Evidentialism, Foundationalism, and Rational Belief

THE LIMITS OF PROOF

We return now to our central question concerning the Judaic-Christian concept of God: What grounds are there for believing that any such being exists?

We saw in Chapters 2, 3, and 4 that it is not possible to establish either the existence or the nonexistence of God by rational arguments proceeding from universally accepted premises. We saw also that arguments to the effect that theism is more probable than naturalism, or naturalism than theism, are basically defective, since the term “probable” lacks a precise meaning in this context.

In spite of the immense intellectual investment that has gone into the various attempts to demonstrate the existence of God, the conclusion that this is indemonstrable agrees not only with the contemporary philosophical understanding of the nature and limits of logical proof but also with the biblical understanding of our knowledge of God.

Philosophy recognizes two ways in which human beings may come to know whatever there is to be known. One way (stressed by empiricism) is through experience, and the other (stressed by rationalism) is through reasoning. The limitation of the rationalist way is that the only truths capable of being strictly proved are analytic and ultimately tautological. We cannot by logic alone demonstrate any matters of fact and existence; these must be known through experience. That two and two equal four can be certified by strict proof; but that we live in a world of objects in space, and that there is this table and that oak tree and those people, are facts that could never be known independently of sense perception. If nothing were given through experience in its various modes, we should never have anything to reason about. This is as true in religion as in other fields. If God exists, God is not an idea but a reality outside us; in order to be known to men and women, God must therefore become manifest in some way within their experience.

This conclusion is in line with the contemporary revolt against the rationalist assumptions which have dominated much of western philosophy since the time of Descartes. Descartes held that we can properly be said to know only truths that are self-evident or that can be reached by logical inferences from self-evident premises. The still popular idea that to know means to be able to prove is a legacy of this tradition. Developing the implications of his starting point, Descartes regarded the reality of the physical world and of other people as matters that must be doubted until they have been established by strict demonstration. Perhaps, he suggested, all our sense experience is delusory. Perhaps, to go to the ultimate of doubt, there is an all-powerful malicious demon who not only deceives our senses but also tampers with our minds. In order to be sure that we are not being comprehensively deluded, we should therefore doubt everything that can without self-contradiction be doubted and in this way discover if anything remains immune to skepticism. There is one such indubitable item, namely, the fact that I who am now doubting exist: cogito ergo sum (I think, therefore I am). Building upon this immovable pinpoint of certainty, Descartes tried to establish, first the existence of God and then, through the argument that God would not allow us to be deceived, the veracity of sense perception.¹

One of Descartes’s proofs of the existence of God, the ontological argument, was discussed in Chapter 2 and found wanting. Indeed, even if that argument had seemed fully cogent, it would not have provided an escape from a self-imposed state of Cartesian doubt. For the possibility that the “malicious demon” exists and has power over our minds undermines all proofs, since that demon can (by tampering with our memories) make us believe an argument to be valid that is in fact not valid. Really radical and total doubt can never be reasoned away, since it includes even our reasoning powers within its scope. The only way of escaping such doubt is to avoid falling into it in the first place. In the present century, under the influence of G. E. Moore (1873–1958) and others, the view has gained ground that Cartesian doubt, far from being the most rational of procedures, is actually perverse and irrational. It is, Moore protested, absurd to think that we need to prove the existence of the world in which we are living. Its reality is our

¹Descartes, Discourse on Method and Meditations.
paradigm of what we mean by "real." We start out with a consciousness of the world and of other people, and this consciousness is neither capable nor in need of philosophical justification.²

It has also been argued that when doubt becomes universal in its scope, it becomes meaningless. To doubt whether some particular perceived object is real is to doubt whether it is as real as the other sensible objects that we experience. "Is that chair really there?" means "Is it there in the way in which the table and the other chairs are there?" But what does it mean to doubt whether there is really anything whatever there? Such "doubt" is meaningless. For if nothing is real, there is no longer any sense in which anything can be said to be unreal.

To pursue the same point from a slightly different perspective, if the word "real" has any meaning for us, we must acknowledge standard or paradigm cases of its correct use. We must be able to point to a clear and unproblematic instance of something's being real. What can this be but some ordinary physical object perceived by the senses? But if tables and chairs and houses and people are accepted as paradigm cases of real objects, it becomes self-contradictory to suggest that the whole world of tables and chairs and houses and people may possibly be unreal. By definition, they are not unreal, for they are typical instances of what we mean by real objects.

To deny the validity of universal skepticism of the senses is not, however, to deny that there are illusions and hallucinations, or that there are many, and perhaps even inexhaustible, philosophical problems connected with sense perception. It is one thing to know that a number of sense reports are true and another thing to arrive at their correct philosophical analysis.

