

PROOFS, PRIDE, AND INCARNATION: IS NATURAL THEOLOGY THEOLOGICALLY TABOO?

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In his *Pensées*, Blaise Pascal left us the memorable and often remarkable fragments of what would have been his systematic defense of the Christian religion had death not tragically intervened at age thirty-nine. Despite his apologetic ambitions Pascal was an ardent opponent of natural theology, or what he called the "metaphysical proofs"¹ for God's existence. He did not argue merely that natural theology is not required for Christian belief to be rational, as does Alvin Plantinga. Pascal's claim was stronger: Natural theology is theologically taboo. Others such as Søren Kierkegaard, Karl Barth, Herman Bavinck and Cornelius Van Til have staked similar claims.

Christians and other theists have often disagreed on the role philosophy should play in relation to the claims of revelation. Surely the faithful should avoid any philosophical method that contradicts a central tenet of the faith they are laboring to defend. Therefore for reasons of theological integrity believers should scrutinize carefully how philosophy might help or hinder faith. This paper will examine Pascal's understanding of the noetic effects of sin in relationship to theistic arguments, consider the three dimensions of pride antithetical to Christian belief, and consider whether any of the three classical kinds of arguments for God's existence would, if successful, foster a pride hostile to the Christian message.

I will contend that none of these theistic arguments are conducive to an anti-Christian pride and that if any or all of the arguments are epistemically effective they could provide resources for an appropriate humility before the Deity for which they philosophically argue. If this is true, theistic arguments could be employed profitably in the apologetic and evangelistic endeavors in ways not normally considered. This paper is programmatic in

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¹ On "metaphysical proofs" see B. Pascal, *Pensées* (New York: Viking, 1985) 190/543. The first number is the later Lafuma enumeration of the fragments, while the second is the older system. Throughout this paper I use the terms "theistic proofs" and "theistic arguments" interchangeably even though the distinction has been rightly made between a theistic proof as a demonstrative case for God's existence (either deductively sound or overwhelmingly probable on nondeductive grounds) and a theistic argument (or collection of arguments) as a rationally persuasive but less epistemically robust enterprise. Pascal used the word "proofs" and never made this more modern distinction. But his arguments against proofs would, I think, apply equally well to theistic arguments of the cosmological, design, or ontological stripe, since the latter's epistemic aim is still the same as that of proofs: to rationally justify theism through natural theology, or what Pascal called "metaphysical arguments."

that I will not make a case for the philosophical virtues of any of the theistic arguments I discuss, although I think such a case can be made for some versions of the arguments. My concern is to show that there is no *a priori* theological reason to abandon natural theology.

I. NOETIC IMPAIRMENT AND THEISTIC ARGUMENTS

Pascal's criticisms of this method of defending Christian belief are multifaceted.² Yet one of his more interesting arguments attacks theistic proofs for their inability to incorporate the central theme of Christianity: the incarnation. This omission, Pascal argues, enervates any metaphysical proofs' religious efficacy. He says such proofs are "useless and sterile."³ Worse yet, theistic proofs *sans* incarnation can even inhibit genuinely religious belief by cultivating a pride incompatible with Christian spirituality. To consider the full force of Pascal's argument we must first examine his statements on the noetic effects of sin that render theistic proofs void:

Man does not know the place he should occupy. He has obviously gone astray; he has fallen from his true place and cannot find it again. He searches everywhere, anxiously but in vain, in the midst of impenetrable darkness.⁴

Since . . . men are in darkness and remote from God . . . he has hidden himself from their understanding. . . . This is the very name which he gives himself in Scripture: *Deus absconditus* [the hidden God].⁵

Pascal also claims that proofs disregard this noetic impairment through seeking knowledge of God apart from Christ, which is a prideful activity.

