The Great Debate

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The Proof of God: The Debate That Shaped Modern Belief, by Larry Witham; Atlas & Co. Publishers, 2008.

THIS IS an inexpensive, beautifully produced, and readable little hardcopy book. There's nothing in it philosophy students don't learn, depending on their institution's politics: at my secular university we began with Bertrand Russell and encouraged to stick to logical positivism; later, at my religious seminary, we began with the pre-Socratics and were taken on the grand tour of the history of ideas. It's good to have a refresher course written for the general reader; it's also engaging to read a popular account of the protagonists against the background of their mostly dramatic historical settings, primarily in the Middle Ages, Renaissance, and Enlightenment. In earlier centuries the focus was the struggle between temporal and spiritual authority; in later centuries the focus was either locating or dislocating Aristotelianism within Christian belief; more recently the focus has been on arguing for or against the secularising cause. Ironically, many of the great minds who argued for or against Aristotle were actually or nearly accused of heresy before their thinking was absorbed into orthodoxy.

This is the story of the great debate that attempts to prove God's existence; but, just when you thought you remembered the affirmative and negative sides, and who debated on which side, the author reminds you of the subtlety of the debate. Also, it's not only a debate about proving God's existence; it's about the relationship between mind and body, and the different roles reason and the senses play in our constructions of reality. This is a meta-Western debate; there are more than two sides; there are deists, theists, atheists, and agnostics on every side. That's daunting intellectual territory but Larry Witham is a storyteller who knows how to popularise an otherwise inaccessible subject. He weaves his narrative in such an approachable way that, once you read his latest book, you may want to buy several copies as gifts for friends. I did.

For Witham the debate begins in the eleventh century; an age in which the ancient Greek attempt to understand the world by reason was beginning to challenge ancient Judaeo-Christian authority. The tradition of quoting exclusively from the church fathers came under siege as medieval philosophers began to smuggle the sliver of Aristotle they had (his *Categories*, with it two simplest tools: the syllogism; the argument of what's possible and impossible) into their discourses on theology and philosophy and logic. This was the very beginning of scholasticism, a new dialectic that went on to incorporate Greek logic into Christian thinking. The scholastics were inspired by a belief in the corresponding harmony of mind, God, physical things, logic, and language.

Witham begins with Anselm of Canterbury. Inspired by the opening verse of Psalm 14, Anselm argued that because God is an idea of which "nothing greater can be thought" then God has to exist in reality as well as the mind since it's logically absurd to think of God not existing. This argument was countered by Gaunilo, a monk in a nearby monastery, who argued that an idea existing in the mind doesn't have to exist in reality. Undeterred, Anselm continued to defend his argument: when a person hears the word God the reality of God is understood in the mind; once God is in the mind this is proof of God. The exchange between Anselm and Gaunilo began the most famous debate in Western history: between apriorism (the belief in knowledge not derived from sensory experience) and nominalism (the doctrine that abstract concepts are merely names without corresponding reality).

Anselm's proof of God didn't have a large audience until the newly-found universities of Europe matured and produced later and greater scholastics. He was part of the first phase of scholasticism built on a few remnants of Artistotle's logic. The rest of Aristotle's recently discovered works, eventually translated in Spain and Sicily a century after Anselm's death, inspired another kind of proof for God based on Aristotle's physics: from the effects in the world back to the cause. Modern philosophers called this an *a posteriori* argument. Once the philosophy of Aristotle was in full view, it provided

theology with a system to describe the cosmos, as well as a dialectic method of analysis. For Aristotle the power of all life was motion. He conceived God as the first motion or "prime mover"; the ultimate cause of activity in an eternal material universe. After God and motion, reason was next in greatness; a virtue that made humans superior among creatures.

Between 1200 and 1650, Aristotle's framework dominated education in the liberal arts. During this period, two religious orders emerged, Dominicans and Franciscans, both of which exerted a strong influence in the British and Continental universities. In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas became the most influential Dominican philosopher and Duns Scotus became the most influential Franciscan philosopher.

