TO PROVE OR NOT TO PROVE: PASCAL ON NATURAL THEOLOGY

by

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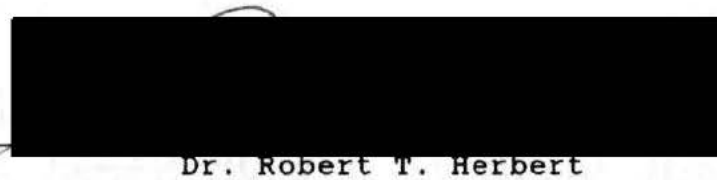
A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Department of Philosophy
and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

June 1993

APPROVED: 

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An Abstract for the Dissertation of

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for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in the Department of Philosophy to be taken June 1993

Title: TO PROVE OR NOT TO PROVE: PASCAL ON NATURAL THEOLOGY

Approved: [redacted]

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In this dissertation I argue that Pascal's reasons for rejecting the enterprise of natural theology are inadequate to negate the discipline's possible value for Christian theism.

I begin by explaining the nature, function, and scope of natural theology or the attempt to argue for God's existence apart from revelation.

Pascal argues that the Bible itself precludes the activity of natural theology. I dispute this claim by giving reasons why the omission of natural in the Bible does not mean that the enterprise itself is illegitimate.

Although Pascal argues that the very nature of God as an infinite being renders a positive proof of his existence impossible because of the opacity of the infinite, I argue that Pascal misconstrues the nature of divine infinity and that when properly understood the notion of divine infinity does not rule out natural theology a priori.

According to Pascal, the kind of reasoning used in theistic proofs is inappropriate for religious believers because it is "too remote from human reasoning" to move one to real religious devotion. I claim that even complex proofs for God's existence, if successful, could engender a kind of religious devotion.

Pascal finds the God derived through natural theology--the "God of the philosophers"--to be too abstract and religiously unsatisfying to be equated with the biblical "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." On the contrary, I affirm that the divine predicates derived from natural theology (should they be derivable) have a significant overlap with the description of God in the Scriptures.

Against Pascal's idea that a successful natural theology engenders a kind of pride in its practitioners that is incompatible with the Christian claim, I argue that philosophical proofs may but need not engender such pride.

Finally, I take up the matter of the cogency of one version of the cosmological argument in relation to the defense of Christian theism.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the members of my committee, Professor Robert Herbert, Professor Don Levi, Professor William Davie, and Professor Benton Johnson, for their help and guidance on this dissertation. My appreciation also goes to Stuart Smith for editorial assistance on earlier versions of most of these chapters. I especially want to thank Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, my wife, for her good sense and advice, moral and spiritual support, and patience through the long and demanding dissertation process. She is a gift from above.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother, Lillian Groothuis Dunn, for her perennial and perpetual maternal valor.

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CHAPTER I

THE PURPORTED BENEFITS OF NATURAL THEOLOGY

Throughout the history of Christian theology and philosophy, Christian thinkers have hailed the rational credibility and even superiority of Christianity. Their arguments have often included the contention that the existence of God is subject to rational demonstration. On the other hand, equally devout and intelligent Christians have denied the need for theistic proofs and have even warned of their dangers. To cite an extreme case, Kierkegaard says that any rational defender of Christianity is de facto "Judas number two."

Although Blaise Pascal didn't put the matter as severely as Kierkegaard (and few have done so), he likewise abandoned the project of natural theology for several reasons that we will analyze in the chapters forthcoming. But first, it is important to understand the tradition of natural theology and its quest to certify rationally Christian belief. In exploring this tradition, we will not make laborious reference to the many volumes of natural theology but rather make the best possible case for its legitimacy and necessity by broadly considering the

purported benefits of its success and the detriments of its possible failure. The latter is equally important as the former, because many natural theologians have argued that the failure of their project would mean no less than the intellectual suicide of Christian belief. That is, if the existence of God cannot be proved, then God is not a worthy object of belief and any justification for belief untethered from rational proof or demonstration is mere subjectivism or emotionalism or cultural habit. But before inspecting the arguments for natural theology, it is incumbent to be clear on just what the enterprise involves.

The Nature of Natural Theology

In the perennial debate concerning the existence of God and the rationality of belief in God, several basic perspectives have emerged. Classical natural theology claims that proofs for God's existence succeed and that this fact makes belief in God rational. This could be called theistic evidentialism: proof is needed for the proposition and proof is available. Detractors claim that the proofs for God's existence fail and that this fact makes belief in God lacking in rational support because proof is needed for the proposition and proof is unavailable. This could be called agnostic evidentialism because of the claim that

evidence is lacking to establish the existence of God. This agnostic claim should be distinguished, though, from the atheist saying that God's existence has thus been disproved. Not having sufficient evidence for X, does not necessarily entail that the existence of X has been disproved; it only means that the existence of X has not been proved. All that could be said is that there is insufficient reason to believe that X exists, not that there is sufficient reason to believe that X does not exist. The debate between these evidentialist contestants revolves around the soundness of various arguments for God's existence.

Others claim that one is within one's epistemic rights to believe in God without proofs for God's existence. Those in this camp may either view proofs as interesting and possibly helpful, but not necessary for reasonable belief, or they may actively attack the proofs as fundamentally wrongheaded and theologically deleterious for various reasons (such as Kierkegaard and Pascal).

Pascal believes that Christianity is in no need of natural theology and can retain its epistemic integrity without it. For instance, in a programmatic fragment describing the order of his proposed Apology for the Christian Religion, Pascal says that the cure for people's rejection of religion is "to show that religion is not

contrary to reason, but worthy of reverence and respect."[1] Pascal affirmed several lines of argument for Christianity throughout Pensees, which he summarizes:

> Make [religion] attractive, make good men wish it were true, and then show that it is.
> Worthy of reverence because it really understands human nature.
> Attractive because it promises the true good.[2]

But none of Pascal's strategies depended on traditional theistic proofs. He gives several kinds of reasons for rejecting natural theology, which raise a host of intriguing epistemological issues regarding the nature and functions of theistic proofs. But before discussing Pascal's arguments against natural theology in chapters 2 through 6, a better understanding of just what he is rejecting is required--even if he did not provide us with such.

Natural theology attempts to construct proofs which infer or deduce the existence of God from non-theological premises taken from nature or, in the case of the ontological argument, from the concept of God itself as found in human consciousness. A non-theological premise is one that can be asserted without necessary reference to God, such as "there is order in the universe" or "there is beauty in the universe" or "I have an idea of God." These could also be called natural premises. One who denies that any combination of only natural premises yields a theological

conclusion could be called a "theological non-naturalist." Agnostics, atheists (whether rightly or wrongly) and some theists (such as Pascal and Kierkegaard) have held this position.[3] A radical non-naturalist believes that no possible natural premises would entail the existence of God. A moderate non-naturalist holds that no presently known natural premises entail the existence of God, but certain facts, should they ever obtain, could provide premises that would entail theism. Penelhum argues that radical non-naturalism is too strict in its criteria, because we can imagine certain extraordinary phenomena that would be probative for theism--such as unambiguously miraculous occurrences, or repeated acts of special providence.[4]

A successful theistic argument would need to contain only true, non-theological premises that can be known to be true and that taken together entail the conclusion that God exists. It is impermissible that such an argument contain the conclusion in any of the premises. Following Aristotle and more recently Anthony Kenny, it must also be the case that the premises of the argument are better known than the conclusion. Pascal himself mentions this in a fragment:

> What we are trying to prove always seems obscure and what we use for the proof seems clear; for when we put forward something to be proved, we first imagine that it must therefore be obscure, whereas the thing that is to prove is clear, and thus we easily understand it.[5]

If I hold Q on the basis of P, I must (at least initially) be more certain about P than about Q, otherwise I am not giving an argument (which is an inference from premise to conclusion) for believing Q when I argue from P to Q.[6] This relationship is especially evident in Thomas Aquinas's Five Ways when Thomas argues that our knowledge of God's existence proceeds from our knowledge of effects back to their original Cause. We know these effects more immediately and certainly than we know the Cause they entail, even if such a Being can be "demonstrated." In other words, our knowledge of God is inferential, not direct or unmediated (at least in this life). Thomas says "we can clearly demonstrate the existence of God from His effects, though from them we cannot perfectly know God as He is in His essence."[7] Gilson's exposition of Thomas's proofs captures the epistemic condition: "The only road which can lead us to a knowledge of the Creator must be cut through the things of sense."[8]

Proponents of the various versions of the ontological argument do not empirically "cut through the things of sense," but still appeal to the a priori concept of God as cryptically containing an argument for God's existence. But even in this case, the concept of God is, at least initially, better known than the existence of God derived

from it. Thus the proof still furthers our knowledge, as all proofs must. Furthermore, the ontological arguments, though different in structure from empirical arguments, still begin with a natural premise: that of the idea of God, which is not presupposed to refer to an extant God (such a proposition would render it a non-natural and theological premise). Proponents claim that when properly understood the idea of God ends up entailing the existence of a being "greater than which cannot be conceived" or, in other words, a maximally great being.

Furthermore, classical natural theology argues that God's existence can either be deduced with demonstrative certainty or inferred with a very high degree of probability. Following Penelhum, we may say that natural theology tries to build "proofs" for God's existence where "proof" means either deductive derivation or overwhelming probability. By the latter, Penelhum means that a successful non-deductive proof is one in which the conclusion has "the highest possible degree" of probability or likelihood, such that to deny it would render one irrational.[9] Although other kinds of theistic arguments may be given that do not trade on the notion of "proof," Pascal was not concerned with them; he was interacting with the classical tradition, not recent, less dogmatic adjustments

of it. (Some of these concerns with other kinds of theistic argumentation will be assessed in chapter 7.)

Giving Reasons to Believe

We will now consider the case of the quintessential natural theologian. One strong appeal of natural theology is its insistence that one ought to have good and sufficient reasons to believe in matters of great importance. No reasons are needed for matters of taste or subjective judgment, but matters of consequence, it is claimed, require rational grounding and certitude. The belief in the Christian God entails not just a noetic assent to theism but a life commitment to the doctrines and precepts of Christianity and, believers would say, a commitment to God himself. Believers are called to lay down their lives, make sacrifices, put others before themselves, and even be willing to die for the cause. Thus belief in God has existential ramifications of no small importance.

Given this situation, natural theologians argue that one ought to be certain about beliefs that make such a difference in one's life; this certainty should be based on reason and evidence. We can enlist several illustrations in support of this concept. Before marrying, one should be very certain that the person in question is compatible since

so much mutual misery will result if the wrong choice is made. Even the thralldom of "falling in love" shouldn't dampen a critical appraisal of the situation because many marriages of passion have ended as disasters for both parties. For this reason, churches and counseling centers offer premarital counseling sessions. Likewise, in political judgments it is expected that one should have sufficient reason for supporting or voting for a candidate or particular cause. Voting for someone because "she makes me feel good" may exhaust the rationality of many voters, but few would grant that this is a sufficient reason for voting one way or another. Some rational case should be made that candidate X is superior to candidate Y. After all, these people will directly affect our destiny through their authority and influence. We should not play around with our votes or support.

If reasoned assent based on sufficient evidence and ample argumentation is required in these kinds of areas, should it not also be required, a fortiori, with respect to matters of religious significance? The natural theologian believes it should.

An Aid to Conversion

If a believer is in a debate with a skeptic about the truth of what the Bible says about salvation and the skeptic questions the rationality of believing in God at all, any the emphasis on the Bible as a normative divine revelation will fall on deaf ears. Whatever interest the skeptic has in the Bible--and it might be considerable, given the fact that Isaac Asimov, a confirmed atheist, wrote a guide to the Bible--it will not be to consult a holy book for indispensable guidance on salvation and conduct.

The natural theologian will interject that his arguments for the existence of God are independent of the Bible's claims and so are not question-begging or viciously circular. If God's existence can be proved through the assumptions of common sense, which both the skeptic and the believer must accept, the claim that the Bible is God's word gains a new plausibility. If there is a God, then there may be a specific revelation from God. If there is no God, then there is no revelation. The natural theologian will not claim to be able to prove that everything in the Bible is true or helpful, but he or she will claim to give the Bible a kind of prima facie acceptability not possible for the skeptic otherwise.

Of course, if one converts from skepticism to a generic theism, one could also become interested in the Koran or the Bhagavad-Gita as potential revelations. But the natural theologian will claim that moving one from skepticism to theism (albeit a nonspecific kind) is at least a step in the right direction. A theist may end up as a Christian. He is closer to Christianity, conceptually speaking, than is a skeptic or an atheist (although one may jump from atheism directly into Christianity, Islam, or Judaism). In other words, one conceptual disincentive to becoming a Christian (uncertainty about the existence of God) has been dissolved, even if one has not yet embraced Christianity. An historical example might prove helpful.

C. S. Lewis's journey of faith was intellectually staggered; he did not move from atheism to Christianity without intermediary steps. He moved from atheism to idealism to theism and ultimately to Christianity, not resting cognitively content until the final stage. [10] According to Lewis, there was a logic in the progression. His abandonment of atheism for idealism removed the disincentive to believe in a spiritual realm. His conversion to theism from absolute idealism removed the conceptual prohibition of thinking of God in personal terms, even if Lewis had not yet affirmed the Incarnation.

I am not arguing that idealism must lead to theism or that theism must lead to Christianity by force of logical necessity. Nor am I claiming that, theologically speaking, it is more difficult for God to convince an atheist of Christianity than it is for God to so convince a theist. Orthodox theologians claim that grace may strike anywhere in accordance with divine providence. I am claiming that a theist is conceptually more similar to a Christian than is an atheist with respect one's basic metaphysical commitment. The theist is, therefore, less conceptually distanced from becoming a Christian than is an atheist; although there may be any other number of reasons--cognitive otherwise--why someone might fail to embrace Christianity.

However, natural theologians, by their own reckonings, are not poised to <u>produce</u> conversions--either to theism or Christianity. This, they would say, is God's prerogative. Natural theologians are more like sowers who hope their seed (arguments) will find root and grow into full faith. Hence, they try to convince skeptics of theism in the hopes that this will remove significant disincentives to faith and open a door to Christianity. Whether anyone goes through that door is another matter.[11]

Joining the ranks of the theists may mean that one becomes a Christian theist (unless one joins the ranks with

a preexisting anti-Christian viewpoint that is not dislodged by further arguments or insights).[12] In any event, the mission of the natural theologian is to engender a basic theism not intrinsically hostile to a specifically Christian theism. More on the relationship between theism and Christian theism will come up in later chapters.

Moreover, the natural theologian appeals to natural premises already held by the unbeliever and labors to employ them to derive the existence of God. He does not demand instantaneous faith in some imperious fashion, but asks the unbeliever to consider arguments that the unbeliever should not find exotic, opaque, or objectionable. The natural theologian thinks that his reliance on commonly held rational principles and commonly available facts is a distinct epistemic advantage over any other approach. The unbeliever is challenged to believe--but according to the canons of his own rationality. This kind of argument, if successful, is very forceful. One can reject such argument only on penalty of being divided against one's own deepest rational commitments.

Help for Doubters

The natural theologian can also argue that natural theology is a good encouragement for the doubting Thomases

already in the fold. If their faith is failing, they can receive encouragement that there is good rational support for their belief in God. The natural theologian would not want to substitute philosophical argument for pastoral counseling, since the causes of doubt are often more than cognitive: They may be related to a lack of attentiveness to the affirmations of faith, a moral sluggishness, or any number of factors (and this is taken up in chapter 3). But the natural theologian is ready with arguments to bolster the faith of believers who waver, those who say, "I believe, but please help my unbelief." Consider this example.

If a man finds some evidence that his trusted and beloved wife is having an affair, he may worry over the matter without losing all faith in his wife. Even entertaining the remote possibility her unfaithfulness bothers him greatly. On the one hand, he is sure his wife would never commit infidelity, but, on the other hand he knows that others have thought the same and have been betrayed. He doesn't want to believe the worst, but he cannot dismiss the thought. Eventually, after further investigating the matter, he finds the evidence to be entirely innocuous when he discovers that someone with a penchant for gossip had confused his wife with another woman who had been romancing with another man. This change in the

evidential situation doesn't move the husband from believing that his wife was unfaithful to the opposite view; rather his doubts are overcome through a better understanding of the evidential situation.

These kinds of conditions, the natural theologians claim, could obtain with respect to belief in God. One's theistic confidence could be challenged because apparent counterevidence appears; but one's faith need not ultimately be crushed if the charges can be rebutted with intellectual integrity.

A detractor will say that if one's faith is so subject to fluctuation according to the circumstances it is hardly religious at all, but some kind of probabilistic belief that is too fragile to be a living faith. How one views the situation depends largely on what is taken to be the epistemic requirements of Christianity. If one believes that faith must be based on good reasons, and good reasons are available to those who take the time and effort to look, then the epistemic prospects look bright. Religious faith, because associated with rational determinants, may have its ups and downs epistemically, but it should never be down for the count.

This is often the case with scientific hypotheses. If a hypothesis is worth its salt, it will withstand the

sustained scrutiny of the scientific community. The fact that a hypothesis is questioned or critiqued need not throw its protagonists into despair. They must simply review the criticism and determine if their theory can pass the tests. If the hypothesis is strong enough, it ultimately has nothing to fear, despite moments when its credibility seems to be on the line.

A different perspective takes faith to be another kind of epistemic acquisition altogether, a kind of unconditional assent that is exempted from the constraints and protocols of argument and evidence entirely. In this view, good reasons are not available, and so faith, if based on good reasons, could never be what it ought to be. Faith dependent on reasons and evidences would be conditioned and variable and therefore not genuine faith.

The natural theologian denies this view of faith as credible by arguing that it entails a problematic situation. If one has faith in what is not rationally demonstrable, the charge of subjectivism or projection can be easily made against the "faith" in question. Since the believer gives no <u>reasons</u> for faith that should convince unbelievers, the unbelieving skeptic assigns <u>causes</u> that exhaustively explain the believer's faith in naturalistic terms. Freud's famous projection argument claims that believers project a desire

for security in a dangerous world onto the cosmos and create a theological father figure out of their own insecurities. Thus belief in a Father God reduces to various psychological causes. Similar kinds of critiques have been made by Marxists, Nietzscheians, and others. The conclusion is that faith is generated by purely social or natural factors; thus we are given no reason to assume a theological referent. We should rather infer that the referent is but an illusion, a figment of the pious imagination--however pleasant or placebic it might be.

The Need for Positive Evidence

Theists who oppose natural theology as a constructive or positive activity (i.e., constructing proofs for God's existence) sometimes attempt to defeat these sorts of anti-theistic arguments without venturing into metaphysical arguments for deity. They may say that the debunkers misdescribe theism or that their negative arguments are flawed. If successful, this kind of defensive move insulates the theist from some of the accusations of the critics.

A skeptic may argue that the following propositions cannot all be true because they are logically incompatible.

1. God exists

2. God is perfectly good

3. God is omnipotent

4. There is evil

It seems that at most only three of the four can be true. But every one of these propositions must be true for Christian theism to be true. Therefore theism is false. To this argument, a defender of theism may argue that the propositions are logically compatible if we introduce the proposition

5. For any evil God allows, God has a sufficient reason to allow that evil.

If successful, this kind of argument defends theism against one version of the problem of evil. The potential defeater is defeated.

But the natural theologian will want to claim that defeating a potential defeater of theism is not equivalent to constructing a positive case for belief and is thus only part of the task of the philosophical theist. In this case, a good defense is required but not sufficient for epistemic respectability, because defending one's fortress from attack is different from acquiring new territory, that is, from making new believers. A battery of psychological tests may vindicate my sanity against charges of dementia or derangement but fail to establish my sanctity. If I am concerned merely with deflecting invectives regarding my

purported pathology, the tests will suffice. If I am concerned to present myself as a moral model worthy of emulation, the tests will hardly satisfy. In the same way, defending a position from attack is distinguishable from establishing that position as cognitively convincing.

The natural theologian is not content with the brand of epistemic security that comes from successfully handling challenges to the credibility of the faith. He is not content to admit that theism is just as rational as atheism. He does not want epistemic parity with the atheist; he wants to convert him by establishing the cogency of his position through arguments that ought to convince all rational people. An epistemic standoff is deemed inadequate and unsatisfying. The natural theologian desires and pursues a positive argument for theism that renders it intellectually superior and not merely intellectually tolerable.

The natural theologian will take W.K. Clifford seriously and at face value when he says: "It is wrong, everywhere, and for everyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."[13] Clifford's famous "ethics of belief" stipulates that holding beliefs apart from adequate evidence is not merely unwise but imprudent and even possibly dangerous, as is illustrated by his credulous ship builder who knowingly allows an unsafe emigrant-ship out to

sea because he has deceived himself into thinking it safe. Furthermore, believing things on insufficient evidence, as he thinks religious believers must do, may become habitual: "The danger to society is...that it should become credulous, and lose the habit of testing things and inquiring into them; for then it must sink back into savagery."[14]

In the essay "The Will to Believe," William James, himself no natural theologian, made a famous response to Clifford that challenges his epistemic regulations as inordinately strict. This argument is worth considering, but the natural theologian takes another approach entirely. Theism, it is argued, requires neither the sacrifice of the intellect nor a special epistemic category to justify itself. It takes up the strongest challenge possible and beats it on its own grounds, thus vindicating itself without special pleading. Proofs are needed for epistemic propriety, and proofs are available for those who care to look. There is sufficient reason to believe in the existence of God. An attentive and honest Cliffordian should be satisfied.

The natural theologian could argue further that in the context of religious pluralism a positive case becomes even more necessary. With a diversity of religious claims available for inspection and religious missionaries of every

stripe eager to convert, the believer should have reasons to believe in the cognitive superiority of his religious tradition. Otherwise, his religious choice--which is only one among many possible choices in a pluralistic setting--will seem arbitrary or subjective. Hence, religious communities should be able to fortify their beliefs through natural theology to protect themselves from the cognitive threat of alien religious claims and to gain strength in confronting those differing beliefs. Those who believe in God and dare to be his intellectual representatives are not content to carve out a place in the pluralistic pantheon of gods when their God claims the throne.

The natural theologian could also argue that religious believers have the ethical obligation to engage in natural theology at some level because their own religious tradition bids them to bring their message to as many people as possible. If skeptics or infidels are to be reached, they must be convinced of the verity of the faith. To do otherwise would be to ignore people one's religious tradition says we should try to convince. This would be both uncaring to the individual and unfaithful to the tradition itself.

The Limitations of Natural Theology

Even the most ambitious natural theology will disavow any claim that it can establish every theistic doctrine. It must stop at some kind of general theism. Because of this, natural theology alone will not suffice to arbitrate truth-claims between theistic religions, but it could nevertheless be employed against pantheism (by arguing that God is proved to be transcendent, not identical with nature), polytheism/animism (by arguing that there is one Supreme Being), or the religious agnosticism of some forms of Buddhism, Jainism, etc. (by arguing that God can be known to exist).

Even if the natural theologian makes an impassioned and multifaceted argument for his legitimacy, he should retain a keen sense of the limitations of the project. Any orthodox understanding of both divine grace and human turpitude precludes the simplistic notion that arguments are sufficient to generate faith in the hearers. Nevertheless, for the reasons given above, the natural theologian is convinced that the proofs are helpful and part of the overall intellectual duty of the religious community. Not all believers may bank on or even know much about natural theology, but it is important for the intellectual integrity

of the community for the arguments to be available if needed.

To summarize, the arguments given to support natural theology may be divided into three basic categories. First, a life commitment such as Christianity requires firm reasons for that commitment. Second, it is argued that to avoid natural theology will lead to deleterious results: the faith will be assaulted by skeptics, believers will falter, and outreach will be hindered. Third, arguments are given to the effect that the religious tradition itself demands natural theology either directly or indirectly. A text like Isaiah chapter one might be cited where God says through the prophet, "Come let us reason together" (Isaiah 1:18).

Pascal's Rejection of Natural Theology

For a variety of reasons to be explored in the pages following, Pascal does not find these kinds of justifications convincing. Although he was a believer seeking to persuade skeptics to take faith seriously, he believed that the project of theistic proofs was fundamentally misconceived. Pascal argues that the apparent desirability of natural theology discussed in this chapter is overruled by significant defects that render proofs more harmful than helpful. The chapters that follow will explain

and assess four of Pascal's substantial criticisms of natural theology.

First, Pascal argues that the Bible itself precludes the activity of natural theology. If so, believers have no business in defending the faith by means excluded by the faith itself. One may attract alcoholics to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings by offering free champagne, but one ought not do so. This is discussed in chapter 2.

Second, Pascal argues that the very nature of God as an infinite being renders a positive proof of his existence impossible because of the opacity of the infinite. In order to guard God's supremacy as infinite and thus incomprehensible, we must sacrifice proofs that can never ascend from the finite to the infinite. If we can't fathom the infinite, we certainly cannot prove its existence. To attempt the impossible is no virtue, however pure the motivation. This argument is addressed in chapter 3.

Third, the kind of reasoning used in theistic proofs is, according to Pascal, inappropriate for religious believers because it is "too remote from human reasoning" to move one to real religious devotion. This concern over the method of theistic arguments will be discussed in chapter 4.

Fourth, Pascal finds the God derived through natural theology--the "God of the philosophers"--to be too abstract

and religiously unsatisfying to be equated with the biblical "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." Therefore, natural theology, even if convincing, succeeds only in proving the wrong God, a deity who is no more than a religiously worthless, if metaphysically curious, entity. Chapter 5 concerns this argument.

Fifth, Pascal thinks that natural theology engenders a kind of pride in its practitioners that is incompatible with the Christian claim that God can be found only through humble faith in the Incarnation. If proofs can be successfully constructed, one will never see one's radical human need for redemption that is available only through a mediator. A God of proof cannot be a God of grace. This claim will be assessed in chapter 6.

The analysis of chapters 2 through 6 differs from many works on natural theology or on Pascal in that it does not consider the cogency of either any theistic arguments or of Pascal's own defense of Christianity. Rather, they look at the problems and puzzles that emerge in the dialectic between Pascal's theological non-naturalism and the theological naturalism of the natural theologians. This is an under-explored area worthy of some sustained scrutiny.

In the concluding chapter, I will take up the matter of the cogency of the theistic proofs and the relationship of

natural theology to the defense of Christian theism. Then we will return to some of the concerns of this chapter in light of the issues discussed in chapters 2 through 6.

Notes

1 Pascal, Pensees, ed. Alban Krailshaimer (Great Britain: Penguin Books, 1985), 527/40. The first reference, 527, is to the Lafuma numbering system of the Pensees, which is used in the Krailshaimer edition I have cited. The second number, 40, refers to the same fragment in the Brunschvicg numbering system.

2 Ibid.

3 This term is used this way by Terence Penelhum, Problems of Religious Knowledge (New York: MacMillan, 1971), 55.

4 Ibid., 58-60.

5 Pascal, Pensees, 11/247.

6 See Anthony Kenny, Faith and Reason (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 18f.

7 Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica. Translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Chicago, IL: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1952), First Part, Q. 2, Art. 2, Obj. 3.

8 Etienne Gilson, The Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas (New York: Dorset Press, 1948), 64.

9 Penelhum, 38.

10 Although Lewis credits his conversion ultimately to God drawing him, his autobiography, Suprised By Joy (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955), reveals the intellectual steps involved in the process.

11 In his autobiography, Surprised by Joy, C.S. Lewis speaks of being drawn into the kingdom by God's will; but he also speaks of being convinced of certain truths along the way that contributed to his conversion. Lewis seems to view these two factors as compatible. See chapter 14 on this.

12 The only exception to this is where a monotheistic faith excludes the concept of an incarnation. This will be further discussed in chapter 6.

13 Quoted in William James, The Will to Believe (New York: NY: Dover Publications, 1956), 8.

14 William Clifford, Lectures and Essays, Vol. II, ed. F. Pollock (London, Macmillan and Co., 1879), 185-86, quoted in William Rowe, Philosophy of Religion (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1978), 174.

CHAPTER II

THE BIBLICAL OMISSION ARGUMENT

One argument against natural theology appeals to what Christians take to be special revelation, the Bible itself. Pascal believes that biblical passages or the lack thereof prohibit the enterprise of natural theology. We will first turn to this concern before addressing Pascal's other reasons for rejecting natural theology.

The Biblical Case Against Natural Theology

Pascal is impressed by the fact that no biblical writer argues from nature to Creator. No inspired writer is a natural theologian. His observation should be quoted in full:

> It is a remarkable fact that no canonical author has ever used nature to prove God. They all try to make people believe in him. David, Solomon, etc., never said: 'There is no such thing as a vacuum, therefore God exists.' They must have been cleverer than the cleverest of their successors, all of whom have used proofs from nature. This is very noteworthy.[1]

Because the Scriptures themselves lack proofs from nature, Pascal has no need for them. He inserts the sentence, "They [the biblical writers] all try to make people believe in him," to mean that certain kinds of

persuasion are appropriate, but proofs from nature are not. Pascal appears to be assuming that if the Scriptures are religiously normative with respect to theological knowledge about God, humans, ethics, and salvation, they must also be epistemically normative when it comes to theistic arguments.[2] Pascal's reasoning seems to follow in this way:

1. The Bible is epistemically normative. It specifically and exhaustively tells us how to acquire knowledge of God.
2. No biblical writer gives a theistic proof.
3. No biblical writer recommends or permits the construction of a theistic proof as a way to acquire knowledge of God.
4. Therefore no theistic proofs are biblically sanctioned as ways to acquire knowledge of God.

In other words, if God had sanctioned theistic arguments from nature, he would have inspired a biblical writer to present one or more such arguments. We could extend Pascal's observation by adding that if theistic proofs were appropriate we would expect the Scripture at least to advocate the construction of one or more of them. But Scripture does neither, therefore, we can conclude that God does not sanction theistic arguments.

Pascal's argument is valid. Its soundness is another matter because premises 1 and 3 are questionable. We should remember that Pascal does not rest his perspective simply on

a lack of overt natural theology in the Bible; he also believes that the stated scriptural teaching on sin, the fall, and redemption prohibits arguments based on natural theology, because of the inherent corruption of human reason through sin. We will take up this latter concern in another chapter: it is first important to analyze Pascal's biblical omission argument on its own merits to discern what, if anything, it entails with respect to natural theology. Does this omission show that natural theology is opposed to the very theism it purports to defend?

