, RNTP as a whole, if it were to function, could only result in RNTP_{anerkennen}. This would be reason for the Barthian to reject RNTP, that is, RNTP_{anerkennen} can, for the Barthian, only occur in the locus of revelation occurring in the individual's encounter with Christ. Even from a non-Barthian perspective, it seems strange to suppose that RNTP might result in RNTP_{anerkennen} without also bringing some sort of propositional knowledge with it. This is precisely the reason for which the Barthian would reject the possibility of RNTP_{anerkennen}, as it would result in the blindest of trusts when not coupled with the *erkennen* of the Barthian perspective.

Abstracted from the Barthian perspective, it would seem that RNTP_{erkennen} is a live option. If RNTP does indeed deliver valid information about God, it should deliver information about God in his own nature, and not merely in an analogous fashion. The Barthian qualification of self-revelation might well be expanded from the locus of revelation in Christ to the idea of general revelation in nature, thus resulting in “plain” RNTP being a tool by which one discovers the Christian God's self-revelation in his creation.

RNTP_{erkennen} becomes, however, problematic on this assumption.

If RNTP_{erkennen} gives genuine information about God's self-revelation in nature apart from, or perhaps even over against God's self-revelation in Christ, the question must be raised about the efficacy as well as the content of this revelation. To opine that RNTP_{erkennen} is as effective as the special revelation in Christ is to allow the logical possibility that no revelation in Christ is necessary for the salvation of the individual, as well as the

¹³ Cf. Karl Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* IV/1 (Zürich: EVG Verlag 1960): 847-872.

possibility of Rahner's "anonymous Christians." If it is not as effective as special revelation, one must still answer the question about the content of the revelation.

If the efficacy is not the same, both RNTP_{erkennen} and special revelation cannot have identical content in every respect. Fully different content is a possibility; however, this would imply that the content of the self-revelation of God in special revelation is not all the truth which there is to be known about God, and that it would be up to individual humans to find out other aspects of God's character, or other characteristics of God – what seems to be a rather heterodox position, for while it is orthodox to assume that there is more to the nature of God than is humanly knowable, it is, to say the least, unusual to assume that there are humanly knowable facts about God which are only available through the action of humans and not at all available through special revelation. This becomes especially problematic on this view, as this knowledge is knowledge about the nature or character of God, and not merely factual knowledge about how God might have done things (i.e. it is a matter of knowledge about God Himself, not merely a matter of scientific knowledge making one's understanding of creation more precise. One would wish to distinguish between knowledge of the type "God has the attribute X" and of the type "God created the physical universe such that it follows certain physical laws").

The only real option on this view would be to posit that RNTP_{erkennen} results in a partial knowledge of the Christian God as God, and to posit that for whatever reason, this knowledge is insufficient to be salvific knowledge. It cannot be simply numerically insufficient; the thought of knowing enough true propositions about God to gain salvation is simply ludicrous. Thus there must be some specifically salvific content which is unavailable to RNTP_{erkennen} and yet a part of special revelation. There is a twofold problem with this assumption, however.

Firstly, this assumption runs the same risk which was seen above, that of making only a distinction of degree between the nonsalvific action of man and the salvific action of God. In the event one were inclined to see this as unproblematic in and of itself, one must also face a seeming contradiction in positing that either of the two definitions of RNTP which result in this definition seem to have, i.e. it seems irreconcilable to posit either of these definitions of RNTP and to find this distinction of degree unproblematic. The definition of RNTP given in (3) was that of rendering probable the Christian message. One seems thereby to end up in the situation of affirming the state of affairs such that one can believe the Christian message and at the same time lack that knowledge which is necessary for salvation. Belief in the Christian message as a whole seems to necessarily include belief in the Gospel message of salvation. Thus one both

believes that which is necessary for salvation, and lacks that knowledge which is necessary for salvation – one is now the straw man used against the Calvinists, one who wishes to believe and believes intellectually, but is excluded from the Kingdom.

Solving this problem requires the same step as the first possible response to the arguments given in the first part of this article, namely, rejecting part or all of definition (3). One may reformulate (3) in the manner described above, or, in conjunction with this option, reformulate (3) as:

RNTP_{partial} = the attempt to render probable *certain parts* of the Christian message without supernatural aid.

This results in two possible solutions:

RNTP_{erkennenpartial} = RNTP proper results in knowledge whereby *some things about God* are recognized as *some true things about God* in general self-revelation

And

RNTP_{notitiapartial} = RNTP proper brings propositional knowledge about God, or that X is the fact about God, *when these facts are such that they comprise a subset of the facts about God in special revelation.*

This does not escape the problem which some would have with a preliminary step or with partial knowledge about God; however, if one finds a preliminary step on a “scale of belief” unproblematic, these definitions may be satisfying.

Conclusion

What these considerations have shown is that there are essentially two possible roles for RNTP. The first possible role is primarily that of a sense-making function within the community of faith, to strengthen the individual who already believes and reassure him or her that having specifically Christian faith is neither irrational nor ludicrous. This is the function given theological presuppositions which coincide with traditional Reformed or Lutheran views (among others!).

The second possible role for RNTP is that of an “apologetic”, that is to say, to posit that it has convincing and explanatory power for the conversion of the non-believer, and has thus a place in evangelistic endeavours. This role for RNTP requires a doctrine of prevenient grace, regardless of which objection to the initial arguments is taken, and may also

require some work in specifying precisely what sort of knowledge is available from RNTP.

It should be noted that the use of RNTP as a response to arguments for atheism may be that of a sense-making, strengthening function within the faith community, as well as an evangelistic endeavour, and the validity of RNTP in this arena must be judged on the aims of those engaging in it.

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