Following Aristotle, Aquinas argued that knowledge came from the senses (*a posteriori* knowledge); therefore humans can only know God by analogy, such as the relationship between parents and children or the observation of cause and effect. Aquinas offered five ways God could be known by his effects in the world: motion suggests a first mover, causes suggest a first cause, the contingency of things suggests a necessary source, the world's gradations of less and more require an ultimate standard, natural things have purposeful ends so there must be an intelligent governor. Scotus also followed Aristotle but was trying to solve new problems. He agreed with Aquinas that knowledge came from the senses but, where Aquinas argued that God's actions were governed by cosmic reason, in Scotus's view God was not necessarily rational and could do anything except engage in self-contradiction. For Aquinas, God was known indirectly as a first mover; for Scotus, it was more perfect and immediate to know God as ultimate being. For the scholastics, the good was defined by moral legislation; for Scotus, it was defined by the moral legislator (God).

Early in the fourteenth century, another Franciscan was rising in the ranks at Oxford, William of Ockham. He took what he liked from Scotus then launched his own revolt. The entire system of Aquinas had been built on the logic of Aristotle, and even

Scotus perpetuated this Aristotelian system, but Ockham rejected the argument that mind and world and God were all connected. His anti-metaphysical thinking, which tampered with what by then had become Aristotelian orthodoxies, undermined the scholastic belief in universals. To Ockham universals looked suspect and useless; they were merely helpful names inside the mind; rhetorical tools not real substances outside the mind. Ockham had little to offer metaphysicians and instead his thinking foreshadowed a "faith alone" future. For this, some historians call him the "first Protestant". His nominalism smouldered in monasteries and universities across Europe; nominalist teachings were condemned; despite the papacy's best efforts, though, the influx of Ockham's English texts couldn't be stopped and were widely studied on the Continent. An Ockhamist school emerged, but by then Ockham had become only one source in the expanding *via moderna* of empiricism and humanism and scepticism which began to rival the *via antiqua* of the scholasticism of Aristotle and Aquinas.

Three hundred year later, in the seventeenth century, René Descartes resolved to devote his life to cultivating his reason and advancing an empirical method. As a rationalist, he set out to prove the existence of God. He argued it was possible to have a clear and distinct knowledge of God and the universe typified by the laws of mathematics. While his first proof of God appeared to be Anselmian (or a priori; the idea of God proves the reality of God) in fact it was more typical of Aquinas (or *a posteriori*; since all things have causes, the perfect idea of God must have a perfect source outside the imperfect human mind). He believed that scepticism could be defeated and certainty could be restored, beginning with the clear and distinct idea that "I exist". He wanted to present a single unified vision of knowledge as a literal organic whole: "… philosophy is like a tree. The roots are metaphysics, the trunk is physics, and the branches emerging from the trunk are all the sciences, which may be reduced to three principal ones, namely medicine, mechanics and morals".

During Descartes's lifetime, the Inquisition forced Galileo to recant his support for the Copernican system, which opposed the Ptolemaic system by proposing the

planets rotated around the sun. Aware of what was happening to Galileo, Descartes took great (and almost comical) care to conceal the fact that he himself had written works which could be regarded as heretical. Thirteen years after his death, his writings were put on the Index of Forbidden books, primarily for having stumbled on the doctrine of the Eucharist, which stipulated that any tampering with Aristotelian physics violated church dogma. By then, though, Cartesian philosophy had become a crucial element in the history of Western thought. His physics may have been naive but the body of his work largely defines the range of our modern questions about knowledge, subjectivity, consciousness, the nature of science, matter, and even reality. He brought the debate about the proof of God into the modern world.

