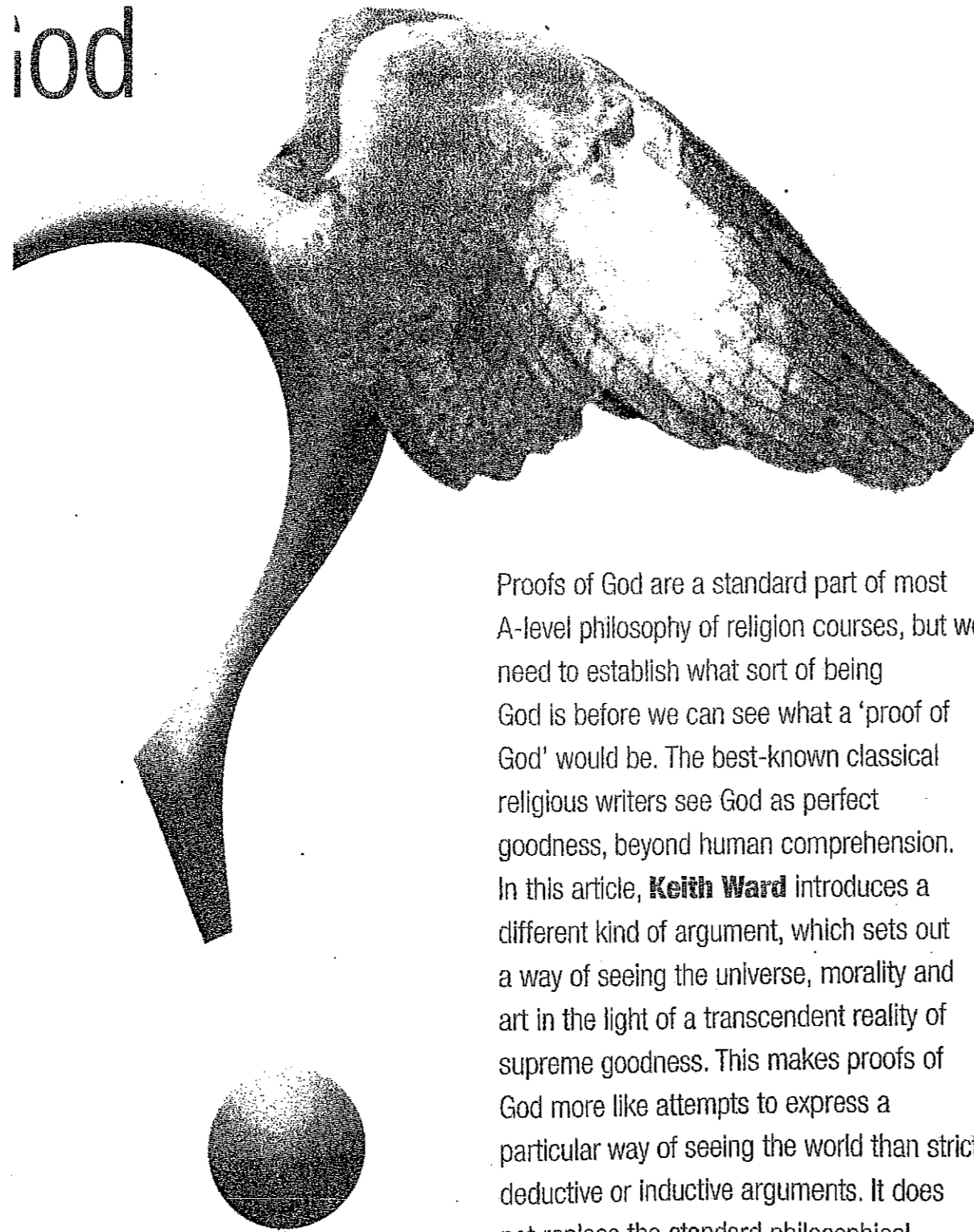


Proofs for the existence

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Proofs of God are a standard part of most A-level philosophy of religion courses, but we need to establish what sort of being God is before we can see what a 'proof of God' would be. The best-known classical religious writers see God as perfect goodness, beyond human comprehension. In this article, **Keith Ward** introduces a different kind of argument, which sets out a way of seeing the universe, morality and art in the light of a transcendent reality of supreme goodness. This makes proofs of God more like attempts to express a particular way of seeing the world than strict deductive or inductive arguments. It does not replace the standard philosophical treatments of the traditional proofs, but suggests another way of approaching them.