Knowing God without knowing our wretchedness makes for pride.⁶

Wretchedness induces despair. Pride induces presumption. The Incarnation shows man the greatness of his wretchedness through the greatness of the remedy required.⁷

All those who seek God apart from Christ, and who go no further than nature, either find no light to satisfy them or come to devise a means of knowing and serving God without a mediator, thus falling into atheism or deism, two things almost equally abhorrent to Christianity.⁸

In speaking of the futility of metaphysical proofs Pascal quotes Augustine—"What they gained by curiosity they lost through pride"—and comments:

That is the result of knowing God without Christ, in other words, communicating without a mediator with a God known without a mediator. Whereas those who have known God through a mediator know their own wretchedness.⁹

² For a more complete assessment of Pascal's rejection of natural theology see D. Groothuis, *To Prove or Not to Prove: Pascal on Natural Theology* (dissertation, University of Oregon, 1993).

³ Pascal, *Pensées* 449/556.

⁴ *Ibid.* 400/427.

⁵ *Ibid.* 427/194.

⁶ *Ibid.* 192/527.

⁷ *Ibid.* 352/526.

⁸ *Ibid.* 449/556.

⁹ *Ibid.* 190/543 (italics his).

The last four quotations combine to claim that the attempt to know God without a mediator (through proofs or otherwise) disregards human corruption and fosters a presumptive pride that is hostile to Christianity.

Structurally, then, Pascal's overall argument looks like this: (1) Humans have fallen into sin. (2) Sin entails noetic as well as moral impairment, which renders God as hidden. (3) The doctrine of the incarnation necessarily assumes the existence of sin and the possibility of redemption. (4) Claims to prove God without involving Christ disregard noetic impairment and so foster pride. (5) Pride is incompatible with receiving saving grace. (6) Therefore proofs are theologically illegitimate because they encourage pride that keeps one from receiving grace.

This argument does not proceed from the assumptions that theistic proofs do fail philosophically but from the assumption that they should fail given a certain theological anthropology. That is, even if some philosopher thinks he has found a conclusive theistic argument it should be rejected because such an argument would be in conflict with a crucial Christian claim: that God opposes the proud but exalts the humble. Pascal hence rejects proofs by a kind of theological *reductio ad absurdum* argument: To prove God is to prove something that God does not allow: certain knowledge of his existence through natural theology and apart from religious faith.

The orthodox natural theologian¹⁰ will not disagree with Pascal's premises 1, 2, 3 or 5 although he will—despite his belief in human sinfulness—debate the meaning, relevance and extent of the noetic impairment implied by premise 2. He will also question the truth of premise 4.

The orthodox natural theologian can see that sin has affected every area of human life but maintain that this does not necessarily mean that rational theistic argumentation is thereby precluded. This involves the question as to whether the Bible itself permits natural theology. My judgment, although I cannot argue it here, is that it does not forbid natural theology even if it does not encourage it.¹¹ One would think that the Bible would forbid natural theology outright if sin had made it an impossible task in principle, just as it forbids the notion that one may earn salvation through the works of the law apart from faith.

Noetic impairment can be plausibly understood to mean a moral disposition to avoid certain theological truths. This noetic condition in turn leads to poor reasoning. For instance, in the heat of debate over one's character, rational arguments about one's moral history and personal inclinations may cease to be employed or recognized because one's capacity for rational analysis is impaired by the intensity of the situation. The doctrine of sin claims something similar. For instance, Paul says that the person without the Spirit does not accept the things of God because sin has incapacitated him (see 1 Cor 2:14; Eph 4:17–18). Paul is not referring to the denial of the

¹⁰ By "orthodox natural theologian" I mean one who would employ philosophical arguments to support the claims of orthodox or revealed theology. This class of arguers would exclude those—such as process theologians, Spinoza, or Hegel—who philosophically argue for the existence of a deity with less than the full complement of orthodox attributes.

¹¹ See Groothuis, *To Prove*, chap. 2.

existence of God but rather to a rejection of the gospel message. The orthodox natural theologian claims that the relevance of noetic impairment concerns a tendency to attempt to escape God's authority in various ways but that this does not entail the failure of natural theology. An alcoholic may want to avoid the fact that he is in need of treatment, but it is not inappropriate to present evidence to convince him that he is an alcoholic.

