

DO THE “CLASSIC” PROOFS FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD ACTUALLY DEMONSTRATE GOD’S EXISTENCE?

No, they do not. The title of this paper is a closed-ended question, so I thought I would simply answer it at the outset. I will attempt to substantiate my answer by first providing a basic explanation of the classic proofs for God’s existence.¹ The biblical and philosophical reasons for my repudiation of the traditional, classic proofs will then be offered. I will conclude by briefly stating the proper way in which God’s existence should be demonstrated to the “fool”² who doubts it.

In all worthwhile debates, treatises, and other formal means of communication, the meaning of the terms used must be clearly defined. The need is no different for this relatively short treatment of the subject at hand. What is a proof? Who or what is God? *The American Heritage Collegiate Dictionary* defines a proof as “the evidence or argument that compels the mind to accept an assertion as true” and “the validation of a proposition by application of specified rules, as of induction or deduction, to axioms and previously derived conclusions.”³ Professor of philosophy, Stephen Davis, characterizes a theistic proof as “an attempt to prove, by argument, that God exists.”⁴ Another potentially ambiguous term has now been introduced—argument. Davis defines an argument as “a finite set of words arranged in sentences, consisting

¹Many large books which discuss the various proofs for God’s existence have been written. The length of this research paper precludes an analysis of the numerous renderings of even the four major proofs for theism considered here.

²My use of “fool” is not intended to be pejorative. It is a reference to Yahweh’s assessment of the atheist (Ps 14:1a, NASB). “The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God.’”

³*The American Heritage Collegiate Dictionary* (1997), s.v. “proof.”

of one or more premises and a conclusion, and whose premises are designed to . . . provide intellectual support for the conclusion.”⁵

With this definition of “proof” in mind, I shall proceed to defining “God.” By “God,” I mean the God of the Bible—Yahweh. I have held for some time now that arguing for the existence of “the God of theism,”⁶ which many (if not most) Christians and non-Christians do today, is both futile and immoral.⁷ The nature and character of the God of postmodernity’s imagination is as diverse as the individual constituents of pop culture. Thus the validity of the classic proofs for “God’s” existence varies depending on the God that is being arbitrated. I contend that the traditional formulation⁸ of the classic theistic proofs employed by many Christian apologists do not *necessarily* point to Yahweh.

The most famous *a priori*⁹ “argument” for the existence of God was first conceived and written by an eminent medieval philosopher, theologian, and churchman named Anselm. The gist of his meditation is found in *Proslogion*, one of his works which dates from 1079.

It is quite possible to think of something whose nonexistence cannot be thought of. This must be greater than something whose nonexistence can be thought of. So if this thing (than which no greater thing can be thought) can be thought of as not existing, then, that

⁴Stephen T. Davis, *God, Reason, & Theistic Proofs* (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 1.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

⁷The apostle Peter commands Christians in 1 Peter 3:15 to “sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts” (NASB). Followers of Christ, therefore, do not have the right to reason in an allegedly neutral fashion when making a defense of God. Neither may Christians argue as if unbelievers are intellectually neutral for *all* the thoughts of the wicked are “There is no God” (Ps 10:4b).

⁸The classic formulation of the proofs only seek to prove theism, which again, I believe is absurd. Within the Christian worldview, however, the traditional theistic proofs work very well to demonstrate the veracity of the Bible’s presentation of God. Many thanks to Cornelius Van Til for helping me understand this distinction.

⁹“A proposition is known *a priori* if it can be known without experience of the specific course of events in the actual world.” See *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (1996), s.v. “a priori/a posteriori.”

very thing than which a greater thing cannot be thought is not that than which a greater cannot be thought. This is a contradiction. So it is true that there exists something than which nothing greater can be thought, that it cannot be thought of as not existing. And you are this thing, O Lord our God! So truly therefore do you exist, O Lord my God, that you cannot be thought of as not existing, and with good reason; for if a human mind could think of anything greater than you, the creature would rise above the Creator and judge you; which is obviously absurd.