Concerning premise 1, no one should expect that one book--even a large book that Christians claim as a revelation--should contain everything of epistemic significance. The fact that the Bible lacks arguments on many disputable issues in the twentieth century is no evidence that such arguments are beside the point. An omission need not be a prohibition. But Pascal might want to argue that there is nothing of greater significance to Christian <u>theism</u> than God and our epistemic deportment toward him. The concept of belief in God is pivotal to the entire Bible and thus to Christian theology, spirituality, and ethics. It would be legitimate, then, to expect the Bible to contain everything epistemically pertinent to acquiring belief in God. We should expect the Bible--when

taken as a revelation from God to all humanity--to exemplify or encourage natural theology if the practice is legitimate. But it does not. This, Pascal could say, is no incidental omission but rather a disarming silence. Natural theologians are left without any biblically sanctioned tools.

It could be argued that the biblical writers had no need of theistic arguments given the religious climate in which they wrote, and that this historical condition accounts for why there is no record of such arguments in Scripture. But this does not mean that theists in more skeptical intellectual environs might not have use for them.[3] Atheism does not seem to have been a particular problem for the biblical writers, although the same cannot be said for polytheism or pantheism. John Baillie observes that "none of the Old Testament writers treats of the existence of deity as if it were an open question or in any sense problematic," and the same can be said of the New Testament.[4] Henry Sloane Coffin once preached that the Ten Commandments began with "Thou shall have no other gods beside me," instead of "Thou shall have at least one God,"[5]

One might counter this claim by arguing that the Bible itself admits of atheists. In Psalm 14, verse 1, the writer says that "the fool says in his heart, 'There is no God"

(see also Psalm 10:4 and 53:1). If the Bible cites actual atheists and refuses to engage in natural theology, this would strengthen the claim that the Bible does not sanction the practice.

This argument should not be ignored, but the use of the word "atheist" by the psalmist may not refer to one who denies a divine being, but rather one who defies a divine being. A note in the New International Version Study Bible on Psalm 14:1 calls the "fools" view a "practical atheism." Another explanatory note in The New Oxford Study Bible commenting on a parallel verse in Psalm 10:4 says "They are not atheists, but deny that God is concerned with moral retribution." In other words, the Psalms speak of those who try to deny God in their actions while still knowing that he exists. This is explained by a later verse in Psalm 10 that further describes the "atheist": "He says to himself, 'God has forgotten; he covers his face and never sees" (verse 11). The "atheists" are trying to deny the moral consequences of God's existence in relation to their misdeeds. So for all intents and purposes, they live like atheists and are as such "practical atheists." John Baillie comments that these verses do not have to do with "intellectual perplexity but with sinful evasion--with

wicked man's attempt to persuade himself that he can go through with his wickedness and yet escape divine judgment."[6]

This could be likened to the cigarette addict who knows that her addiction is extremely unhealthy yet continues to smoke with abandon. When confronted with facts that prove her potentially suicidal actions, she brushes them off and refuses to take them seriously. She is thus both a nay-sayer about the perils of smoking (because she doesn't change her actions and refuses to admit the dangers) and a believer in these dangers nonetheless. This kind of psychological situation is not rare, and many other kinds of examples could be marshalled.

Given the epistemic significance of the ancient historical situation as religious, it seems illegitimate to view Scripture as definitively circumscribing the means of acquiring knowledge of God. One can still hold that the Bible is theologically authoritative and morally normative without holding that it is epistemically normative and therefore precludes any natural theology that it does not exemplify. So premise 1 is not clearly true and is likely false in the way stipulated above.

The absence of either theistic proofs or any direct admonition to engage in such proofs need not preclude

natural theology as salutary for some Christians. It is clear that the biblical writers offer no theistic proofs (Pascal's premise 2). But we must question Pascal's premise 3 that no biblical writer advocates or allows theistic proofs. Several biblical texts teach that God is manifested in the natural order. If "the heavens declare the glory of God" (Psalm 19:1), one might infer that natural arguments are available to convince skeptics of this fact. On the other hand, it has been suggested that this text might be simply a confession of the believing psalmist and not an assertion that one could infer from the heavens that God made them. On this reading, the psalmist believes the heavens declare the glory of God; but the heavens give no independent evidence for the existence of God.

But verse four of Psalm 19 might challenge this view: "Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world." This universal reference may indicate that the heavens offer a worldwide testimony to God (through their "voice") that should be recognized by earth's inhabitants. This interpretation would mean that the evidence for God is everywhere available. Yet the critic could reply that their voice being heard simply means that all can observe the heavens, but all do not recognize the starry heavens in particular (and the universe in general)

as God's work, nor can they because they lack the conviction that God exists. Pascal seems to have held this view. In speaking of the claim that "the sky and the birds prove God' he replies that his religion does not say so "for though it is true [that the sky and birds prove God] in a sense for some souls whom God has enlightened in this way, yet it is untrue for the majority."[7]

This could be likened to me hearing a Russian speaker without having a translator available. I hear his voice, but I do not understand the message.

Both interpretations have some merit, and neither handily wins the day, although the universal testimony view seems most consistent with the context of the psalm. Nevertheless, these verses taken alone cannot serve either to license or to prohibit natural theology.

In response to the objection that "since a cause cannot be demonstrated by an effect not proportionate to it, it seems that the existence of God cannot be demonstrated," Thomas Aquinas says, "On the contrary. The Apostle says: The invisible things of Him are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made (Rom. 1:20)." Thomas continues, "This could not be unless the existence of God could be demonstrated through the things that are made. For the first thing we must know of anything is whether it exists."[8]

Thomas thinks it is required that we be able to know through argument that God exists in order for Paul's statement to make sense. Thomas is not arguing that Paul provides such an argument (Paul only gives an assertion), but that if his statement is true (as Thomas claims it is), such a theistic argument is both needful and possible--since revelation will never contradict reason. This challenges Pascal's premise 3 that proofs are not recommended in Scripture. Thomas thinks they are required if the Romans passage is to make sense.

Thomas' inference rests on two notions. First, he assumes that if God can be known "by the things that are made," such knowledge must be proved by rational argument in which "the things that are made" serve as a premise or evidence for the argument. But some, such as Calvin and Plantinga, have argued that while one may know God through creation, one needs no argument to do so. God's existence can be known as an intuitive truth or a basic belief not inferred from anything else. Seeing a flower may occasion the belief that God made that flower, and serve as the "grounding" for that belief; but, according to Plantinga, the existence of natural objects does not provide evidence for the deity.[9]

Second, Thomas interprets the passage to mean that "the invisible things of Him are clearly seen" by humanity as a

whole; that is, the creation reveals the Creator to every sentient person. This interpretation has a long and substantial history and seems to fit Paul's overall argument of Romans chapters 1 through 3 to establish the guilt of the entire human race. But R.T. Herbert has argued that Paul is speaking of pagan polytheists, not of humanity as a whole (which includes atheists). Therefore, God's existence is not rationally demonstrated to all humans through creation. Rather, if one is a polytheist, it would be rational to reduce one's theology to one God. But this doesn't imply that the text in Romans teaches that a rational argument from creation is available to persuade the atheist to become a theist.[10] We cannot settle this interpretive question here, but it will suffice to say that in light of this controversy the biblical evidence is not clearly against natural theology. No texts directly prohibit natural theology; neither do any passages unambiguously demand natural theology, but some may permit or even encourage it.

One could argue that the task of Christian philosophers in more skeptical times could include constructing arguments that alert unbelievers to the manifestations of God in nature so as to persuade them to believe in God. These arguments, if inspired by Romans chapter one, could be a posteriori arguments of the cosmological or teleological

type since they argue from an observance of nature (or natural premises) to the existence of God. Or appeal could be made to an a priori ontological argument. The natural theologian might cite the Apostle Peter in favor of natural theology for a skeptical time: "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Peter 3:15). If the atheist asks for a reason why the believer believes in God, he should be given one--and this shouldn't in principle preclude theistic proofs (although other kinds of reasons might be given). The natural theologian could grant that no theistic arguments per se are given in Scripture but still challenge Pascal's notion that the Scriptures do not allow such theistic argumentation in any circumstance.

Thomas Morris has put the matter well in speaking of philosophical theology in general (which includes natural theology):

> From the fact that the biblical documents, written as they were to deal with burning practical questions of the greatest personal significance, do not address all the possible philosophical questions which can also, in their own way, be of the greatest intellectual significance, it does not follow at all that these more theoretical questions are illegitimate, or that they are unimportant.[11]

He goes on to suggest that any person asking philosophical questions about religious matters should do all in his power

to find answers to these questions, even if they are not directly answered by the Bible itself. To do otherwise would be to deny an important aspect of one's identity.[12]

Morris is speaking broadly of philosophical theology that includes much more than theistic proofs, and it might be the case--although he does not make this claim--that only matters pertaining to the coherence of theism (its conceptual integrity), rather than the existence of God, are the proper subject of his remarks. That is, the believer or unbeliever can legitimately engage in philosophical theology by reflecting on divine intelligibility and compatibility of the divine attributes, but not try to construct proofs for God's existence. But this limitation would apply only if some other reason can be given for rejecting the proofs besides the fact that the Bible omits them. Morris believes that an omission may not be a prohibition, especially if the raw materials--if not the finished arguments--for philosophical theology are available in Scripture itself.

Another of Pascal's assertions could be challenged by those who allow, encourage, or practice natural theology. Pascal remarks that none of the biblical writers gives proofs--which is true--but he also says "they must have been cleverer than the cleverest of their successors, all of whom used proofs from nature." By this he seems to mean that if the best and brightest canonical authors deemed theistic

proofs unworthy or unnecessary, then we ought to imitate their philosophical omission. But even an orthodox view of the inspiration of Scripture need not affirm that the biblical writers were "the cleverest of the clever"--the most intelligent theologians of all time. All that need be affirmed is that the each writer was infallibly inspired by God to write as he did for the purposes at hand.[13] If God's existence did not need argumentation in the cultural milieu of the biblical writers, this doesn't imply that someone clever enough to construct theistic arguments might not come along at a later time when skepticism should render them necessary. It could be that Thomas Aquinas, philosopher extraordinaire, was, in fact, "more clever" than Solomon or David or any other biblical writer with respect to natural theology; but this would not imply that the biblical writers were not divinely inspired or that Aquinas was so inspired. All it would imply is that a Christian philosopher deigned to use reason in service of faith in a different way than that of the canonical writers.

Theological Assistance from Bavinck?

An argument that fits the spirit of Pascal's rejection of natural theology was also given by Herman Bavinck, a Dutch theologian favorably cited by Plantinga partially to

substantiate his claim that natural theology is not needed for an epistemically credible Christian belief:[14]

> A distinct natural theology, obtained apart from any revelation, merely through observation and study of the universe in which man lives, does not exist...
>
> Scripture urges us to behold heaven and earth, birds and ants, flowers and lilies, in order that we may see and recognize God in them. "Lift up your eyes on high, and see who hath created these." Is. 40:26. Scripture does not reason in the abstract. It does not make God the conclusion of a syllogism, leaving it to us whether we think the argument holds or not. But it speaks with authority.[15]

Bavinck thinks that the reason Scripture lacks theistic proofs is that any syllogistic reasoning, however cogent, is incompatible with biblical authority. By this he seems to mean that if proof for God's existence were derivative of natural premises and inferential reasoning, then biblical authority would be compromised. God's existence, for Bavinck, is not established by arguments based on non-theological premises, but by biblical revelation alone. The Bible tells us to see God as Creator and nature as God's creation: it does not tell us to see nature as evidence for God.

Bavinck's argument is similar to Pascal's biblical omission argument in that it regards biblical revelation as epistemically authoritative, and rules out extra-biblical means of acquiring knowledge of God--that is, natural

theology. In logical form, Bavinck's argument runs as follows:

1. Whatever speaks with the highest authority allows no external corroboration (implied).

2. The Bible speaks with the highest authority (about the existence of God).

3. Therefore, the Bible allows no external corroboration (with respect to the existence of God). There is no efficacious natural theology.

This argument is valid, but its first premise will be disputed.

Bavinck attempts to give a reason why the Scriptures lack theistic proofs, although the Scriptures themselves give no reason. So he cannot speak with the direct authority of revelation on this issue, although he believes his argument is based on the overall testimony of Scripture. We need to look more closely at the nature of authority to see if Bavinck's premise 1 is true.

Whatever speaks with authority--at whatever level--must be viewed by others as having authority, if it is to be recognized as authoritative. This almost tautological observation can be used against Bavinck. A text on biology may be the definitive statement on the subject and thus have the highest scientific authority. Yet this authority would not be damaged by those who refuse to view it as authoritative out of ignorance, perversity or disagreement.

Neither would it demean the authority of the text if someone were to defend its credentials to skeptics whom the defender wishes to convince. It could still have the highest authority as a biology text even though its authority needed to be corroborated through various means. The means used to certify the authority are simply what constitutes its credentials as an authority. Credentials do not undermine authority; they establish it.

We could imagine God making use of natural theology--by creating brilliant natural theologians such as St. Thomas or Richard Swinburne for this purpose--to accredit himself as existing for certain skeptical types. Since God would be viewed as creating the very means by which natural theology accredits him, the use of natural theology need not diminish the authority of God's word, the Bible; it would rather complement biblical authority. The intrinsic authority of Scripture would not be dependent on the arguments of natural theology, but God's existence would be demonstrated through such arguments for those people who aren't content to rely on the biblical evidence alone. The statements of the Bible would receive their epistemic credentials through natural theology and thus be shown as having the highest authority.

Bavinck may be thinking that the authority of the Bible's pronouncements on God's existence are not simply

true--that God exists, that he is the ultimate Judge and Redeemer, etc.--but that these pronouncements are self-attesting or self-authorizing and so in need of no outside corroboration. Self-attesting or self-authorizing here means not that the statements are tautologically true or must be seen as true by any attentive thinker--statements such as "the whole is greater than the parts" or "no object is bigger than it is." What is meant is that they appeal to no other human source for their credibility. A better way to put it might be to say that the Bible's pronouncements on the existence of God are "God-attested" because God alone certifies their truth value in the Scripture without any external, evidential support.

In this sense, to speak with authority means to need no assistance or extrinsic authorization, as when a father says to a three-year-old child, "No dessert tonight because you misbehaved today." That's the final word. To enlist a sociologist to concur would be absurd.

One may choose to view Scripture's authority in this way, but it doesn't seem forced upon us, unless--as we have denied--specific texts forbid natural theology. Further, many orthodox natural theologians have not viewed the Bible in this manner. Even if one holds, as did Bavinck and Pascal, that the Bible alone is the inspired Scripture, this

need not imply that God is limited to this medium to convince skeptics of his existence.

The idea that the Bible is the ultimate and final witness to or revelation of God's existence need not necessarily eliminate the idea that there are independent reasons that could convince skeptics that God exists. Thus Bavinck's first premise seems false. If this is so, his criticism loses its force and his assist to Pascal is nullified.

To pursue this debate on natural theology in any more depth would take us beyond the scope of our inquiry. We may, however, safely conclude that for Pascal (or Bavinck) to make the case that theistic arguments are inappropriate, he needs to look further than the biblical omission argument. It may well be that theistic arguments should be deemed illegitimate by believers for a variety of other reasons, and that believers should adopt a moderate theological non-naturalism (and this will be explored in later chapters). But the mere fact that theistic proofs are not overtly stated in Scripture is an inconclusive argument against their felicity. To rely on this fact alone would appear to commit the fallacy of the argument from silence. When Pascal says that the absence of natural theology in Scripture is "very noteworthy" he means, I think, that its

absence bespeaks a host of other factors about human reason, sin, and the nature of God as infinite that render such proofs illegitimate. For him, "the hidden God" cannot be approached in this manner. But to adequately address this will require the following chapters.

An Inconclusive Argument

This chapter has considered the biblical omission argument as one reason to reject natural theology and has argued that although it raises interesting issues deserving of further attention, it is insufficient to invalidate natural theology. The fact that no biblical author gives a specimen of natural theology does not necessarily imply its illegitimacy, although it does raise the question as to why there is an omission. This could be because no arguments were needed during the time the documents were written, although such arguments might be needed at a later point.

Yet even if the biblical omission argument fails to undermine natural theology, Pascal offers further criticisms addressing the matter of the a priori impossibility of finite beings proving an infinite God. To these issues we will now turn.

Notes

1 Pascal, Pensees, 463/243.

2 I owe this distinction to Keith Yandell.

3 The biblical writers do, though, argue against idolatry as illogical. A finite, inanimate idol cannot a universe make. See Isaiah, chapters 44-45.

4 John Baillie, Our Knowledge of God (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, n.d.), 119.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., 120.

7 Pascal, 3/244.

8 Aquinas, Summa, First Part, Q. 2, Art. 2, Obj. 3. Emphasis added.

9 See Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," in Faith and Rationality, Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff eds. (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 16-93.

10 See R.T. Herbert, "Is Coming to Believe in God Reasonable or Unreasonable?" Faith and Philosophy vol. 9 (January 1991): 46-47.

11 Thomas V. Morris, Our Idea of God (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 31.

12 Ibid.

13 The Old Testament says that Solomon was the wisest man living, but this need not mean that he had the highest intelligence, since, according to the biblical writers, more is involved in wisdom than mere intellect.

14 Bavinck goes further than Plantinga in saying that an efficacious natural theology is impossible. Plantinga's guarded defense of a modal ontological argument shows that he finds this version of natural theology to be plausible, even if not strictly needed for the believer to be within

his epistemic rights in believing in God as a properly basic belief.

15 Plantinga, 64.

CHAPTER III

PROOF AND INFINITY

In the last chapter we considered and strongly questioned Pascal's argument that natural theology is not warranted because it is prohibited, or at least not practiced, by the biblical writers. In this chapter we will consider Pascal's objection that natural theology is doomed because the concept of God's infinity renders theistic proofs logically impossible.

The Role of Infinity in the Wager Argument

In the prologue to the wager argument, Pascal argues for the rational unknowability and undemonstrability of God by virtue of divine infinity. The overall strategy of the wager proper, which we will not flesh out, is essentially to render the existence of God unknowable through reason in order to set up a prudential calculation which favors belief over unbelief. Because "the finite is annihilated in the presence of the infinite and becomes pure nothingness" so "it is with our mind before God."[1]

Before continuing with Pascal's argument, this phrase "the finite is annihilated in the presence of the infinite"

demands scrutiny. Pascal seems to mean that since the infinite is without limit it infinitely transcends or eclipses anything finite, no matter how great the finite might be. So, the finite when compared to the infinite becomes "pure nothingness." Pascal might want to say that it is comparatively "pure nothingness" because of the greatness of what it is being compared. But he cannot mean this "pure nothingness" literally, though, because something finite is still some (finite) thing, however disproportionate it might be with the infinite. It exists, and what exists is not nothing. Pascal could say that the distance or the discrepancy between the finite and the infinite is unlimited because of the nature of the infinite, but this still leaves the finite as more than "pure nothingness." In fact, ascribing the adjective "pure" to nothingness seems redundant or even wrongheaded. If the finite is "pure nothingness" when compared with the infinite, then what is the nonexistent when compared with the finite or with the infinite? Would it be an even "purer nothingness"? If so, nonsense is being multiplied. Nothingness is, it seems, an all-or-nothing concept that does not admit of degrees; neither can anything finite be nothingness, pure or otherwise.

Pascal goes on to say that we may know that the infinite exists, but we cannot know the nature of that which is infinite. This is shown by the example of an infinite number. Pascal says:

> We know that the infinite exists without knowing its nature, just as we know that it is untrue that numbers are finite. Thus it is true that there is an infinite number, but we do not know what it is. It is untrue that it is even, untrue that it is odd, for by adding a unit it does not change its nature. Yet it is a number, and every number is even or odd.[2]

Although Pascal doesn't develop the point, he seems to be saying that if we can form some concept of an infinite number--even though we can't say what it is--we can conceive of its existence; an infinite number is, then, logically possible, though mysterious. (We will take this up below after further developing his argument.) Elsewhere he says that "everything that is incomprehensible does not cease to exist."[3]

God, says Pascal, is "infinitely beyond our comprehension, since being indivisible and without limits, he bears no relation to us."[4] Therefore, we are "incapable of knowing either what he is or whether he is. That being so, who would dare to attempt an answer to the question? Certainly not we, who bear no relation to him"[5] Pascal means we are incapable of knowing God except by faith apart from reason. His tack is to reject proofs because they are

conceptually impossible given the nature of their object. If we cannot conceptualize the infinite we cannot prove the infinite because we have no idea what we are proving. The finite cannot ascend by reason to the knowledge of the infinite because the disproportion between the finite and the infinite is too great.

But even though God is infinitely beyond our comprehension, Pascal still wants to affirm that an infinite God, like an infinite number, is not impossible to conceptualize in the most minimal manner--even if reason can neither fathom its nature nor prove its existence. Either God is, or he is not; but "reason cannot make you choose either, reason cannot prove either wrong."[6] Like the infinite number, we can conceive of its existence because it is not logically impossible, but we are unable to fathom it. Unlike the infinite number, which presumably (but mysteriously) exists, we are unable to prove or disprove God's existence. But Pascal, nevertheless, thinks we can believe in God's existence even if it is beyond proof because what is incomprehensible may still exist. His elaboration of divine infinity is meant to preclude proof, not render belief impossible. This concomitant dismissal of proof and retaining of belief will be disputed in a few pages after we further develop his argument.

Pascal then defends Christians who claim that reason cannot establish the existence or nature of God, because he believes such proof is impossible given the very notion of God's infinity. Nevertheless, the coin falls only one of two ways; God either exists or he does not.

Infinity and the Impossibility of Proof

Pascal's infinity argument implies a terminal epistemic agnosticism. The logical choice is a simple case of exclusive disjunction: either God exists or God does not exist. The coin has only two sides. But no evidence can be adduced on either side. We are at an absolute impasse. Pascal may have wanted to entice the most hardened religious skeptic here, one who would not find any theistic argument compelling or even suggestive. In this case, Pascal would have been granting for the sake of argument a premise which he himself did not hold. We cannot explore this in relation to the wager, but the a priori exclusion of natural theology on account of divine infinity is worth exploring in its own right.

Pascal's essential argument, then, looks like this.

1. God is infinite.
2. Finite knowers cannot comprehend the infinite through reason.
3. We cannot prove what we cannot comprehend.

4. Therefore, we can neither prove nor disprove the infinite God's existence or know God's nature through reason.

5. Because of 4 Christians are not epistemically disadvantaged by the dearth of proofs; they could not be expected to prove the existence of an infinite God.

The natural theologian would be especially offended by this maneuver because conclusion 5 attempts to make the absence of proofs an epistemic virtue instead of a vice. But Pascal's argument, as stated above in lines 1-4, is valid whether or not the natural theologian would be satisfied with the epistemic implications of the conclusion. Should Pascal's argument succeed it would be a powerful a priori prohibition of natural theology because it eliminates any imperative to attempt theistic proofs. Premise 3 is not directly affirmed by Pascal, but seems assumed in his argument. We will grant premise 3 to Pascal for the time being (although we will later claim that it entails a problem) and pursue the truth of premise 2 in order to determine whether his argument is sound.

Comprehending an Infinite Number

Pascal uses the example of an infinite number to establish two points: First, he wants to say that finite knowers cannot comprehend the infinite because of its mysterious properties. Second, he wants to argue

nonetheless that one can at least formulate the concept of an infinite number--and so believe in its existence--even if one cannot comprehend it. He seems to be saying that something may be mysterious and opaque to reason, but still be logically possible. But Pascal's argument breaks down if the very idea of an infinite number dissolves upon closer inspection.

We have some notion of infinitude or limitlessness and we have some understanding of number. But less than a fruitful union occurs when the two are conjoined. Any possible number--say a positive integer--is always one integer less than a still higher integer; and that integer is one less than a still higher integer; ad infinitum. The process of progressive addition is infinite (hence ad infinitum) because it allows of an unlimited increase. But it is a confusion to speak of an infinite number (singular) because any specifiable integer is always a limitation or a demarcation in a series of which it is only a finite part. Therefore, there doesn't seem to be an infinite number because the series doesn't allow an upper or maximal limit occupied by only one integer. We might be permitted to say that the set of positive integers is infinite, but any given number can never be infinite because it is always a limitation. Infinite series of numbers is one thing; an

infinite number is another thing entirely--and something not philosophically helpful.

Samuel Johnson made just this point in a slightly different but illuminating manner:

> Numeration is certainly infinite, for eternity might be employed in adding unit to unit, but every number is in itself finite, as the possibility of doubling it easily proves: besides, stop at what point you will, you find yourself as far from infinitude as ever.[7]

When Johnson speaks of "numeration" he is describing what I've called the process of progressive addition. He captures the finitude of any number not by specifying their place in a series as I've done, but by the interesting fact that they can be doubled and that any number is equally distance from infinitude.[8]

If these reflections are correct, Pascal cannot use the mysterious properties of an infinite number as an analogy for the mysterious properties of an infinite God. We cannot comprehend the end of a limitless series of numbers simply because it has no end. But we can comprehend the idea of the limitless series itself. And any given number can be comprehended.

The incoherence of Pascal's idea of an infinite number, it seems, does little to elucidate the meaning or bare possibility of an infinite God. He claims that it is an example of what we can believe in without comprehending.

Yet if the concept of an infinite number is (as argued) itself a muddle, and there is no such thing, the example must fail. Of course, Pascal's entire argument does not rest on the comparison of God to an infinite number. But even if these criticisms fail to undermine Pascal comparison, he still faces other stiff challenges.

For instance, it should be inquired whether it is possible to even <u>believe</u> in the existence of what is incomprehensible. Belief, if it is to make sense, requires a purported and comprehensible subject of that belief--otherwise nothing intelligible is signified by the belief itself. No one can believe that "green ideas sleep furiously" because that sentence is incomprehensible, despite its grammatical form; it is meaningless because it fails to single out a comprehensible subject available for assent. Pascal seems to have inadvertently perched himself on the horns of a dilemma. If he affirms that God is incomprehensible (in order to eliminate proof or disproof), this excludes belief itself; but this is just what he wants to preserve--belief without proof. If he permits God to be comprehensible, this allows for belief but also introduces the possibility of proof and disproof, something Pascal earnestly wants to disallow.

The Theological Sense of Divine Infinity

Premise 2 states that finite knowers cannot comprehend the infinite through reason. This has been questioned by our discussion of infinity with respect to numbers. But Pascal also thinks that God's infinity, which is even more mysterious than that of numbers, renders God infinitely beyond our rational comprehension. Yet if divine infinity can be legitimately construed as more comprehensible than Pascal granted, it may not follow that finite knowers would be incapable of knowing God's nature and therefore incapable of either proving or disproving God's existence.

Since Pascal ultimately wanted to defend the biblical idea of God and not the "God of the philosophers," it seems out of character for him to appeal to such an abstruse notion of infinity in order to preclude proofs and commence his prudential wager argument. Pascal may be wanting to stress the uniqueness and transcendence of God such that the skeptic realizes that the epistemic procedures or requirements applied to other aspects of knowledge do not apply to God. God, after all, is not an item of everyday experience as are material objects.

Nevertheless, a case could be made that the introduction of the term "infinite" in the manner proposed by Pascal tends to create a pseudo-problem because the God

of the Bible is not presented as being infinite in the manner alluded to in Pascal's discussion of "infinite number." Pascal's own words should guide us here: "Anyone who wishes to give the meaning of Scripture without taking it from Scripture is the enemy of Scripture. St. Augustine, De Doctrina Christiana [III-27]."[9] In other words, let the Scriptures give the meaning of the word "God," not mathematical or philosophical speculation.

Pascal might respond that this fragment was meant to apply to believers engaged in biblical exegesis, and not to apply the task of persuading skeptics to wager on God. Further, a Christian philosopher is advised to use nontheological language to communicate Christianity to those outside its ranks. It is true that if one desires to communicate with those outside the religious ranks it would be appropriate to translate theological terms in ways that reach a secular audience. Believing philosophers of religion routinely do this. But if Pascal wants to present the idea of God to the skeptic in a secular manner, he should not misrepresent his own tradition's theology. The project of translation should not end in self-subversion. This is the concern to which I will now attend.

The New International Version of the Bible never translates any Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek word as "infinity"

or "infinite," although many passages speak of God's perfections and incomparability. The King James Version uses the word "infinite" only once to refer to God: "Great is the Lord. . . his understanding is infinite" (Psalm 147:5). The significance is that God's knowledge is comprehensive and transcends what any human or every human could know. But Salomon Bochner notes that "the Old Testament exulted in the omnipotence of the Creator, but it did not initiate problems about the unboundedness of His power."[10] (This is also true of the New Testament.) For instance, when King David reflects on God's knowledge he says: "You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD" (Psalm 139:4). He also says, "How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them. Were I to count them they would outnumber the grains of sand" (Psalm 139:17, 18).

To put it philosophically, for David, God knows all true propositions to be true. Put another way, he knows all that is logically possible to know. But, for David, this has nothing to do with God having no relation to us because of divine infinity. Rather, God's knowledge is without restrictions; ours is limited. David confesses that "such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to

attain," but far from lapsing into epistemological despair, he says that God's thoughts (at least the ones he can fathom) are "precious" to him. No philosophically troublesome notion intrudes on David's reflection on God's supremacy in the area of divine knowledge.

The same situation applies to references concerning God's omnipotence and omnipresence. Jeremiah reflects on God as the Creator and exclaims: "Ah, Sovereign LORD, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you" (Jeremiah 32:7). If God can create the universe, nothing can resist his power. Similarly, no place is foreign to the presence of God. Solomon exclaims, "The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I built!" (1 Kings 8:27). For the Apostle Paul, God's status as Creator also insures his noncontingency or aseity:

> The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else (Acts 17:24-25).

Paul is explaining that since God created all things and transcends the human environment ("doesn't live in temples built by hands"), he requires no external assistance in any respect ("is not served by human hands"); on the contrary, he uniquely imparts life and existence to all

creation. Although Paul doesn't use the philosophical term, he surely has noncontingency in mind, as opposed to the ontological status of the finite gods of Greek fascination.

The canonical writers marvel over God's supremacy but never take this to imply an absolute barrier between God and human knowledge of God. They do not worry over any philosophical implications of infinity (as employed by Pascal in a mathematical sense of an infinite number) because the concept itself is alien to their thinking. The whole prospect of comparing God to an abstract mathematical concept seems wrongheaded in principle and is nowhere suggested by the biblical writers, nor does it seem to be implied by any of their statements.[11]

Mathematical infinites, whatever they may be, have to do (roughly) with numerical series. They concern numerical quantities. Yet when we are speaking of a personal being, we are not speaking of a numerical units in a set. Instead of speaking of mathematical quantities we are speaking of a divine person with a determinate character. Thus the kinds of problems and paradoxes attending mathematical infinities seem to have little or no effect on the infinitude of God.[12] But in what manner could God rightly be considered infinite?