If humans do not naturally want to submit to a higher authority they may have the tendency to eschew good arguments (should there be any) to the effect that God exists. A tendency toward irrationality in humans may be implied by the doctrine of the fall. But this, *contra* Pascal, does not necessarily entail a prohibition of proofs. It might just make the job tougher, as mentioned above. The natural theologian could readily adopt Pascal's own program, which warns of the irrationality caused by fallen passions but still engages in debate:

I should like to arouse in man [the unbeliever] the desire to find truth, to be ready, to be free from passion, to follow it wherever he may find it, realizing how far his knowledge is clouded by passions. I should like him to hate his concupiscence which automatically makes his decisions for him, so that it should not blind him when he makes his choice, nor hinder him once he has chosen.¹²

II. PRIDE AND HUMILITY IN THREE DIMENSIONS

Concerning Pascal's premise 5 (that pride is incompatible with receiving saving grace), the natural theologian can contend that proofs need not produce pride if their true nature and function is understood. Could philosophical reasoning about God actually enhance or engender humility instead of enervating it? To answer this query adequately we need to evaluate each of the major kinds of metaphysical arguments for the existence of God with respect to pride and humility.

Although the meanings of the terms "pride" and "humility" are varied because they are determined largely by their uses in different linguistic and existential settings, we can specify Pascal's intended meaning of the terms fairly simply and directly. He is interested in how pride or humility function with respect to one's religious orientation. Pride, for Pascal, is any attitude or disposition that encourages or perpetuates an independence from God. Conversely humility is any attitude or disposition that encourages or perpetuates dependence upon God.

Before investigating the matter further we should eliminate a kind of pride that need not pose a threat to religious sensibilities or sensitivities. This concerns a sense of accomplishment over a task well done. One can be "proud of" her grade-point average in graduate school without lapsing into an immoral pride that exalts oneself or ignores God. She might say, "I worked hard, got good grades, and am proud of it." But if she is religiously inclined she could also add, without pious contrivance, that she was thank-

¹² Pascal, *Pensées* 119/423.

ful to God for making this achievement possible. Of course this theologically benign pride could turn vicious if it waxes egocentric and inflated, but it need not do so.

I can be pleased and honored by the actions of a significant other and so be "proud" of that person. If my wife receives commendatory reviews of her first book I can say, "Becky, I am proud of you. You worked hard, you worked intelligently, and you produced an excellent book." Nothing in this statement reflects or engenders the kind of pride that Pascal is anxious to avoid, although one could become obsessed with another's accomplishments. Pascal warns of this kind of idolatrous pride when he says that "everything which drives us to become attached to creatures is bad, since it prevents us from serving God, if we know him, or seeking him if we do not."¹³ An attachment to one's achievement or to another person can become religiously condemnatory but need not do so.

Although Pascal did not articulate the matter in detail, the matter of pride and humility can be understood in the three dimensions of ontology, epistemology and morality as follows.

If one is ontologically proud he esteems his status more highly than he ought. The fable of the king commanding in vain the tide to halt its advances exemplifies ontological pride. The king believes he possesses powers he does not possess. Humility involves a proper ontological estimation: The tides are stronger than I. Apart from this fable we could cite the conceited, incumbent politician who fails to vigorously campaign for reelection because he overestimates his popularity with the voters—only to lose the election. He believes he possesses a popularity he does not possess. He is ontologically proud.

An epistemic dimension is involved in the previous discussion of ontological pride in that the ontologically prideful falsely evaluates his status and thus makes a mistake in judgment. But we can still distinguish ontological pride from epistemic pride according to what factor predominates. In fact the distinction, albeit a bit artificial, will be useful when we audit the theistic arguments for elements of pride.

If one is epistemically proud he esteems his noetic status more highly than he ought. One rests content with inadequate knowledge about a particular subject and deems it exhaustive or at least sufficient. This can involve knowing that one's knowledge is inadequate, but not caring—like the philosophy professor who lectures on Hegel with great aplomb, while knowing he is hardly an expert—or thinking one has sufficient knowledge when he should have investigated the matter further to confirm this. If I think I know enough about automotive repair to fix my carburetor—and so refuse professional services—and in fact am an automotive ignoramus, I exhibit epistemic pride. Humility involves a proper epistemic estimation: Experts are wiser than I. With respect to orthodox natural theology, if a natural theologian claims to corner the market on theological knowledge he becomes proud because he leaves no place for revelation.