Although almost everyone refers to this particular passage in Anselm's writing as an argument or proof for God's existence, Anselm never described his thoughts as such. Critics of the "argument," such as myself, must keep this fact in mind. "The *Proslogion* is a work of meditation, not of logical argument."¹⁰ The definition that Anselm assigns to God makes perfect sense given his Christian convictions (i.e., his Christian worldview). His statements coincide with the biblical presentation of God. I regard Anselm's "ontological argument" as an indubitable proof only for those who already hold a view of God that is similar to his own. The "argument," therefore, is better labeled a tool for personal spiritual edification because those who already espouse a particular proposition (e.g., God exists) do not need proof for it. "The 'argument' does not really have force outside this context of faith, and Anselm never intended it to be used in this general philosophical manner."¹¹

A "bare" presentation of the ontological argument as a proof for God's existence may be faulted in many ways. I will address only one. Even if I agree with Anselm that God is a being than which a greater being cannot be conceived, the existence of Yahweh has not been proved. Only the *existence* of the greatest being, however one defines it, him, or her, *may have* been proved. How else is the "greatest being" defined? The answer to this question depends

¹⁰Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 158.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 159.

upon the theological¹² presuppositions of the person to whom it is posed. According to the Bible, the presuppositions or fundamental assumptions that one has about God, themselves, and reality are greatly dependent on his or her ethical disposition. Again, only unbelievers *need* proofs for God's existence.

Armed with a raw form of the ontological argument, atheists and agnostics will, according to their depravity, always fashion a god in their own image—one far different from Yahweh. Unbelievers, usually without saying it, consider themselves to be God. They rule, not God. Consider the average female prostitute. Her god, than which nothing greater can be conceived (in her mind), may very well be a sexually perverse deity who fuels her libido and encourages her immoral behavior. The attribute of sexual perversity certainly does not apply to the one, true, and living God who has revealed Himself in Scripture!

Approximately 700 years ago, a Roman Catholic theologian, author, and teacher named Thomas Aquinas popularized three more classic proofs for the existence of God—the cosmological,¹³ teleological, and moral argument.¹⁴ Unlike the ontological argument, these proofs are *a posteriori* in nature. They are used “to argue for the existence of God based on things that we know from experience, things that we have learned through the senses.”¹⁵ In other words, *a posteriori* proofs are verified or falsified via empirical investigation.

¹²Let us assume we have all agreed to call the “greatest being” by the name God.

¹³Aquinas did not invent the cosmological argument. The earliest known rendition of it is expressed by Plato in book X of his *Laws*.

¹⁴ The moral argument is implicitly stated in Aquinas' fourth proof for God's existence, which “in effect argues that because there are degrees of perfection in the universe, there must somewhere be the ultimate perfection.” Quotation taken from Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 183.

¹⁵Davis, *God, Reason, & Theistic Proofs*, 60.

Multiple versions of the cosmological argument are found in Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*. In its most basic form, the cosmological argument "considers the fact that every known thing in the universe has a cause. Therefore, it reasons, the universe itself must also have a cause, and the cause of such a great universe can only be God."¹⁶ God, it is maintained, is the First Cause, the Uncaused Cause, the Unmoved Mover. In the natural world about us, we see things in motion. Sometimes, matter is only in motion at the atomic level (e.g., the movement of electrons about the nucleus of an atom), but, nonetheless, it is in motion. The motion or movement of one thing is caused by something outside of itself. This supposedly demands a "Prime Mover."¹⁷ Modern philosophers and theologians, as is the case with all the classic proofs, have modified and tweaked Aquinas' arguments. Many philosophers today mistakenly summarize Aquinas' proofs by including a premise that says "infinite regress is impossible"¹⁸ even though he "specifically states that philosophy is incapable of showing the impossibility of an infinite series."¹⁹ I mention this fact to illustrate that Aquinas was forthright about the weaknesses of his proofs for God's existence.

Criticisms of the cosmological argument are weighty and numerous. If *all* things in the universe are the result of a cause, what caused God? Theists (especially Christians) usually object at this point and quickly reshape the proof to say: All things in the created order, the natural realm, are in motion or are caused. But what does this reformation assume? It assumes a creator! And this premise will not be granted by anyone who is awake at the wheel of debate.

¹⁶Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000), 143.

¹⁷Ronald H. Nash, *Life's Ultimate Questions: An Introduction to Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 173.

¹⁸Davis, *God, Reason, & Theistic Proofs*, 61-62.

Schopenhauer's criticism of the cosmological argument is incisive when he says that defenders of the proof treat the causal principle "like a hired cab, which we dismiss when we have reached our destination."²⁰ Special pleading and exceptions (hired cabs) are not allowed when the existence of God is being deliberated.

Are all effects the result of only one cause? Many effects in our experiences are known to be the result of several causes: combustion, water, love, fertilization, etc. Could not the universe then be the result of two or more causes? Why must one conclude that one cause is back of everything?