Divine Infinity: Adverbial Predication

It is often claimed that whether or not the biblical writers bring up philosophical problems associated with the knowledge of God, the knowledge of God would be impossible or unreliable given the supposed ontological discrepancy between God and humans. God is uncreated, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, perfectly good, etc., while humans have no such status. Yet we will argue below that God's transcendence, when properly elaborated, need not exclude meaningful predication.

Many of the problems envisaged by Pascal and others seem to stem from their use of "infinite" as an imprecise adjective to modify God. To say that "God is infinite" is a very general and abstract description because we have not qualified or specified to what the infinity refers (beside God). The word "infinite" can be applied in any number of ways. We have already questioned Pascal's use of the term for God which trades on a dubious mathematical analogy. In light of our previous discussion, it makes more sense and is more consonant with Judeo-Christian theism to use "infinite" adverbially, rather than adjectivally. We can say that God is infinitely powerful, infinitely just, infinitely loving, etc. Construed in this way, "infinite" does not denote an attribute <u>simpliciter</u> but qualifies all the divine

attributes. Similarly, if we referred to someone as "an amazing person" we would know little about that person because we could not determine in what sense he was amazing. Is he amazingly strong, amazingly beautiful, amazingly weak, etc.? But if he is amazingly intelligent we begin to understand something of the person. The generic adjective when applied without qualification directly to the noun God is descriptively inadequate; the adverbial qualification of the adjective gives the determinative meaning to the noun in question.[13]

I will henceforth use "adverbially infinite" to mean a particular specification of divine attributes; but it is granted that this meaning could also be rendered adjectivally by saying that "God's mercy is infinite" or "God's power is infinite" because these two sentences express, respectively, the same propositions expressed in the following two sentences: "God is infinitely merciful" and "God is infinitely powerful." What we want to rule out is simply an unqualified adjectival reference of the noun God as in: "God is infinite."[14] To this end, and for convenience sake, we will speak of adverbial infinity to refer to what was discussed above.

Anselmian Infinity: Maximal Greatness

If we can give some determinate meaning to God's infinity without metaphysically enervating the classical understanding of the divine attributes, then the idea of God as infinite need not rule out a proof for his existence. This counters premise 2 of Pascal's argument. We have already tried to give a more determinative meaning to the divine infinity through adverbial predication, but more work needs to be done.

God has been traditionally understood by those reflecting on the biblical materials, especially in the Anselmian tradition, as infinite in the sense of being the superlative or maximal Being who possesses the sum of all perfections, moral and metaphysical, to the highest degree logically possible. In Anselm's famous words from the Proslogion, God is a being "greater than which cannot be conceived."[15]

When Anselm is explaining the concept "greater than which cannot be conceived" he doesn't directly refer to God's infinity, although he uses the word elsewhere when he speaks of being "overwhelmed by [God's] infinity" and by the "largeness of the [divine] light."[16] In these cases he is certainly speaking of a being "greater than which cannot be conceived," that is, the greatest possible being, a being

Anselm believes must exist given the very concept of God. How does Anselm, then, combine the notion of infinity and what can be called maximal greatness? Although Anselm doesn't specifically articulate this relationship, his reflections suggest a likely and credible construal. For God to be the greatest conceivable or possible being God must be adverbially infinite in all the dimensions discussed above. If a being was anything less than infinitely good, powerful, or knowledgeable, we could easily conceive of a being of greater power; that is, one who possessed adverbial infinity in every possible dimension. But then the former being would be metaphysically and theologically disadvantaged with respect to the latter and could not be considered the greatest conceivable being. This reductio ad absurdum argument eliminates anything less than the possession of adverbial infinity in every divine aspect.

Therefore, for Anselm (and other classical theists) God's infinity means that: God knows all truths (it is inconceivable to know more); is able to perform any logically possible action (it is inconceivable to be stronger)[17]; is dependent on no other being for his existence or continuation or execution of his plans (it is inconceivable to be more independent); is everywhere present (it is inconceivable to be more available or able to act at

any given point at any given time); and is totally and supremely good (it is inconceivable to be morally superior).

I will be assuming that the Anselmian tradition is fundamentally correct in its conception of God as the greatest possible being.[18] Another line of argument which I will not pursue is that the biblical writers should not be pressed on this point of maximal greatness because all they emphasize is God's existential greatness; that is, God is the greatest extant being and is so far above any other being that he therefore deserves obedience and praise. This perspective of existential greatness would encourage a different critique of Pascal which would attack his first premise that God is infinite. From this perspective, God need not possess even adverbial infinity to be the biblical deity. But we will bracket this issue and continue to explore a more Anselmian theism.

Divine Actions as Expressions of Adverbial Infinity

To illustrate these maximal properties or attributes, the Scriptures give accounts of God acting in extraordinary ways. God reveals through his prophets and apostles what is normally unknowable by mere humans (expressing omniscience); he performs actions impossible for humans such as parting the Red Sea to insure his people's release from unjust

bondage (expressing omnipotence and perfect goodness). I say that these actions "express" (rather than "demonstrate") omniscience, omnipotence, and perfect goodness because in these kinds of examples the accounts of divine action underdetermine the attributes in question. But this is only to be expected. Neither omniscience nor omnipotence can be infallibly inferred from any finite set of observations because omniscience means unlimited knowledge and omnipotence means unlimited power. A mere human could never observe everything an unlimited God might do (to establish omnipotence) or discover everything that an unlimited God might know (to establish omniscience). Human finitude in the face of unlimited knowledge or power eliminates this outright. Nor does the account of God delivering his people from Egypt or any other account in Israel's history prove that God is perfectly good. But these scriptural accounts are understood by the writers as examples of the actions of an almighty God. Because God achieves what no other being could achieve and because God declares himself to be Almighty, the biblical writers present God as the "Almighty" and interpret his great deeds as actions performed by omnipotence. For this reason they do not present God's actions as those of a very powerful being who falls something short of being all-powerful.

The biblical reports are logically compatible with God's adverbial infinity because an omnipotent or infinitely powerful God should be expected to be able to divide vast bodies of water, among other things. However, the reports fail to prove God's adverbial infinity. Similarly, the confession that God created the world and is therefore "almighty" provides a vivid sense of divine power as the universe-maker, but does not prove the point philosophically. The biblical writers assume that God created all things and understand this to be an indication of his unlimited power. They do not argue that God's creation of the world <u>proves</u> omnipotence.

The biblical idea of unlimited power is illustrated or indicated in an account from Genesis. God appears to a ninety-nine year old Abraham and declares, "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. I will confirm by covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your number." (Genesis 17:1-2). God declares, as it were, his infinite power by calling himself "God Almighty," but this power is to be expressed through making the aged Abraham the father of many nations and his wife Sarah a new mother at the age of ninety. After Sarah laughs at the idea of conceiving in her dotage, God rhetorically inquires, "Is anything too hard for the LORD?" The event illustrates just

what it means for God to be almighty: two senior citizens will be miraculously enlisted to propagate (literally) God's purposes.

The faithful hear the declaration that God is almighty and then witness what they are told to take as an expression of almightiness. The assertion by God that he is almighty becomes their interpretive principle for viewing and understanding the following abnormal or extraordinary events. The believers are not inferring that God is almighty from these mighty acts because all that could be inferred would be that God possessed the power requisite for these acts. An almighty power which exceeds the power needed for these events would not have been demonstrated.

These observations show, I think, pace Pascal, that an infinite God need not be understood as having no intelligible or coherent relation to finite beings. Biblically understood, God, the infinite being, reveals himself as one who transcends the powers of finite humans, and this revelation expresses (even if it does not prove) God's infinity. The examples of divine action given above show that one can speak meaningfully about God's infinity through references to God's actions in the world as they are explained in Scripture. Nothing in what has been said commits one to admit the truth of these biblical accounts.

They are enlisted to clarify the theological notion of divine infinity. The issue of truth surfaces later in the chapter when we address the matter of theistic proofs.

Yet if, as Pascal claims, an infinite God bears no logical relation to finite humans, we have not a clue how to describe God at all. No divine predicates are appropriate if God is infinitely beyond our comprehension. Or we might just as easily say that any predicate is as good as any other (except for the predicate "finite"). As mentioned earlier, if this is the case it is difficult to make sense out of even believing in God. We need some intelligible description in order to understand precisely what it is we are believing. Pascal's fascination with the mathematically infinite with respect to an infinite number seems here to imply an impermeable epistemic barrier between humans and God--and one that he, as a Christian philosopher, ought not labor to build.

If God's nature is in principle unknowable by reason, then no proof for God's existence is possible, simply because we can never know what we are trying to prove in the first place, let alone whether the proof is successful. An argument with no intelligible conclusion is no argument. The argument could never begin, just as Alice in Wonderland could never successfully hunt the wild snark because she was

never told what to look for (besides the fact that it was called a "snark").

We can here compare Pascal's infinity objection to something similar (but not identical) in the Summa Theologica. Thomas argued that proofs for God's existence need not reach the "essence" of God but can, through an examination of God's effects in the world, know his existence.[19] He responds in this way to the objection that finite effects can never prove an infinite God because of the discrepancy between the infinite and the finite. This objection differs from Pascal's in that it does not question the comprehensibility of the infinite (as applied to God or anything else) but, rather, the possibility of reasoning from finite effects to an infinite cause. Although the case will not be examined in detail, it should be noted that neither Thomas nor his hypothetical objector grant that divine infinity involved the kind epistemic impasse employed by Pascal. Even though Thomas says that proofs cannot demonstrate the essence of God, he does not deny that they can establish something intelligible about God.[20] Our discussion of adverbial infinity need not claim to have discovered "the essence of God" (whatever that might be) but only that God can be spoken about intelligibly and without

the kind of epistemic malaise invoked by Pascal. This also involves excluding some attributes from the deity.

Divine Infinity and the Exclusion of Attributes

The orthodox predicates of God also exclude attributes not fitting a superlative being. This exclusionary function is, in fact, a requirement of intelligible assertion. Coherent statements need to pick their referents out of the crowd and so exclude nonreferents. If I say that Babe Ruth was primarily a great homerun hitter, this excludes him from being predominantly a singles hitter like Pete Rose. In the case of God, being omniscient (infinitely knowledgeable) excludes ignorance; being omnipotent (infinitely powerful) excludes impotence; being omnipresent (infinitely available to act at any given place--an entailment of omnipotence) excludes being out of touch with any aspect of creation; being omnibenevolent (infinitely good) excludes evil. The adverbial use of infinity eliminates attributes which contradict the adjectives they modify.

God's adverbial infinity cannot be understood as the possession of all possible attributes, but rather the possession of all the attributes of divinity as stipulated in the biblical accounts and as articulated in orthodox theology. This distances the Judeo-Christian view from that

of Spinoza who affirmed a pantheistic deity who possessed an infinite number of attributes, of which only two are knowable: thought and extension.[21] This is antithetical to the biblical view that God has a determinate character which excludes certain attributes such as spatial extension.

God's adverbial infinity, as traditionally conceived, need not entail an infinite epistemic chasm between God and humanity if infinity is understood as the possession of divine moral and metaphysical attributes that are expressed and explained through the biblical accounts. God should not be understood as being a part of the creation or as being ignorant, weak, or immoral--all adjectives of deficiency. Any being possessing any of these attributes is not God, however exalted it may be in other respects.

In this sense, God's infinity (adverbially conceived) has its "limits." But here the word "limits" really means demarcation or definition, not deficiency or diminution in any respect. That God is personal as opposed to being impersonal is not a limitation; rather, being personal simply excludes being impersonal. God's attributes circumscribe or delineate what is meant by "God." (To say that Michael Jordan does not have three bad basketball games in a row is not a limitation; it is rather a specification of excellence.) While surpassing human knowledge in many

ways, the God of revelation is presented as having a determinate and describable character.

First- and Second-Order Assertions About God

Perhaps we can better understand intelligible statements about an infinite being by invoking the idea of first-order and second-order assertions. I can make a number of intelligible first-order assertions about the constitution and functions of a commercial jet aircraft. I know the number of engines mounted on a Boeing 747, that the pilot sometimes uses the automatic pilot, and that the loud sound before landing is the landing gear being engaged. Nevertheless, I know little about the actual workings of a jet aircraft. About these mysteries I can assert "I know there are four engines" (first-order), but I don't know how they work (second-order); I know when the landing gear is engaged (first-order), but I don't know how it works (second-order); etc. The second-order assertions exhibit my ignorance, but in the context of my knowledge. In other words, although I acknowledge the limitations of my understanding of a jet aircraft, I do nothing to thereby abdicate all claims to having any understanding of a jet aircraft.

Second-order assertions may also be understood as excluding certain things. My (second-order) assertion of ignorance about certain aspects of X, Y, and Z does not mean that concerning those aspects I believe anything is possible. Some statements are excluded. I know <u>that</u> the engine of a 747 works, although I do not know <u>how</u>; but I do know that the engine is <u>not</u> run by a team of pygmies on treadmills. That is ruled out. With respect to God, I can understand what it means for God to be noncontingent and omniscient without knowing <u>how</u> this could be (besides knowing that only a divine being has these attributes); and I can understand that God's noncontingency rules out all ontological dependence on any other beings. I also understand that omniscience rules out all ignorance of any sort.

A theist can say that revelation discloses certain attributes of God which are intelligible (because expressed in the scriptural accounts), but that God still remains incomprehensible in many ways to a finite mind. I can't know precisely what I don't comprehend about God, but I can know that there are some things I don't comprehend. By being partial, my knowledge can encompass mysteries. The Old and New Testaments affirm that God is a personal agent who is like a father, a warrior, a shepherd, a friend, a

counselor, etc. If we want to understand what it means for God to be like a father, we can refer to passages that speak of his care and provision for Israel and refer to his actions which exemplify this. If we want to understand what God's adverbial infinity or supremacy means to the biblical writers we can examine the conceptual framework in which God expresses what is understood to be his unmatched (or infinite) attributes. The theological meaning of God as infinite is found in the biblical treatment, not in Pascal's very suspect mathematical analogy.[22]

Inconceivable and Conceivable Infinity

We can summarize the intelligibility of the divine infinity by comparing two somewhat similar, but crucially different, statements about God's transcendence. Pascal is eager to defend God's transcendence to the degree that proofs are impossible: they cannot reach their object because of its exalted state as infinite. Metaphysically, he seems to be saying:

> M: God is completely dissimilar to anything finite because he is infinite.

This metaphysical affirmation certainly does defend the radical transcendence of God, but at the expense of meaningful predication about God--since we are left only with utterly inadequate finite concepts. Given his

understanding of infinity the following epistemological statement would follow:

> E: God is infinitely beyond our rational comprehension.

We can call this position inconceivable infinity. When it is endorsed, we can grant that such a being could neither be proved nor even believed in, as we argued above.

But another way of defending transcendence entails no such expense in meaningful predication. As opposed to M, consider this metaphysical statement:

> M-1: God is not completely similar to anything finite because he is adverbially infinite in the ways specified in Scripture.

This affirmation preserves the transcendence of God because it maintains that God is distinct from any finite creation. From this affirmation the following epistemological statement is entailed which differs significantly from E:

> E-1: God, who is adverbially infinite, is not beyond our rational comprehension, although certain divine attributes are beyond our imagination.[23]

E-1 follows because, as argued above, God's adverbial infinity is intelligible through the biblical accounts. Furthermore, the concept of adverbial infinity with respect to divine power or divine knowledge is not incomprehensible, even though finite knowers could never imagine or picture

such powers. This is why: While I can easily visualize a triangle, square or pentagon, I cannot visualize a chiliagon (a thousand-sided figure). Nevertheless, I can form a perfectly intelligible concept of a chiliagon because I understand what it means for a figure to have sides and I understand what is meant by a thousand. If I want to visualize to aid my understanding I can simply multiply the four sides of a square that I can visualize by 250 (or by some similar procedure combining visualization and multiplication). The same procedure holds true with respect to infinite power. I cannot picture omnipotence but I do know what power is and can picture actions performed by exercising power--say, the muscle power used by a man raking leaves. I can then multiply the notion of power by infinity in order to comprehend (but not imagine) omnipotence. The same kind of methodology is available for conceptualizing omniscience by applying the concept of infinity to knowledge. It can be argued that one cannot picture or visualize anything without limit because the imagination always frames or limits its pictures; but this hardly rules out the coherent and intelligible concept of infinite knowledge or power.

We can call the position so far outlined conceivable infinity. Isaiah speaks of God's transcendence in ways

compatible with E-1: "'To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?' says the Holy One" (Isaiah 40:25). Nothing in creation is God's equal; nothing created is infinitely good, wise, or powerful. Yet this statement also preserves the possibility of finding some similarities between God and creation. It is also assumed that we can conceptualize God as unique. Earlier in Isaiah chapter forty-five this is affirmed of the unequaled one: "He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart" (Isaiah 45:11). Since something is known of finite goodness, wisdom, and power (as with a strong and caring shepherd) which serves as a basis of comparison with the infinite God. We then take those known qualities and multiply them, as it were, by infinity in order to comprehend the concept of God's adverbial infinity.

Therefore, Pascal is not warranted in precluding theistic proofs because the theological and biblical understanding of divine infinity as articulated above--which, we have argued, he himself as a Christian ought to have faithfully represented--is a good deal more precise and comprehensible than his mathematical presentation would have it. On this basis, then, we can successfully reinterpret divine infinity such that premise 1 of Pascal's argument is understood as not contaminating the idea of divine

infinitude as unintelligible (premises 2) and therefore incapable of proof (premise 3 and conclusion 4). If we can speak intelligibly about the character of God, a proof for God's existence is not thereby ruled out on the basis that we must remain ignorant of what we have set out to prove. If we can have some understanding of what an infinite being might be like, and what actions would express that being at work, this eliminates one significant refutation of the possibility of theistic proofs (although other challenges are possible). This is not to sweep aside the many challenges to the coherence of religious language, but it is to show that the notion of God's infinity, when suitably qualified, need not arrest the kind of meaningful predication which itself is a prerequisite for the possibility of proving God's existence.

Natural Theology and Divine Infinity

As mentioned above, no historical event, taken by itself, can prove God's infinite (or maximal) power, knowledge, or goodness--although the biblical accounts can help explain what is meant by a maximal being. But the classical proofs for God's existence do not appeal to historical events but to general claims about nature (such as its contingency and order) and to principles (such as

causation) which combine to prove an infinite God. In the case of an ontological argument, an appeal is made to the concept of God itself in connection with several logical principles. If one or more of these proofs succeed, God's existence is proved either from some aspect of nature or from the very concept of deity.

Pascal wanted to rule out theistic proofs a priori by virtue of the concept of divine infinity, whereby the infinite, as Pascal says, "bears no relation to us."[24] I have tried to show that God's infinity, theologically understood, need not and should not be conceived in that manner. But if, having surmounted Pascal's a priori strictures against theistic proofs, we attempt to construct a theistic proof, we can argue for an adverbially infinite God who nonetheless bears some intelligible, logical relation to finite humans.

One fragment from Pensees might be viewed as an abbreviated cosmological argument that (somewhat ironically) makes just this point:

> I feel that it is possible that I might never have existed. . . . Therefore I who think would never have been if my mother had been killed before I had come to live; therefore I am not a necessary being. I am not eternal or infinite either, but I can see there is in nature a being who is necessary, eternal, and infinite.[25]

It is difficult if not impossible to ascertain how Pascal would have incorporated this fragment into his proposed but unfinished Apology. It might have been placed in a dialogue as a form of theistic argumentation to be rejected. Or, it might be a confession of creaturehood by a believer that is not meant to be an argument. Whatever purpose the fragment might have served, the point is that if a cosmological argument structurally similar to this fragment establishes some kind of rational or conceptual relationship between the "necessary, eternal and infinite" being and the contingent human knower who "might never have existed." Rather than the idea of infinity precluding any logical relationship, this fragment seems to say that a theistic argument would rationally infer an infinite being from a contingent world.

The argument would look like this:

1. There are contingent and finite beings.
2. Contingent and finite beings cannot explain their own existence without an ultimate and necessary cause (assumed).
3. Therefore, there must be an ultimate, necessary (noncontingent), and infinite being (God) to explain the existence of contingent and finite beings.

According to Pascal's fragment, God would be inferred and identified (if not completely understood) by virtue of the finite, because contingent finitude would be explained

by an infinite being whose divine "necessity" refers to noncontingency or absolute ontological independence (aseity). Whether or not this argument is sound, it is intelligibly stated because the terms can be understood: God is contrasted with what is finite and contingent. We can thus see a logical relationship of opposition between contingency and necessity and between finitude and infinitude. This fragment of an argument does not go very far in describing the divine attributes (and goes less far in proving them), but it does make a few of them intelligible.

The Relationship of Aseity to Infinity

A successful cosmological argument proves a noncontingent being, that is, a being who depends on no other being for its existence or continuation. In the above fragment, Pascal refers to the noncontingent God as "infinite." But a crucial question is the relationship between aseity and divine infinity.

First, it is possible to at least conceive of noncontingent entities (call them monads) that are neither omnipotent nor omniscient; that is, they do not possess adverbial infinity with respect to power or knowledge. Consider a pea-sized monad that is uncreated and

indestructible. It is ontologically secure--lacking external origination and incapable of obliteration; but it is difficult to see why it should possess any of the classical omni-attributes, despite its (rather unassuming) aseity. A monad would, though, be of infinite duration since it was never brought into existence at a given time and would never cease existing. Nevertheless, the possession of aseity doesn't seem to entail adverbial infinity, except with respect to duration. But infinite duration does not a deity make, although deity demands infinite duration (or atemporal eternity).[26] So it could be argued that aseity alone does not entail divine infinity because we can conceive of aseity without infinity: the first concept does not necessarily entail the second.

But at least two points can be argued on this score--one relating to cosmological arguments and one relating to ontological arguments. First, a successful cosmological argument will eliminate any "monads" by claiming that the very nature of the universe is contingent and ontologically insecure. Simply because we can conceive of an aseic monad (or a unicorn) does not mean we have any positive reason to think any exist. Our monads might be logically conceivable but be rendered highly implausible through a cogent cosmological argument that claims that the universe

evidences no such monads. Whether this result is secured by any cosmological argument is here not our concern. The point is only that such monads, while conceivable as aseic entities that are noninfinite (spare infinite duration), are dissolved in the conclusion of the cosmological argument and therefore pose no threat to the unique aseity of the cosmological Creator.[27]

But would this uniquely aseic being be infinite in power? It doesn't seem that one kind of cosmological argument can prove such a conclusion. The argument to which I refer claims that the universe eternally coexists with and depends upon God. In this case, God's possession of unique cosmological aseity can only entail that God is the cause (understood as support) of all existence; it does not seem to prove that God's power extends beyond what God has in fact caused. The possession of unique aseity (which excludes the existence of monads, pea-sized or otherwise) demands that no other creature be noncontingent, but it does not seem to demand that the uniquely aseic being be omnipotent. The power it possess could conceivably be less than adverbially infinite even though it is the only being possessing aseity.[28] Hence, a God who eternally coexists with a universe he "creates" might lack the power of creating the universe ex nihilo. All this kind of

cosmological argument would prove would be God's power to support eternally the universe. But this doesn't mean that the God so proven must lack exnihilating power.

However, one can plausibly argue that if a being possesses unique aseity and is capable of creation ex nihilo, that being must be unlimited in power. This directly follows from two considerations. First, it seems difficult to imagine a greater expenditure of power than the act of absolute origination, that of creating the entire universe out of nothing without external assistance. Second, such an exnihilating being would be uniquely aseic or noncontingent (since it alone precedes the existence of the contingent universe) and thus is unlimited by any external factors--although this being might freely place certain restrictions upon itself. Such a noncontingent being would be incapable of losing its noncontingent status since, by definition, it depends on nothing outside itself for its existence. Nothing could, then, threaten its aseity/noncontingency. And if this incorrigibly noncontingent being has created ex nihilo, there seems to be nothing it could not accomplish at any point even after creation since an exnihilating and aseic being could suffer no diminution of the already maximal power it has demonstrated by the act of universe-making.[29]

But this argument for the omnipotence of an aseic and exnihilating being would only apply to cosmological arguments that claim that God not only causes the existence of the contingent universe by upholding it, but also created the universe from nothing. In other words, this kind of cosmological argument rules out an eternally contingent universe. The philosophical significance of this in relation to Pascal's challenge is that if such an argument succeeds it, unlike the aforementioned cosmological argument, seems to prove that God is infinite in power, something Pascal thought was ruled out by the very concept of God. Neither Taylor nor Aquinas, for instance, argues for ex nihilo creation, but others using such strategies as the Kalaam cosmological argument have done so.[30]

Thus, the relation of aseity to adverbial infinity with respect to cosmological arguments comes down to this: A cosmologically derived deity may be aseic but lack the power to create ex nihilo, if all the argument establishes is eternal "creation" understood as ontological support. Nevertheless, the deity derived from an ex nihilo cosmological argument may be both aseic and possess exnihilating power. In this case, the being would, it could be argued, be infinite in power. Moreover, if any being exercises exnihilating power that being must be aseic

because the act of bringing the universe into existence from nothing eliminates the possibility of the exnihilating agent being dependent on anything extrinsic to itself precisely because there was absolutely nothing in existence before the creation for that being to be dependent upon. Therefore, the concept of exnihilation analytically contains the concept of aseity; but the concept of aseity does not analytically contain the concept of exnihilation, although the concept of aseity allows for the possibility that the aseic being is also an exnihilating one.

Second, we summon the ontological argument in our consideration of aseity. It can be argued that while any possible aseic entities need not be infinite in any sense besides endless duration, an adverbially infinite or maximally great being must be aseic for the following reasons. If a being were not aseic, it would be dependent on some other being for its origination or continuation and so could not possibly be maximally great (and so divine) with respect to power. This condition, then, would undermine the ontological or Anselmian formulation of omnipotence--meaning that God is not only the most powerful being extant, but the most powerful being possible. In fact, the very notion of omni-potence speaks of unlimited power; therefore such a being could not be ontologically

dependent on any extrinsic power for its existence or continuation because dependence would entail a lack of self-determination.

Furthermore, adverbial infinity entails God's unique aseity, as did the cosmological argument. If God possessed aseity and any other less exalted beings possessed aseity (like our monads) God would lack the power of causing these noncontingent beings to exist and would thus fail to be maximally great as the Creator and sustainer of all beings apart from himself. Therefore, according to ontological cogitations, God must be the only aseic being if he is to be maximally great. It could also be argued that if an exnihilating being has greater power than nonexnihilating being, then the maximal being must be an exnihilating one as well.

Proofs and Intelligible Relation

If a cosmological argument succeeds, it proves a being whose existence is not contingent--a being who possesses unique aseity. In this case, contra Pascal's comments on the incomprehensibility of an infinite God, there would be an intelligible relationship between God and the universe: the contingent universe is dependent upon its noncontingent

Creator, and the creation itself indicates its created status by virtue of its contingency.

Therefore, God's unique aseity, although not a guarantee of adverbial infinity, need not rule out an intelligible relation between God and human beings. Pascal may have assumed that unique aseity necessitates divine infinity, but this--as argued above--may be philosophically indiscreet. Whatever Pascal thought, contingency and aseity (noncontingency) are correlative and mutually explanatory terms: to understand one is to understand the other.

Therefore, a successful cosmological argument, even if it does not establish the existence of God's adverbial infinity, does establish God's unique aseity (a uniquely divine attribute that is compatible with all the other aspects of divine infinity) and an intelligible relationship between the created and the Creator. This argument works against Pascal's reasoning that God's infinity renders him wholly unrelated to finite humans. Even if a successful cosmological argument failed to prove God's adverbial infinity, at least one of the divine attributes (aseity) would be demonstrated; and that attribute is compatible with adverbial infinity. Therefore, God <u>could</u> be adverbially infinite (although a nonexnihilational cosmological argument might fail to <u>prove</u> this) and still have some intelligible

relation with human knowers, at least with respect to the contingency-aseity correlation. If so, Pascal's argument fails.

Anselm's ontological argumentation also involves a intelligible relationship between finite humans and an infinite God. Anselm took the very concept of divine infinity (which he construed as maximal greatness) and used it as the basis for his ontological proof. For Anselm, the concept of God is so ontologically enriched that it betrays the very existence of God. Anselm thus concluded exactly the opposite of Pascal. Rather than it being impossible to determine rationally whether an infinite God exists, the concept of God's infinity rationally demands that we believe in God's existence. This is not to argue that Anselm's argument succeeds, but only to observe that he took the idea of infinity not as an epistemic detriment but as a springboard for philosophical argument. If God "exists in the understanding," as Anselm puts it, he must "exist in reality," since otherwise he would not be a being a greater than which cannot be conceived.[31] Pascal ends up precluding the existence of God "in the understanding" because of his views on what we have termed "inconceivable infinity." Many other natural theologians have been less ontologically ambitious than Anselm, but they have not found the notion of

God's infinity to exclude in principle and a priori the possibility of theistic proofs.

The ontological argument differs from a posteriori arguments because it is grounded in the a priori concept of God rather than in any observations about the universe. Nevertheless, if the argument succeeds it too establishes a logical relationship, contra Pascal, between the infinite and the finite. According to the ontological argument, God is the greatest possible being, a being a greater than which cannot be conceived. This does not mean that God is utterly inconceivable (as Pascal maintained), but that it is utterly inconceivable that anything be greater than God. Anselm did confess that God was "not only that than which a greater cannot be conceived, but [also] something greater than can be conceived."[32] But this differs from Pascal's restriction in that we can conceive of God as the greatest possible being without conceiving all that constitutes that greatness. This harks back to the distinction between first-order and second-order predications. Anselm's formulation also has an exclusionary effect because it disallows predicating anything of God less than maximal greatness. God's infinity may transcend our understanding but it need not and must not eradicate it, as we have mentioned in several contexts above.

So we find that in the process of considering the essential concepts of the cosmological and ontological arguments, we can make some sense of what is meant by God's infinity. This is the case even if both arguments--or both kinds of arguments, since there are multiple versions of each--fail as proofs. The proofs at least indicate that it is possible rationally to conceive of an infinite God--as either a causally or logically necessary being--even if they fail to prove that God exists. This contradicts Pascal's claim that it is divine unknowability which definitively precludes proof. (Of course, proofs may fail for reasons other than an a priori inability to conceptualize adequately their object.)