¹³ Ibid. 618/479.

If one is morally proud he esteems his ethical status more highly than he ought. If I believe I am exempt from political corruption when in fact I am not I exhibit moral pride. This is similar to ontological pride, but it emphasizes the moral dimension of being. It also involves an epistemic defect because of false self-estimation. I rest content in my moral integrity when I believe myself to be morally impregnable when I am really fragile. The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, told by Jesus to correct those "who were confident of their own righteousness," underscores this. The Pharisee thanked God for his own righteous deeds and especially that he was not a sinner like the nearby tax collector. The tax collector, on the other hand, confessed his sin openly before God. Jesus commented that the tax collector, not the Pharisee, was justified before God (Luke 18:9-14). Humility involves a proper moral estimation: Others are more virtuous than I.

All three dimensions of pride and humility are interrelated, as I have attempted to indicate. All the dimensions are captured by the ancient Greek concept of hubris: the tragic misapprehension and overestimation of one's abilities, both moral and natural, and the underestimation of one's liabilities in these areas, even in the face of evidence to the contrary. Hubris is the animating attitude in all three dimensions of pride. One may overrate oneself ontologically, overestimate one's capacities epistemically, or overstate one's moral rectitude.

With this understanding of pride and humility in the background we can proceed to evaluate each of the kinds of theistic proofs for any inherent hubris. Our survey will consider the project of natural theology as conceived by its orthodox protagonists.

III. PRIDE, HUMILITY, AND COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS

If a cosmological argument could be established that relies on the idea of the contingency and finitude of nature and humanity as a premise that then serves to derive a being who causes the universe to exist, the argument itself puts one in an ontologically humbled position. If all nature depends on God's creating and sustaining activity, no one could justifiably claim ultimate ontological independence or isolation from God. One's origin would be considered to be God-created, and one's continued existence would be viewed as God-sustained. Therefore no one could rightly claim to be a necessary being or part of a necessary being in any sense (as in pantheism), nor could one claim to be a chance result of nature beholden to nothing divine. In this case a process of inferential reasoning (however complex it might be) delivers a conclusion that seems conducive to a kind of ontological humility.¹⁴

But what of epistemic humility? Would a successful cosmological argument tend toward a cognitive hubris that would put one at odds with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? A knowledge of God based on the cosmological argument need not give rise to intellectual pride because such a

¹⁴ See J. Collins, *God in Modern Philosophy* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1960) 339.

cosmological endeavor would not erase the limitations of one's intellectual abilities. It is in the nature of the case that such knowledge of God derived from a cosmological argument would be partial, given God's transcendence on the one hand and human creaturehood on the other. Furthermore the argumentation leads one to view his finitude and contingency in light of an independent or necessary existence—that is, in light of God. The ontological disparity should be evident enough. One might also be open to this being making itself known through other proofs or through media besides philosophical argument such as religious experience.

But if a cosmological argument does nothing to encourage ontological or intellectual pride, what is its relationship to moral pride? The moral nature of the deity of the cosmological argument is not thickly articulated since the argument is principally concerned with metaphysical attributes relating to causation. But there seems to be nothing in the cosmological argument to weaken or threaten the classical claims concerning God's character as morally good—unless a case is made that the cosmological argument is the only means by which to acquire knowledge about the nature of God. If this is so, god's moral character would remain largely unknowable. But even this agnostic conclusion need not foster moral pride in a cosmological theist. Having proved the cosmological God would have little if any positive bearing on one's overall moral standing. A cosmological theist would have no more reason to be proud than anyone else would. So it seems that cosmological arguments provide no materials for undercutting the kind of humility Pascal finds indispensable for his case. This seems so even if one is quite "proud" over one's labors in constructing the best cosmological argument possible because this kind of satisfaction over achievement need not produce the theological aversions Pascal fears. It need not be vicious pride.