The cosmological argument is based on the "law" of causality? But do we *know* that everything is the result of a cause or causes? Or is the law an experiential inference? No one *knows* that all things are contingent, because no one has observed *all* things. Moreover, "even if the things or events in this world are all 'effects' . . . , why couldn't there be an infinite regress of purely *natural* causes? After all, our experience of causation is limited to the natural world, so how can we extrapolate beyond natural experience?"²¹ In his usual perceptive style, noted theologian and apologist Greg Bahnsen has written, "The cosmological argument amounts to saying: '*Each of the many parts* within experience has a *natural* cause; therefore, *the whole* set of things has a *single* and *supernatural* cause.'²² "It [the traditional cosmological argument]

¹⁹Nash, *Life's Ultimate Questions*, 173.

²⁰Davis, *God, Reason, & Theistic Proofs*, 73.

²¹Greg Bahnsen, "A Critique of 'Classical Apologetics'" *Presbyterian Journal* 44:32 (1985) [on-line]; accessed 18 April 2004; available from <http://www.cmfnow.com/articles/PA061.htm>; Internet.

²²Greg Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1998), 618.

fallaciously moves from a premise about natural causes to a conclusion about a supernatural cause—completely exceeding the scope of the premise.”²³

In spite of Davis’ attempt to rebut one criticism of the cosmological argument, I maintain that advocates of the proof commit the philosophical fallacy of composition.²⁴ Davis writes “If we can give a plausible explanation of the existence of all the contingent things that have ever existed, there is nothing called ‘the world’ (the set of all the contingent beings) that is left unexplained and that accordingly requires the existence of a necessary being outside the set to explain it.”²⁵ Again, do we *know* that all things are contingent? No. Even if the world as a whole could be shown to be contingent, why could not a contingent cause have caused the world? Davis says a singular being is required to explain the contingent set. I smell prejudicial conjecture. One could legitimately say multiple beings caused the set.

Another classic proof for God’s existence that is often advanced by those who endorse natural theology²⁶ is called the teleological or design argument. The adjective “teleological” is a combination of two Greek words: “telos” meaning end or goal and “logos” meaning word, statement, or message. (Many philosophers classify the teleological argument as a subcategory of the cosmological argument.) “Given our observation of many instances of design and purpose in the world, our minds drive us to the existence of God, the cause of this order and purpose.”²⁷

²³Ibid.

²⁴The assumption that the properties of the whole are identical to the properties of the parts that comprise the whole.

²⁵Davis, *God, Reason, & Theistic Proofs*, 74.

²⁶The knowledge of a god that is acquired (supposedly) through a discursive process and chains of inference which stem from observation of the world and its natural phenomena. Classical and evidential apologists rest many of their “proofs” upon this theory.

²⁷Nash, *Life’s Ultimate Questions*, 174.

This is the teleological argument, succinctly stated. A fuller, classic expression of the proof may be found in William Paley's book *Natural Theology*.

There cannot be a design without a designer; contrivance without a contriver; order without choice; arrangement without anything capable of arranging; subserviency and relation to a purpose without that which could intend a purpose; means suitable to an end, and executing their office in accomplishing that end, without the end ever having been contemplated or the means accommodated to it. Arrangement, disposition of parts, subserviency of means to an end, relation of instruments to a use imply the presence of intelligence and mind.²⁸

The world itself and many parts within it scream design. Design requires a designer. I believe, along with theists who do not love Yahweh and even many atheists, that the individual arguments undergirding intelligent design are very compelling. Numerous examples could be cited. A personal computer (PC) is a very complex electromechanical design, yet most scientists would posit that the complexity of the human eye far exceeds that of a PC. Consider the position of the earth relative to the sun. Its location in our solar system seems purposeful in that if it “were either 5 per cent [sic] closer or 1 per cent [sic] farther from the the [sic] sun, life would not be possible on it.”²⁹ Life itself seems purposed. William Lane Craig, well known Christian apologist and proponent of the classic proofs for God's existence, “likens the emergence of life in the universe apart from intelligent guidance not to a roulette wheel yielding a certain number, but to all the roulette wheels in Monte Carlo, quite unrelated to each other, simultaneously yielding numbers within narrow limits and bearing certain precise mathematical relations among them.”³⁰ The mathematical probability of life (even one amino acid, let alone an enzyme or cell) arising from non-life is so improbable that it approaches impossibility.

²⁸William Paley, *Natural Theology* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), 8-9.

²⁹Davis, *God, Reason, & Theistic Proofs*, 110.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 111.

Why then do not non-theists become theists? Because their worldview is naturalistic. In a world of chance “governed” by natural law alone, anything is possible. Anything can happen, they say, given enough time. From what other weaknesses does the teleological argument suffer? Why does the supposed proof fail to prove the existence of Yahweh? Earth may have been thoughtfully and purposefully created by a designer, just as car engines are thoughtfully and purposefully designed. Mechanical engineers, however, are not divine simply because they can design.