Whatever divine attributes may be deducible from design arguments, divine infinity does not seem to be one of them. It could be claimed that only a divine mind could so order and direct universe, but this would not establish, in and of itself, an infinitely wise or infinitely knowing mind; although such arguments might establish the existence of the greatest extant mind.

Mutual Underdetermination

The overall argument of this chapter is that we can make sense of the idea of God's infinity by appealing to the

biblical tradition of grounding the idea in God's actions that are interpreted by the canonical writers as expressive of God's unmatched character as adverbially infinite. Divine infinity is understood as the possession of the standard omni-attributes and unique aseity.

But the theistic proofs used by natural theologians do not employ such material as premises for their arguments (one does not appeal to special revelation as an authority if one is engaged in natural theology), neither do they yield a deity who is necessarily an actor in history with all the specific divine attributes so central to the biblical materials. (This will be addressed further in chapters 5 and 6.)

I have argued that both the cosmological and ontological arguments provide us with a God who is uniquely aseic. A successful ontological argument would establish the existence of God as maximally powerful (infinite in power) as well, as might a cosmological argument that proves God created ex nihilo. Thus we can form some concept of God as infinite even apart from the biblical materials, but this still leaves some of the religiously significant attributes of God--such as mercy or justice--underdetermined with respect to proof.

We are faced with a relationship between the biblical accounts and the theistic proofs of what might be called mutual underdetermination. Appeals to Scripture determine the meaning or intelligibility of God's adverbial infinity in several dimensions, but underdetermine (that is, do not prove) the actual existence of such a God. The Scriptures do not prove God's existence; they declare it. Some of the appeals to natural theology determine (if successful) an adverbially infinite being, but underdetermine this being's specific personality with respect to the divine portrait of the biblical tradition. Nevertheless, some overlap can be discerned.

Both the biblical texts and some of the classical proofs speak of God as noncontingent, in the sense of being eternally and ontologically independent.[33] A successful cosmological argument proves a being who is causally necessary (noncontingent), either as the eternal sustainer of the universe or its exnihilating creator. This comports with the claims in biblical revelation that God is eternal and ontologically independent. The philosophical sense of God's aseity is assumed by the biblical writers (although it is not spelled out philosophically nor do the canonical authors argue for it). We have already discussed Paul's proclamation of divine aseity in his Mars Hill address. In

the context of God's power to raise the dead, Jesus says that God "the Father has life in himself" (John 5:26). The text does not simply mean that living things have life in them--in a way that a rock or a corpse would not--but that God, as Creator, is the giver of all life outside himself, and that God is the ultimate source of all created life. Eternality and ontological independence is also implied by the biblical claims that God is without beginning ("from everlasting to everlasting") and so without origination or dependence on any outside factors.

Furthermore, the first chapter of the Gospel of John also claims that through the divine Word "all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made." (verse 3). This assumes that the divine Word is unmade or uncaused, being the maker or cause of all else. In this case, then, there is an overlap between the biblical understanding of God and that of natural theology. Therefore, the notion of divine infinity is not as opaque as Pascal painted it.

Nevertheless, natural theology is relatively reticent with respect to God's specific moral character or interaction (if any) with humanity. How much could be known about God through natural theology depends on how adventuresome the natural theologian and how successful the

enterprise might be. Thomas thought that many of the divine attributes--such as unicity, simplicity, truth, infinity, immensity, ubiquity, and eternity--could be so determined but still saw the need for revelation. Less ambitious natural theologians will stake out fewer divine attributes. Whatever the purported province of the endeavor, the deity derived is less than the biblical being.

A successful ontological argument establishes a being who is necessary in a logical sense and who possesses all perfections, moral and metaphysical, to the highest degree. This would yield more about God's character than a posteriori arguments because God would be deemed the greatest possible being.[34] How God's maximal goodness is construed would depend on various intuitions of value--that is, what properties are deemed better to have than to lack. But the exact nature of God's morality would remain underdetermined, as would his interaction with or expectations of humanity (if any).

In one sense, then, we can pronounce Pascal to be correct. Reason cannot prove God to be infinite, <u>with respect to all the ways specified by the Christian tradition</u>. But God's adverbial infinity does not necessarily render God "infinitely beyond comprehension," nor does being unique mean God "bears no relation to us."[35]

Yet the fact that natural theology underdetermines the biblical deity need not entirely incapacitate the project of natural theology if the proofs are considered to be rational preambles to faith (more on this in chapter 5).

But Pascal's claim is more radical that what has been said about mutual underdetermination in that he denies any meaningful discussion of God's nature by means of unaided human reason. I have argued that we can make sense of the meaning of the term "an infinite God" if we properly illustrate the idea through references to biblical materials. This is not to claim that the materials are inspired or true (which would beg the question), but simply that they give a coherent and intelligible picture of the being taken to be infinite. Several theistic proofs also give us at least a coherent account of some aspects of divine infinity.

But we should consider one last possibility. Where would natural theology stand if it could not prove the existence of a God who is shown to be infinite in any sense? That is, what if my arguments that a successful cosmological or ontological argument justify divine infinity prove incorrect and no proof can succeed when its object is infinite because adverbial infinity is always underdetermined by any philosophical argument? Even in this

case, Pascal's criticisms could still be averted if one could adequately conceptualize (even if not prove) divine infinity through the biblical examples because his argument is based on the notion that divine infinity is incomprehensible. If natural theology is able to suitably conceptualize God but unable to prove the existence of a God who possesses adverbial infinity in any respect it would have failed for a reason other than Pascal's. But would natural theology have failed entirely if God's adverbial infinity could not be proved?

The natural theologian might shift strategy and say that natural theology proves the existence of a being greater than any other (or existentially great), even if that a being cannot be proved to be infinite (the greatest possible being). Yet because of our knowledge of revealed theology we should identify this supreme Being with the infinite (or superlative) God of the Bible because of the overwhelming, but not total, similarity. We would then move from an overwhelmingly probable "proof" of divine infinity to something less convincing, but possibly still cogent. This tack will only be mentioned at this point; it will be discussed in chapters 5 and 7. I am assuming here that divine, adverbial infinity can be entailed by certain kinds of successful theistic arguments.

Divine Infinity Not Prohibitive A Priori

This chapter has addressed an objection to natural theology which is based on the idea of God as infinite. But the notion of God's infinity does not serve as an a priori prohibition of any possible proofs. Pascal takes the idea of infinity to imply that no concept of God will obtain. Therefore, we can construct no proof from finite concepts to an infinite God. But Pascal's construal of the infinity of God is strangely dissonant with the biblical tradition he tries to represent and defend. The Bible never presents God as infinite in any philosophically abstract sense, but rather as the superlative or maximal being who intervenes powerfully and personally in human affairs. If God can be rendered intelligible as a superlative being, it may be possible to build proofs for that being's existence.

Yet even if Pascal's criticisms discussed in this and the previous chapter fail to undermine natural theology, Pascal offers further objections to the endeavor which address the nature of theistic proofs as too esoteric to produce a properly religious effect. This claim will be assessed in the next chapter.

Notes

1 Pascal, Pensees, 418/233.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., 149/430.

4 Ibid., 418/233.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Samuel Johnson as quoted in D. Elton Trueblood, A Philosopher's Way, (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1978), 77.

8 I have quoted and commented on Johnson after my observations because this quotation came to my attention after I had formulated my critique of Pascal's view of an infinite number. Johnson's analysis essentially agrees with my own, but it did not inspire my analysis.

9 Pascal, 251/900.

10 Salomon Bochner, "Infinity," Dictionary of the History of Ideas, 4 vols. Philip P. Wiener, ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973), 2:604.

11 This differs from cases where biblical writers describe God in nonphilosophical ways that, nevertheless, can be translated into philosophical terms or that have philosophical implications. This will be taken up in chapter 5.

12 This is not to say that philosophers haven't puzzled over supposed paradoxes resulting from a reflection on God's attributes, such as the paradox of the stone (can God make a stone too heavy for God to lift?). My point is that Pascal's invocation of the mathematically infinite at this point is illegitimate.

13 See D. W. D. Shaw, Who is God? (London: SCM Press, 1968), p. 60f, quoted in Carl Henry, God, Revelation, and Authority, 6 vols. (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1976-82), 1:232.

14 Even this locution could be permitted as a kind of shorthand expression for what I've explained above if the appropriate distinctions are kept in mind.

15 Saint Anselm, Proslogion, ch. II in Saint Anselm: Basic Writings. Translated by S. N. Deane (La Salle, IL: Open Court Publishing Company, 1966).

16 Ibid., ch. XVI.

17 Creating a square circle or a married bachelor is not an action God cannot do; square circles and married bachelors are nonsense concepts. The idea of performing nonsense or suffering a lack of power by not being able to perform nonsense is itself incoherent (nonsense).

18 It should be noted that the employment of Anselm's maximality categories doesn't demand that the ontological argument itself succeeds.

19 Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, First Part, Q. 2, Art. 2, Obj. 3.

20 Thomas also relies on analogical knowledge of God in an attempt to preserve both the transcendence and intelligibility of God. Our discussion of the intelligibility of divine, adverbial infinity will not rely on this Thomistic notion.

21 See Baruch Spinoza, The Ethics and Selected Letters. Translated by Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1982), 31. More on Spinoza's unorthodox views will be discussed and documented in chapter five.

22 The above discussion was prompted in part by Ninian Smart, The Philosophy of Religion (New York: Random House, 1970), 51f.

23 The general impetus for this distinction comes from Thomas Morris, Our Idea of God (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 19-21; although I have adapted it for my purposes.

24 Pascal, 418/233.

25 Ibid., 135/469.

26 The concept of atemporal eternity seems to be a difficult concept to defend. Thus I lean toward the infinite duration or "everlasting" view of divine existence. But this view will not be defended because it is of no great importance to matters at hand.

27 Richard Taylor argues against the claim that the universe or any portion of it is self-existent in his cosmological argument. See his Metaphysics, 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1992), 104-110.

28 This conclusion would have no bearing on the notion of existential divine greatness, as explained above, since it dispenses with the notion of God's maximal greatness.

29 By omnipotence we do not, as mentioned above, include logically impossible actions. See footnote #17.

30 For a recent formulation of the Kalaam cosmological argument see J. P. Moreland, Scaling the Secular City (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1987), 15-42.

31 Anselm, ch. II.

32 Ibid., ch. XV.

33 Neither the argument from design nor the moral argument necessarily seems to have this entailment.

34 Some clarification is needed with respect to two kinds of "necessary existence." A successful ontological argument renders God a logically necessary being; that is, it is logically impossible for God not to exist. The proposition "God does not exist" would be a contradiction. Put another way, God exists in every possible world. If this is true then God would also be causally necessary (noncontingent). But if God is deemed to be causally necessary through the cosmological argument, he need not be considered logically necessary.

35 Pascal, 418/233.

CHAPTER IV

PROOFS AS REMOTE FROM HUMAN REASONING

The second and third chapters considered two of Pascal's objections to natural theology--the biblical omission argument and the idea that an infinite God could never be proven--neither of which was found to be sufficient to stultify the work of natural theologians. But Pascal has more arguments against what we called in chapter 1 "the purported benefits of natural theology." Rather than enlisting the services of natural theology to convince unbelievers, Pascal argues that the venture, however nobly conceived, goes wrong because it fails to do justice to the subject matter to which it attends so earnestly.

Pascal claims that the kind of argumentation required for theistic proofs is unacceptable for religious devotion. Hence, instead of accepting any theistic arguments as a service to faith, Pascal rejects them as wrongheaded in principle because theistic arguments are too opaque to be religiously helpful; they are too "remote from reasoning" and so have "little impact."

In order to understand the nature of Pascal's complaint, we should note that he is rejecting the standard

Thomistic approach to theistic proofs; but neither Thomas nor other natural theologians consider themselves to be in the peril Pascal suspects, as we will see as this study unfolds. Thomas argued from nature to deity through the use of unaided reason. He affirmed theological naturalism, as opposed to theological non-naturalism: natural premises are available to demonstrate theological truth. His argumentation comprises the preambles of faith. The Five Ways claim to demonstrate, in order of Thomas' exposition: an Unmoved Mover, a First Cause, a Necessary Being, a Perfect Being, and a Designer. And these, he claims, all men call God.

This Being can be known through the proper operations of reason; the existence of God need not be an article of faith, though those who do not have the time or the facility for such proofs may believe in God's existence by faith in lieu of reason's demonstrations. Thomas acknowledges that natural theology lacks certain uniquely and indispensably Christian features such as the ex nihilo creation of the universe, the Trinity, and the Incarnation. Thomas takes these divine truths to be "above reason" and only knowable by faith (not unaided reason) in the authority of revelation. But since "grace does not destroy nature but perfects it,"[1] this reliance on faith, he thinks, poses no

epistemic or moral threat to his philosophical project of theological integrity. Neither is the process of argumentative proof ill-suited for God as its object because, for Thomas, philosophy is the handmaiden of theology.

Proofs as Remote From Reasoning

Pascal objects to Thomistic and any other natural theology as the wrong approach entirely. Even if some recondite argument could be constructed that would prove God's existence, the conclusion of the argument would not have the kind of psychological staying power worthy of the subject matter. He says:

> The metaphysical proofs for the existence of God are so remote from human reasoning and so involved that they make little impact, and even if they did help some people, it would only be for the moment during which they watched the demonstration, because an hour later they would be afraid they had made a mistake.[2]

In this argument, Pascal is not concerned so much that the object of the proof is not the living God of Scriptural tradition (this will be taken up later in the next chapter), but that the process of argumentation used in the proofs is somehow inappropriate or imprudent. His argument is structured like this:

1. Metaphysical proofs for God's existence are remote from reasoning in that they are involved or complex.

2. What is remote from reasoning has "little impact" existentially because of its complexity and tentativeness; one would be fear being mistaken in reasoning.

3. Therefore, metaphysical proofs have little existential impact.

4. True knowledge of God (that is, religiously relevant understanding) can not be remote from reason and have little existential impact (implied).

5. Therefore, metaphysical proofs cannot deliver any true knowledge of God.

Premise 2 is only intimated by the above quotation by Pascal, but it is further borne out by Pascal's celebrated distinction between the "God of the philosophers" (supposedly proved through abstruse reasoning) and the "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." Pascal draws this distinction dramatically in an account of a gripping religious experience recorded in "the memorial." [3] The philosopher's God makes "little impact" religiously while the God of religion is the deity whom Pascal believed was the source of his religious experience. By referring to the "God of the philosophers" Pascal not only refers, I think, to the nature of this deity (see the next chapter) but also the God of <u>philosophizing</u>; that is, the philosophical approach to the issue of God's existence, e.g. complicated proofs.

We need to inquire more deeply into just what bothers Pascal about these "metaphysical proofs." He is concerned that they are "so remote from human reasoning and so involved that they make little impact." By "little impact" Pascal appears to mean that the proofs lack existential effect on one's conduct. That is, the proofs are not earth-shaking or deeply engaging. If I learn the exact age of my neighbor this belief will likely have "little impact." On the other hand, if I am an African American and I learn that my neighbor is a member of the Ku Klux Klan the impact increases.

My account of what Pascal means by "little impact" is something of an educated reconstruction because he does not explicitly or at length explain just what he means by this locution (besides his worries that the proofs will be mute because of their complexity and tentativeness that relate to fear over miscalculation). I suggest he may have also had in mind the notion that the proofs have little existential impact in that they don't positively affect one's religious conduct by engendering spiritual sanctity. If the proofs are so tentative they could not hope to ground a solid faith.

I believe this construal is Pascalian in spirit, if not in letter. Whatever the case, I will use this enriched

notion of "little impact" in my assessment of Pascal's criticism of philosophical reasoning used in service of religious faith. Even if Pascal did not have precisely this latter notion in mind in the above quotation, it nonetheless seems worthwhile to include as part of an anti-proof argument because this understanding of "little impact," if defensible, would only strengthen Pascal's overall case against natural theology. (We must wait until chapters 5 and 6 for a detailed discussion of what kind of religious impact the object of theistic proofs might have. In this chapter we are concerned only with the process of proof.)

Simple Proofs and Remoteness from Reasoning

Our investigation will begin with premise 1: Metaphysical proofs for God's existence are remote from reasoning. Pascal does not identify just what proofs he is addressing besides using the adjective "metaphysical." This might distinguish metaphysical proofs from moral proofs or from religious experience arguments. Whatever the case may be, Pascal's assertion may lack substantiation: not all proofs are esoteric and hence "remote from reasoning" or "so involved." Thomas' Five Ways, whatever their ultimate cogency may be (which need not concern us here), do not appear extremely opaque to human reasoning, particularly the

arguments for a First Cause or a Designer as stated in the Summa Theologica. Certain simplified versions of these kinds of arguments are sometimes on the lips of nonspecialists. Consider this argument which involve only two premises and a modus ponens form of argument.

1. If anything intricate and beautiful evinces design then it implies a designer.

2. The world is intricate and beautiful and evinces design.

3. Therefore: the world is designed by a Designer.

This gives the rudiments of an argument from design.

This argument is elementary or embryonic to the point of being almost crude. But these simple sorts of arguments open up the kind of considerations needed to discuss theistic proofs intelligently. They can be understood without esoteric philosophical or theological training. [4] Attentive undergraduates can understand more sophisticated versions of these arguments if exposed to clear expositions of the arguments through reading and teaching. These arguments in their more developed form may be remote from conversation at most collegiate social events (excepting the Philosophy Club), but they need not be remote from reasoning per se.

Most theists may not have come to believe in God through these arguments (but some will claim that they

have), but the fact that they are used in conversation shows that theists deem them intelligible and worthy of discussion. These examples of simple theistic arguments are only meant to show that some nonphilosophical theists adduce these mini-arguments and show some understanding of them. This being the case, the germ of Thomas' arguments cannot be considered so "remote from human reasoning." In fact, the more rigorous statement of the arguments in Thomas's Summa Theologica takes up only a few pages and is not highly arcane (though he does develop the proof from motion in much more depth in Summa Contra Gentiles). Of course, philosophers following Thomas, such as Anthony Kenny, have written far more about his arguments than Thomas himself ever did, but the point stands that proofs need not be highly complex to be understood or discussed or believed. So, Pascal's premise 1 does not seem to be clearly true.

However, one could plausibly argue that a high level of sophistication is required for the proper evaluation (whether positive or negative) of these proofs. Anthony Kenny, for instance, spends over a hundred densely argued pages in discussing the Five Ways.[5] He deems this philosophically appropriate and necessary if an adequate judgment is to be made on the value of these arguments. Consider another case.

Nonphysicists attending a popular lecture on recent cosmological theories may understand the rudiments of the theories sufficiently well to discuss the merits of these theories after the lecture with their peers. But this does not qualify them to make authoritative judgments on cosmology, even if their views happen to be correct. If this kind of analogy can be drawn, Pascal's point seems to stand because the subject matter demands an intellectual rigor which is "remote from reasoning" or at least remote from common understanding. (More on what constitutes "remoteness from reasoning" will be discussed below.)

How one assesses the matter of complexity in argument with respect to its relation to rational justification depends on the cogency of the arguments in question at the various levels of sophistication. Although I am not wedded to the following notion, it could be that a relatively simple and straightforward theistic proof is cogent. If so, the one who understands the proof may come to a justified theistic belief without considering further philosophical complexities. This would be the case even if sophisticated critics constructed complex criticisms of the argument far beyond the ken of those believing the simple argument. We can think of any number of sophisticated criticisms of justified beliefs which need not concern one convinced

otherwise--such as the arguments of the flat earth society against a round earth and the arguments of those who deny the holocaust. But these examples may be too extreme to be good examples. Let us consider another one.

On the basis of a few facts and a basic moral intuition, one may justifiably believe that the United States' entry into the Korean was warranted; and this position could be rationally held without consulting the revisionist arguments against the military intervention, however sophisticated they may be. One simply cannot chase down every possible refutation of arguments that appear solid.

Arguments as Window Dressing for Faith?

But even if simple theistic arguments might succeed, Pascal could claim that these mini-arguments, while not necessarily "remote from reasoning," are really just window-dressing for more deeply held beliefs which are not rooted in philosophical reflection, but in an immediate intuition of what he calls "the heart," the organ for the acquisition of nondiscursive knowledge.[6] He might argue that because believers feel obliged to defend their faith and convince the unconverted, they attempt to argue them into belief through proofs. However noble the intentions may be from a religious perspective, the arguments given are not the true

basis for the believer's convictions. If the believer's belief were based solely on proofs he would not likely be so zealous for conversions because the issue would be one of dispassionate philosophical disputation not religious conversion.

This reply highlights the fact that one may defend a proposition by using arguments that were not the basis for one's original assent to that proposition. One may come to believe in the Christian God through a unique and convincing religious experience, and not through metaphysical proofs. One's certainty would then originally be rooted in a situation which cannot be reproduced on command for unbelievers. Nevertheless, if one believes that God exists, it could be that there are other means available for convincing people of God's existence because there are, generally speaking, various ways of coming to know that the same object exists. The following tale from cryptozoology illustrates this principle.

One may come to believe that Sasquatch exists because of a Sasquatch sighting made when one was in one's right mind and in clear light and at close range. But one might attempt to convince one not so favorably (or unfavorably) positioned of the existence of Sasquatch through various other media--reports of sightings, circumstantial evidence

such as footprints, and other means to establish the crypto-zoological claim. The eyewitness of a veridical Sasquatchophany certainly needs no such supports for his original belief so long as he has good reason to trust the experience as veridical, but he may employ nonSasquatchophanic means in order to convince others of the objective existence of the creature (or to develop for himself a more systematic Sasquatchology). This kind of non-eyewitness argumentation may be less convincing than would be the more direct Sasquatchophany, but it might convince skeptics nonetheless.

In the same way, theists converted apart from argument may adduce arguments (that they find convincing after the fact of their theism) to commend their theism to others not yet convinced. There need not be anything epistemically improper about this enterprise if it is carried out with intellectual integrity and avoids propagandizing. (This argument about simple theistic arguments would also apply, mutatis mutandis, to more complicated versions.)

Complex Proofs and Existential Impact

But even if these mini-theistic arguments are not illegitimate in principle, it is certainly true that many metaphysical arguments for God's existence are extremely

complicated and intellectually taxing, if not intimidating. Pascal, being familiar with the proofs of Augustine, Aquinas, and Descartes, probably thought that the proofs for God's existence most likely to succeed were the more sophisticated versions, which he deemed very "remote from human reasoning." Despite our discussion about the possible success of a simple theistic argument, we can grant Pascal this point regarding the complexity of the arguments. Nevertheless, it need not be the case that even every complicated (or speculative) theistic argument must be "remote from human reasoning" in the sense of having "little impact." A complicated and successful theistic argument would, in fact, itself be the result of human reasoning, albeit arduous reasoning, and could have considerable impact.

Before preceding further, a distinction is required to clear up some possible confusions. When Pascal speaks of arguments as being "remote from human reasoning" he may mean arguments that are uncommon with respect to their complexity. Or he may refer to arguments that are remote from the practical reasoning used in everyday business transactions (such as balancing a checkbook) or family affairs (such as considering what and who to put in your will). Any ontological argument would likely fit in this

category of the uncommon argument because we seldom, if ever, deduce the objective existence of anything the existence of which is debatable from the very nature of its concept or definition. An absolutely perfect automobile or island does not exist simply because we can conceptualize or define it. (This comment is not meant to refute any ontological argument, but simply to illustrate its uncommon form.) Similarly, Aquinas' attempt to prove the Prime Mover in Summa Contra Gentiles (where the argument is longer and more complex than the version in Summa Theologica), is a somewhat uncommon form of argument or at least remote from practical reasoning.

Therefore, on the one hand, it can be said that these kinds of complex arguments are "remote from common or practical reasoning." The same is true, of course, for the theory of relativity or quantum physics. On the other hand, the most abstruse and recondite theistic arguments are not remote from human reasoning when they are philosophical projects. If a theistic proof avoids propaganda and preaching and works within the prescribed framework of the law of noncontradiction, the law of identity, the law of excluded middle, modus ponens, modus tolens, contraposition, material implication and all the other stipulations of logic, it is an exemplary case of human reasoning.

Someone partial to natural theology might contend that the better theistic proofs are models of human reasoning at its zenith. We might call this intellectual enterprise speculative reasoning, not in the sense of "mere speculation" (reckless rumination untethered from epistemic sobriety) but in the sense of contemplation on matters philosophical; that is, rumination on matters not subject to immediate empirical adjudication. Furthermore, the quality and passion of intellect required to construct a speculative argument could, contra Pascal, conceivably make someone all the more certain of its conclusion. These arguments may be both complex and profound, and so deserving of respect and attention.

If an undergraduate philosophy student scrupulously works her way through a commendable modern anthology of the philosophy of religion, carefully weighing arguments for and against theism, and comes to the conclusion (rightly or wrongly) that the arguments for theism considerably outweigh the arguments against it such that she reckons theism to be proved, she may view this conclusion as a considerable intellectual achievement that leads her to a rather gripping conclusion: God exists. She would claim to have moved from either atheism or agnosticism to theism through convincing arguments.

This philosophical reasoning, contra Pascal's premises 2 and 3, seems to have at least some existential effect. The student might begin to ponder her relation to God, what God might want from her, whether there is an afterlife, etc. She might now engage in spirited arguments with atheists whose position she now rejects. Like C. S. Lewis, who adopted a generic theism before converting to Christianity, the newly convinced theist may even begin to attend religious services out of an ill-defined sense of religious obligation.[7] My point is that these are not implausible actions for one convinced of theism, and that they bear the marks of existential impact.

Pascal might ask the following: What if the ratiocination requisite for her conversion to theism was so esoteric as to render her belief tenuous because she cannot be sure she has reasoned correctly? Her theism then would only obtain during the moment she understood the demonstration "because an hour later [she] would be afraid [she] made a mistake."[8] This kind of epistemically episodic and infirm theism is hardly the fiber of robust faith.

There is little sense of intellectual achievement in the simple operations of reason such as making change or gauging how much money to put in the parking meter. But more grandiose intellectual enterprises, if successfully

executed, can galvanize one's attention on the conclusion. This often happens in the case of detailed, difficult, and controversial scientific theories--whether in biology, physics, sociology, or elsewhere. A student may labor long and hard to figure out the Pythagorean theorem, only to forget all the steps involved at a later time; but having understood the theorem only once is enough to know that it is true. Not being able to rehearse instantly all its steps upon command does not defeat the truth of the Pythagorean theorem for one who truly remembers having mastered it. This consideration begins to challenge Pascal's premise 2: "What is remote from reasoning has little existential impact." An argument may be difficult to execute and understand, but still have existential effect because of the subject matter and the disciple required to understand it. But to critique further Pascal's statement we need to consider the role of habituation with respect to difficult reasoning.

Belief and Habituation

Even by Pascal's own reasoning, belief in difficult proofs--mathematical or theological or philosophical--can be intellectually ingrained through habit because "we are as much automaton as mind." We only need see the truth of the

reasoning--that is, its soundness and cogency--once in order to continue to believe the conclusion of the given argument. Pascal further explains this:

> Proofs only convince the mind; habit provides the strongest proofs and those most believed. It inclines the automaton, which leads the mind unconsciously along with it. . . . In short, we must resort to habit once the mind has seen where the truth lies, in order to steep and stain ourselves in that belief which constantly eludes us, for it is too much trouble to have the proofs always present before us. . . . We must therefore make both parts of us [the mind and the automaton] believe: the mind by reasons, which need to be seen only once in a lifetime, and the automaton by habit.[9]

Pascal employs two senses of the word "proof." When he says that "proofs only convince the mind" he means intellectual arguments that compel rational assent. This is an epistemic proof. Understanding the Pythagorean Theorem is an example of a (mathematical) proof convincing the mind; it is epistemic in nature. When Pascal says that the "strongest proofs" are provided by habit he means proof in the sense of the conditioning required to habituate a belief psychologically. This is, somewhat paradoxically, a non-epistemic or psychological (as opposed to logical) sense of "proof." This non-epistemic proof presupposes the epistemic proof and inclines the automaton to believe something.

But what might Pascal have in mind when he speaks of ingraining a mathematical belief through habit?

Unfortunately, he does not explicitly tell us, but several likely candidates present themselves. If Sam finds a mathematical proof to be convincing but difficult to remember and rehearse, he could read it repeatedly so the steps become more familiar. This process could eventually eliminate the strangeness of the proof. Furthermore, one could memorize the proof and refer to it at will to sure up one's understanding through familiarity. This kind of habituation builds up the understanding through repetition that makes the material more customary and digestible. The certainty of its truth is thereby strengthened. This process would help dissipate Pascal's concern that complex arguments have "little impact" because "an hour latter [a person] would be afraid they had made a mistake." Any fear over miscalculation (say over the Pythagorean Theorem) decreases as certainty is enhanced through repetition.

However, Sam doesn't merely see the truth of the proof "once in a lifetime." He sees it initially, finds it difficult to retain in his understanding, and so becomes more familiar with it through repetition. This construction differs from Pascal's statement in that the cognitive element is repeated through habit until it becomes more psychologically certain. In the fragment above, Pascal speaks of it being "too much trouble to have the proofs

always present before us" in connection with only needed to see their truth once. But the repetition of the proof need not be perennial ("always before us") in order to solidify the certainty.

In these sorts of cases, becoming habituated to a proposition once certainly believed--however obscure the process of reasoning needed to derive the proposition might have been--is the psychological answer to the problem of "remoteness from human reasoning." The remote--or the intellectually involved or complex--can be made more immediate and available through repetitive practices if one so desires. Pascal also mentions this sense of habituation to fortify belief in the context of the believer's thought-life.

> Man is so made that if he is told often enough that he is a fool he believes it. By telling himself so often enough he convinces himself, because when he is alone he carries on an inner dialogue with himself which is important to keep under proper control. . . . We must keep silence as far as we can and only talk to ourselves about God, whom we know to be true, and thus convince ourselves that he is.[10]

Pascal uses "know to be true" in a different sense than "convince ourselves that he is [true]." The former seems to mean an initial intellectual assent whereas the latter has to do with a certainty that is achieved through habituation. This corresponds to the distinction between epistemic

knowledge and proof through habituation made a few paragraphs above. Pascal does not specify just what he is speaking of, but he could be referring either to God's existence or to God's truthfulness (or trustworthiness). His central point is that habituation can fortify belief.

However, if one already knows God to be true (either in terms of existing or being trustworthy or both), what need is there to convince ourselves that he is true? Is this not redundant? I know that the Atlanta Braves lost the seventh game of the 1991 World Series in the bottom of the tenth inning. Do I need further to convince myself of this mournful fact? I may not want to believe it, but it has been amply verified through so many means that I cannot deny it and retain my sanity.