Philosophers often talk about 'proofs for the existence of God'. This could be misleading. What would you think if I asked you for proofs for the existence of your best friend? That sort of thing doesn't need proof, you might rightly say. Only of entities like the Yeti or the unicorn, whose existence is extremely dubious, do we ask for proofs. So if you ask for a proof of God, you are already admitting that the existence of God is very dubious. If you offer to give a proof, you are saying that, though God is usually absent, and admittedly so odd that it may seem crazy to think there is a God, you have some evidence that others strangely seem to have missed that 'proves' God really exists. Is this what a believer in God really wants to do, or ought ever to think about?

Take another example. How could you prove that everyone should respect the freedom of conscience of others? You might try to give reasons why they should, or point out the consequences of not doing so, but in the end you could never 'prove' it. It is not the sort of thing you could establish beyond reasonable doubt.

Alternatively, how could you prove that Mozart's Requiem is a beautiful piece of music? You could point to the rich harmonies, the soaring melodies, the balanced structures and innovative instrumentation. But if you are talking to a tone-deaf person, all your reasoning may leave him unmoved. You cannot prove that something is beautiful, though you can try to bring features to people's attention that *may* cause them to see it as beautiful.

What about proving the existence of God? Is it like producing evidence for a dubious being that not many people have seen? Is it like getting people to ask themselves about their ultimate commitments and values? Or is it like getting people to see that something is beautiful, when they may have overlooked it, or not looked in the right way? To answer these questions, we first have to ask what God is.

What God is and what God is not

The most respected thinkers in the world's religious traditions have stressed that God is not a humanoid being just outside the universe, and is not 'a being' or 'an object' like any being or object in the universe, or one that can even be imagined in its essential nature by the human mind. For example:

* In Christianity, Thomas Aquinas wrote that 'we do not know what God is', and referred to Boethius's definition of God as 'the unlimited ocean of Being'.

* In Judaism, Moses Maimonides wrote that we cannot say anything positive about God at all, but only what God is not.

* In Islam, Al Gazzali wrote that the utter simplicity of God's being defeats all human attempts to describe God.

* In Hinduism, Sankara wrote that the ultimate reality (that we call God) does not possess any properties, and is beyond the reach of the human intellect.

According to all these writers, God is so far from being a finite picturable being that it might be better to say that God is 'nothing' (not-a-thing), than to say that God is a thing, another finite being, for which there is not quite enough evidence. This 'negative' or 'apophatic' way, as it is often called, is very important for orthodox believers in God. It prevents us from thinking of God as a finite object that we can understand with a little effort. God is the ultimate mystery of being, ungraspable by human thought.

Is this enough?

But we cannot remain content with that. God is not just a big Nothing. Therefore all these writers agree that God is self-existent supreme value:

* God is self-existent, in that God does not depend on anything else for existence. All existence derives from God, and only God exists by the divine power alone.

* God is supreme value, in that everything that is worthwhile, that could be chosen by a fully rational being, exists in God in an unsurpassable way.

God is, in Anselm's justly famous definition, 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived'. Whatever there is that is of value exists in its fullest possible form in God, who is therefore the supreme object of all positive and non-harmful desires, the supremely good-and-beautiful.

When theologians say that God is not an object, they mean that God's self-existent perfection transcends all finite objects, which can only display a limited set of values, and then very imperfectly. When they say we cannot understand God, they

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mean that the human mind is incapable of seeing what it is like to contain all values in an unsurpassable way, to be perfect Goodness, Beauty and Truth. So, while believers confess that they cannot really conceive (imagine) God, they also believe that God is greater than the greatest, most worthwhile, beautiful, wise, compassionate and creative being that they can conceive.

Deductive, inductive and perspectival arguments

How can anyone possibly prove that there is a being of self-existent supreme value? It is certainly not like finding evidence for some exotic animal. However, if this God is supposed to be the source of the whole universe, then the nature of the universe should be evidence of some sort — our universe must be the kind of universe that could be the creation of a perfect God. This would not really be proving that God exists. It would be showing that the existence of God would be a reasonable explanation of why the universe is the way it is, and perhaps would be the best ultimate explanation, answering all our questions about the universe in a completely satisfying way.

Since we admit that we cannot understand God, we would not be claiming that we could actually have this explanation ourselves. Our claim would be that God is the ultimate explanation for the universe, whether we understand it or not (just as relativity theory gives an explanation for Newton's laws, even if you cannot understand it). We would not be saying that all the physicists in the world could stop work because theologians have the ultimate explanation already. On the contrary, we would say that the physicists are justified in trying to go on understanding the physical universe, precisely because it has an intelligible structure grounded in the wisdom and beauty of a creator God.

