

The Absolute Question

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Proofs only ever produce a merely indirect insight.
F. W. J. Schelling

The core of the papers gathered here were first presented at a conference on the philosophy of religion hosted by the International Institute for Hermeneutics at Mount Allison University (New Brunswick) in August 2006. Other papers were solicited by the editors to round out a historical retrieval of the proofs for God's existence. The editors would like to thank all who contributed papers to the volume, as well as everyone involved in the Mount Allison meeting, the presenters, many of whom joined us from Europe, Mount Allison philosophy students who assisted in the organization of the conference, and the president of Mount Allison University, Dr. Robert Campbell, who helped bring the whole event to actuality by a crucial infusion of funds at the last minute. Last but not least, I would like to thank Michael Austin for his invaluable editorial assistance.

The proofs for God invariably disappoint the questions which give rise to them. These questions belong to three different forms of the absolute question, corresponding to three religious attitudes: faith, agnosticism, and gnosis. The question of the absolute (objective genitive) is directed to the absolute, it is the absolute's question. As such the question may dare to address God as a divine person. Thus conceived the absolute question is a work of faith. Here is the nub of the tradition, faith seeking understanding as Anselm, improvising on Augustine put it. The question may also be a question about the absolute, the question that raises the problem of the questionability of the absolute. As such the question is the expression of agnosticism. The absolute question can be thought of, finally, as the question of the absolute (subjective genitive), the question which originates in the absolute, which has something of the absolute about it, a question which is itself an indication or expression of the absolute. Here we may ask about the possibility of a kind of pre-knowledge of the absolute, a variety of gnosis, informing and driving the intellect in a certain direction: grasping in an inexpressible experience something of the reality of the absolute, and inflamed by a longing for the fullness of absolute knowledge and

presence, the questioner seeks to elaborate the conditions of the possibility of the absolute.

In recent philosophy most philosophical questioning of the absolute occurs within the attitude of agnosticism. Agnosticism is not necessarily a renunciation of the infinity of intellectual eros expressed in faith and gnosis. Philosophical agnosticism might in fact inspire and motivate philosophy to reach beyond a certain limited frame of questionability, to absolutize questioning itself by excluding no possible frame of questionability, no possible mode of cognition. In this instance, the question so extends itself as to gesture towards the possibility of that which reason cannot think. But how to avoid Hegel? How to avoid turning the absolute poverty of reason into absolute knowledge? We avoid Hegel by refusing to make questioning itself a mode of knowing. The prisoner who taps on the wall of his cell knows that there is an outside, but does not know anything else about it. He knows only that the wall is a wall, and all walls shut out at the same time that they shut in. The Hegelian dialectic of the limit would make all demarcation of a boundary into a mapping of an exterior. To know one's poverty is not an implicit wealth, to trace the limit is not necessarily to be already beyond it.

One makes this point best by taking a good hard look at the proofs—the point of this volume. Is philosophical theology ever conclusive? What would it mean to take one of the proofs as conclusive, aside from the bald assertion, that God is? Would it not mean to take a cosmology, and an epistemology, above all, a metaphysics as conclusive?

A-gnosis is not a denial of the possibility of gnosis but a denial that philosophy as such possesses or could possess gnosis. One does not philosophize in the face of God: one worships. This does not mean that philosophy must be in principle atheistic (Heidegger). Exactly the opposite is true. Philosophy cannot claim any more certainty about this question than its methods allow. None of the proofs show conclusively that God exists, for each of them assumes a metaphysics, which is only one among the many that are possible. But none of the failures to prove show that God is not. Given a certain metaphysics, say act-potency, then God must exist. For nothing that is at some time and in some respect in potency can reduce itself to act. To concede this metaphysical point is to affirm the necessity of pure act, that which is not moved by another but which moves all moved movers. It is the metaphysics of act-potency that is at issue in this proof, not God's existence. There are other forms of metaphysics, which yield other forms of proof: Spinoza's metaphysics of efficient causality for example, with its attendant ontological proof. One wonders if Aquinas lists "five ways," not in order to show how indubitable God's existence is for philosophy (everywhere you turn, there he is), but in order to show how multiple the ways to him are. Even granted that the five ways in some fashion work together to generate the conclusion, that God exists, Aquinas has little to conclude therefrom about "what we all call God." Indeed, by calling God First Cause, Pure Act, Necessary Being, etc, Aquinas admits that he does not know what God is. The world "proportionate" to the human intellect (as Lonergan puts it) is a world of

physically-embedded forms, the existence of which are contingent upon other forms, and knowledge of which begins and ends with sensible being. Pure act is not something that a living, embodied, and temporally-bound human being could possibly know in the full sense of the term. Such agnosticism says nothing about the possibility of a non-philosophical disclosure of God.

The question might be absolute (without restriction), but a proof cannot be. A proof is at best a way (via), perilous and vulnerable to multiple attacks, to a provisional certainty conditional upon conceding a particular and eminently questionable metaphysics.