Has ‘Modernity’ Shown All Arguments for the Existence of God to be Wrong?

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Many German philosophers and theologians are impressed by Kant’s claim that arguments for the existence of God are impossible or by the idea that ‘modernity’ makes arguments for the existence of God ‘problematic’. The title of this collection, Proofs for the Existence of God as a Challenge to Modern Reason reflects this. Though this collection starts from the idea that proofs for the existence of God are ‘problematic’, it also challenges it.

The collection is based on a conference in 2011 and presents 17 German articles (by Robert Spaemann, Rolf Schönberger, Jens Halfwassen, Markus Gabriel, Thomas Buchheim, Axel Hutter, Gunnar Hindrichs, Markus Enders, Friedrich Hermanni, Armin Kreiner, Svend Andersen, Anton Friedrich Koch, Friederike Schick, Christian Illies, Christoph Schwöbel, Friedo Ricken, and Matthias Lutz-Bachmann) and three English articles (by Peter van Inwagen, Richard Swinburne, and John Leslie) about arguments for the existence of God.

Although, in my view, the term ‘analytic’ is often confusing, it is informative to say that the German articles in this collection are in some sense non-analytic. Let me try to describe their style. Some of the articles differ from usual Anglo-American philosophy articles just in that they address a rather broad...
question or a range of questions and in that they interact much with historical authors, in particular with Hegel, Kant, Leibniz, and Thomas Aquinas. But they do defend a philosophical thesis or at least comment on the authors they interact with. Other articles defend no philosophical thesis but only present the view of a historical author or compare several authors. But these latter articles are not strictly exegetical either. They do not investigate in detail how a particular text is to be interpreted. Rather, they look for general characteristics of certain authors or for lines of development of ideas. They paint a landscape of ideas or write a drama in which they let historical authors interact with each other. For these authors, this is one way of doing philosophy and perhaps the only way they think philosophy is ‘possible today’. They ‘reflect’ on authors or ideas, instead of—as Anglo-American philosophers would do it—straight away defending a philosophical thesis.

About half of the German articles in this collection are purely or primarily historical in this way. For example, Friedo Ricken presents Kant’s moral argument for the existence of God, Friederike Schick describes Leibniz’s and Samuel Clarke’s cosmological arguments, and Rolf Schönberger presents a text by Meister Eckhart. Jens Halfwassen reflects on the ontological argument, with references to Hegel, Meister Eckhart and Plato. One of his questions is: ‘If the absolute is conceived of as existing, is it then still conceived of as the absolute? And if we conceive of the absolute, following Meister Eckhart, as being itself or, following Hegel, as the absolute idea and the absolute spirit, are we then still conceiving of the absolute?’ Markus Gabriel, in his German article ‘Is the concept of God of the ontological argument consistent?’, brings Anselm, Leibniz, and Hegel into dialogue with each other.

Let me turn to some of the articles with a more specific thesis. Thomas Buchheim brings to our attention that often—especially where Kant is admired—the term ‘proof of the existence of God’ (Gottesbeweis) is understood as implying that a proof removes all doubt and stops all conjecturing. In German, that term is being used more often than the term ‘argument for the existence of God’, which does not imply this absolute certainty. In my view, the very high standard of ‘proof’, which requires that it is shown ‘once and for all’ that there is a God, is one of the main reasons for the widespread skepticism towards arguments for the existence of God. Buchheim gives four reasons for doubting the possibility of proving God’s existence in this sense: 1. There is no sufficiently clear concept of God; 2. God is relevant for our life; 3. we are not impartial; 4. it is supposed that the world is independent and God is transcendent.

Also Armin Kreiner, who in his article raises objections against cosmological arguments, has in mind deductive arguments which produce absolute certainty. He straightforwardly claims that the cosmological argument is not