

[1975, *In Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*. Merrill C. Tenney, ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.]

THEISM The terms *atheism*, the dogmatic denial of God, and *agnosticism*, a profession of ignorance, indicate a material distinction from *theism*. The term *deism*, however, a Lat. derivative, and *theism*, a Gr. word are linguistically equivalent, yet they are used conventionally to designate two different positions.

In the 18th cent., John Toland, Anthony Collins, the Earl of Shaftesbury (A. A. Cooper), and others launched an attack on supernatural Christianity. Although they believed in God, they denied the occurrence of miracles and special revelation, and defended a purely natural religion. Their God is something called an absentee God, one who started the universe going, but thereafter never interfered. If the term "absentee" is technically inaccurate, at least they insist that divine action is uniform and is not to be distinguished from the laws of nature. This philosophy was called deism. Theism, its opposite, asserts that God has spoken and has acted at particular times and places.

Although theism and deism are thus distinguished, the former term is often used to refer simply to the argument for the existence of God, and some of these also are found in deism. The term theology no doubt covers a discussion of the divine attributes as given in Scripture, and in a wider sense includes also anthropology, soteriology, etc.; but usually theism designates a philosophical defense of the existence of God. No doubt it ought to and sometimes does defend miracles, but philosophically the theistic proofs are its main contents.

Immanuel Kant classified all theistic proofs into three types. The first, the ontological argument, not used by the deists, is based on logic alone and makes no appeal to experience. The second, the cosmological argument, is based on the minimum of experience; and the third, the teleological, or, as Kant termed it, the physico-theological argument, appeals to the maximum of experience. The deists, as well as Aristotle and St. Thomas, used these two.

Anselm (1033-1109), Archbishop of Canterbury, out of his Augustinian background, invented the ontological argument. Referring to Psalm 14:1, "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God,'" Anselm pointed out that God, the Being than which nothing greater can be conceived, must exist in the fool's understanding (for otherwise he would not understand his own denial), although he does not understand God to exist outside his mind.

The two states of existence are, of course, different. A painter may have a picture in his mind, but this is different from and less real than a picture on canvas. But whereas a picture can exist in the mind without existing on canvas, God, the Being than which nothing greater can be conceived, cannot exist in the understanding alone. For if it could, one might conceive it to exist in reality also, and this would be greater.

Therefore if that than which nothing greater can be conceived exists in the understanding alone, the very Being than which nothing greater can be conceived is one than which a greater can be conceived. But obviously this is impossible because it is a self-contradiction. God therefore exists necessarily, by the force of pure logic. That is why the atheist is called a fool.

Descartes (1596-1650) streamlined the Anselmic argument as follows: God is the Being who has all perfections: existence is a perfection; therefore God exists.

This argument has fascinated Augustinian theologians, and many volumes have been written about it. Gaunilo, Anselm's contemporary, and Kant, both speaking from a different epistemological basis, attempt to refute it.

Kant's main arguments (*Critique of Pure Reason* , B 620-630) are these two. First, there is no intelligible meaning in the assertion of a necessary Being—one whose non-existence is self-contradictory. All knowing of necessity is restricted to necessary judgments. We know quite well that a triangle necessarily has three angles: to deny the predicate is to contradict the subject. But one can deny both the subject and the predicate without contradiction. Similarly, God is omnipotent is a necessary judgment, for omnipotence attaches to the concept of God as necessarily as three angle attach to triangle. But one can deny both omnipotence and God without self-contradiction. To try to escape this consideration by talking of a necessary Being, as distinct from a necessary judgment, is to use words without meaning.

It is essentially the same argument when Kant denies that existence is a predicate or perfection. A hundred real dollars have no more predicates than a hundred imaginary dollars. To say the dollars exist does not add another predicate: it merely posits the subject with all its predicates. In other words it expresses the relation of the contents of the concept to a bank account.

Kant's second main criticism requires one to answer whether the proposition “God is” is an analytic judgment or a synthetic judgment. If it is analytical, with its predicate logically contained in the subject, then an assertion of the subject's existence is merely an assertion that one is thinking the concept in question. No other existence is relevant. But if every existential proposition is synthetic, if, that is, the predicate is not logically contained in the subject, but is an addition to it, then obviously there is no self-contradiction in the denial of the predicate to the subject. For these reasons Kant and all others who emphasize sensory experience repudiate the ontological argument.

Since the teleological argument has the same logical status as the cosmological, the two can be discussed together, with emphasis on the simpler one. Kant, reducing it to its barest minimum, makes it sound very simple indeed: “if something exists, an absolutely necessary Being must likewise exist; now, I, at least, exist; consequently there exists an absolutely necessary Being.”

Hume discussed the argument in the form: the world is an effect and must therefore have a cause; to which form was added the teleological consideration that since the world is imperfect, God will vindicate His justice at some future date.

Anyone who has not plowed through *Physics VIII* of Aristotle, who was the first to elaborate the cosmological argument, cannot appreciate the complexities of this “simple” argument.

The stages of Aristotle's argument are these. First, a mover is required to explain motion. This proposition is based on a theory of nature and on the concepts of potentiality and actuality. Unfortunately, neither Aristotle nor Thomas Aquinas was able to defined these concepts. They relied on an indeterminable analogy. This prevents a satisfactory definition of motion also, because Aristotle has already used motion in describing potentiality before he uses potentiality in defining motion.

The second stage of the argument aims to show that there is one eternal mover. Six chapters are needed to explain this step.

The third stage concludes that this eternal mover is not itself in motion. If it were, motion and the world could come to an end; but this is impossible because the second stage, that there is an eternal mover, depends on a proof that motion can never cease.

The fourth point is that the unmoved mover has no magnitude, and, fifth, it is situated on the circumference of the universe.

Thomas Aquinas compounds the difficulty by denying the possibility of a positive or univocal knowledge of God. No predicate, such as good, when attributed to God, means what it means when attributed to men. Similarly the verb "is," or the notion of existence, cannot be used univocally of God and a creature. But if this is so, the existence of created things in motion, which must appear in the premises of the cosmological argument, cannot imply a term of different meaning, viz., the existence of God, in the conclusion.

Hume, besides denying that the world is an effect, attacks the teleological considerations. If our knowledge of God, he points out, arises from an observation of the world, we can assign no attributes to God other than those just sufficient to account for the world. Since the world exhibits a mixture of good, evil, and indifference, we cannot show that God is any better than the observed proportion. In particular there is no basis for supposing that God is good enough to redress injustices at some future date.

Although the Lutherans (and of course the Roman Catholics) have been favorable to the cosmological argument, Calvin rejected it. For him God is the first, not the last, object of knowledge. And unless one first knows God, he cannot know himself or anything else. This position seems to be the truest to the Bible.

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