But Pascal is not thinking of these kinds of situations where persuasion is superfluous. He is considering cases of religious belief is threatened by doubt over either God's existence or trustworthiness. In these cases, the stability of one's belief may be rocked by various factors, including an inattention to the very object of faith or inattention to one's previous religious experiences. Consider Thomas.

It might be that Thomas' life becomes extremely cluttered with activities that leave little time for religious reflection, prayer, or worship. This results in

his thought-life wandering from its religious moorings, and Thomas feels unsettled and insecure in his faith. Pascal would counsel him to return to his roots--through talking to himself about God--to convince himself that God is there and is true. Pascal assumes that at some level that someone like Thomas already believes in God and his trustworthiness, but through spiritual sloth or worldly busyness this belief has faded in intensity and therefore needs rekindling.

This route to certitude through habituation is similar to Pascal's comments at the end of the wager argument. Through acting like a believer, the skeptic may eventually find himself to be a believer. However, in the case of the wager, a prudential decision to believe is advocated in place of any theistic proofs. There is no epistemic certainty through argument about the existence of God that precedes the wager, except to say that the odds for God's existence over against his nonexistence are even. Habituation is not used for training the mind to remember a truth once seen, but has another function.[11]

A person who is not interested in the subject matter of a complex argument may doubt the conclusion because of insufficient habituation, with the result that the conclusion has "little impact." For instance, I may conclude through the use of the complex sociological method

of regression analysis that Asian Americans tend to watch less television because of their work ethic. But since this fact has little impact on me existentially, I may doubt the veracity of the conclusion if I forget how to do regression analysis. This would not likely be the case if I was doing a well-funded research project related to Asian Americans or if I had some other incentive to understand the sociological investigation. In this case, the procedure of regression analysis, though initially difficult to master, would have become second-nature to me through repeated use.

Complex Proofs not Dissallowed

All things considered, Pascal's argument loses its force in the case of any successful, albeit complicated, metaphysical argument for God's existence that one finds worthy of attention. Such an argument would be a paradigm case of human reasoning in its speculative mode. The argumentative procedures may be more complex than what is used in the common operations of life, but this in no way diminishes a proofs probative force or its possible existential impact.

Nevertheless, Pascal, resourceful philosopher that he was, is not yet silenced. If the nature of reasoning used in theistic proofs is not necessarily unworthy of their

divine object, it might be that the nature of the divine object so proven may be unworthy of Christian theism. In this case the deity proven would make "little impact" existentially not because of the tentativeness or esotericism of the proof but because of the nature of God so proven. Pascal argues that even a successful natural theology would fail to prove anything more than an abstract deity far removed from the God of religious faith. Such an enfeebled proof could only be counterproductive to the religious cause. This formidable charge will be investigated in the ensuing chapter.

Notes

1 Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, First Part, Q. 1, Art. 8, Reply Obj. 2.

2 Pascal, Pensees, 190/543.

3 See Pascal, 913. This fragment does not have number besides the Lafuma numbering.

4 One seldom if ever hears the ontological argument presented in miniature (unless one is already in philosophical circles), although one might so hear it.

5 Anthony Kenny, The Five Ways (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980).

6 Although Pascal uses the ontological language of faculty psychology when speaking of the heart as an organ of knowledge, one can recast (and de-ontologize) his terms by saying that the "heart" simply refers to a capacity to know intuitively or nondiscursively.

7 C. S. Lewis, Surprised by Joy (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955), 233-34.

8 Pascal, 190/543.

9 Ibid., 821/252; emphasis mine.

10 Ibid., 99/536.

11 Ibid., 418/233.

CHAPTER V

PROOFS AND THE PROBLEM OF AN ABSTRACT GOD

The previous chapter addressed Pascal's objection that the process of proof required in natural theology is too "remote from reasoning" to have the religious effect Pascal deems necessary for real faith. This complaint was found wanting, but Pascal marshals a related challenge to all natural theology. The God proved through natural theology is too abstract and impersonal to be identical with the God of living faith.

An Abstract God?

Pascal's argument with respect to the abstract God rides on the coattails of the previous argument about remoteness from reason, but instead of concentrating on the process of proof he switches his attention to the object of that proof. As mentioned in chapter 4, in the "memorial" Pascal contrasted "the God of philosophers and scholars" with "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" and "the God of Jesus Christ." The former is but a philosophical abstraction; the latter is a living reality of whom Pascal testifies, and not simply a warranted conclusion. Pascal

summarizes his experience with one word, "Fire," and further elaborates by saying: "Certainty, certainty, heartfelt joy, peace." He further differentiates the God of the philosophers from the God of his experience by saying "He [God] can only be found by the ways taught in the Gospels."[1] Proofs are certainly not in view.

Even if one would assent to classical proofs, this would not yield the biblical deity:

> Even if someone were convinced that the proportions between numbers are immaterial, eternal truths, depending on a first truth in which they subsist, called God, I should not consider that he had made much progress toward his salvation.[2]

The last phrase is paramount for Pascal. Here, unlike the passages on God's infinity that introduce the wager argument, he seems to grant that some kinds of natural theology might yield the existence of a metaphysically ultimate being, but that such proof, in itself, lacks religious force. One convinced by the argument from immutable truth--and Pascal probably has Father Mersenne or Augustine in mind--need not, for instance, view the Christian doctrines of original sin or the Incarnation to be truths. Rather, if the argument is successful, God's existence is deduced from the existence of eternal truth, but not all of these truths need be those of orthodox

theology. Such a God may be a divine mathematician, but not much more. Pascal goes on to say: "The Christian's God does not consist merely of a God who is the author of mathematical truths and the order of the elements."[3] This God, Pascal avers, is too abstract and too impersonal to have any religious bearing.

Pascal's overall argument against the "God of the philosophers" from the Pensees can be reconstructed to run as follows:

1. The biblical God is not an abstract being but a personal deity with specific attributes.
2. The God of philosophy, derived from natural theology, is an abstract being.
3. Therefore, the biblical God and the God of philosophy cannot be identical.
4. Because of 3, natural theology is not a legitimate enterprise to derive knowledge of the (non-abstract) biblical God.

Even philosophers who find theistic arguments compelling or at least plausible admit that the classical arguments taken singly or conjointly do not demonstrate the entire deity of revealed theology. Elements of the divine character essential and indispensable to Christian theism--such as the Trinity or the Incarnation--are not deducible through argument alone (although they may be rendered more intelligible or coherent through philosophical analysis).

Thomas himself also readily admitted that logical argumentation must be supplemented by revelation for any adequate view of God. In answering the first question of Summa Theologica, "Whether, besides Philosophy, any further Doctrine is required?" Thomas quotes a Scripture about the importance of biblical inspiration and says: "Scripture inspired by God is no part of the philosophical sciences, which have been built up by human reason. It is therefore useful that besides philosophical doctrine there should be other knowledge that is inspired by God." Indeed "it was necessary for man's salvation that there should be a knowledge revealed by God, beside the philosophical sciences."[4]

Thomas also mentions the need for revelation to meet the needs of those who lack either the time or the facility to master natural theology. This limitation concerns the contingent factors that would make theological reflection impossible for some, not the intrinsic inability of all human knowers to ascend to theological truths that Thomas says are "above reason."[5]

Along these lines, Richard Taylor, having presented cosmological and design arguments for God's existence, admits that his theistic conclusions hardly "amount to any sort of confirmation of religion" because they are

"metaphysical and philosophical considerations having implications of only a purely speculative kind" that "imply almost nothing with respect to any divine attributes, such as benevolence."[6]

Perhaps Taylor is being too theologically modest. If his arguments succeed, he has proved this:

1. God exists as a causally necessary being and who thus supports the contingent cosmos.

2. God exits as the designer of our cognitive equipment which render them generally reliable for reasoning and observation.

This being would be the only such being to possess causally necessary existence or self-existence (aseity). This accords well with Christian theism's view of God as the supreme existent who sustains the universe. Taylor's philosophically derived deity is also like the Christian God because both are viewed as a cosmic designer.

These two qualities, contra Taylor, surely <u>are</u> part of a larger cluster of essential "divine attributes," classically understood. But these attributes, while necessary for the Christian view of God, are not sufficient to establish God's moral character ("benevolence") or any specific intentions toward humanity. They say nothing of the Trinity or of the Incarnation or of any way of salvation. Taylor himself seems to rest content in

something less than Christian theism when he concludes Metaphysics by recommending that one seek to understand "what Spinoza meant by the intellectual love of God."[7] This shows that a philosophically derived deity may be worthy of assent and some wonderment, but may fail to evoke the worship required by a religiously vigorous monotheism. Whether this less than orthodox view is necessarily or even likely the case for those who argue philosophically about God will be taken up below.

Peter Geach on Abstract Natural Theology

Without referring to him directly, Peter Geach attacks the idea embraced by Pascal that the God of natural theology is too abstract to be identical with the "true and living" God of revealed religion and religious belief. Geach finds this view confused. He argues that abstract inferences can single out concrete referents in certain situations; and if this is so, there is no reason to disqualify natural theology from referring to the God of Scripture simply on the basis that natural theology can only yield an abstract entity nonidentical with the God of biblical revelation. His project is not to construct a cogent natural theology but to justify this kind of project as free from any intrinsic deformity.

To make his point about abstract reference and concrete referents, Geach uses an example from Sherlock Holmes's investigation of a mysterious death. Imagine that Holmes deduced from available evidence both the existence of a murderer--that the death in question was a homicide--and some of the murder's characteristics. This is a rather abstract notion of the murderer in the sense of being general; it is not a specific or personal description. The description is abstract in that the characteristics of the murder are ones that many people share and that fail to pick out one particular person, as would that person's finger prints and social security number.

But suppose the police then arrested a man with the general characteristics deduced by Holmes and found other "confirmatory proofs of his guilt."[8] Geach says, "it would occur to nobody, I imagine, to distinguish between the abstract murderer of Sherlock Holmes' deductions and the real live murderer raging in his cell."[9] In other words, the two different kinds of reference would, nonetheless, have a common referent.

To briefly return to the argument of the previous chapter about "remoteness from reasoning," even if Holmes's attitude was cold and detached, his reasoning would be no less cogent. Similarly, even if a natural theologian's

attitude is cold and detached, his arguments could still prove cogent. The point of Geach's analogy indirectly answers Pascal's objection about arguments "remote from reason" and having "little effect." Whatever one's attitude toward the cognitive challenge or the level of difficulty in the deductions--and both Holmes and the natural theologian may labor long and hard to prove their points--a good argument is a good argument, whatever the subject of its conclusion or the attitude of the arguer.

To return to the issue at hand, Geach's claim seems to be that abstract reasoning--or reasoning that infers the existence of a subject that can only be described through the use of rather general references--need not exclude the discovery of a specific and personal subject of that reasoning. He seems to be arguing that a rather abstract description will fit a specific case under certain circumstances, such as when the murderer is apprehended. But he notes that other "confirmatory proofs" are required in order to properly establish the identity of the particular man as the murderer. These evidential factors are presented in addition to what Holmes has deduced and so involve evidence compatible with, but also beyond the scope of, his original inference.

To anticipate a distinction later made by Geach in connection with natural theology, the inference that there is a murderer means that someone or another occupies the title, position, or status as "the murderer" (as opposed to there being no murderer because the death was accidental or suicidal). A particular person is the murderer, but we do not yet know which person has the status or claims the position as the murderer, even though we have a few leads as to what kind of a person it is. Whoever it might be, "murderer" is not their proper name. Before the "confirmatory proofs" are found, any number of people could conceivably occupy the title or position of murderer, just as several baseball players could bat in the cleanup position for their team in the opening lineup.

This situation of identifying a title or position that someone (we know not who) occupies as a murderer differs from another context in which we are acquainted with a "nice" person who we later discover is a murderer. In this kind of case we know the particular person before knowing that he has the title or position of being a murderer.

Geach does not develop his provocative analogy any further, but we can do so without, I think, departing from his essential insights: Natural theology tells us in the abstract that there is a God with certain attributes who can

be discovered with the assistance of certain other "confirmatory proofs," just as Holmes's murderer is discovered through this means. When these additional proofs are given, we find that the specific God discovered is one and the same as the God of abstract natural theology, just as the abstract description of the murderer corresponds with the actual apprehended murderer. To stay with Geach's analogy, the additional proofs, whatever they might be, would have to show that God possessed certain attributes neither proved by, nor incompatible with, the project of natural theology alone.

This confirmatory project of proof could be difficult, more difficult, in fact, than in the case of the murderer. If natural theology yields a necessary being or designer or a maximal being, is this the God of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam or some monotheistic God distinct from these traditions (there is, for instance, a theistic strain in Hinduism) or of any historical tradition? Geach does not take this up, apart from his comments on how far one can stray from a proper theological description without describing the wrong God. Historically speaking, all the natural theologians have claimed to establish philosophically is a monotheistic deity whose specific identity is not be determined through their procedures.

Aquinas ends his proves with the conclusion "and this all men call God," but he grants that natural theology cannot prove the Trinity or creation ex nihilo. Room must be left for revelation to fill out the picture. Natural theology tells us that there is a God and that God has certain attributes. But it is left to us to inquire as to which of the contenders, if any, is the specifically genuine deity.

Unlike the case where Holmes's deduction leads the authorities to pursue the purported murderer, the natural theologian might stop at the deduction of a generic deity and investigate the matter no further. If this is all that natural theology can establish, why go beyond it? There is clearly a moral imperative to catch a murderer, but is there such an imperative to transcend generic theism and decide between competing monotheisms? (We will discuss the motivation of prudence below.) The cases seem somewhat disanalogous.

In the case of the murderer, a suspect is apprehended through descriptions given by Holmes. Then, through "confirmatory proofs," the suspect becomes a convict. In the case of the God of natural theology, we have at least three suspects and the matter of convicting or confirming proof is very involved indeed, more involved that what is required to identify the murder suspect. Viewed in this way

by filling out Geach's analogy, these "confirmatory proofs"--whatever they may be--have substantial epistemic force in identifying the true God.

The cases are analogous in that some kind of "confirmatory proofs" are needed; but a disanalogy appears in considering the complicated nature in discerning just what this confirmation would involve. Holmes gives an abstract description of a human being. His description is abstract in that it could refer to any number of people because it is general. But as Geach says, no one will have any reason to differentiate the "abstract murderer" from the "real live murderer" raging about in the cell. But this assertion confuses matters. Strictly speaking, there was no "abstract murderer" (to use Geach's term), only a concrete murderer who, when his existence was first deduced by Holmes, was referred to in an abstract manner; that is, the reference was abstract because of a lack of knowledge by Holmes that rendered his speculative reference a general one. At that point, the question of the existence or non-existence of a murderer was solved, but the exact or specific identity of the murderer remained unsolved. To use our previous distinction: we know that someone holds the position or title of "murderer"; we do not know exactly who holds that title. I cannot now remember the name of the

queen of the Netherlands; but I know that there is someone who occupies that position or title. Holmes knew that the murderer was a human being of some stripe, and he knew what kind of creatures human beings are, even if he couldn't give a specific description of the particular person.

What worries thinkers like Pascal is that natural theologians not only make abstract references to God (that refer to God in philosophical, and not devotional, terms) but actually may refer to God as an abstract being--as a kind of Cosmic Principle or Source lacking concrete personality or goodness or the ability or willingness to redeem erring mortals. We know the murderer is some kind of person, but do we have this knowledge of God, given the restricted scope of natural theology? Pascal explains the nature of the God in which he is interested in a section contesting natural theology. He emphasizes people's subjective response to the biblical God which would not necessarily be entailed by abstract deities:

> The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the God of the Christians is a God of love and consolation: he is a God who fills the soul and heart of those whom he possesses: he is a God who makes them inwardly aware of their wretchedness and his infinite mercy: who unites himself with them in the depths of their soul: who
>
> fills it with humility, joy, confidence and love: who makes them incapable of having any other end but him.[10]

Pascal does not elaborate on the exact nature of his concern with the limits or misleading aspects of natural theology, but we can develop it in this way. The God of natural theology might fall short of the biblical deity in three different ways.

First, natural theology might claim to establish the existence of a God that is more of a metaphysical principle than a personal being. This would contradict the orthodox claim that God is a thoroughly personal being who cannot be subsumed under any higher impersonal philosophical category. H. P. Owen notes that theists "differ from thinkers such as Sankara, Spinoza, Hegel, and F. H. Bradley for whom personal images of God are intellectually immature depictions of a suprapersonal Absolute."[11] For theism, God is personal all the way down. Proofs for an impersonal deity would not assist the theistic cause; they would contradict it.[12]

Second, natural theology could claim to establish the existence of a God that is the source of the universe but confess that the question of whether God possesses any distinctly personal attributes transcends its philosophical prowess. This is roughly Richard Taylor's position as explained in his book Metaphysics.

Third, natural theology could argue that it demonstrates the existence of a personal source of the world

but cannot tell us very much about what God's personal characteristics might be. This is similar to an archaeologist who unearths a piece of ancient pottery that he discerns was made by a human, not by natural processes or by any animal; but he cannot determine very much as to what the creator of the pottery was like.

The first instance is the only case in which natural theology directly threatens Pascal's theology. The last two cases of natural theology do not necessarily undermine any Christian notion of God, they simply underdetermine it. Just what might be established by the various kinds of theistic proofs will be discussed in chapter 6 in connection with the issue of whether or not proofs would engender pride and will also be addressed in chapter 7.

Geach anticipates the problem of defining the attributes of the God of natural theology. He raises the difficulty of the natural theologian who, on the one hand, correctly proves the existence of God with attributes ABC, which are solely predicable of God, but who, on the other hand, predicates to God attributes XYZ, which God does not, in fact, possess. This, according to Geach, is the error of Spinoza, who falsely believed that "God produces all possible creatures, by a natural necessity of fully manifesting his infinite power."[13] In this case, Geach

contends, the natural theologian has proved the existence of the true God (there is only one) but his conception of God is partially incorrect.

A critic can question Geach's claim that the true God may be proved by those who significantly misdescribe this God. He might think that such an understanding is too charitable and wonder whether the deity derived can really be considered the true God. He might ask: Which deity has been deduced (by Spinoza or any other erring natural theologian)--the real God or another one? Can Geach accommodate the distressing contention that natural theology may "prove" false deities? Put another way, if the procedures of natural theology allow for conflicting theistic conclusions, then, by reductio ad absurdum, something is wrong with those procedures. It could be that the procedures are intrinsically defective.

Geach attempts to dissolve this problem by more carefully articulating what is at issue. The question, he thinks, is not "Which God has been proved to exist--the true God or some other?"[14] Rather, the proposition "A God exists" does not predicate existence to one of several God-candidates (one real, the others illusory), but instead "affirms that something-or-another has Divine attributes."[15] The situation could be put another way: the divine

attributes ABC are uniquely predicated of X--whatever X may be (in addition to ABC). Geach gives an example. Someone correctly believes that the President of France exists, but is mistaken as to who exactly holds the office--he might even think it is occupied by someone whose very identity was a muddle, like Poincare who was thought by a student to be an eminent statesman as well as a mathematician. Geach says:

> And similarly, there is nothing to stop a natural theologian, or anyone else, from at once truly believing or even knowing that the Divine attributes belong to something, and making a false ascription of those attributes to an inferior or phantom object.[16]

It is not clear what Geach means by saying that "Divine attributes" could be predicated to an "inferior object." If an object truly possesses <u>any</u> divine attribute (such as omnipotence or omniscience), then that object cannot be ontologically inferior to anything since God (the only entity possessing any <u>divine</u> attribute), by definition, is not inferior to any being. There can be no "inferior object" possessing any <u>divine</u> attribute.

But perhaps Geach means that a partially erring natural theologian might ascribe the divine attribute of, say, omniscience to a being whom, he wrongly supposes, also possesses an attribute not truly possessed by the extant

trinitarian God, such as the absolute and undifferentiated unity ascribed to Allah. In this case of false unitarian ascription, the partially erring natural theologian's concept of God is "inferior" to that which Geach takes to be the correct concept of the existing Christian God. Yet there would be no inferior entity possessing the unitarian attribute falsely ascribed along with possession of any genuinely divine attribute.

Therefore, it is vexing to find that Geach also speaks of the possibility of one "truly believing or even knowing that the Divine attributes belong to something" [17] and ascribing these attributes to a "phantom" object. Such an object would, on any normal meaning of the word "phantom" be a mere chimera or nullity (like a "phantom limb") and therefore no different from the conceptually "inferior [and nonexistent] object" discussed above. If Geach means to distinguish an "inferior object" from a "phantom object" with reference to what the partially erring natural theologian speaks about, I cannot make out what he means.

Yet despite this fuzziness an important differentiation has been established. Although he doesn't put it this way, Geach is drawing a distinction between (1) the word "God" as an office, title, position or set of capacities that is owned by one entity or another and (2) "God" as a proper

name that can refer to only one person (a more rigid designator). This echoes the distinction previously made between "the murderer" as a position and the occupant of that position. To use another example, any number of people could be the president of the United States. However, all of the recent presidents, by virtue of their office, have certain things in common such as being the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces, being over thirty-five years of age, being limited to two terms in office, etc. Therefore, although someone could know that the presidency was occupied by someone he could be mistaken as to who that person was. But one could not be so confused as to think that the presidency was occupied by a thirty-one-year old who was elected for a ten-year term. The Constitution forbids this (at least as of 1993).

Geach states that only God can "draw the line" where a natural theologian stops believing in the true God because of the admixture of false predicates. It is certainly true that we often err in our beliefs about other people--many of whom we know quite well--without being mistaken about their identity. I know my wife truly, but I hold more than a few false beliefs about her--if my past experience can serve as a guide. But none of these errors has been serious enough to discredit my opinion of her completely, as would be the

case if I discovered to my horror that she was an escaped serial killer. The discovery of her criminality would show my belief in her as a decent person to be radically erroneous and would reveal that I didn't really know her at all. My wife, qua loving person through and through, doesn't exist.

But surely some determinate divine attributes must be properly identified if the claim can be sustained that the partially erring natural theologian has proven and identified the real God at all. Here Geach appears to be careless. Upon closer inspection, his example of Spinoza is not one in which substantial theistic attributes are properly identified but muddied up with attributes not truly possessed by the real God (which Geach understands to be the Christian God). On the contrary, Spinoza's God is understood as the one infinite substance that includes all existence (monism). He says in Proposition 14 of Book One of his Ethics "There can be, or be conceived, no other substance but God." This substance is, in his words, Deus sive natura, (God or nature), a pantheistic deity not ontologically distinct from nature[18] and that is impersonal as well, as the previous quote by Owen noted.[19] So Geach should say that Spinoza fundamentally misidentified what "divine attributes" actually are because he includes

attributes which are antithetical to classically essential theistic attributes. This case is similar to the one where someone says that he knows that the present President of the United States is thirty-one-years old. Geach should recognize that Spinoza goes beyond misidentifying who occupies the title of God; he misunderstands what the title itself stipulates.

Geach's distinction works better in cases where basic theistic attributes are defended by natural theologians, but, nevertheless, other attributes are falsely ascribed in addition to this necessary theistic core. In Geach's case as a Roman Catholic believer, he could say that the Jewish natural theologian Maimonides as a monotheist correctly ascribed to God the attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence but incorrectly denied the Trinity. Consider these six criteria as necessary for any classical monotheism:

1. There is only one God (not many) who is
2. Knowable through some means (not ineffable)
3. Personal (not impersonal)
4. Worthy of adoration and worship (not indifferent)
5. Distinct from the world (not pantheistically or monistically identical with it)

6. Continuously involved in it (not deistically detached).

Maimonides affirms 1-6. Spinoza only unambiguously affirms 1, 2 and 6; in any event, he falls outside of theism, as the leaders of his synagogue rightly concluded before excommunicating him for heresy. Richard Taylor only unambiguously affirms 1, 2, and 5; he may accept 3 and 6; but he rejects 4 outright, a point crucial to Pascal. Similar criteria checks can be made for various natural theologians.

But despite the limitations delineated above, if natural theology could establish 1-6 it would at least narrow the theological field considerably because these divine attributes, if proved, would eliminate pantheism, polytheism, deism, and dualism as metaphysical challengers to theism--even though it would still permit a variety of monotheisms. If this was the case, further argumentation or investigation could concentrate on which of the theistic religions is the true religion, as will be discussed below. Natural theology would have done some important prefatory work, albeit limited in scope. And even if the "God of the philosophers" ends up being abstract, at least some other abstract notions would be eliminated from theistic competition.

Is the Biblical God Abstract?

Pascal's first premise that the biblical God is not abstract should also be assessed. The premise requires some unpacking in light of the various meanings of the word "abstract."

First, the word abstract may concern general or basic descriptions lacking certain specific content. This is the matter taken up by Geach's murderer example and we need not discuss it more here.

Second, another use of "abstract" that Pascal is concerned about, I think, is talk of God that is abstract in the sense of being impersonal or philosophically abstruse. In Thomistic language, to refer to God as "pure act" (actus purus) is abstract in that it says nothing about any personal traits such as love, mercy or justice; it also takes some thinking to understand just what actus purus means because we have to master the Aristotelian categories of actuality and potentiality.

But this objection to abstraction as impersonal or abstruse language can be rebutted through a consideration of different types of complementary description. God, as presented in biblical materials, is not described philosophically, but as a particular divine being with

specifiable attributes often evidenced in relation to human beings (as discussed in chapter 3). For instance, the living God of the Hebrews is never referred to as "aseic" or as "omnicompetent," as have some philosophers and theologians who trade on such abstract epithets. Nevertheless, the biblical God, according to orthodox thought, possesses attributes which, when distinguished from particular claims about historical intervention, are abstract in the sense of being metaphysical or somewhat abstruse.

To say that God is self-existent or the maximally greatest being or the First Cause is to speak in abstractions in that we are not speaking of particular divine actions or intentions but of rather arcane (but not unintelligible) metaphysical concepts. Yet as understood within the theistic traditions, these abstract attributes do apply to the particular and personal deity described in Scripture. In that way, God does possess attributes which can legitimately be seen as abstract (from one philosophical angle at least), but these abstract descriptions do not necessarily override or undermine the distinctively personal attributes.

John Hick seems to agree with Pascal's concern when he speaks of the difference between the God of religion and the

God of the philosophers. He says that the Hebrew-Christian "God was not a proposition completing a syllogism, or an abstract idea accepted by the mind, but the reality which gave meaning to their lives."[20] Of course, no orthodox theist, philosophically inclined or otherwise, thinks that God is a proposition. God may be provable through an argument that concludes with the proposition "God exists," but that is a different matter than God being a proposition. But caricature aside, Hick introduces a different aspect to the notion of an abstract God when he says that this intellectual view of deity is merely "accepted by the mind." This might be called intellectualism, which means a purely cognitive recognition of certain theological facts that fail to bear on one's religious life. To harken back to chapter 4, this is similar to Pascal's concern that complex proofs for God will have "little impact" even on the one convinced by them.

Hick's description does seem to fit the orientation of the biblical writers (see chapter 2 on this), but there need be no dichotomy between the philosophical and the devotional approaches to God with respect to the being addressed. There is no necessary contradiction between believing God's existence can be proved (or at least certain things about God) through argument and that this same God, understood

from within a religious tradition, can give meaning to one's life. Also, as mentioned above, certain attributes of God can be "abstract" in the sense of being metaphysical qualities such as aseity and also be possessed by a living and personal God. We should remember that Anselm's rather abstruse ontological argument was situated--without artifice, I think--within a prayer.

Natural theology offers proofs for a God who is self-existent, or the maximally greatest being, or the designer, etc. Successful proofs provide an abstract framework for the divine being, but they do not fill in the specifics about that being's character. Even an ontological argument--which, if successful, establishes a maximally great being--does not specify just what the good may be or how we should imitate it. For instance, if it is good to be both loving and just, how then are these two goods both maximized in the divine nature? Revealed religion answers this question, but the ontological argument does not answer it because of its formal and abstract nature. Nevertheless, this abstraction doesn't logically preclude that God is a personal being who, nevertheless, can be accurately, if inadequately, described in an abstract manner--and who could harmonize in his being both love and justice.

All in all, Pascal's premise 1 is not clearly true since the God of religion can be understood in certain abstract ways without suffering spiritual diminution in the philosophical process.

The God of Philosophy and Religion?

Brian Hebblethwaite, a defender of natural theology, agrees with Geach's objection to dismissing the God of philosophers as too abstract to be identified with the God of religion. He, too, wants to eliminate Pascal's distinction between the God of the philosophers and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, which Pascal uses to reject natural theology. Since Hebblethwaite elaborates on the theme of the compatibility of natural and revealed theology more fully than Geach, his comments are worth examining. He argues that

> there is no clash between the God of philosophy and the God of religion. It is the very same God, dimly apprehended through the philosophical arguments of natural theology as the source and goal of all there is, who is also self-disclosed in Christ as the God of love evoking the religious response of gratitude and devotion.[21]

Hebblethwaite's point is that both natural theology and revealed religion refer to the same God despite the fact that the specificity of reference and the method for ascertaining this knowledge differ considerably. The deity

of natural theology is not a truncated imposter of the God of religion; rather, natural theology can only establish so much about the God of religion. The rest is left to revelation. Both natural theology and revealed religion refer to the same entity, but they do so by using different methods and by giving different but compatible and complementary descriptions. The natural theologian uses reason and argument to deduce theistic facts and describes these facts in characteristically philosophical and abstract ways. Revealed theology pronounces truth about God as the direct communication from God and speaks of God in religiously reverent ways. To put it another way, there is only an epistemic distinction between the God of religion and the God of philosophy with respect to how knowledge of God is obtained and how much knowledge each domain can provide. But there is no metaphysical distinction between the God of the philosophers and the God of religion because they are identical. Both are also said to refer to the same object.

The benefits of Hebblethwaite's approach, should it prove correct, would be considerable because the theologian and philosopher could join hands in a common and mutually supportive endeavor. The theistically enlightened philosopher would cease to threaten the theologian with the

imperious demands of critical reason, and the theologian would not inveigh against the machinations of philosophical speculation. An irenic division of cognitive labor would ensue that would rival that attained at the apex of medieval philosophy.

Still, Hebblethewaite's anti-Pascalian claim needs to be analyzed carefully in order to tease out its assumptions and implications. His analysis takes the perspective of the religious believer who appreciates natural theology and believes in revealed theology as well. Scripture tells him that God is the designer, the cause of everything, the maximal being, etc. He finds support for these attributes in the arguments of natural theology that agree with the Scriptural pronouncements and credits the natural theologians with "dimly apprehending" (through argument, not revelation) the same God he worships.

