WHAT IS A PROOF FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD ?

I) *The Term "God"*

The purpose of this paper is to examine the notion of a proof for the existence of God. I take the term "God" in this context as an abbreviation for the definite description "the x such that $\varnothing x$". I furthermore take "$\varnothing$" in this description as a predicate whose extension is defined, relative to a set *BEL* of sentences expressing a monotheistic religious belief or doctrine, as follows. Let *BEL (God/x)* be the set of formulae that results from substituting an occurrence of the new variable 'x' for each purely referential occurrence of the term "God" in each member of *BEL*. Then let the extension of "$\varnothing$" be the class of all things α for which there exists an assignment function d of values to variables such that both $d(x) = \alpha$ and d satisfies (every member of) *BEL (God/x)*.

We shall say that a monotheistic doctrine is *true* if and only if, where *BEL* is a set of sentences expressing that doctrine, there is an assignment function which satisfies *BEL (God/x)*. We shall say that a monotheistic doctrine is *false* if and only if it is not true. The restriction to monotheistic doctrines is essential if the procedure outlined above is to make good sense. In a set of sentences *BEL* expressing a polytheistic religion, "God" does not abbreviate a definite description. In fact, if one cares to make the distinction, "God" does not appear there at all, although "god" does occur and is a general predicate.

In effect our procedure guarantees that the sentence "God exists" co-entail a whole monotheism. It loads the word "God" with a great deal of religious significance. I take this to be desirable. For instance, where *BEL* expresses Judaic doctrine, our procedure gives a clear sense to the statement that God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

II) *The Sentence "God exists"*

By a "proof for the existence of God" I understand a *philosophical* proof for the existence of God. Here I take "philosophy" in a very broad sense, distinguished mainly by its opposition to "theology". I take a "proof" in general to be a sound argument for each step of which a justification is given. I take a "theological" proof, relative to a given religious doctrine, to be a proof at least one of whose steps is justified by appeal to the truth of a set *BEL* expressing that doctrine. A "philosophical" proof then is any proof that is not theological relative to any religious doctrine. The various steps of a "philosophical" proof may be justified by appeal to general philosophical principles or to particular empirical data. But no step of a philosophical proof may be justified by appeal to religious doctrine.

Now for at least some monotheistic religions, it is philosophically certain that there can be no philosophical proof that there exists an entity with all the characteristics attributed to God by the doctrine of that religion – and this *not* for the reason that a set *BEL* expressing that doctrine must be inconsistent, but for a more interesting reason. A proof of this observation may be had by noting that it is part of traditional Christian doctrine that certain truths about God cannot be known except by appealing to the truth of the doctrine. The most familiar example is the dogma of the Trinity. It is part of traditional Christian doctrine that the dogma of the Trinity is beyond the reach of the "unaided intellect". If we are to know the truth of that dogma, it must be revealed to us; we could never have found it out for ourselves.

It follows that if Christian doctrine is true, not all of it can be philosophically proven. (Furthermore, if it is false not all of it can be philosophically proven, since philosophical proofs are sound arguments.) And since, from the considerations of section I, the sentence "God exists" co-entails the whole of a religious doctrine, it follows that where "God" is used in the context of Christian doctrine, there can be no philosophical proof whose conclusion is the sentence "God exists". Note that this is a purely philosophical result.

I do not think we ought to take this result to mean that there can be no philosophical proof for the existence of God. I think we should conclude instead that philosophical proofs for the existence of God, if there are any, do not have as their conclusions the sentence "God exists". At least this is so in the context of certain religious doctrines.

Accordingly, the question used as a title to this paper, "What is a proof for the existence of God ?", is one the answer to which is not immediately obvious. The question may be taken as equivalent to the question "How can the God of the philosophers be the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (or the God of St. Paul, or the God of Mohammed, etc.) ?" Throughout the remainder of this paper, I shall assume the context of some religious doctrine, say traditional Christianity, for which the result described above holds. This is not to say that I assume some such doctrine to be *true,* but only that I assume that it is in terms of a set *BEL* of sentences expressing some such doctrine that the term "God" is defined according to the schema of section I.

III)   *A Definition of the Notion of a Proof for the Existence of God*

In this section I shall, for the purposes of exposition, adopt the position that, whatever a (philosophical) proof for the existence of God might be, the question whether a given philosophical proof is or is not a proof for the existence of God is a question that properly belongs to philosophy alone. By this I mean that an appeal to the truth of some religious doctrine is never relevant to deciding the question. I take this to be no more than an application of the principle that philosophy is master of its own house. There is another view, of course, namely that philosophy is the handmaiden of theology. This is a view that can be adopted only by the believer. While I shall expound the former view, which I shall call the "Autonomy" view, I shall nevertheless want to ensure that my suggested definition of a proof for the existence of God accommodates also the practice of those who hold the other view, which I shall call the "Handmaiden" view. In other words, I want to find a *common* definition of a proof for the existence of God, one which presupposes neither the Autonomy view nor the Handmaiden view.