In man’s experience, all of the things (e.g., engineers, artists, birds, bees) that design other things are created beings. No one has ever experienced an uncreated designer. Consistent induction requires one to ask, “What created the designer of the world?” Thinking unbelievers, such as David Hume, have challenged Christians who use the teleological argument to answer this legitimate and appropriate question. The Christian rejoinder, eventually is “But God is the uncreated Master Designer.” This pitiful response begs the question!

Yahweh is omnipotent and omniscient. Must one conclude that the Master Designer possesses these attributes? Could not the designer of our world have been a powerful alien from another galaxy? Or maybe a whole family of aliens designed and created that which we behold about us. Nothing about the design argument precludes the possibility of several designers.

Yahweh is also perfect in all that He does. But does our world always appear to be perfect? Dysteleological phenomena abound in our world. “Natural catastrophes, such as tornadoes, hurricanes . . . and a host of other ‘acts of God,’ as the insurance companies term them, cause us to wonder what sort of designer planned the universe.”³¹ Could not one conclude through observation that our world is “only the first essay of some infant deity who afterwards

³¹Davis, *God, Reason, & Theistic Proofs*, 103.

abandoned it, ashamed of his lame performance?”³² Christians can partially explain the reason for the existence of natural disasters, pain, and death. It fits within their worldview. Can a theist who utilizes a supposedly worldview-less presentation of the teleological argument answer the criticisms of Hume and other non-theists? I think not. Even if the design argument is valid and sound, “the designer whose existence will have been proved is far from the God of theism,”³³ which includes the one true and living God, Yahweh.

The last of the major classic proofs for the existence of God is commonly called the moral argument. The argument is really one illustration of the transcendental argument for God’s existence. God is the precondition of intelligibility for even rationally discussing morality. Without God, the concept of morality is unintelligible. Why? Morality presupposes law. Law presupposes a law-giver. All man-made laws are subjective. (They are subject to the mind and will of man.) True, objective morality, unlike the behavior code of social convention, must be based on something outside of man. Classical apologists assert this “fountain of the moral law must be God or a Godlike being.”³⁴

Does the moral argument, presented without a worldview context on allegedly neutral ground, prove the existence of Yahweh? No. Many strongly believe that God and/or his revelation is the objective standard for moral law. Muslims appeal to Allah’s revelation in the Qur’an as their objective, divinely inspired source for morality. Hindus look to the Bhagavad-Gita as their source for spiritual guidance, including moral behavior. The “objective” law sources are numerous. Everyone on Earth could agree that God is the final reference point for

³²Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 187.

³³Davis, *God, Reason, & Theistic Proofs*, 102.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 148.

morality, thereby proving the strength of the classic moral argument. Everyone could then pour their own personal meaning into the term “God.” Once again, Yahweh’s existence has not been demonstrated through a classic proof. Instead, an amorphous, vacuous, personal deity has been exalted in His place. I do not believe this pleases the Lord.

Many Christians today and throughout the history of the church have included the classic proofs for God’s existence in their apologetic arsenal. And I am confident that Yahweh often blessed their efforts as they attempted to “give an account for the hope”³⁵ within them. No one is perfect in his or her apologetic method or evangelism. God frequently uses our crooked sticks to strike a straight line. But God’s redemption of our arguments does not permit us to continue using them if they have been shown to be faulty. In light of the philosophical defects of the classic proofs presented in this paper, we should ask, What does God think about the classic proofs?

The Bible contains *no* arguments (classic or otherwise) for God’s existence because all men already know that God exists. “For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been *clearly* [emphasis mine] seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though *they knew God* [emphasis mine], they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks.”³⁶ Those who deny Yahweh’s existence are liars. It is the job of the Christian apologist to unmask the sinner’s unbelief for what it truly is—secret belief.³⁷

³⁵1 Peter 3:15b, NASB

³⁶Romans 1:20-21a, NASB

³⁷I have Cornelius Van Til to thank for this brilliant way of understanding the unbeliever’s “unbelief.”

How should a Christian prove Yahweh's existence? A detailed answer to this question exceeds the remaining space of this assignment, but I shall provide the overarching procedure by paraphrasing a statement of Harry Frankfurt in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. The assertion that Yahweh exists and has revealed Himself in the Bible is true because of the impossibility of the contrary (i.e., His nonexistence). Unbelief in the existence and revelation of Yahweh is inconceivable because one's unbelief would destroy or "violate the conditions or presuppositions of rational inquiry," thus destroying the very possibility of *rationally* affirming, rejecting, or even considering His existence.