But this dual apprehension of God will only be epistemically credible if two conditions are met. First, as noted above, the God of many philosophers--such as Spinoza, Hegel, Whitehead, and J.S. Mill--does clash with the God of the Bible. These concepts of deity are logically incompatible at a fundamental level with the biblical God, so much so that the God (or gods) of the philosophers is a different idea altogether from the God of revealed religion-

-even if there is some overlap in predication between the two camps. (In this regard, remember the six necessary criteria for theism given above.) So Hebblethwaite would need to establish that these projects are faulty because they don't "dimly apprehend" the deity of orthodoxy at all. These natural theologians seem to be blind to the God of religion entirely, or at least seem to be looking in the wrong direction. They are no allies to the revealed cause.

Second, even if (some) natural theologians affirm that there is a God with certain attributes that are compatible with the God of the Bible, this doesn't necessarily mean that their arguments are sound demonstrations. It may be that the biblical deity truly exists, but that the arguments of natural theology fail to establish even the kinds of metaphysical attributes which are the heart and soul of the classical proofs. In this case, we could still say that there is but one God, the God of religion (or we should say, the God of the true religion), but that the philosophers' attempts at proving him have failed. The God of the philosophers could be identical with the God of religion but not because of the philosophers' philosophical prowess in proving a God with certain theistically necessarily attributes, but because the divine attributes specified

through the theistic proofs harmonize with or compliment or do not contradict those of the biblical deity.

Another epistemically discrediting charge is that theistic philosophers are not overtly or covertly influenced by revealed religion but simply do poor metaphysics with respect to the question of God's existence. This charge could be leveled against theistic philosophers such as Richard Taylor who do not appear to identify themselves with any tradition of revealed religion.

Pascal is operating under the assumption that if certain attributes of God can be established by philosophical argument alone, this will be a disincentive to considering God as a personal being who stipulates conditions necessary for knowing Him. Hebblethwaite to the contrary, it could be that a philosopher will not consider natural knowledge of God to be a "dim perception" of what revelation reveals. He might consider it to be a clear (or relatively clear) perception of all that can be known. Given this assumption, would the philosopher still be inclined to inquire more about God through means other than philosophy?

Pascal thinks not. He fears that theistic proof that establish only the more metaphysical and abstract divine attributes will provide no incentive for those converted to

theism to move to a Christian view and the personal devotion required of it. The theistic neophytes will simply drop their philosophical anchors in the safe and undemanding port of abstract theism and sail no farther, for the winds of their certainties have ceased.

But there seems to be no one answer for all the cases where someone deems natural theology to be theistically cogent but religiously indeterminate. For some, proofs could be seen as persuasive and as finally satisfying; and nothing more is needed to be known about God. Philosophy is sufficient for them. But others may find a bare theism to be inhospitable and be willing to consider more religiously robust alternative for any number of reasons. Pascal, at least with respect to the arguments we have thus far considered, fails to demonstrate that there is something intrinsic to the nature of proofs that hinders one from moving beyond what the proofs affirm.

This conclusion might be challenged, however, if we consider natural theologians who not only want to establish God's existence through argument but also want to limit the knowledge of God to philosophy. These philosophers would reject the possibility of revealed religion adding anything of substance to what can be know of God. They would affirm the omnicompetance of philosophy to establish any truth

about God. The classical natural theologians from Aquinas to Swinburne have never made such a claim, but other less orthodox thinkers such as Whitehead and Kant certainly have done so.

Just how this debate turns out, of course, depends on the cogency of the arguments given on both sides. (This will be taken up in the final chapter.) Nevertheless, the mere possibility that some natural theologians would claim to limit the knowledge of God to philosophical proof does not appear to pose a threat so great that the entire enterprise should be abandoned on that basis alone. To advert to chapter one, it seems beneficial to the Christian natural theologian to move a person from skepticism to generic theism by argument, even if the same kinds of arguments will take the newly converted theist no further. This is because a theist is intellectually closer to Christianity than is a skeptic. That is to say that Christianity is conceptually subsumed under theism; it is a species of monotheism whereas Christianity and skepticism are much further apart conceptually; in fact, they are exclusive and antithetical categories. Furthermore, even if proofs give out short of the Christian God, other kinds of argument may be utilized.

Natural Theology and Wagering on God

Interestingly, an argument constructed from Pascalian materials can be enlisted against Pascal's own concern that generic theism is disadvantageous to the theological cause because it stops short of the orthodox deity. Although we can only sketch the following line of reasoning, the natural theologian could--after offering theistic proofs--advocate a Pascalian kind of wager for the purpose of inciting one to adopt an expressly Christian theism.

Pascal's original wager argument claims that the most prudent course of action is to bet on the existence of an unprovable God who makes eternal life available to those who believe in him. All things considered, Pascal reasons, it is better to believe in God than to risk the results of unbelief, which could forfeit eternal life. His claim is that when theoretical reasoning is exhausted and of no further use (the kind of argumentation involved in proving God's existence), we must shift to considerations of prudence. If a factual matter cannot be determined through argument, one should act in such a way as to maximize possible gains and minimize possible losses, despite the uncertainties involved.

For instance, if I am not certain whether or not the mole on my left arm is abnormal to the point of being potentially cancerous, the wisest course of action in light of my uncertainty is to have it checked by a physician. If the mole is normal, I have only spent the money for a doctor's visit that I could have lived without; if it is cancerous, I may have saved my life. In other words, prudence dictates choosing the safest path in times of uncertainty.

The natural theologian, or an enterprising cohort, could argue in a prudential fashion similar to Pascal, but on a different epistemic foundation. Unlike Pascal, who begins his wager with an agnostic premise, a successful natural theologian could claim that God's existence has been determined, but that the specific nature of God (as triune or incarnational) is beyond the province of proofs. On this matter, he could claim, there is room for at least some agnosticism. But since nothing less than the enjoyment or forfeiture of eternal life hangs in the balance, the prudent theist should cast his lot with the God of biblical revelation. Of course, the God of Islam would be a competitor in this gambit, but the natural theologian could marshall various kinds of arguments for the acceptability of believing in the Christian God.[22]

I need not specifically develop how such an argument might work. It could be than no such argument succeeds in marshalling prudential resources in service of Christianity. Nevertheless, the rub is that according to Pascal's own lights, prudential considerations could be invoked in situations of uncertainty in the hopes of convincing the theist to embrace Christianity, just as prudential arguments are marshalled in the original wager to convince the skeptic to embrace theism. The difference in the two types of argumentation comes in determining just where to summon prudential considerations.

This excursus is an ad hominem argument against Pascal. This means that the argument takes one of Pascal's insights and applies it against another aspect of his thought. If a wager is a legitimate device to convince the skeptic to become a theist if no further rational justification can be given, then, mutatis mutandis, a wager is a legitimate device to convince a generic theist to become a Christian theist if no further rational justification (in the sense of proofs) can be given. Although Pascal and the natural theologian differ in their assessment of the epistemic justification of Christian theism, the natural theologian might agree with Pascal that Christianity has certain prudential resources to draw upon.[23]

Of course, this argument only works if the overall enterprise of natural theology is not incorrigibly errant. It has been the burden of the preceding arguments and chapters to make the case that the very idea of natural theology is not afflicted in the ways Pascal has charged; although more remains to be argued in the following chapters. If these arguments against Pascal are correct, there is little to fear from the generic theism of natural theology. It need not necessarily freeze the theist at the rather abstract level, Pascal's anxieties notwithstanding.

Drawing Boundaries

This chapter has further expanded the dialogue between Pascal and the natural theologian. While earlier chapters argued that two of Pascal's arguments against natural theology were stimulating but ultimately ineffective, this chapter argues that the claims of natural theologians may be problematic as well. Even a successful proof may end up freezing the prover at the level of generic theism and far short of biblical faith. And many natural theologians, such as Spinoza, have argued for deities quite incompatible with biblical religion. So the natural theologian must not only legitimize his project as intrinsically worthwhile but also

defeat any competing natural theologians and their "other gods."

Is the God of the philosophers too abstract to be identified with the God of the Bible? The answer all depends on the nature and success of the proofs in question. If a philosopher could derive a deity who fulfills the six necessary criteria for theism, this being would be far less abstract than the God of Spinoza, Hegel, or Whitehead. Nevertheless, much about this God would still be unknown, such as the behaviors and attitudes God deems appropriate for creatures. Hence, even if God has been properly identified with respect to certain metaphysical attributes, natural theology still fails to fully prove the biblical deity. A successful natural theology could be compatible with any monotheism such as Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, and indeed we find natural theologians abounding in all three traditions. Or the philosopher's God might not be identified with any of these traditions.

We will conclude by drawing some boundaries. Hebbelthwaite's claim that there is no God of the philosophers but only the God of religion "dimly apprehended" by philosophers appears to be too cavalier because of the disagreements among philosophers and because of the problem of underdetermination: the philosophers, even

if very successful, can only prove so much about God. Here Pascal's worry about the abstract and abstruse God of the philosophers being substituted for the biblical God has some merit. But, contrariwise, a successful natural theology would eliminate some theistic competitors (as well as atheism and agnosticism) and at least get one into the theistic camp. Moreover, prudential considerations similar to those originally used by Pascal in his wager might be applied after the work of natural theology had terminated.

Given the above considerations, natural theology seems helpful to the cause of Christian revelation so long as three conditions are met. First, nothing inherent in natural theology should limit the divine attributes to those deducible through natural theology. Second, the product of natural theology should not provide any psychological disincentive to pursue the matter of what else might be known about God outside of natural theology proper. Third, natural theology must not in principle render a belief in the Incarnation less credible than it would be apart from theistic proofs.

We have not mentioned this latter concern in this chapter, yet it is central for Pascal's rejection of natural theology. To further unravel this problem of the propriety of natural theology and its "abstract God," we need to

consider Pascal's concerns that the Christian doctrine of sin renders the entire project of natural theology to be ill-advised because it bypasses what makes Christianity unique among theisms--the doctrine of a divine-human Mediator, the Incarnation. The natural theologian confidently finds no problem here. This dispute will be addressed in the next chapter. It will also critique an interesting argument that Christianity predicts that no theistic proofs will be successful--because of noetic impairment of the fall--so it is not injured by their failure. To this we now turn.

Notes

1 Pascal, 913. This fragment does not have a number besides the Lafuma numbering.

2 Ibid., 449/556.

3 Ibid.

4 Aquinas, Summa Theologica, First Part, Q. 1, Art. 1, Obj. 2.

5 Aquinas, Summa Contra Gentiles, 8 vols., translated by the English Dominican Fathers (London: Burns, Oates and Washbournee Ltd., n. d.), I:4.

6 Richard Taylor, Metaphysics 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1992), 115.

7 Ibid., 123.

8 Peter Geach, God and the Soul (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), 113.

9 Ibid.

10 Pascal, 449/556.

11 H.P. Owen, "Theism," Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 8 vols., ed. Paul Edwards (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc. and the Free Press, 1972), 7:97.

12 Although Pascal does not mention the problem of theological impersonalism specifically, he could have been concerned that Aquinas' proofs, relying as they do on Aristotelian notions, might only prove an impersonal Unmoved Mover, and not the "I am who I am" of the Scriptures. This is a legitimate concern whether or not Pascal had Thomas in mind.

13 Geach, 114. Geach's description of Spinoza's God as "producing creatures" may be somewhat misleading since the God of Spinoza was really God/nature where God is not ontologically distinct from nature and so does not produce distinct creatures. But this is a minor point since it is clear that Spinoza's theology is at odds with orthodox

monotheism at many pivotal points. See the following discussion on this.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., 115.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Alasdair MacIntryre notes that since for Spinoza, "'God' is the name of the one substance whose other name is 'Nature,' the contrast between God and the world, a contrast which is at the heart of both Judaism and Christianity, is obliterated." Quoted in "Spinoza" in The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 7:533.

18 See footnote #10.

19 John Hick, Philosophy of Religion, 2nd ed. (Englewood, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 51.

20 Brian Hebblethwaite, The Ocean of Truth (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 99.

21 Pascal himself argues against Islam in several fragments of Pensees.

22 This does not imply that all or most natural theologians will be receptive to a wager argument. The wager hangs on a variety of controversial claims besides the debate over its agnostic prologue (see chapter 3). Some natural theologians may view it as appealing to crass self-interest or as merely a form of brainwashing. Some hold that belief cannot be induced through any act of the will so the prudential impetus is moot. Although I think good answers can be marshalled against these charges, my point is merely that prudential factors might be enlisted by the natural theologian after a theistic proofs in a way similar to what Pascal intended apart from any proofs in his own wager. On the wager argument see Thomas V. Morris, Making Sense of it All (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 109-127.

CHAPTER VI

PROOFS, PRIDE, AND INCARNATION

In previous chapters we have argued that Pascal's concerns about the omission of theistic argument in the Bible, the nature of proving an infinite being, the nature of reasoning required for theistic proofs, and the difference between the abstract God of philosophers and the living God of religious faith have generated fruitful philosophical discussions, but have failed to eliminate the impetus for natural theology. We have not, nor shall we in this chapter, inspect the cogency of any actual proof for God's existence; rather, we are analyzing the debate between the natural theologian and Pascal, who finds the entire enterprise to be intrinsically mistaken given the very nature of Christian theism.

Pascal also objected to proofs for God's existence on theological and moral grounds. He gives three arguments that are ingenious, fascinating, and little pondered in any philosophical depth. The first argument is an argument to explain why theistic proofs fail and should be expected to fail given the claims of Christianity. The second argument claims that successful theistic proofs cultivate a pride

that is antithetical to what Christianity allows because they do not concern the Incarnation and its presupposition of the need for grace and humility. The third argument maintains that a proof for the existence of God that omits reference to Christ is ultimately hostile to Christian theism. We will address each argument in turn.

The Failure of Proof and Noetic Impairment

Pascal believes that humanity's fall into sin resulted in substantial noetic impairment. Humans have not only lost their ethical innocence, they have also lost the ability--apart from religious faith--to find certainty with respect to the existence of God and other matters of religious importance. Pascal complains of "the boldness with which these people [natural theologians] presume to speak about God"[1] in that they try to prove God's existence from the works of nature. Pascal says that these proofs might impress the faithful who already see nature in a divine light, but that they will have an insufficient effect on those "in whom [the] light has gone out," those who are "deprived of faith and grace." These will only see "obscurity and darkness."[2]

Even in the case of the "faithful," who are impressed by the proofs because they have an antecedent understanding

of nature as God's creation, the proofs do not seem to actually function as proofs; that is, as arguments employing natural premises to derive a theological conclusion (see chapter 1). Rather, they seem merely to remind the believer of what he already believes without the need for proof. If this is Pascal's point, it is difficult to understand how proofs could help bolster the faith of those who claim to be believers but who experience serious doubts, because, according to Pascal, one can only appreciate the proofs if one already believes. This understanding of the use of proofs for believers contradicts the argument of the natural theologian, mentioned in chapter 1, who wants to use proofs not only to convince the skeptic but to assist the doubters within the fold. In Pascal's construal of the believer's response to proofs, the doubter would only be reminded of the nature of the belief that he is in fact now questioning, and this would provide no help in assuaging doubts. If I am a Socialist seriously doubting whether to vote for a Socialist candidate for Congress because I am beginning to question the truth of Socialist ideals, it does nothing to assuage my doubts if I am told that the candidate believes in the egalitarian redistribution of wealth through the force of law. It is the truth of just that (socialist) proposition that I am questioning.

Another Kierkegaardian line of criticism claims that serious doubts about one's faith are always strictly moral problems relating to the rebellion against authority, and that they require, not more evidence or greater arguments, but the corrective of repentance and a more earnest moral resolve. If this is the meaning of a believer's doubts, then rehearsing proofs would be to no avail. If a lack of moral substance (or a kind of intellectual cowardice) is the impetus for doubt, the socialist who questions socialism should be motivated to vote socialist not by arguments for or definitions of socialism but by a rousing call to arms meant to bring a backslider back into full ideological obedience. Likewise the doubting Christian needs to hear a strong sermon on Christian commitment.

Whatever salutary effect Pascal thought proofs (if we can call them that) might have for the believer, he deemed any genuinely epistemic or philosophical proof of God's existence to be excluded on the basis of the noetic effects of sin: sin makes such proofs impossible. To realize the plight of human sin is to realize one's noetic incapacities, which are part of the curse of the fall. Therefore, proofs for God's existence convincing to the unbeliever are excluded in principle. As Pascal many times affirms, God is a "hidden God" (<u>deus absconditus</u>) to those whose

sensitivities are effaced by the fall. An unambiguous revelation of deity is impossible under these conditions: "Since...men are in darkness and remote from God...he has hidden himself from their understanding."[3] By this Pascal means not only that the nature of God is obscured but even certainty concerning the existence of God.

Pascal claims that believers are not entirely freed from the epistemic effects of the fall, but that they can, nonetheless, see the universe as God's creation. Even though "there is enough light to enlighten the elect" there is also "enough obscurity to humiliate them."[4] Nevertheless, he says "those with living faith in their hearts can certainly see at once that everything which exists is entirely the work of the God they worship." [5] But Pascal never claims that believers can construct cogent theistic proofs or recognize such proofs constructed by others as sound. He seems to have considered this project impossible for believer and unbeliever alike, presumably because sin affects the noetic capacities of both. Or Pascal may have thought that God directly reveals his existence to believers without the intermediary of argument such that theistic proofs would be unnecessary even to a person completely unaffected by sin. We don't need to prove our friend's existence. We simply know him. Whatever is

the case, Pascal's understanding of proofs rules out employing them to fortify the feeble faith of doubters.

Another way of understanding Pascal's remarks about the failure of theistic proofs is to interpret him to be offering an explanation for why no theistic proofs are successful. Pascal deems skepticism successful in overthrowing metaphysical proofs of deity, but still attempts to justify Christianity epistemically. Instead of the common strategy of building new or improved proofs, he judges the entire project as misguided because it is at odds with the theological foundations of Christianity itself.

This argument can be summarized as follows:

1. No theistic proofs succeed philosophically.
2. Christianity predicts that no theistic proofs will succeed because of its doctrine of the noetic effects of sin, which preclude such epistemic entitlements.
3. Therefore: Christianity is not necessarily epistemically impaired because it has not failed to do something it claims it be able to perform.

Although we will not develop the idea in this chapter, Pascal believes there are alternative ways of defending Christianity that do not involve theistic proofs. Nevertheless, this epistemic-theological claim about the impossibility of proof means that strict proofs are eliminated in the nature of the case. This argument differs

from that given in chapter 4, which claimed that philosophically successful proofs fail religiously because their conclusion is not the full-orbed God of revelation, but a philosophical abstraction ill-suited to incline one to believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The present argument appears to forbid the success of any theistic argument and says that Christianity explains why they fail. These two strategies may appear to be at cross-purposes, but we can reconstruct Pascal's anti-proof reasoning as follows.

Pascal can first argue that no proof works (as he did with respect to God's infinity rendering proofs impossible), but concede the point to a natural theologian for the sake of argument and still array his argument about the religious failure of the abstract God. It has been argued that this latter argument, while raising important points about the limits of even a successful natural theology, did not disqualify natural theology at the onset. The argument that sin precludes proof is similar in effect to the argument concerning divine infinity in that it precludes in principle any proofs; yet Pascal's new argument has a different emphasis than the argument given in chapter 3, which claimed that proofs must fail because of the opacity of their infinite object. Here Pascal is claiming that proofs must

fail, not so much because of the opacity of their object (an infinite God), but because of the opacity of the subject (a sinful and noetically impaired arguer) who is incapable of theological certainty through unaided reason apart from religious faith.

The natural theologian will, of course, dispute both premises of this argument. We will not here inspect the vagaries of theistic proofs, but suffice it to say that a negative judgment on their efficacy requires no little philosophical work--and much more today than it did in Pascal's time given the increased analytical attention given to theistic arguments. There are several different kinds of arguments to refute as well as variations within the kinds. For instance, Thomas's cosmological argument may fail but Richard Taylor's cosmological argument may succeed (so long as it avoids the philosophical inadequacies of Thomas's argument). Or, Anselm's ontological argument may fail but Norman Malcolm's revised ontological argument may succeed. Pascal does not attempt such a comprehensive negative task of disproof beyond his general arguments for the limitations of reason and his argument from infinity (chapter 3). And as a theist, he cannot argue, as do atheologians such as Kai Nielsen, that the very concept of God is self-contradictory or incoherent. To argue in this way would eliminate too

much for a theist who wishes at least to maintain the rational intelligibility of faith, as does Pascal. But even if Pascal shows reason to be beset by external distractions, corruption through the passions, and an inability to justify certain kinds of intuitive knowledge (as he tries to do at length in Pensees), these considerations in themselves, the natural theologian would adamantly claim, do not conclusively rule out a proof for the existence of God. These considerations may simply show that constructing such a theistic proof--and convincing those distracted from pure reason of its verity--requires considerable work, as does teaching mathematics to a hyperactive, but non-retarded, first-grader. If the goal is not impossible and is deemed noble and possible, the difficulties involved in meeting the goal may be surmounted through concentrated and innovative effort.

Moreover, even if no successful theistic proof had been given up until Pascal's day (or our own day), this fact alone does not mean that one will never be given (unless his a priori argument against proving an infinite God is correct; in chapter 3 we have argued that it is not). The notion of a mechanical calculator may have seemed impossible or inconceivable even several decades before Pascal himself invented one (the precursor to the computer); but if humans

are smart enough to invent the calculator (and now the computer), why would he believe that human reason is prohibited from proving God's existence? Or it could be that a successful proof has been given, but that it languishes in obscurity in some collected papers of a minor eighteenth century Danish philosopher and hence has not been given sufficient publicity to be recognized? In this case, the proof exists but is not available.

Another option is that a successful proof has been constructed but has not been recognized as such--even by its formulator--because of the general opacity of humanity. In this case, the proof exists but is not discernible as a proof. But, of course, this doesn't do anyone any good, and it remains only a bare possibility with no epistemic force.

Malcolm on the Ontological Argument and Atheism

But what should Pascal make of the situation when a philosopher becomes convinced by a philosophical argument for God's existence, yet stops short of any religious faith? Norman Malcolm illustrates this. He argues that Anselm's ontological argument should be divided into two separate arguments. He thinks that the argument that depends on the idea that existence is a perfection fails. Yet he believes that the other argument, which claims that necessary

existence is a perfection does, in fact, prove the existence of a being "greater than which cannot be conceived."[6] Nevertheless, Malcolm thinks that this conclusion lacks religious force. He says, "I can imagine an atheist going through the argument, becoming convinced of its validity, acutely defending it against objections, yet still remaining an atheist."[7] Malcolm follows this rather curious and cryptic comment with what appears to be a disclaimer and says that the only effect the ontological argument "could have on the fool of the Psalm would be that he stopped saying in his heart 'There is no God' because he would now realize that this is something he cannot meaningfully say or think."[8] Nevertheless, Malcolm thinks that even a demonstrative argument will not produce a "living faith," although it might remove some "philosophical scruples that stand in the way of faith."[9]

How might Pascal respond to these curious comments? A sound and cogent ontological (or any other theistic) argument would be an embarrassment to Pascal's argument given above, since it claims that Christianity predicts there will be no such arguments. Pascal might simply claim that the argument cannot be valid because of a priori religious considerations, but this looks like special pleading or begging the question--especially if a non-

religious philosopher claims the argument is valid. To show the argument is not valid, one needs to argue the case, and Pascal gives no specific refutations of theistic arguments. We can justifiably claim, without giving attention to specific cases, that all arguments for square circles will fail. But proofs for God's existence are something else entirely, unless the very concept of God (like a square circle) is self-contradictory--which is something Pascal can not and does not claim even in the agnostic prologue to the wager (discussed in chapter 3).

But Pascal could revert to the arguments given in chapter 5 by saying that even if one assents to the ontological argument and therefore believes in the existence of the God thus proved, this need not move one religiously. Nevertheless, Malcolm points out that a successful theistic argument can remove philosophical obstacles before the atheist--something Pascal refuses to allow or condone. Malcolm does not elaborate on this, unfortunately. But a case can be made on his behalf, or at least in his spirit.

J. N. Findlay once argued that the very concept of a monotheistic God is self-contradictory. Hence his ontological disproof of the existence of God.[10] If Findlay could be shown that the ontological argument's discussion of God's attributes as the maximal being renders the conception

of God to be intelligible and coherent (as opposed to self-contradictory), he would be forced to give up his strong anti-theistic conclusions, even if the ontological argument as a proof itself did not win him over to theism. In this case, an obstacle to belief would be removed without belief in God being the result. One would move from atheism to agnosticism. All that need be recognized is that the theist's concept of God is not self-contradictory; and that theistic belief would then not be irrational in the sense of incoherent. We can think of other kinds of cases dealing with the problem of evil. If a plausible defense of God's goodness and omnipotence can be made to nullify the problem of evil as a defeater of theism, this would constitute the removal of a philosophical obstacle, even if the argument does not compel belief in God.[11]

But the point made by Malcolm seems to be different than simply defeating conceptual defeaters of theism. He says, somewhat strangely, that one can remain an atheist and be convinced of the validity of the ontological argument as a proof (not just the coherence of theism), although he must realize that he cannot "meaningfully say or think" that "there is no God." But saying "there is no God" is exactly what atheists do, in fact, say; and in so doing they think they are saying it meaningfully. Without invoking a

psychologically sophisticated conception of self-deception (wherein one somehow "believes" both A and non-A), it is difficult to understand what Malcolm could mean. He is not making a point about the conceptual coherence of Anselm's God. Rather, Malcolm says that one can both be an atheist and believe in the validity of ontological argument. This seems to be on the order of saying that one could be a converted carnivore who is now a completely convinced vegetarian, argue this position against carnivorous critics, and still believe that eating meat was preferable to not eating meat. This is absurd for anyone in his right mind.

Malcolm's statement would make more sense if he was discussing an atheist's response to a theistic argument that does not purport to be a <u>proof</u> but rather a probabilistic defense of theism. In this kind of case, the atheist could grant that some inductive theistic argument renders the existence of God likely or renders belief in God to be rational, but that the argument still fails to convert him to theism. In this case, a favorable appraisal of the argument is separable from the theistic or atheistic stance of the one evaluating the argument.

However, things change with respect to the ontological argument, as understood by Malcolm. To be persuaded by Malcolm's or Anslem's or Descartes' ontological argument is

to give assent to its conclusion: there exists a being "greater than which cannot be conceived," and that being is God. This kind of argument is deductive in nature; if it works, the conclusion follows necessarily from the premises, unlike inductive or probabilistic arguments. (Plantinga's ontological argument is not deductively certain in this sense.) To believe this theistic proposition is precisely what makes one a theist, just as to believe in the movement of the earth around the sun makes one a heliocentrist. While not all theists grant validity to the ontological argument, all who endorse the ontological argument are, by necessity, theists (at least of the ontological stripe).

But possibly Malcolm only means that the atheist who assents to the validity of the ontological argument is an atheist by virtue of not having, as Malcolm puts it, a "living faith." By "living faith" Malcolm seems to imply a religious vitality or spiritual piety beyond notional assent. But surely there are theists whose theism is of only peripheral concern to their lives. There are nominal Christians and unobservant Jews and impious Moslems who are theists despite a dearth of religious zeal. These people would not normally be called atheists, although religious teachers in each of their respective traditions might scold

them by calling them "practical atheists" because their theism has so little existential impact.

Judging from the context of Malcolm's remarks, he may simply be saying that the ontological argument in itself cannot produce a religious faith, although it may convince someone of a philosophically credible theism. This view is unproblematic. Yet, as mentioned in chapters 1 and 5, even a non-religious theist is closer conceptually to a specifically religious position than is a confirmed skeptic or atheist. We can explicate this by elaborating a point elliptically made by Malcolm.

Malcolm mentions the fact that a conversion to Christianity is proved, according to Kierkegaard, "from the emotions," when someone is overwhelmed by a sense of sin and a tortured conscience and therefore embraces Christianity to remove the sting of guilt through belief in divine forgiveness.[12] Malcolm says that the subjective state that inclines one to partake in the religious life is not produced by the ontological argument, but is rather presupposed by it. Therefore, even if the ontological argument can "remove some philosophical scruples" that obstruct theistic belief, the real inclination toward the religious life must come from elsewhere.

Malcolm may be right that the impetus for a genuinely religious life does not come through proofs, but neither is a genuinely religious life necessarily presupposed by an ontological argument in every case. Anslem's ontological argument--uttered as it was within a prayer--certainly presupposed a religious life. But one may assent to Anselm's argument or invent a new version of it without being a practicing member of a religious community. In this way, Malcolm's statement needs some modification.

But even if we grant that interest in the religious life involves a sense of sin and the desire for forgiveness, a successful ontological argument could philosophically impress one so as to render a religious commitment consonant with ontological considerations. For instance, if a confirmed atheist is overwhelmed by feelings of guilt, remorse and an intense desire for moral renovation beyond his own resources, yet claims little or no epistemic warrant for theism, he is unlikely to call out to God for forgiveness and grace.[13] But if someone is at some point philosophically convinced by the ontological argument (without religious conversion) and later experiences this kind of moral crisis, he could, barring any other religious antipathies, be favorably inclined to "seek God" (as Pascal puts it) for moral assistance or deliverance than would be

the atheist or agnostic. Or at least we could say that one significant metaphysical disincentive--atheism or agnosticism--to such a response would be thereby removed.

This religious posture seems to make sense because, as mentioned in chapters 3 and 5, the ontological argument, if sound, establishes the existence of the greatest possible being, which means that God possesses every attribute, whether moral or metaphysical, worth having rather than lacking and possesses those attributes to the highest possible degree. Although this is a purely formal understanding of God's attributes, it is, nevertheless, not unreasonable to believe or reasonably hope that such a being would have an interest in the moral striving of human beings, particularly those who believe in God's existence and who seek divine relief from the burdens of a troubled conscience. Hence, while Malcolm may be right in saying that "it would be unreasonable to require that the recognition of Anselm's demonstration as valid must produce a conversion,"[14] a successful ontological argument could provide an epistemic ambience in which real religious conversions are not out of character, or at least an atmosphere in which philosophical obstacles to conversion have been removed through rational proof or argument.