IV. PRIDE, HUMILITY, AND DESIGN ARGUMENTS

If an argument from design succeeds, one would have to face the reality of a Designer who designed oneself and the entire universe. Ontologically this places the designed in an inferior position to the Designer (so long as the problem of evil does not defeat the particular design argument) because one is derived from the higher intelligence and ingenuity of the Designer. There would then seem to be no incentive for a God-rejecting or God-ignoring pride.

Concerning the epistemic dimension, design arguments need not claim to deliver all that is, can, or should be known about the Designer, nor do they limit God's nature to that of a Designer (a mere demiurge). Certain deists may have claimed that our knowledge of God is exhausted through design or other theistic arguments, but a variety of orthodox theists have held otherwise and have supplemented their metaphysical arguments with other kinds of arguments—dealing with morality, religious experience, and so forth—about the character of God and with appeals to revelation. If these kinds of arguments and appeals have persuasive power, there is no

reason why a design argument need engender an epistemic pride in the face of the Designer. Moreover even if these supplemental arguments and appeals fail, one's noetic capacities must be viewed as designed by a Designer. This fact prevents the philosopher from taking credit for her existence or efficacy in design arguments (or for any other proper functioning of her cognitive equipment). These abilities are the gift of another. A reflection on this fact should eliminate pride.¹⁵

The moral nature of the Designer as known through a design argument is certainly not as robust as that claimed by revelational theism. Although the Designer can be known to be extremely ingenious (having engineered the genetic code, an environment finely tuned for the sustenance of human life, breathtaking natural scenery, and so on), little about the divine moral nature can be known beyond the claim that the universe is, as it were, a gift from the Designer. Even the natural theologian most confident in the cogency of his design argument might still reflect on his own use and abuse of what has been designed for him and conclude that there is little room for pride. Having constructed an airtight case for the Designer does not render one a morally upright person, nor does it ensure that one has treated that which has been designed—human, animal, plant, or otherwise—with the proper respect. In any case there appears to be nothing in the design argument to foment pride or hinder humility in the moral dimension.

Philosopher Richard Taylor serves as a concrete example of the response of one who grants cogency to design and cosmological arguments. He believes his arguments support the existence of a noncontingent and designing being. But because of the speculative and limited nature of the arguments he wonders if such a being is worthy of being understood as the God of religious theism. He suggestively says that even if his arguments are "utterly probative" they are "consistent with ever so many views that are radically inconsistent with religion."¹⁶ Taylor does not develop this pregnant sentence and, sad to say, promptly drops the issue immediately after writing it. He does not explain what he means by "religion" or what would constitute being "radically inconsistent" with it. What his arguments—or one like his—would be utterly inconsistent with would be atheism or agnosticism, at least with respect to the existence of a First Cause and Designer. But what Taylor seems to be claiming is that his arguments leave the classical Christian view of God underdetermined. The moral status of this being is unknown, as is the being's intentions toward humankind and what the proper human response to the deity should be.

In light of this theological underdetermination we should ask if Taylor has been "humbled" by his arguments. He must admit that he is a cosmologically dependent and designed being, but such a confession is more of a metaphysical or cosmic recognition than an ethical admission of either guilt

¹⁵ It is interesting that although Taylor argues that it is illogical to trust our senses unless we believe they were created by God to perceive truly, he draws no moral consequences from this. See R. Taylor, *Metaphysics* (4th ed.; Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1992) 112–115.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 115.

or the need for grace. Nevertheless the arguments of Taylor do not seem to foster the kind of pride Pascal fears despite the fact that Taylor, to my knowledge, has not embraced explicitly and distinctively religious beliefs. In fact an orthodox natural theologian might endeavor to make good use of Taylor's comments (as far as they extend) and supplement them with the claims of revealed theology.