This empiricist reasoning is in agreement with the unformulated epistemological assumptions of the Bible. Philosophers of the rationalist tradition, holding that to know means to be able to prove, have been shocked to find that in the Bible, which is the basis of western religion, there is no attempt to demonstrate the existence of God. Instead of professing to establish the reality of God by philosophical reasoning, the Bible takes God's reality for granted. Indeed, to the biblical writers it would have seemed absurd to try to prove by logical argument that God exists, for they were convinced that they were already having to do with God, and God with them, in all the affairs of their lives. God was known to them as a dynamic will interacting with their own wills—a sheer given reality, as inescapably to be reckoned with as destructive storm and life-giving sunshine, or the hatred of their enemies and the friendship of their neighbors. They thought of God as an experienced reality rather

than as an inferred entity. The biblical writers were (sometimes, though doubtless not at all times) as vividly conscious of being in God's presence as they were of living in a material environment. It is impossible to read their writings with any degree of sensitivity without realizing that to these people God was not a proposition completing a syllogism, or an abstract idea accepted by the mind, but the reality that gave meaning to their lives. Their pages resound and vibrate with the sense of God's presence as a building might resound and vibrate from the tread of some great being walking through it. It would be as sensible for husbands or wives to desire philosophical proof of the existence of their family members (who contribute so much to the meaning of their lives) as for persons of faith to seek proof of the existence of God, within whose purpose they are conscious that they live and move and have their being.

It is clear, then, that from the point of view of a faith that is biblical in its orientation, the traditional "theistic proofs" are religiously irrelevant. Even if God could be validly inferred from universally accepted premises, this fact would be of merely academic interest to people who believe that they exist in personal relationship with God and already know God as a living presence.

THE RISK OF BELIEF

This conclusion seems thus far to be valid. That is to say, those who participate in one of the great historic streams of religious experience, accepting the body of beliefs in which it is reflected and proceeding to live on that basis, are not open to any charge of irrationality. They are, in Plantinga’s phrases, not violating any epistemic duties, or forming a defective intellectual structure, but are entirely within their epistemic rights. They are, however, inevitably running a profound epistemic risk—one which is not irrational to take but of which they should be conscious.

Religious believing and disbelieving take place in a situation of ambiguity. We saw in Chapters 2 and 3 that both the main theistic and the main anti-theistic arguments are inconclusive. It is possible to think and to experience the universe, and ourselves as part of it, in both religious and naturalistic ways. For those who sometimes experience life religiously, it can be entirely rational to form beliefs reflecting that mode of experience. At the same time, it is equally rational for those who do not participate in the field of religious experience not to hold such beliefs, and to assume that these experiences are simply projections of our human desires and ideals. (It is also possible for someone who has had a religious experience to dismiss this as delusion. In contrast, others who have not had such experiences may sometimes be so impressed by the lives of outstanding believers that they also come to believe in the reality of the Divine.)

It is however another feature of our situation that (as will be argued more fully in Chapter 8) if the universe is, after all, religiously structured, this will ultimately be confirmed within our experience. In other words, we are facing an issue of fact which is at present veiled in ambiguity, so that both belief and disbelief at present carry with them the risk of profound error. The believer risks the possibility of being deluded and of living, as a result, in a state of self-deception. The nonbeliever risks the possibility of shutting out the most valuable of all realities.

Let us now concentrate upon the believer who acknowledges the present religious ambiguity of the universe. Such a person may find warrant for taking this risk in a revision of William James’s “right to believe” argument. We looked at James’s own version of this in the last chapter and concluded that as it stands, it is altogether too permissive. The only ground for belief that James offers is an inclination or desire to believe. He claims that if we have such an inclination, we are entitled to believe accordingly. But this would validate any and every belief that anyone feels an inclination to hold, so long as it is not capable of being proved or disproved. In the light of the previous discussion, a more acceptable justification is provided by religious experience. Let us then reformulate James’s argument as follows. The practical question is whether or not to trust our religious experience as an authentic awareness of the Divine. We have seen that it is rationally permissible either to trust or to distrust it. Each option carries with it momentous consequences. For one must risk either, if disbelieve turns out to be misplaced, missing a great good, indeed the greatest of all goods; or on the other hand, if belief turns out to be misplaced, falling into the most pathetic of delusions. Given this choice James would urge, and surely with reason, that we have the right to choose for ourselves. People are therefore justified in holding beliefs that are grounded either wholly in their own religious experience or in the experience of the historical tradition to which they belong, this being in turn confirmed by their own much slighter range and intensity of religious experience.

Of course, the options may not be quite so final as James sometimes seemed to assume, and as Pascal (see page 59) certainly supposed, namely as leading to eternal gain or loss. If the universe is religiously structured in a way that will eventually become evident to everyone, it seems likely that all will eventually become oriented to the divine Reality—or, in traditional theological language, will attain to eternal life. The “missing a great good, indeed the greatest of all goods” will then only be temporary, even though it may last for the remainder of this present life. In that case, what is missed now by the nonbeliever is the present good of a conscious relationship to the divine Reality and a life lived in that relationship. But we must add that in our present situation of ambiguity a balancing danger is incurred by the believer. For if in fact mistaken, the believer has fallen into the indignity of failing to face the harsh reality of our human situation and of embracing instead a comforting illusion. It seems that we stand, as finite and ignorant beings, in a universe that both invites religious belief and yet holds over us the possibility that this invitation may be a deception!