We can think of conversion in two ways: (1) conversion to theism as a result of finding theistic arguments sound and (2) religious conversion that presupposes theism but adds an existential dimension to that belief. As we will see below, a reflection upon the implications of the ontological argument could even foment an existential crisis over religious matters. Conversion to theism as a result of proofs can be understood in a psychological or in a philosophical sense. It could be that Carl is convinced of theism through an unsound theistic argument. In this case, his theism is induced through a philosophical argument--and a bad one at that. Nevertheless, this argument is the basis for Carl's psychological state, whatever the worth of the argument. This situation would undermine the rationality of Carl's theism; but not necessarily the rationality of theism in general, just so long as there is one or more theistic argument of which Carl knows nothing or has not recognized as sound.

If there are no sound theistic arguments, any conversion to theism through philosophical argument would render the person so convinced irrational, insomuch as that person deems a successful theistic proof necessary for theism's rationality. In chapter 1 we called such a person a theistic evidentialist. It could be, though, that God

exists despite the absence of proofs (simply because the lack of proofs is not, in this case, the same as disproof). In this case, all theists (whether philosophically hatched or not) would believe the true proposition: God exists. However, only the a-philosophical theists (those who do not rely on arguments to support their belief) would believe the proposition without pain of irrationality. The a-philosophical theist could then invoke a paraphrase of T. S. Eliot against the (failed) philosophical theist: 'Tis the last and highest treason to believe the right thing for the wrong reason.

If there are sound theistic arguments that lead one to believe in theism, conversions based on these arguments would be philosophical conversions because the theistic argument was not simply a psychological inducement to believe (what is ultimately unsound as an argument), but the rational grounding for theism. More on this theme will be taken up in chapter seven.

So while Pascal's first premise concerning the impossibility of proof may be true, it takes quite a bit of work to show that it is true. Many philosophers have engaged in such a task, but Pascal does not do so in any detailed manner. Furthermore, philosophers such as Malcolm (at least at the time of the article in question) and others

believe that some proofs do prove their object as far as they go. In light of this, Pascal's argument only looks appealing if one is convinced of all the following propositions:

1. No theistic proofs are successful.
2. No theistic proofs will ever be successful.
3. Christianity predicts there will be no successful theistic proofs.
4. Christianity can still be intellectually defended in some way apart from proofs[15] (or that it needs no such defense).

Pascal has not successfully demonstrated the truth of the first two propositions, and we will not take up the matter of the fourth in our discussions in this chapter since we are limited to the matter of proofs. Despite the problems with Pascal's argument so far exhibited, we need to consider the third proposition in more depth (which was the second premise in the earlier argument): Does Christianity predict there will be no proofs because of its view of the noetic impairment due to sin? The best way to inspect this claim is to situate it within a more developed argument that directly concerns the Incarnation.

Proofs Without the Incarnation are Vain

Pascal also 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."[16] Worse yet, proofs sans Incarnation can even inhibit genuinely religious belief. Consider, first, Pascal's statements concerning the noetic effects of sin that renders 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.[17]

> 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].[18]

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.[19]

> Wretchedness induces despair.
> Pride induces presumption.
> The Incarnation shows man the greatness of his wretchedness through the greatness of the remedy required.[20]

> 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.[21]

In speaking of the futility of metaphysical proofs, Pascal quotes Saint 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.[22]

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 grace.
6. Therefore, proofs are theologically illegitimate because they encourage pride that keeps one from receiving grace.

Unlike the first argument discussed above, this argument doesn't 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 someone--such as Malcolm or Taylor--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 theologian will not disagree with 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 2; he will also question the truth of 4.

The orthodox natural theologian will want to say that sin has affected every area of human life but that this does not necessarily mean that rational theistic argument is precluded. This concern takes us back to the arguments of chapter 2 as to whether the Bible permits natural theology. Our judgment was that it does not forbid natural theology, even if it doesn't encourage it. One would think that the Bible would forbid natural theology 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 Corinthians 2:14 and Ephesians 4:17-18). Paul is not referring to the denial of the 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.[23]

Theistic Proofs, Pride, and Humility

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 thankful 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 smart; and you produced an excellent book." Nothing in this statement reflects or engenders the kind of pride of which 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 "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."[24] 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 evaluate his status, and thus make an 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. (In a sense, our analysis of epistemic pride will be somewhat one-dimensional because an investigation of the philosophical cogency of proofs must await chapter 7, but some general insights into the nature and scope of natural theology can nonetheless be made when considering the purported epistemic scope of each type of argument.)

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 publican, 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

like the nearby publican, a sinner. The publican, on the other hand, confessed his sin openly before God. Jesus' commented that the publican, 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've 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. How philosophically successful this project actually is will be taken up in the final chapter.

If a cosmological argument could be established that relies on the idea of the contingency and finitude of nature

and humanity as a premise which then serves to derive a being who causes the universe to exist, the argument itself puts one in a 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.[25]

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 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 and human creaturehood. Further, 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 beside 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.

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, etc.--about the character of God and by 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.[26]

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, breath-taking natural scenery, etc.), 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.

Richard Taylor serves as a concrete example of the response of one who grants cogency to design and cosmological arguments. As mentioned in chapter 5, he believes his arguments supports 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 every so many views that are radically inconsistent with religion."[27] Taylor doesn't develop this pregnant sentence and, sad to say, promptly drops the issue immediately after writing it. He doesn't explain what he means by "religion" or what would constitute being "radically inconsistent with it." What his arguments--or one's 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 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 arguments (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, and the afterlife) outside the realm of natural theology proper.

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."[28] 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 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 don't think so, if the arguer, like Anselm, considers the subject matter properly.

Anslem's original ontological argument was framed in the humility of a (non-Pharisaical) 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.

This survey of the three principle 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. 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 faith.

But this point about pride and theistic proof needs further elaboration in connection with the relationship between theism and the Incarnation.

Antecedent Theism and Incarnation

Contrary to Peter Geach (see chapter 5), Pascal thinks he knows exactly where to "draw the line" on whether one believes in the true God or not: one can only believe in the true God and truly know God through a Mediator, the Incarnation. In this, he goes beyond the six theistic criteria given in chapter 5. Generic theism is not enough. Christocentrism is required for true theism.

> We know God only through Jesus Christ. Without this mediator all communication with God is broken off. Through Jesus we know God. All who have claimed to know God and prove his existence without Jesus Christ have only had futile proofs to offer.[29]

He also says:

> Knowing God without knowing our own wretchedness makes for pride.
> Knowing our own wretchedness without knowing God makes for despair.
> Knowing Jesus Christ strikes the balance because he shows us both God and our own wretchedness.[30]

When Pascal refers to "knowing God without knowing our own wretchedness" this must be harmonized with the previous fragment that speaks of those who falsely claim to know God apart from Christ. What Pascal likely means is that one who

thinks he knows God without knowing human wretchedness does not know God as he truly is as the judge and redeemer of human wretchedness.

This understanding of the centrality of the Incarnation is crucial to Pascal's concern to "make religion attractive" to his readers because the true religion "offers the true good."[31] He offers the Incarnation as a tertium quid that rescues creatures from either presumption or desperation: "Jesus is a God whom we can approach without pride and before whom we can humble ourselves without despair."[32]

For Pascal, proofs without Christ, or general theistic proofs such as those of Anselm, Thomas, Taylor, or Malcolm, are futile because they do not establish "communication" between humans and deity. Does this mean that they are likewise futile because they fail even to deduce a general theism? Possibly not. In a letter, Pascal said that "the veil of nature that covers God has been penetrated by some of the unbelieving, who, as St. Paul says, have recognized an invisible God in visible nature."[33] Pascal doesn't say whether this knowledge was acquired through argument or through some other form of apprehension. But this knowledge, even if attained by a few, is still futile because it is salvifically impotent. To know that there is a God is not the same thing as knowing God as the redeemer

worthy of worship and obedience. (But, of course, the natural theologians themselves never claimed that proving the existence of God through their methods would be the same as revealing God as the redeemer worthy of worship.)

We shall take up the issue of whether a successful theistic argument should be viewed as undermining or weakening the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation with its presupposition of human sin and the need for redemption. We will also address the matter of whether a successful theistic proof is "futile" or if it could provide a positive context for coming to believe in the Incarnation.

To begin, no orthodox natural theologian will maintain that the epistemic justification of God through proofs is tantamount to the moral justification of a person before God. Even if one believes in the existence of God through a proof, this does not automatically constitute bona fide membership in the Christian community; this involves a further matter of assenting to the distinctively Christian beliefs such as the Incarnation (which natural theology does not purport to prove) and a commitment to the Christian way of life.

Yet one could argue against Pascal by saying that even if the theistic arguments don't take one all the way to Christian theism, they might, at best, prove the existence

of a First Cause or Designer or Maximal Being, and thus serve as preambles or prolegomena to a more religiously robust theism. But how does this relate to claims about the Incarnation?

If one does not believe in God or is agnostic, one's first response to the idea of the Incarnation will likely be extreme skepticism simply because the concept of Incarnation necessarily presupposes theism. If theism is true, the Incarnation is at least possible because the very concept of the Incarnation contains theism within it; if theism is false, the Incarnation is eliminated; if theism is unlikely, Incarnation is unlikely. The consequence is that unless theism is functioning as a background belief or at least as a strong possibility, the plausibility of the Incarnation will be quite low.

However, Pascal may want to argue that one only comes to know God at all through the Incarnation because God is concretely revealed in one historical person. All other knowledge is abstract and inadequate. We need not preclude the possibility of an agnostic or even an atheist being confronted by the accounts of the Incarnation in the Gospels and finding themselves believing that this was no mere mortal but "God with us." One could simultaneously come to the belief that Christ was God and that God exists (as long

as one has some antecedent concept of God), although the concept of God is logically prior to the concept of the Incarnation of God in Christ.

The question forced upon us by Pascal is whether a general or more abstract theism would contribute nothing or even hinder what Pascal believed was the true and salvific knowledge of God possible only through a belief in the Incarnation.

If Pascal means that theistic proofs are inadequate to prove the Incarnation, he is surely correct because the Incarnation involves historical claims that are not subject to the procedures of theistic proofs.[34] But this assertion only stipulates a limitation, not necessarily a hindrance if there are other avenues of (non-metaphysical) argumentation available. If Pascal means that knowing <u>about</u> God through a proof is not the same as being religiously redeemed through belief in the Incarnation, he is still on common ground with natural theologians. Further, this observation would not be an objection to natural theology because the natural theologians would agree with Pascal at this point.

But it is more difficult to see why a successful natural theology should impede one from coming to believe in the Incarnation or not contribute to the plausibility of this belief, especially in cases where one already holds to

the six criteria of classical theism mentioned in the previous chapter. If one is a theist, the issue would then be: "Since I believe in God, should I believe that this historical person is God Incarnate?" Why should this theist necessarily be any less likely to consider or assent to the Incarnation than would be the atheist or agnostic? He would seem, in fact, to be in better epistemic condition to consider the possibility of an Incarnation. By epistemic condition, I mean that, conceptually speaking, one is closer to Christian theism if one is a theist than if one is an atheist. Or at least we could say that the atheistic aversion to theism would have been overcome. There still might be any number of psychological or social factors that would hinder a theist from becoming a Christian. There is also the matter of non-Incarnational religious faiths.

Jewish and Islamic monotheism rules out Incarnation as either logically impossible or religiously blasphemous or both. God is not incarnational, according to these two religious traditions. But the kind of case I am positing is one in which someone has come to belief in a rather philosophical theism that is not strictly regulated by a historical tradition that rejects an Incarnation. A science fiction example may help us further clarify the matter of theistic proofs and the credibility of the Incarnation. The

use of a far-fetched example is not meant to prejudice the case against the legitimacy of a philosophical theism, but rather to make a relevant point.

Background Beliefs and Recognition

Consider the narrative of Neila. Both Peter and Thomas meet an interesting new employee at work named Neila. She seems odd, but fascinating. She evinces a kind of insight into life that questions basic assumptions of Western culture; she seems to be able to go long periods without sleep, food, and water; and there is something very strange about the texture and even color of her skin. She sometimes pauses in mid-sentence as if to listen to messages coming to her from somewhere. Neila one day arranges for a meeting at her home where she confesses to Peter and Thomas that she is an extraterrestrial agent sent to save errant earthlings. Peter, who believes that extraterrestrial life exists and that some UFO sightings are alien encounters, believes Neila's confession after intensive interrogation. Thomas, an extraterrestrial skeptic, believes that the chance of extraterrestrial life is almost zero. He finds Neila intriguing but sticks to decidedly terrestrial accounts of her oddness: She is well intentioned but mentally deranged;

she suffers from a skin pigmentation abnormality; she is an ingenious practical joker; etc.

We can imagine Thomas converting to Peter's position if Neila really turns on her extraterrestrial charms. In this case Thomas would simultaneously become a believer in extraterrestrials in general and Neila as an extraterrestrial in particular, even though the concept of a visiting alien depends on the logically prior notion of the existence of extraterrestrials. But there seems to be nothing in Peter's background belief in the possibility of alien visitors that would prejudice him or disincline him from viewing Neila as an alien. Quite the contrary seems to be the case.

Extrapolating from Geach's example from chapter 5, we can say that Peter's belief in extraterrestrials was rather abstract or general in that he couldn't determine exactly what an alien would be like. He only believed that they existed (somewhere) and that they might visit earth and be recognized as aliens. The case differs from Geach's in that the murderer deduced by Sherlock Holmes is a human and we already know quite a bit more about humans than we do about aliens. Nevertheless, Peter's abstract antecedent belief in extraterrestrials removes a significant conceptual obstacle to taking Neila's alien autobiography seriously if she

presents it with enough force. This is because Peter, unlike Thomas, does not disbelieve in all extraterrestrial life. Since that belief-repelling element is absent, the case of Neila is seen in a different light. She provides a concrete case to correspond to his previous abstract notion. Her specific character, behavior, and confession provide the "confirmatory proofs" (to cite Geach) of her alien origins.

Similarly, a (non-Jewish and non-Muslim) theist may take claims about the Incarnation quite seriously in order to discern if the person of Christian worship is a concrete expression of deity. Of course, he may do the same for other incarnational claimants (such as Krishna), but this background belief does nothing to discourage investigating--or possibly attaining--a belief in Incarnation.

We may be able to extend the Neila story to make it answer Pascal's worries more exactly. Suppose Neila informs Peter that her advanced civilization has the answer to human woes such as war, pollution, and AIDS and that if earth is to have hope for the future he and other contrite and believing humans must turn from their earth-oriented ways and embrace the solutions she dispenses. There seems to be nothing in Peter's antecedent belief in the possibility of extraterrestrials to dispose him to reject Neila's extraterrestrial gospel. Neither would there seem to be any

reason for someone with a rather abstract notion of God to reject the claims of the Incarnation simply because of an antecedent theism. The antecedent belief would help Neila's case instead of harming it.

Our story is disanalogous to the theistic case in that a belief in extraterrestrials consists in assenting to the existence of a set (of an indeterminate size) of alien beings whereas a Christian belief is mono-theistic. Furthermore, belief in the Christian view of Incarnation is limited to one person, whereas earth might be visited by a number of aliens. Nevertheless, these disanalogies are minor issues. The main similarities obtain: there is a background belief that renders a concrete case more (not less) believable than if that background belief was not present.

Perhaps another example will illumine the issue. The idea of natural theology providing some helpful information about God could be compared to being convinced of the existence of a long-lost cousin through various bits of evidence--such as the reports of relatives, old pictures, stories in a newspaper, etc.--without knowing much of anything about her personality. I could reasonably believe that she exists, but I won't know what kind of a person she is. Yet my very belief in her existence might encourage me

to pursue her so as to discover just what kind of a person this mysterious relative of mine might be. If I think I know something about God, this may spur me on to investigate the Christian claim of Incarnation. At least I should not be disinclined to do so because of my antecedent theism.

Does Philosophy Spoil Incarnational Faith?

But a Pascalian critic might raise the objection that someone schooled in and wooed by natural theology will not likely accept the Incarnation because his idea of deity is so abstract and philosophical. One who assents to the existence of a First Cause or a maximal Being or a Designer (or some other metaphysically abstract reference) is not very likely to deem an ancient Jewish controversialist as God in the flesh. How can these metaphysical attributes obtain for a human being? There are at least two kinds of responses to this charge, one theological and one philosophical.

First, the Pascalian critic should be reminded of the Apostle Paul's address before a Greek philosophical audience at Mars Hill in Athens. Without going into detail, it should be noted that Paul appreciatively cites several of the general theistic ideas of the day. Later in the speech, Paul begins to make special reference to the Incarnation.

He says that these Greek antecedent notions of deity are inadequate theologically, but not wholly wrongheaded. He informs the audience that "what you worship as unknown I will proclaim to you." (See Acts 17:16-34 for the entire account.)

If the structure of Paul's presentation is not to be gainsaid, a Pascalian critic (who would be no critic of the Apostle) should grant that it is not inappropriate in principle to begin a discussion of the faith with a non-incarnational and rather abstract notion of God before taking up a discussion of the Incarnation.

Second, philosophers and theologians have long pondered the coherence of the notion of the Incarnation, and various proposals have been advanced. Thomas Aquinas himself offered both general, metaphysical proofs for God's existence and arguments for the coherence of the Incarnation. He, at least, did not think that natural theology would spoil one for the Incarnation. However, philosophical work on the coherence of the Incarnation need not concern us here. One may stumble over the philosophical puzzles about the doctrine of the Incarnation and deem it incoherent or unintelligible. But whether one is convinced of God's existence through natural theology or not, the puzzles will likely emerge at some level. If one has a

simple unphilosophical theism that predates his later belief in the Incarnation, he would not bring to his incarnational belief all the metaphysical baggage brought by our natural theologian. Nevertheless, he would still believe that God possesses exceptional properties not found on the human scene--such as being the Creator of the universe and being unoriginated. He will bring these undeveloped but real beliefs with him as he considers the Incarnation. It is not clear, then, why the less philosophically robust believer should necessarily be in any better epistemic condition than the more philosophically inclined.

Moreover, the more philosophically disposed theist may initially find the idea of the Incarnation very puzzling, but nevertheless decide (for any number of reasons) to pursue the matter philosophically to see if the notion of an Incarnation can be rendered coherent and so worthy of rational assent. Today he will find ample reading material at his disposal on both sides of this issue. Therefore, even in these kinds of cases, an antecedent philosophical theism need not necessarily hinder the consideration or acceptance of the Incarnation. Philosophical issues--such as free will and determinism, the mind-body problem, the nature of language--are typically perplexing and puzzling; that is what makes them philosophical <u>problems</u>. Yet if one

is sufficiently motivated, he may seek a resolution or dissolution of the problem, or at least an amelioration of it. Why should this not be true of the "problem" of the Incarnation as well?

There is one difference between the classical problems of, say, metaphysics and the problem of the Incarnation. The object of philosophical concern over the Incarnation is a matter of particular religious interest, whereas as other problems--such as free will and determinism or the mind/body problem--are matters that need not involve any explicitly religious themes. Nevertheless, if one is interested in the philosophy of religion (and is not a paradox protagonist), the Incarnation becomes a philosophical problem worthy of attention. Similarly, the less philosophical believer may try to work out some explanations for the idea of the Incarnation and simply consign the inexplicable to the realm of mystery.

This chapter has argued that the Christian notion of sin need not in principle discredit the work of natural theologians. Neither does an antecedent theism epistemically disadvantage the plausibility of the Incarnation; rather, it seems to help establish such a claim or at least remove a conceptual barrier to believing this claim. In the final chapter we will conclude our discussion

of natural theology by exploring just what it can contribute to Christian theism.

Notes

1 Blaise Pascal, Pensees, 781/242.

2 Ibid.

3 Pascal, 427/194.

4 Pascal, 236/578.

5 Pascal, 781/242.

6 Norman Malcolm, "Anselm's Ontological Arguments," in John Hick and Arthur C. McGill, eds., The Many Faced Argument (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1967), 301-20.

7 Ibid., 320.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 J. N. Findlay, "Can God's Existence be Disproved?" in Anthony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre, eds. New Essays in Philosophical Theology (New York: MacMillan, 1964), 47-56. Findlay later renounced this position in his book Ascent to the Absolute. I need not argue that the ontological argument had anything to do with his change of mind. My point is only that we can easily conceive of such a situation.

11 These kinds of arguments fit into the category of defensive arguments and are as such different than positive proofs. See chapter 1 for more on this.

12 Malcolm, 319.

13 Pascal could enlist prudential consideration to prod such a person to call out to God. He could liken the situation to someone who is being mugged calling out for help even though there appears to be no one within earshot. What do you have to lose? But this is, properly speaking, not an epistemic matter but a prudential one which cannot be pursued here.

14 Malcolm, 320.

15 For a discussion of Pascal's plans on how to defend Christianity see chapter one.

16 Pascal, 449/556.

17 Ibid., 400/427

18 Ibid., 427/194.

19 Ibid., 192/527.

20 Ibid., 352/526

21 Ibid., 449/556.

22 Ibid., 190/543; emphasis on Augustine's quote in the original.

23 Pascal, 119/423.

24 Ibid., 618/479.

25 See James Collins, God in Modern Philosophy (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company 1960), 339.

26 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 Richard Taylor, Metaphysics, 4rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc, 1992), 112-115.

27 Ibid., 115.

28 Anselm, ch. XV.

29 Pascal, 189/543.

30 Ibid., 192/527.

31 Ibid., 12/187.

32 Ibid., 212/528.

33 Blaise Pascal in Thoughts, trans. W.F. Trotter (New York: P.F. Collier and Son Company, 1910), 355.

34 Waving certain Hegelian idiosyncrasies, it seems clear that no specific historical claims are subject to deductive procedures.

CHAPTER VII

AFTER PASCAL: AN APPRAISAL OF COSMOLOGICAL THEISM

This dissertation has found Blaise Pascal's rejection of natural theology to be multifaceted and worthy of serious discussion. Nevertheless, I have argued that Pascal's arguments against natural theology are insufficient to demonstrate that the idea or concept of natural theology is fundamentally misconstrued. In chapter 2, I argued that the omission of natural theology in Scripture is not an indictment of natural theology, because such an omission need not be a prohibition. Chapter 3 argued that we can speak coherently and intelligibly of God as adverbially infinite, thus rebutting Pascal's claim that the infinite is too opaque to be the object of any proof. Although Pascal argues that theistic proofs are too abstruse to have any religious effect, chapter 4 claims that a complicated proof need not lack the requisite existential effect. Chapter 5 responded to Pascal's claim that the "God of the philosophers" was too abstract to be identical to the God of living faith and concluded that the God of the philosophers may not be antithetical to Pascal's God. Pascal's concern that proofs are impossible because of noetic impairment was

disputed in chapter 6 as was the claim that successful proofs would generate pride or make accepting the idea of the Incarnation more difficult.

Therefore, in light of these arguments, if natural theology is vulnerable to criticism, its critics must formulate arguments outside of Pascal's purview. What, then, remains of natural theology after Pascal? This question is too broad for our attention, because of the diversity of the different kinds of theistic proofs and because of the variations within the kinds. A criticism of one specific theistic argument may not apply or apply as forcefully to a different version of the argument.

Since the earlier chapters of this dissertation have cleared the way for the legitimacy of natural theology, it is only natural let some philosophical sparks fly by exploring a particular version of the cosmological argument. When I refer to "cosmological theists" I mean those who believe that the cosmos provides reason to believe that a cosmos-creator exists. In this project I will develop one version of the cosmological argument, determine whether this argument can serve as a proof or some other kind of argument, and finally consider how this argument might contribute to the rationality of theism.

Pascalian Fragments for a Cosmological Argument

Pascal, of course, never endorsed a cosmological argument, though he cited the rudiments of one (as mentioned in chapter 3); but before restating this argument, I will explore a few items in this works that provide materials for cosmological concerns.

As an accomplished theoretical and experimental scientist, Pascal was keen to search out the causes of physical phenomena. Pascal's method in science was inductive and empirical. In dethroning the reigning maxim that "nature abhors a vacuum," he marshalled careful reasoning and experimental evidence. Albert Wells notes that Pascal's work on the vacuum evidences "one of the most complete and reliable examples of scientific experimentation known to that time" and that subsequent researchers have "been unable to improve on the simplicity and the clarity of his experimentation."[1] Pascal isolated and implemented the causal conditions required for the vacuum.

In a spiritual context, Pascal said this about prayer:

> Why has God instituted prayer?
> 1. To impart to his creatures the dignity of causality.
> 2. To teach us from whom we derive virtue.[2]

Pascal viewed causality seriously and with respect because it possessed a "dignity" divinely conferred. His

second point underscores the fact that God, and not humanity, is the cause of our virtue.

To begin examining the cosmological argument, we will return to the argument expressed in Pascal's fragment on the matter (referred to in chapter 3):

1. There are contingent and finite beings.

2. Contingent and finite beings cannot explain their own existence without an ultimate and necessary cause (assumed).

3. Therefore, there must be an ultimate, necessary (non-contingent), and infinite being (God) to explain the existence of contingent and finite beings.

This formulation of the cosmological argument will serve as a basic template for the ensuing analysis.

The cosmological argument as stated is an enthymeme; the hidden premise required to make the argument deductively valid is:

2a. Contingent and finite things require some kind of explanation. They cannot exist as mere brute facts.

The argument's soundness hinges on three interrelated and vital factors:

1. The existence of the physical universe that is comprised of finite things (premise 1).

2. The contingency of the universe (premise 2).

3. A principle of causation that claims that finite and contingent beings cannot serve to explain themselves (assumed in premise 2 and 2a).

Each claim will be addressed in turn.

This cosmological argument will have no weight for those--such as solipsists and immaterialists--who deny the objective and material existence of the cosmos, and it is not aimed at their confines. The argument assumes that a material universe composed of finite entities exists objectively. Because of its wide acceptance, this premise will not be argued for, although it has been criticized in the history of philosophy and in some religious traditions.[3]

Contingency and Cosmological Theism

Any cosmological argument depends on the notion of contingency, so it is critical to state clearly what contingency is supposed to involve and entail. First, contingency means that for any finite object it is possible for that object not to have been caused to exist or for the object to have existed in a different form or context than it does in fact exist.[4] Even if a determinist tells us that things must be the way they are because of inescapable causal conditions, we can still imagine another very different, equally inescapable set of causal conditions. As Wittgenstein put it:

> The insidious thing about the causal point of view is that it leads us to say: "Of course, it had to

> happen like that." Whereas we ought to think: it may have happened like that--and also in many other ways.[5]

We can also conceive that no set of causal conditions exists at all, because there might have been nothing instead of something. So we may wonder why something is as it is or wonder why it is at all.

Another way to express the concept of contingency is to say that the truth or falsity of propositions concerning empirical matters (such as the existence of a mountain) depends on a number of factors extrinsic to the propositions themselves. This means that contingent truths may not have been true at all, logically considered. Although it is a necessary (not contingent) truth that every triangle has exactly three sides, it is not a necessary truth that this mountain exists or that it is volcanic.

To put it another way, there must be some causal explanation for the existence of the mountain that is not intrinsic to the mountain itself: It was made through volcanic upheaval centuries ago, etc. Contingent truths may have failed to obtain; contingent things cannot explain themselves but require an extrinsic cause for their existence that explains their existence, which may itself be another contingent thing. (The cosmological debate centers on whether we can have an infinite series of asymmetrical, causally contingent relations.)

Necessary truths are, on the contrary, self-explanatory and not dependent on extrinsic factors for their truth value. They are intrinsically true--true by virtue of their nature as propositions.[6] That a triangle must have three sides or that A cannot be non-A is true whatever the contingent empirical situation might be.

If the concept of contingency is now somewhat clear, we can proceed to question its role in deriving a non-contingent being from the existence of the universe. Cosmological theists claim that the universe is best understood as made up of finite objects whose existence is contingent on extraneous causal factors that provide a causal explanation for their existence. This is reflected in our question concerning any object, How did it come to be? That is, what causal factors produced this object--whether it be a mountain, a mountain bicycle, or a mouse? We don't approach physical objects as independent of external causal factors (that is, as noncontingent) because the question of their origin or causal derivation is always legitimate.[7]

Cosmological arguments divide on the question of the contingency of the universe. Some arguments claim that the idea of an infinite series of contingent causes is impossible or at least highly problematic; therefore, there

must be a First and noncontingent Cause to begin the otherwise inexplicable series of subsequent contingent events. This form of argument would establish the absolute creation of the universe by God (the theological implications of which were discussed in some detail in chapter 3).

The second form of argument grants that there may (but need not be) an infinite series of contingent causes, but that even this series requires an explanation for its existence that is provided by the existence of a noncontingent being on which all contingent existence depends.

The latter argument, though ancient and fascinating, will not be taken up in this chapter for several reasons. First, its conclusion establishes an eternal universe, not an absolute divine creation. However helpful this result might be for natural theology, it falls short of the orthodox doctrine of creation ex nihilo. Second, the argument against infinite causal series seems to be too little investigated recently. It may be philosophically intriguing and profitable to examine this argument in greater detail. Third, the argument against an infinite causal regress does not depend on the principle of sufficient reason as much as it depends on a more

straightforward and less metaphysically involved sense of linear causation wherein contingent beings are accounted for on the basis of antecedent causal conditions. J.L. Mackie, a critic of all theistic argumentation, claimed that the straightforward sense of linear causation needed for "the common sense [cosmological] argument" is more plausible than the principle of sufficient reason because "the notion that an effect depends on a temporally earlier cause is part of our ordinary understanding of causation; we all have some grasp of this asymmetry between cause and effect." [8] We will appeal to this "ordinary understanding of causation" for our construal of premise 2a instead of appealing to the principle of sufficient reason (which is a metaphysically more robust concept). But in order to reach this causal understanding we must first deal with a few examples of dependency relationships that intimate the principle to which we will finally appeal to ground the First Cause cosmological argument.

The Temporal First Cause Argument

The argument for a First (chronological) Cause has been rejected by many philosophers simply because the notion of an infinite causal series seems possible and not intrinsically absurd or problematic. Some philosophers are

sanguine about the plausibility of an infinite and contingent causal series. William Rowe, for instance, endorses the idea in one sentence by saying "there seems to be no good reason for making [the] assumption" that "every causal series must stop with a first member somewhere in the distant past."[9]

The claim, made by Hume and others, is that every contingent being is caused by some other contingent and antecedent being. This amounts to saying that for <u>any</u> and <u>every</u> contingent being in the causal series, that being is explained on the basis of another preceding contingent being that serves as its cause. Yet the cosmological theist thinks that this common response may contain hidden difficulties regarding the nature of contingency when contingency is understood as part of an infinite causal series. This difficulty can be illustrated by examples in which the cosmological theist attempts to isolate a common principle employed for cosmological ends. We will let the theist speak his piece before entertaining rebuttal.