On the Autonomy view, an initially paradoxical fact must be recorded. The sentence "God exists" cannot be the conclusion of a philosophical proof, as the considerations of section II showed. Hence, as far as philosophy can tell, the sentence "God exists" might be false. Therefore, if there is any philosophical proof for the existence of God, the conclusion of that proof will be consistent, as far as philosophy can tell, with the falsehood of the sentence "God exists".

This result seems paradoxical. If philosophical proofs are sound arguments, how can there be a philosophical proof that p if it is not the case that p ? But the paradox is only apparent. It arises from the fact that we usually take a proof for the Ψ-ing of α to be a proof of the sentence "$\Psi\alpha$". In the present case it is not so; a philosophical proof for the existence of God is not a proof of the sentence "God exists". It remains to be seen what it is instead.

I suggest the following. The construction of a proof for the existence of God consists first of finding a predicate such that religious doctrine (perhaps with the help of some philosophy) entails that that predicate be truly predicable of God and of God alone. That is, one first finds a predicate, say "Ψ", such that BEL entails "God is identical with the x such that Ψx". Of course, since "God" is an abbreviation for the definite description "the x such that $\varnothing x$", as explained in section I, one such predicate is available at once. But this predicate will not do. For the next stage in constructing a proof for the existence of God consists of finding a philosophical proof whose conclusion is "There exists an x such that Ψx".

Putting off for the moment further complications, one can see here the general thrust of my answer to the question "What is a proof for the existence of God ?" Such a proof will be a philosophical proof that there exists an entity with a certain property, where, if the religious doctrine is true, that entity has to be God.

This account can perhaps be given some plausibility by an example. Pascal's charge is, "The God of the philosophers is not the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob". But if what the philosopher proves is, let us say, the existence of an uncaused efficient cause, then the believer might well answer Pascal, "Who else could he be ?" For Judaeo-Christian doctrine (with the help of some philosophical terminology) has it that God created, and hence efficiently caused, everything besides himself. God and God alone is an uncaused efficient cause. From the point of view of the believer, what the philosopher has succeeded in proving can be nothing else but God.

Now is the time to bring in the further complications I mentioned. First, observe that the connection between BEL and the sentence "God is identical with the x such that Ψx" is a kind of entailment relation. Material implication will not do, since if God should not exist, BEL would be false, thus verifying the material implication. Hence *any* predicate would fit the schema I have suggested, provided it can be proved that something has that predicate. Nor will strict implication

do, since if *BEL* should happen to be inconsistent, the same problem arises. It appears that the relation needed is a kind of entailment.

The question what happens if *BEL* should turn out to be false or inconsistent leads to the next complication. Suppose there is a predicate, say "Ψ", such that *BEL* entails "God is identical with the x such that Ψx", and such that there is a philosophical proof of the sentence "There exists an x such that Ψx". Then if the schema suggested above were all there is to the notion of a proof for the existence of God, we should have such a proof. But suppose further that there is another predicate, say "Θ", such that *BEL* entails that God does not Θ, and such that nevertheless there is a philosophical proof of the sentence "For all x, if Ψx then Θx". In such a case we should have philosophical proofs of two sentences, one of which asserts the existence of something which the believer can only take to be God, but the two of which together entail that *BEL* is false. In such a case, I think we should clearly *not* want to say we had a proof for the existence of God. Indeed, provided we also had a *proof* that the two sentences together entail that *BEL* is false, I think we should want to say that we had a proof of the *non*-existence of God.

Thus, although if the sentence "God exists" is true, that fact is irrelevant to the question whether a given proof is a philosophical proof for the existence of God, yet if the sentence "God exists" is false, and if there are philosophical *proofs* of sentences that together entail that "God exists" is false, that fact is *not* irrelevant. On the contrary, it guarantees that *no* argument can be a proof for the existence of God.

Notice that the case I have supposed need not be a case of the *inconsistency* of *BEL*. Since philosophical proofs, as I have described them in section II, may appeal to contingent facts, *BEL* can be quite consistent although false in the way described.

In view of this kind of situation, I suggest that a proof for the existence of God be defined as follows:

A philosophical proof the conclusion of which is the sentence "There exists an x such that Ψx" is a proof for the existence of God in the context of the religious doctrine expressed by the set of sentences *BEL* if and only if

    a) *BEL* entails "God is identical with the x such that Ψx", and

    b) there are no philosophical proofs of sentences which, together with "There exists an x such that Ψx" entail that *BEL* is false.

There may be yet additional conditions that need to be added, but these are sufficient to make the final point of this section. Condition b) of my suggested definition is not in general a matter that can be philosophically decided in practice. If condition b) is satisfied, this could be shown philosophically only by an exhaustive inspection of all philosophical proofs. Hence, I conclude, *the question whether a given philosophical proof constitutes a proof for the existence of God is not in general philosophically decidable.*

It might be thought that this is not as it should be. It might seem plausible to suppose that, if a philosopher is going to prove the existence of God, he must in fact produce *two* philosophical proofs, one satisfying condition a) above, and the other *proving* that clause b) is satisfied. This is a more restrictive notion of a proof for the existence of God than the one defined above, which requires only that clause b) be true, not that it be philosophically proven. The more restrictive notion yields the result that no philosophical proof for the existence of God is possible, at least if clause b) above is not in general philosophically decidable, as I have claimed it is not.