After Descartes, the search for both proof and fallacy continued for another three hundred years. On the Continent, rationalists took his lead in eschewing scepticism and looking for a system that would unify God and the world. Baruch Spinoza viewed God and the universe as one material continuum and used the new metaphysical approach to argue that God was necessary. Gottfried Leibniz elaborated on Descartes by adding "assuming that God is possible, he exists". While the rationalists gained ground in Europe, the nominalists gained ground in Britain. Following in the footsteps of Ockham, David Hume argued that that no cause can be proved for anything. For Hume, one is only habituated to such truths as the idea that the sun will rise tomorrow. If that can't be proved then an ineffable divine cause was the hardest of all to prove.

Hume's scepticism travelled to the Continent, where it influenced Immanuel Kant, who at first had been inspired by the rationalism spawned by Descartes but finally decided against it. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant offered his famous chapter "On the Impossibility of an Ontological Proof of the Existence of God", which gave the Anselmian debate its modern title: the ontological argument. George Hegel took up the ontological argument, proposing that culture and ideas evolve dialectically, as a sort of "call and response" of thesis and antithesis and synthesis. The Hegelian dialectical system was called absolute idealism, with the absolute usually standing for God. Hegel

seemed to say that the whole must come before the parts; the absolute must exist before the dialectic of things and ideas: hence God exists. In the philosophy departments of British universities, especially Cambridge, Hegel's new breed of ontology would eventually supersede the Kantian critique.

While a graduate student at Cambridge, Bertrand Russell was initially persuaded in favour of the ontological argument, under the influence of his teacher Francis Bradley, who in saying "What may be and must be, is" was stating the ontological argument in its purest and most secular form. There's a famous story about the younger Russell walking near Trinity Lane one day in 1894, throwing his tobacco tin in the air, catching it, and exclaiming: "Great Scott, the ontological argument is sound!" The older Russell later wrote: "When I was young, I hoped to find religious satisfaction in philosophy; even after I had abandoned Hegel, the eternal Platonic world [of Descartes and mathematics] gave me something nonhuman to admire". When his early romance with cosmic unity ended, Russell replaced it with what he called the philosophy of logical analysis, also known as logical positivism.

The Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein joined Russell in casting aside all metaphysical inquiry and advocating logical analysis in its place. But while logical analysis dominated Anglo-American philosophy for most of the twentieth century (including my philosophy studies at a secular university in the 1970s) it suffered the same fate as so many philosophical systems. It turned out that logical analysis itself couldn't be verified to the philosophers' satisfaction, and its nominalist quest to identify all things with simple words proved futile. Wittgenstein argued that the only world humans truly know is the one created by the manipulation of words themselves and each human group invents its own language-games. When it comes to complex ideas, or interpretations of life, all that can be said is: "This language-game is played." Therefore, Wittgenstein concluded, philosophy had no real problems, such as proofs of God, only puzzles of language.

In the last chapter, Witham points out that, in the final analysis, the proof of God, or the ontological argument, is a form of logic that appeals to reason, which operates on the premise that there is a greatest reality. Nowadays, those who accept this premise as self-evident, necessary, or useful, would say the ontological argument is at least logically valid. In philosophy, however, the ontological argument is hardly proof of God's existence. Witham ends with a quote from the Cambridge philosopher Jonathan Barnes, who summarised in 1972: "There is no reason to accept it as proof of theism, since there is no reason to believe a presupposition of its first premiss, namely the proposition that there is just one thing than which nothing greater can be imagined". This quote forms the end of Witham's frame, the beginning of which was Anselm, who argued that because God is an idea, of which "nothing greater can be thought", then God has to exist in reality as well as the mind, since it's logically absurd to think of God not existing.

There's a epilogue, though, in which Witham speculates on the future of the proof of God, or the ontological argument, in light of the debate over intelligent design and the insights of neuroscience, both of which are compelling if still inconclusive extensions of the debate between apriorism (the belief in knowledge not derived from sensory experience) and nominalism (the doctrine that abstract concepts are merely names without corresponding reality).

Witham narrates the history of the great debate in an entertaining way. But his book is also an engaging history that tells us much about how the protagonists lived and died, and about many of the high and low influences that surrounded them: personal and inter-personal, social and economic, religious and political. That's a valuable literary accomplishment and no mean feat for any author.

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