Analogies for Original Causation

Consider a linear series of causally related events where each event depends on a previous event such that event B depends on C and C depends on D, etc. Suppose I desire to

borrow one hundred dollars from B, but B must first borrow the money from C, who must first borrow the money form D, etc., ad infinitum. It is claimed that I will never receive the hundred dollars if no one in the linear, dependent causal series ever originally possesses the money required for there to be any borrowing. And although the borrowing example draws on a finite situation (there is a finite number of people and a finite amount of possible money to borrow), the further claim is made that even an infinite number of borrowings will never generate a receiving of the money if there is no original unborrowing-possessor-giver of the needed funds that makes the ensuing borrowing possible.

The situation should not viewed as one in which there is an infinite series of lenders who all both possesses and have received the needed funds to lend which they do in fact lend, ad infinitum. There is no problem with that sort of example since the money is always available for lending at every stage. But that notion presupposes an infinite chain wherein each lender already possesses the needed funds who makes them available to the series of potential borrowers. The cosmological theist's money example questions how the money itself could ever be available if each borrower of money must borrow the money from another borrower, ad infinitum, none of whom are unborrrowing lenders. The

philosophical rub for the cosmological theist, then, is the infinity of borrowers, not an infinity of lenders (a proposition which seems to beg the question of the example). The cosmological theist will claim that the notion of an original lender is intelligible and required for the subsequent and dependent causal chain, while the notion of a borrower logical presupposes a lender who originally possesses the needed funds.

Similarly, if I seek permission from a governmental official to build an addition to my home and he grants it, the permission is explained by virtue of the official's authority. But if official 1 must ask for permission from official 2 who must ask permission from official 3, ad infinitum, I will never receive permission to build the addition to my home because in this Kaffka-like scenario there is no original authority from which to secure permission. Again, the notion of endless contingency is problematic when the state of affairs in question--permission in this case--is not traceable to an noncontingent first term but is rather an infinite series of contingent or dependent cases that can never borrow the contingency it must receive from a contingent source or giver.

The same point, although situated in different logical genre, can be underscored concerning premises in arguments. For any argument to begin, some premise must be undisputed; that is, some premise or premises must be basic. If every premise needed justification from a previous premise (that is, needed to be proved), no premise would be justified and no arguments could properly begin. As Bertrand Russell once (somewhere) said, "An argument has to start somewhere." There must be, in other words, a finite regress of justification with respect to propositions. No one can rightly argue that he believes A on the basis of B and believes B on the basis of C, ad infinitum. There would in that case be no reason to believe A at all because it can neither become a basic belief nor a proven belief. Conclusions are logically dependent on their premises, but premises must not be logically dependent on other premises, ad infinitum. This example concerns logical dependency and not causal dependency in the sense of the previous two examples, but the situation of dependence on a prior originating condition still obtains.[10]

The examples cited, despite their differences with respect to the stipulated dependency conditions, intimate and assume a more general and formal proposition. J.L. Mackie notes this general principle that is utilized by

temporal First cause arguments: "When items are ordered in a relation of dependence, the regress must end somewhere; it cannot be either infinite or circular."[11]

To refer to our three examples, real borrowing requires an original giver that makes the borrowing possible, not endless requests; actual permissions require an original permitter who makes the permissions possible, not endless permissions; bona fide arguments require undisputed premises that make the argument possible, not an endless series of disputed premises requiring further support. It is granted that the sense of antecedent dependency or contingency differs in these three cases, but the unifying concept is that some noncontingent, originating and antecedent state must account for or explain the subsequent contingent states. And without this noncontingent originating state the dependent states would not obtain. We can make this principle of antecedent dependency more specific with respect to the linear causation of physical states (which is what we need for a cosmological argument) in this way:

> The principle of linear causation: For any contingent physical state of affairs, there must be some antecedent and original state of affairs that serves as the causal explanation of the resulting physical state of affairs that is itself not contingent on any antecedent state of affairs.

Therefore, there cannot be an infinite series of similarly contingent states because this precludes the

"original and antecedent state of affairs that serves as the causal explanation of the resulting series." We may now take this principle and apply it to the case of the physical existence of a cosmos consisting of contingent beings and events.

The Principle Applied to the Cosmological Argument

If there is an infinite causal series of contingent beings (beings that receive their existence from other contingent and antecedent beings, ad infinitum), then no contingent being can now exist because these antecedent beings would lack a necessary causal explanation--just as the home builder would lack permission to build, the receiving of money without a giver would never occur, and the arguments without basic premises would never begin. Since we live in a world of contingent things, this infinite and contingent causal regress cannot be the case. There must be a beginning and an Originator.

To put the cosmological case positively, if any contingent being exists qua contingent being, it must receive its existence from a noncontingent being--however distant that noncontingent being might be on the (finite) causal chain. Otherwise, the series of contingent beings would be endlessly contingent without an original cause and

could therefore not exist. Cosmological theism claims that one escapes the problem of endless contingency--caused by the positing of an infinite and contingent causal regress--by simply granting the existence of a noncontingent or ontologically independent First Cause. If we grant that this Being brought the universe into existence we are freed from the conundrums attendant upon an infinite and contingent causal series. This being, as the noncontingent First Cause, would be different in kind from any physical and contingent state of affairs and would, therefore, have the theological attribute of being the Creator distinct from the contingent universe.[12]

The critic may object in several ways. First, he may say that the analogies invoked are significantly disanalogous to the case of an infinite and contingent causal series, and if this is so the concept of such a series has not been rendered problematic. Second, he may argue that the infinite causal series itself is not contingent but necessary in some way. The first objection will be discussed before the second.

Questioning the Cosmological Analogies

What about the examples employed against an infinite causal series? The skeptic may retort by making the general

claim that for any and every contingent physical state of affairs that state of affairs is caused by an antecedent state of affairs that serves as its immediate explanation, ad infinitum. Therefore, no contingent state of affairs is ever really left begging for a causal explanation, as is the case in the cosmological examples.

The cosmological theist disputes that this causal understanding can account for or explain the existence of the set of all causal relations such that we can grant an infinite causal series that is not dependent upon a First Cause. The true statement "X exists because caused by antecedent causal state Y" invokes the following true statement "Y exists because of the antecedent causal state W," ad infinitum. The cosmological theist does not object to the verity of the first two statements, but to the ad infinitum qualifier that is meant to refer to an entire infinite causal chain, because without an originating cause, he claims, the chain itself hangs in mid-air. To put it another way, we cannot jump out of a bottomless pit; yet we may climb out of the pit if the ladder is resting on rock bottom.

Just as the cases of borrowing, permission, and premises require a first term, so it is with the more

general case of physical existence itself. Its existence must be traced to an original Cause that is itself noncontingent. This understanding is admittedly much more general than tracing the pathways that led to a borrowing, a permission, or a premise, but it appeals to the same logical insight that undergirds the sense of all three examples. The cosmological theist's argument simply moves from the admittedly different particular cases of contingent properties or particular states of affairs needing an original cause to the more general claim that no contingent physical thing or collection of contingent physical things can exist without an original term. If the case of receiving physical existence or being is relevantly different from the cases cited above, it needs to be shown just how they are relevantly different.

The skeptic will argue that the examples cited all trade on natural cases where there is clearly no first term available to commence the causal series. These examples involve intrinsically limited situations: there is no infinite number of people to ask for money or permission; neither is there an infinite number of premises available. For one to ascend from a pit requires there to be a bottom from which to ascend.

With respect to borrowing money, the critic might aver that we are discussing a paradigmatic finite causal condition. One person is borrowing from another person and there is nothing mysterious about it. This does nothing to render problematic the idea of an infinite causal series relating to items beyond the borrowing of money. Yes, the borrowing of money must find an absolute origin in an actual sum of money if there is to be any borrowing at all, but the universe need not find an absolute origin because it is something entirely different than a finite amount of money: it is the sum of all things without any beginning required.

The skeptic could continue by saying that the very idea of an infinite casual regress implies both that there is no first term and that no first term is required. This is because for any part of an infinite causal chain there is always a previous causal state available to explain any subsequent causal events. Although it is true that I can't borrow one hundred dollars if the hundred dollars is unavailable because no one has ever received it, it is not the case that the history of the universe must commence with a First Cause since antecedent causal states are available at any and every point of an infinite series. The skeptic argues that the very notion of infinity insures this result. It is granted that we never reach that point at which the

causal chain began, but that is simply because nothing can commence an infinite causal chain.

The skeptic will also claim that the quip about the problem of jumping out of a bottomless pit is misconceived because he is not arguing for the existence of endless empty space but an infinite causal chain.

The cosmological theist responds that the skeptic has explained just what an infinite causal chain is supposed to accomplish, but nevertheless contends that he has failed to convincingly show that this chain actually exists. If there is such a thing as an infinite and contingent causal chain, then, by definition, every contingent state of affairs is explicable. This is similar to the conditional statement that if there is a perpetual motion machine, then its continuing motion is not dependent on any outside causes. However, the idea of perpetual motion is only a hypothetical construct. The question at issue concerns the very coherence of an infinite and contingent causal chain. The cosmological theist argues that the chain is left hanging in mid-air with no visible means of ontological support because causal contingency requires more than an infinite regress to further contingencies.

The cosmological theist can here further flesh out the analogy of a chain suspended from a wall.[13] Such a chain is

contingent on something fixed and each link in the chain must refer back to the first supported link in the chain in order to explain how it can hang at all. We cannot imagine a chain hanging in mid-air without a supported link. Even if we supply the chain with an infinite number of unsupported links, this will not yield a fixed point to insure a supported chain.

This example differs from those examples mentioned earlier that refer to antecedent causal states because the fixed point simultaneously causes the chain to be supported (rather than preceding it in time), but it still illustrates the theist's contention that contingency multiplied by infinity still lacks the required cause for any contingent causal state of affairs to exist.

The skeptic will contest any need for an originating cause in the sense offered by the cosmological theist. He claims that any and every link in the infinite causal chain (whether literal or figurative) is adequately explained (or supported) by the immediately antecedent causal state without any need for a noncontingent originating Cause. This is because an infinite chain has infinite resources to supply an infinite number of the required antecedent causal states. No First Cause is necessary to account for the succession of contingent states. Furthermore, the very

notion of the chain having to be supported by a fixed point assumes there is a first cause for a finite chain. But the skeptic claims that the chain is infinite and so dispenses with the need for an fixed point or first cause. The cosmological theist has prejudiced the issue by speaking of "an infinite number of un-supported links" because each link is supported by a previous link, ad infinitum. Therefore, no links are unsupported because for any link there is another link available to support it.

The cosmological theist may counter that even an infinite causal chain will not generate the required causal efficacy if the nature of every link in the chain is contingent, because a contingent state of affairs requires an extrinsic cause for its existence. If the cause is endlessly referred to previous states of affairs, no contingent state of affairs would ever eventuate--endless borrowing does not produce a possessing (to cite a previous locution). The claim in this case is that even an infinite series of contingent states of affairs cannot generate any contingent state because the addition of an infinite number of links in the causal chain will not get the chain to hang in the first place.

The cosmological theist could produce another example and liken the infinite regress to an infinite number of

boxcars each being pulled by another boxcar which is pulled by another boxcar, ad infinitum--sans any locomotive. [14] The endless addition of passive boxcars does nothing to generate or activate the movement.

But the skeptic retorts that the reference to a locomotive and boxcars again assumes a beginning to the series that is not required if the series is infinite. There is no first locomotive (cause) in an infinite causal series, and the boxcar example is weighted against the infinite regress since in our experience with finite causal chains pertaining to railroads we know that a passive boxcar's movement (on a level surface) requires locomotion or propulsion outside of itself. But the infinite regress argument sees causation distributed equally throughout the entire infinite causal series; that is, there is an endless series of caused causes in the past, each caused by a previous cause. The insertion of boxcars and locomotives prejudices the matter toward a First Cause and skews the issue at hand. Nothing need supply the original cause of all the ensuing effects if causation is available at every and any point on the infinite causal chain.

Moreover, the skeptic could argue that it is questionable to assume that rest is the natural state and that movement requires a first mover. He could rather posit

that motion is evenly distributed throughout the chain as the natural state that requires no first animating cause. This also comports with the change in thinking from the Aristotelian to the Newtonian understanding of motion. The Aristotelian view made motion problematic and in need of explanation while the Newtonian view makes rest just as problematic and in need of explanation. As Kenny puts it,

> At any given time the rectilinear uniform motion of a body can be explained by the principle of inertia in terms of the bodiy's own previous motion without appeal to any other agent. And there seems to be a priori reason why this explanatory process should not go backwards forever.[15]

This rejoinder seems to indicate that the example of motion (used of boxcars or anything else) may not best serve the cosmological cause. However, the argument of this chapter trades on the idea of a First Cause more than a Prime Mover, so it seems that the box car example could be omitted without serious damage to the overall argument. It is, nevertheless, worth noting that Newton himself said that by his "principle [of motion] alone there never could be any motion in the world. Some other principle was necessary for putting bodies into motion."[16] So, Newton's principle may provide an adequate operational explanation for motion apart from another agent, while leaving open the possibility of an originating cause of that motion.

The skeptic might try to further legitimize the idea of an infinite causal chain by claiming that just as we can imagine that the infinite set of all odd numbers is equal to the infinite set of all even numbers, we can conceive of an equally infinite set of both causes and effects. Causes and effects are simply two types of punctiliar designators for an infinity of points comprising an infinite temporal series. This move tries to show that the idea of an infinitely extended series is not the problem that the theist contends it is.

However, the cosmological theist contends that this rejoinder confuses the difference between infinite sets of numbers and infinite sets of physical causes and effects. It is one thing to conceive of an infinite set of numbers (which have no physical existence); it is quite another thing to make sense of an infinite and contingent causal series comprised of physical objects. The latter involves concrete causal relations between contingent entities; the former requires nothing of the sort. Therefore, since the cosmological theists argument trades not on the impossibility of an infinite series simpliciter but on an infinite causal series, the conceivability of the infinite sets of numbers does not ensure the reality of an infinite

and contingent causal series. They are two very different sorts of things.[17]

The skeptic could, nevertheless, grant this point that an infinite causal series trades on a notion of existential and causal dependency not found in infinite sets of numbers and still claim that an infinite causal series is not impossible, despite its difference from other kinds of infinite series. This admission would deprive him of a positive example from mathematical infinity, but not, in itself, defeat his defense of an infinite causal regress so long as his previous defenses of the infinite regress of causes are legitimate.

What Explains the Existence of God?

The critic might attempt a <u>reductio</u> argument by responding that the cosmological strategy must backfire on God himself. If the idea of an existentially infinite series is inherently problematic, then the idea of an infinite series in the life of God is equally problematic, since God is classically understood as existing "from everlasting to everlasting" and without beginning. If this problem obtains for God, who was invoked to solve the causal problem in the first place, why bother with any theological

explanation? At least two responses are forthcoming, one that I take to be more tenable than the other.

First, some theists argue that God does not inhabit time as do the creatures. God is, rather, atemporal and transcends the succession of temporal moments. If this is right, the notion of an infinite series would not apply to God, since the divine life is not describable according to a series of discrete and sequential occasions. Some such as Augustine claim that God lives in the "eternal present," not in time. Although this view sports some noteworthy defenders, both ancient and modern, I find it beset with difficulties concerning the intelligibility of an atemporal God's relationship to his temporal creation. So for this and other reasons that need not concern us, I will not champion this purported solution.[18]

Second, the skeptical objector has slightly but crucially misunderstood what the cosmological theist claims. The theist is not arguing that any existentially infinite series is impossible, but that an infinite series of a <u>contingent</u> and <u>causal</u> kind is impossible. If God has always existed in time (as I claim), then God's age is infinite as "the Ancient of Days." Some philosophers, such as the defenders of the Kalaam cosmological argument, object to the coherence of this notion of infinite time, but there seems

to be no insufferable difficulty with it. We must remember that infinite duration with respect to deity does not involve any causal series of an infinite and contingent nature (just as the infinite number case does not involve causation between contingent beings). If God is a noncontingent being and the First Cause, he is caused by nothing and is utterly removed from any causal series, except those causal series that God originates. God exists from eternity in a beginningless and endless series of moments but God does not exists as part of an infinite series of physical and asymmetrical causes and effects--one moment in the life of God does not cause another moment in the life of God. There is no question of dependence on any antecedent and contingent causal conditions and so no problem of the infinite causal regress of contingent states.

The skeptic may change strategy (since this argument failed) and ask, "Why stop at God as the First Cause if one is so concerned about beings needing to be explained by antecedent causal factors? Why should God be exempt from the revered causal principle?" Does this attempted reductio work?

The cosmological theist responds that God is historically understood to be noncontingent and not subject to any contingent causal series. The cosmological theist

never claimed that every entity requires a cause, but that every contingent and physical entity requires a cause.19 God's existence, the cosmological theist maintains, is the explanation of the contingent causal series that make up the contingent physical universe. God's own existence is not explained by any causal series, but by the divine nature as noncontingent. The causal buck stops here. God's existence is viewed as causally necessary in that it is necessary to account for the existence of contingent beings linked in causal series that are otherwise inexplicable.[20]

Another criticism of the temporal First Cause argument concerns a way of granting the need for a necessity sans First Cause to ground or explain the contingency of the universe.

The Infinite Causal Chain as Noncontingent

The skeptic might try to shore up his defense of the infinite causal chain argument by claiming that the infinite causal chain as a whole is noncontingent. To appease the cosmological theist's desire for an explanatory necessity, the skeptic could suggest that an infinite and contingent causal chain provides this much vaunted property.

The skeptic can grant that the very concept of contingency, when applied to any particular physical object

or portion of an infinite causal chain, requires that the object or section depends for its existence on an antecedent causal state of affairs. Any physical object's existence is not causally noncontingent, but causally contingent. However, the situation changes if we posit an infinite series of contingent states of affairs because such a state, by virtue of its infinity, does not cry out for a causal necessity beyond itself. Rather, an infinite causal chain as a whole can be viewed as possessing a necessity not possessed by any finite segment of the causal chain. If a causal chain is infinite it is, then, unlimited and causally contingent on nothing else outside of itself--even if each of its members is contingent on antecedent causal states.

This philosophical move provokes a discussion of the ontological relation between parts and wholes. A standard line of argument by cosmological theists is that if everything in the universe is contingent, then the universe itself must be contingent, which means that it must be contingent on a noncontingent First Cause. The skeptic wants to claim that necessity can be predicated to the infinite causal chain as a whole, but not to the individual parts. This issue invites some philosophical analysis and the consideration of several examples.

The Relation of Parts to the Whole

The crucial move philosophically is from the contingency of any and every object in the universe (represented by a contingent truth that describes this state of affairs) to the contingency of the universe *in toto*. The latter claim is needed for the theological conclusion that there is a noncontingent First Cause of the universe that explains its existence.

The objection is often raised that this inference from the contingency of the parts to the contingency of the whole commits the fallacy of composition: a whole does not have the same properties as all of the its parts. For instance, although each individual playing card is light, a truck load of playing cards is not light but heavy. Similarly, although each individual brick is rectangular, a wall of bricks may be nonrectangular.

It should be noted, nevertheless, that the fallacy of composition is a fallacy that is applicable to some whole-part relations but not all such relations. This is because it is not a *formal* fallacy (fallacious whenever its form appears independent of any material considerations), but an *informal* fallacy that only obtains when particular material factors are present.

In other whole-part relationships, the fallacy of composition does not occur. If each individual playing card is made of paper, then one ton of playing cards will be made of paper. If each individual brick occupies space, then the whole wall will occupy space. In these kinds of cases, a property of the parts distributes as a property of the whole. Therefore, no context-independent rule can be stipulated as to whether a fallacy of composition has been committed. We must consult individual cases.[21]

Has the fallacy of composition been committed by those who claim that the universe itself is contingent because everything in the universe is contingent?

If each member of a world-champion little league baseball team is dependent for his superior teamwork on the wisdom of the coach, then the whole team is dependent or contingent on the coach for its excellence as a team. The property of individual contingency for any given members distributes or is applicable to the team as a whole without transmuting into another property (as when individually light playing cards make up a heavy truck load of playing cards). Each member shares a common quality with all the other members that is not annulled when that property is applied or added to the whole. The quality of baseball-playing excellence--applied either to individuals or to the

whole--relates to dependence on the extrinsic cause of the coach. This baseball example does not show that the universe as a whole does not possess a property (necessity) not shared by all of its parts. Rather, it shows that it might not have this property given the analogy of the baseball team.

On the other hand, we could not affirm that because all the team members rely on their two eyes to play baseball that the entire team relies on two eyes. The property of possessing two eyes cannot be distributed to the whole because it is numerically particular to each member. Another way to put it is that some individual properties when added to the entire set of individuals result in a new property not shared by the individuals. This additive factor causes a transmutation when applied to the whole: many individually light cards become part of a heavy truckload of cards.

Nevertheless, additive factors may not cause a transmutation when applied to the whole, as when adding up zeros will not produce a positive number. Adding up a million individually light playing cards will make the set of cards heavy, but it will not make the set of cards argentine. The cosmological arguer claims that adding any number of contingent beings will not result in a

noncontingent universe; or, to put it more modestly: there is no clear reason to think that a universe consisting of only contingent beings will possess the property of noncontingency and not require an explanation for its existence provided by an extrinsic First Cause. If this is the case, it is plausible that the universe as a whole is contingent and not noncontingent.

Adjudicating this dispute about the contingency or necessity of the universe is no simple matter because, as Hume saliently pointed out, the universe is a uniquely singular state of affairs that is, in the nature of the case, incomparable to anything else because there are no other universes with which to compare it. We will, nevertheless, labor to cite the strengths and weaknesses of each position regarding the composition of the universe.

The cosmological theist seems right in insisting that the fallacy of composition is not necessarily committed by saying that if everything in the universe is contingent the universe itself is contingent. There are enough counterexamples to make this a possibility. This point serves the cosmological theist in either the temporal First Cause or the eternal universe versions of the cosmological argument. Nevertheless, the possibility of a comprehensively contingent universe does not compellingly

make the case that the universe is in fact contingent because it still might be the case that the fallacy of composition is committed. So unless this argument against the fallacy of composition in the case of the universe is conjoined with some other compelling argument concerning the impossibility of an infinite regress of contingent causal states, the skeptic will likely remain unconvinced of its cogency.

The skeptic argues that although a comprehensively contingent universe may be a possibility, the idea of an infinite causal chain makes plausible the conclusion that the entire chain possesses necessity. The concept of infinity means that the chain is without conceivable or actual limit, and this is as good a candidate as any for the philosophical role of noncontingency.

The skeptic could also choose to switch philosophical gears by granting that the universe is comprehensively contingent, with no logical necessity in sight, and still, for the reasons given above, maintain that this requires no First Cause. To concede this point might weaken the skeptic's case somewhat, but not as to undermine it so long as his previous arguments protect him from any insufferable difficulties related to an infinite causal regress.

Cosmological Theism and the Rationality of Theism

What, then, has this First Cause cosmological argument contributed to the rationality of theism?

First, it must be granted that even if we deem the temporal First Cause argument successful as a proof, only one aspect of theism (the causal origination of the Universe by a temporal First Cause) has been proved, since this argument says little or nothing about the moral character of the Originator. We have addressed the implications of this sort of limitation in previous chapters. Nevertheless, if the First Cause argument is sound, this redounds to the benefit of theism, because the argument gives good reason to believe in the existence of a noncontingent being who created the universe. This conclusion is a pivotal aspect of the Christian doctrine of creation, and it could serve as one line of argument in support of theological claims even if a complement of other rational considerations remain to be filled out to bolster the argument for Christian theism.

The epistemic situation could be likened to a courtroom where various kinds of evidences are adduced on behalf of a factual claim. The evidential repertoire includes both persons acting as witnesses and objects used as exhibits. No single witness or single exhibit may be able to establish that Jones killed Smith. However, if various witnesses with

different perspectives and different kinds of exhibits all contribute to the truth of Jones's guilt without contradicting each other and without the opposing side marshalling adequate counterevidence, the guilt of Jones can be reasonably inferred from the cumulative case of combined evidential factors offered.

Who Wins the Cosmological Debate?

But just how does the First Cause argument come out, given our debate between the skeptic and the theist? As I have discussed the argument, the cosmological theist tries to show the reasonableness of positing a temporal First Cause to avoid the various purported problems of the infinite and contingent causal regress. But the skeptic argues the infinite regress rejoinder is not impossible or particularly problematic and has the advantage of not requiring a theological explanation.

The skeptic should grant that the cosmological theist's appeal to the principle of linear causation does not imperil his understanding of God as the First Cause because this requires no antecedent and contingent causal state. Also, the notion of infinite duration in the life of God does not produce the kinds of problems the cosmological theist believes are generated by an infinite and contingent casual

regress. In this way, the cosmological theist has defended the consistent application of his causal principle against several reductio arguments proffered by the skeptic.

The skeptic may, then, grant that the idea of a First Cause is not incoherent as an explanation for the present contingent state of affairs and is not subject to reductio arguments, but still argue that the idea is required as an explanation for the universe because an infinite causal series accounts for present conditions without recourse to any noncontingent theological entity. The skeptic ultimately appeals to the cogency of the concept of nontheological infinity to warrant his naturalism. He claims that an infinite causal chain protects him from the need to invoke a noncontingent being distinct from nature. He is content with the notion of a beginningless causal chain that is, nevertheless, not causeless.

The cosmological theist, on the other hand, maintains that the concept of causal contingency requires dependence on something besides further ad infinitum dependencies. He questions whether the notion of an infinite regress of causes can justify any present contingent actuality. He finds the notion of endless and beginingless series of causally contingent states of affairs to be troublesome; he

therefore claims that the idea of a noncontingent Creator is more warranted than an infinite and contingent causal chain.

The result of this dialectic between the cosmological theist and the skeptic may ultimately boil down to a clash of entrenched philosophical intuitions. The skeptic's appeal to an infinite regress satisfies his understanding of causal explanation and does not generate any clear absurdities. Of course, this approach will not serve as a proof to those who have differing intuitions on the nature of infinite series. Yet the argument could open up a skeptic to the possibility of a temporal First Cause in case he had never applied his intuition about the problems with an infinite causal series to specifically theistic arguments. The cosmological theist's appeal to a noncontingent First Cause satisfies his understanding of causal explanation and does not generate any clear absurdities.

The cosmological theist, while developing a coherent account of the universe as contingent on God, may, nevertheless, have difficulty dislodging the skeptic's recourse to a thoroughly natural universe. In this respect, then, the First Cause argument may not carry conviction for the persistent skeptic because he is not <u>forced</u> to any theistic conclusion through the use of common sense (which

is the task of natural theology as outlined in chapter one). Nevertheless, I have argued that the skeptic's confidence in the infinite causal regress could be jostled by the kinds of analogies and arguments employed in this chapter.

However, even if the version of the temporal First Cause argument given in this chapter is thoroughly discredited, this does not necessarily herald the demise of all temporal First Cause arguments--unless, of course, what is wrong with the argument in this chapter is wrong with all the arguments of the same genre. But even if all temporal First Cause arguments are philosophically bankrupt, there remains the venerable tradition of the eternal-universe versions of the cosmological arguments (as well as a variety of noncosmological arguments). This kind of argument hinges on the principle of sufficient reason instead of banking on the linear-causal principle discussed in this chapter. But a theist could grant that an infinite causal regress is possible and still ask why that infinite causal regress exists in the first place. This is a legitimate question because giving a causal explanation for every contingent state in the universe is not identical to giving a reason why the entire series of causes exists at all. But this, of course, is a line of argument that would take us far beyond the limited scope of this chapter.

Notes

1 Albert N. Wells, Pascal's Recovery of Man's Wholeness (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1965), 60.

2 Blaise Pascal, Pensees, 930/513.

3 Descartes argues in the Meditations that from his idea of an infinite God, an infinite God must exist in order to cause such a thought in a finite mind that otherwise could never have come across it. This is a kind of cosmological argument that only depends on the idea of God in a mind and does not require the existence of the material universe. I will not be addressing it.

4 The obverse of this understanding of contingency does not entail that God, as a noncontingent being, exists with logical necessity (as the ontological argument claims). The cosmological argument under discussion only addresses causal necessity, which concerns the existence of a First Cause inferred from the existence of contingent, finite and physical objects, whose existence is not logically necessary. This argument grants that it is logically possible for God not to exist, but that given the nature of the contingent universe there must be a God who is not causally contingent. It also claims that if God does exist, being noncontingent, God cannot cease to exist. It likewise rules out the possibility of God being caused to exist by another since in that case God would not be noncontingent. Thus, it is logically possible for God not to exist; that is, the proposition "God does not exist" is not a logical contradiction on the order of "a triangle has four sides." Neither is the statement "God exists" like the statement "a triangle has three sides" because the latter statement possesses logical necessity while the former statement, as understood by cosmological theists, does not.

5 Ludwig Wittgenstein, Culture and Value (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 37e.

6 Because the cosmological argument only concerns itself with causal necessity, I will not take up the issue of whether there are necessary things in the sense of things that exist with logical necessity.

7 Some critics of the cosmological argument claim that while no normally recognized finite physical objects are

noncontingent, there may be some eternal and noncontingent fundamental particles out of which all things are made. This is a worthwhile argument to assess, but the burden of this chapter concerns instead the debate over the possibility of infinite causal chains.

8 J.L. Mackie, The Miracle of Theism (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 92.

9 William Rowe, Philosophy of Religion (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1978), 22.

10 These three kinds of examples are given in Richard Purtill, Reason to Believe (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1974), 83-84, but I have adapted them for my purposes.

11 Mackie, 90.

12 One interesting question at this point would be how such a different kind (noncontingent) being could be involved in causal relations with contingent beings. Yet if the First Causes argument is sound the very existence of contingent beings demands that this be the case. Furthermore, there may be other philosophical resources for softening the problem of causal interaction between different types of beings, but we cannot take them up in this context.

13 See Richard Purtill, "The Current State of Arguments for the Existence of God," in Review and Expositor, vol. LXXXII, No. 4 (Fall 1985), 521-533.

14 Ibid.

15 Anthony Kenny, The Five Ways (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980), 29.

16 Cited in Ibid.

17 See Ed L. Miller, God and Reason (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc. 1972), 48-49.

18 See Nicholas Wolterstorff, "God Everlasting" in Clifton J. Orlebeke and Lewis B. Smedes eds., God and the Good (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 181-203.

19 See C. Stephen Evans, Philosophy of Religion (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 53.

20 This should be distinguished from the kind of logical necessity implied by the ontological argument. For more on the distinction between causal and logical necessity see chapter 3 and footnote #4.

21 See Miller, 56.

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