If we talked about proofs of God in this area, we would be speaking of ways of seeing and understanding the physical universe that helped us to see how a self-existent being of supreme value would be an ultimate explanation of the universe. We would be suggesting that the best explanation of the universe in all its elegant complexity would be found in a reality beyond it, mind-like and intelligible in nature, but untouched

by the transience, decay and dissolution of all physical things.

This sort of argument would not be deductive — as though you could find God in the conclusion of an argument whose premises did not mention God, like pulling a rabbit out of a hat. Nor would it be inductive — as though you could assess the probability of there being a God, like a detective discovering clues that show who the murderer is. It would be what might be called a **perspectival argument**, leading people to see things in different ways, or from different points of view. The perspective of a believer in the existence of God is one that seeks to relate all things to a self-existent and perfect creator: 'See all things as held in being by their participation in the self-existent source of all value', says the theist. This perspective also tries to show that such a view makes good sense of what might otherwise seem arbitrary or chaotic, and gives significance to what might otherwise seem pointless.

There is a great deal of room for discussion and argument in a perspectival approach, but little of it is either deductive or inductive, in a rigorous way. It is a matter of presenting and re-presenting features of the experienced universe, and of seeking a pattern that most adequately integrates all its complex data in the most coherent way. Personal judgement and sensitivity cannot be eliminated from such arguments, and we would not expect complete agreement at their conclusion. But we might expect participants to come to a fuller understanding of which perspectives are profound and which are shallow, which are strongly and which are weakly supported.

A perspectival argument for God

We can now see how a perspectival argument for God would go. The theist would point to the fine-tuning of the physical universe, the mathematical elegance and beauty of its laws, the drive of evolution towards greater consciousness and responsible action, and the way in which quantum physics points to a hidden underlying reality as the source of physical events. The atheist would reply by pointing out that the laws of thermodynamics mean the inevitable end of the physical universe, so that the whole thing seems ultimately purposeless. The atheist would also point to the

apparent cruelty and randomness of the evolutionary process, and to the superfluity of God as an actual principle of explanation in the sciences.

Each individual will weigh these factors in different ways. There is no agreed scale of probabilities that can be used to decide between them. As a theist, I would claim that the end of the physical universe is not the end of all existence because God remains and remembers all that has ever been. God remembers us, and it is not unreasonable to think that God might grant us, after death, a share in that eternally present 'memory' of what has been. The evolutionary process is not truly random, for it is ordered towards producing intelligent and responsible agents, persons, who can know and love God. The sufferings it entails are necessary to the process itself, though we cannot understand exactly in what way. God is not meant to be an explanation of specific physical processes. God is, however, the ultimate explanation of why there are any such processes at all — either because they necessarily follow from this sort of creation, or because they are necessary conditions, instances or consequences of specific sorts of goodness. That is what I, as a theist, would say. But I know that atheists have ways of depicting a different possible perspective. It may seem that there is deadlock.

'Proving God' as evoking a vision of supreme goodness

What might prove decisive is whether there is any place for a sense of a personal reality at the heart of the physical universe, that can be experienced as a transforming moral power for good. For the atheist, it might seem that religious claims to experience such a power lead to great evils of repression and warfare, and consequent dislike of religion will lead to a rejection of all quasi-religious perspectives on the universe. But for the theist, a sense of the personal reality of God puts both morality and art in a new and deeper light.

In morality, goodness will not be seen just as something humans invent. It will be seen as rooted in the nature of things, an objective reality that stands over us and demands our loyalty and invites our love. In art, the whole universe will become, to various degrees and in various ways,



a sacrament of beauty, containing and making possible a huge variety of physical signs of transcendent beauty. So religion transfigures morality and art by introducing a transcendent dimension that communicates to us through moral and artistic sensibility a reality that is greater and more sublime than any of our own invented constructs. Here, too, perspectival arguments are important, as presenting to us a 'transcendent' view of morality and art, that can be integrated with a scientifically influenced perspective on the physical universe as the handiwork of a perfect creator God.

If there are proofs of God, they are more like attempts to evoke a certain way of seeing the universe than purely intellectual attempts to show there must be a first cause. To assent to the existence of God is, in the end, to learn to see all things in the light of a transcendent reality of supreme goodness. Perhaps, in seeking to understand religious belief, the important thing is to see what such a vision could be, and what it means to those who seek or claim it. Understanding proofs of God is, perhaps, more like understanding great poetry or art than learning to dissect logical arguments. The ideal, of course, is to be able to do both.

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