How one responds at the point of philosophically derived and intellectually respectable theism is not at all predictable. It seems person-relative. Having constructed a new version of the argument from design, one might become quite haughty over one's philosophical prowess and in the process forget that one must give credit ultimately to the designer of one's intellect for the brilliance of the argument (or at least for the capacity to argue at all). Another person may find a version of the cosmological argument to be compelling and then reflect at length on his contingency and limitations—ontologically, intellectually and morally. Such a person might be prepared for further theological considerations (such as salvation, the pursuit of divine virtues, the afterlife) outside the realm of natural theology proper.

V. PRIDE, HUMILITY, AND ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS

How does an ontological argument fare concerning pride and humility? If an ontological argument is successful, the concept of God entails the existence of a maximally great being who ontologically dwarfs the prover by comparison. Anselm himself was quite cognizant of this fact and placed his argument within the structure of a prayer. The one praying is certainly not a being greater than or equal to the Being who is addressed in the prayer.

One cannot take credit for having invented the concept of God as one might take credit for having invented a new piece of technology. However one comes across the idea, it is part of the given of life—at least in the western cultures that Anselm and Pascal were addressing. It takes no special merit to possess the concept of God, just as it takes no special merit to possess the concept of addition in mathematics. It takes no special intelligence or diligence in acquiring facts.

The ontological proof does not create God. It merely proves or discovers a God "greater than which cannot be conceived." And the God proved through the argument also transcends what can be known through the argument alone, so there would be no room for epistemic pride in the sense of monopolizing the theological market through one proof. Anselm confessed that God was "not only that than which a greater cannot be conceived, but [also] something greater than can be conceived."¹⁷ Any moral pride that might be produced at constructing such a wonderful or clever argument should evaporate through the consideration of the Being so proved, who is not only ontologically but morally the apex of all existence. Certainly many philosophers who have endorsed the ontological argument have failed to fall prostrate before

¹⁷ Anselm, *Proslogion*, chap. 15.

this superlative Being, but if they attended carefully to their object of proof there would at least be no room for pride in Pascal's sense.

An ontological arguer might, though, claim a certain special intelligence or wisdom in having discerned an important but previously undiscovered aspect of the idea of God—namely, that the concept of God entails God's existence. Could this lead to the kind of pride that concerns Pascal? I do not think so—if the arguer, like Anselm, considers the subject matter properly.

Anselm's original ontological argument was framed in the humility of a (nonpharisaical) prayer. Whether subsequent ontological arguers situate their cogitations in prayer or not, they should consider that a Being greater than which cannot be conceived would be worthy of their consideration. Even if an arguer shows special ingenuity in proving God, this ingenuity must pale in significance when compared to the divine infinite wisdom. Moreover even a successful ontological argument does nothing to morally ennoble the prover. The arguer who reflects on the idea of God as a maximally good being should find himself something less than a maximally good being, and so quite a moral distance from the object of his proof.

VI. CONCLUSION: THEISTIC ARGUMENTS NOT TABOO

This survey of three principal types of metaphysical proofs suggests that neither a cosmological, design, or ontological argument necessarily or even likely would induce those convinced by their cogency to adopt an attitude of either ontological, epistemic, or moral pride with respect to the object of their proof—given Pascal's understanding of pride as religious independence. Although I will not argue it here, I doubt that any other theistic argument concerning religious or moral experience would necessarily or even likely foster an anti-Christian pride. Contrariwise, reflection on the objects of philosophical proof could even occasion certain religious considerations. Therefore it is difficult to agree with Pascal's verdict that proofs lead to a pride incompatible with Christian faith. On the contrary, effective theistic arguments yield moral and theological resources amenable to orthodox purposes. These purposes certainly involve persuading unbelievers of the cruciality of the incarnation for salvation (as Pascal rightly emphasized), but it seems that a kind of metaphysical and moral preparation might be gained through the deft deployment of theistic arguments that neither explicitly mention the incarnation nor exclude other arguments for its believability, the likes of which Pascal himself provides in many of the fragments in *Pensées*.¹⁸

¹⁸ My thanks go to Robert T. Herbert for his comments on an earlier version of this paper.