Although the more restrictive view perhaps has some merit, the weaker definition I suggested above has an important advantage. It presupposes *neither* the Autonomy *nor* the Handmaiden view of philosophy.

Those who hold the Handmaiden view are committed to the truth of *BEL,* which entails that condition b) of my suggested definition is met. A believer, at least in a traditional context, must hold that his beliefs cannot be decisively and *philosophically* refuted. Hence, on the Handmaiden view, condition b) of my definition is trivially guaranteed and superfluous. A definition of a proof for the existence of God that *presupposed* the Handmaiden view to the exclusion of the Autonomy view would omit condition b) entirely.

On the other hand, the more restrictive definition which requires that condition b) be philosophically proven, while it accomodates the Autonomy view, does not conform to the practice of those who hold the Handmaiden view. In practice, *theologians* who try to construct *philosophical* proofs for the existence of God make no attempt to establish condition b) of my definition, since its truth is guaranteed by *BEL,* although they often strive to refute philosophical arguments purporting to show that condition b) is not met. They *claim* they are trying to construct a philosophical proof, although on the restrictive

definition they are not; they are only attempting to construct *half* a philosophical proof, the half that involves condition a).

My definition presupposes neither view, but accommodates both. Condition b) of the definition must be true, although it need not be philosophically proven. On the Handmaiden view its truth is guaranteed in advance, and the problem reduces to one of finding a proof that meets condition a). On the Autonomy view, condition b) is not guaranteed, and is moreover not in general philosophically decidable. I know of no other definition that will accommodate the requirements of both views.

IV) *Historical Considerations*

One might think that, in a monotheistic context, a proof for the existence of God ought to include a proof of his uniqueness. This would yield a notion narrower than the one I suggested above. From this point of view, the conclusion of a proof for the existence of God would be a sentence of the form "There is exactly one x such that Ψx".

Although there is some plausibility to this view, it conflicts with the historical practice. Traditionally, proofs for the uniqueness of God are kept quite separate from proofs for his existence. In Part I of the *Summa theologiae*, for instance, Aquinas offers his five famous attempts to prove the existence of God in Q. 2, a. 3, while the unity of God is argued only much later in Q. 11, a. 3-4. The arguments are quite distinct. Yet Aquinas does not hesitate to speak of the existence of God as having already been established long before he gets to Q. 11. (See, for instance, the prologue to Q. 3.)

There are other considerations that show my explanation of the notion of a proof for the existence of God to fit traditional practice. Consider, for example, Aquinas' five famous arguments. The sentence "God exists" is not the conclusion of – nor does it even appear in – any of them. In each case, Aquinas picks a predicate, say "Ψ", and argues to the conclusion "There exists an x such that Ψx". (Note that the conclusion is not that there exists *exactly one* such x.) Then he adds in each case a remark which often strikes his readers as far too hasty, a remark to the effect that what he has proven to exist is to be identified with God. The seemingly hasty identifications can be readily explained on my account. They are Aquinas' recognition, in

each case, that the predicate he has chosen satisfies clause a) of my definition.

Perhaps the clearest illustration, however, of how my account conforms to traditional practice, is to be found in Anselm's presentation of the so-called "ontological" argument. He begins by noting, "And indeed we believe that thou art a being than which nothing greater can be conceived." [1] The following chapter makes it clear that he intends this to be a description applying uniquely to God. We are thus given notice that, for this argument, the predicate chosen is "a being than which no greater can be conceived", and that clause a) of the definition above is met. The actual argument is introduced by the Scriptural allusion, "Or is there no such nature, since the fool hath said in his heart, there is no God ?" [2].

Anselm does not attempt to answer the fool by providing a proof of the sentence "God exists". Rather, he argues to the conclusion "Hence, there is no doubt that there exists a being than which nothing greater can be conceived, and it exists both in the understanding and in reality." [3] (Note again that there is no uniqueness claim at this stage.) The word "God" in fact appears nowhere in the argument.

The same thing is true of the argument, in the following chapter, for the conclusion, "There is, then, so truly a being than which nothing greater can be conceived to exist, that it cannot even be conceived not to exist" [4]. The word "God" nowhere appears in the actual argument, although following the conclusion of the argument Anselm makes the identification "and this being thou art, O Lord, our God". [5]

In general, in these two chapters, the properly philosophical argumentation is kept clearly separated from the passages that rest on religious doctrine by a simple literary device. The latter are put in the second person, and addressed to God in the form of a prayer.

Neither Aquinas nor Anselm, of course, gives any philosophical ar-

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[1] St. Anselm, *Prosloguim; Monologuim*, etc., trans. S. N. Deane (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1959), Ch. 2.
[2] *Ibid.*
[3] *Ibid.*
[4] *Ibid.*, ch. 3.
[5] *Ibid.*

gument to decide clause b) of the definition. As holders of the Hand-maiden view, they are committed automatically to the truth of con-dition b). One can regard these theological commitments as decisive only if one regards theology, not philosophy, as master of philosophy's house.

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