ARE PHILOSOPHICAL PROOFS OF THE EXISTENCE OF GOD THEOLOGICALLY MEANINGFUL?*

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Proofs of the existence of God have comprised the border area between philosophy and theology. They combine philosophy’s concern for certainty with theology’s concern for God. However, this border status of the proofs has made them troublesome for both philosophers and theologians. Many philosophers have regarded these proofs as asserting too much, as drawing conclusions unsupported by the premises whence they have been drawn. Many theologians have regarded these proofs as asserting too little, as being inadequate to the richness of God who presents Himself in revelation. Yet despite the efforts of some philosophers to deny the philosophical relevance of this question by making it an issue for dogmatic theology, it has, nevertheless, reappeared in contemporary philosophical discussion.¹ On the other hand, despite the efforts of some theologians to deny the theological relevance of this question by making it an issue for scholastic philosophy, it has, nevertheless, reappeared in contemporary theological discourse.²

As a theologian, I shall attempt to show in this paper how the three proofs of the existence of God (ontological, teleological, cosmological), outlined by Immanuel Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason*,³ are theologically meaningful statements if one reinterprets them within the context of theology and abandons the hope that they are or can ever be philosophically convincing. In other words, rejection of the philosophical claims made by some of their proponents does not make these statements about God themselves theologically meaningless.

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I have purposely chosen Kant’s outline of these three proofs for two reasons. First, his outline has become so commonplace that it is quickly recognizable, even though I use it differently than he did. Second, by using his outline of the proofs, I attempt to answer his charge that they have no necessary connection with our understanding of experience. I shall attempt to show that if one takes revelation to be a distinct type of experience, then the three proofs can be constituted as having a necessary connection with that experience: the ontological proof as a condition and the teleological and cosmological proofs as postulates. To borrow from the Psalmist, “The stone which the builders have rejected has become the cornerstone” (Ps. 118:22).

The Ontological Argument

In order to understand the meaning of a proof of the existence of God, theologically or otherwise, one has to understand what happens when something is “proven.”

It would seem that “proof” is either logical or ontological. Logical proof is essentially formal, that is, it does not refer to real referents but, rather, makes such reference possible. Thus Ludwig Wittgenstein noted, “A proposition that has sense states something [Der sinnvolle Satz sagt etwas aus], which is shown by its proof [Beweis] to be so. In Logic every proposition is the form of a proof.”

Since proofs of the existence of God all intend a real referent, one cannot classify them as essentially logical.

Ontologically, proof is a type of presentation or re-presentation; that is, a method designed to make an entity which is now absent present. It thus constitutes a relation between a knowing subject and a knowable object. The object should determine the method of presentation. As Martin Heidegger well noted, “Every inquiry is a seeking [Suchen]. Every seeking gets guided beforehand by what is sought. Inquiry is a cognizant seeking for an entity both with regard to the fact that it is and with regard to its Being as it is [in seinem Dass-und Sosein].”

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