

Modernizing the Case for God

Philosophers refurbish the tools of reason to sharpen arguments for theism

God? Wasn't he chased out of heaven by Marx, banished to the unconscious by Freud and announced by Nietzsche to be deceased? Did not Darwin drive him out of the empirical world? Well, not entirely. In a quiet revolution in thought and argument that hardly anyone could have foreseen only two decades ago, God is making a comeback. Most intriguingly, this is happening not among theologians or ordinary believers—most of whom never accepted for a moment that he was in any serious trouble—but in the crisp, intellectual circles of academic philosophers, where the consensus had long banished the Almighty from fruitful discourse.

Now it is more respectable among philosophers than it has been for a generation to talk about the possibility of God's existence. The shift is most striking in the Anglo-American academies of thought, where strict forms of empiricism have reigned. "What science cannot tell us, mankind cannot know," declared Bertrand Russell. And A.J. Ayer, on behalf of logical positivism, decreed that "all utterances about the nature of God are nonsensical." The accepted wisdom was that the only valid statements were those verifiable through the senses.

Today even atheistic philosophers agree that Ayer's rigid rule is inadequate to deal with human experience. Meanwhile, science, his model for learning, has become less presumptuous and ambitious, its theorizing about cosmic astronomy closer to theology, its promise as savior and absolute explainer of the world somewhat tarnished. In the era of quarks, black holes, physics can seem as baffling as foreign policy in the age of the Ayatullah. Philosophers of science, such as Thomas Kuhn of Princeton, have applied relativism, formerly employed against religion, to scientific knowledge. Cornell President Frank Rhodes, a geologist, once observed that "the qualities that [scientists] measure may have as little relation to the world itself as a telephone number has to its subscriber."

Broad cultural forces are also at work. Says Douglas Hall, a theologian at Montreal's McGill University: "The experiment with secularism finally proved to be too much for the human psyche to cope with, both in the Marxist world and our

world. If you begin to doubt that there is some meaning in the process of history, then you get frightened of your own secularity, and you return to religion."

Though still a distinct minority in secular universities, some philosophers are not only willing to talk about God but to believe in him. In the U.S., 300 of them belong to the Society for Christian Philosophy. Some scholars are attacking atheism and reviving and refining arguments

pher and guru of the Great Books Program, published *How to Think About God: A Guide for the 20th Century Pagan* (Macmillan; \$9.95). In September Doubleday will issue the English version of dissident Roman Catholic Theologian Hans Küng's latest, which despite its 850 pages is a huge bestseller in West Germany. The title: *Does God Exist?*

His predictable answer: yes. Even nonbelievers, Küng writes, know that an unjust world raises the question of morality and, in turn, religion. Besides that, the 20th century is littered with the sorry results of supplanting God with an absolute force that is not divine, such as the "people" in Nazism or the party in Communism. Küng's lucid analysis contends that atheism's 19th century patriarchs proclaimed their theories but never bothered to prove them. Ludwig Feuerbach, the founder of modern atheism, asserted that religious beliefs were mere projections of mankind's noblest qualities; Küng responds that such philosophers' belief in the goodness of human nature is far more likely to be such a projection.

Whatever atheism's weaknesses, what about the other side? Can God's existence be established by reason, without resorting to the Bible, revelations, church dogmas or a leap of faith? The attempt is traditionally known as "natural theology," and except for the largely self-contained world of Roman Catholic philosophy, it went out of style more than a century ago.

In the current revival, most arguments still employ the traditional definition of God as a unique personal creative entity. What is new is the effort to refurbish and enhance the traditional approaches to the problem. A summary of the work being done to put new wine in these old wineskins:

The Moral Proof. This is essentially Küng's approach. Conscience doth make Christians—or at least theists—of us all. The case builds upon the universal signs among mankind of conscience, of some moral law and of each person's inability to keep it satisfactorily, all of which cannot be explained as mere conditioning or self-interest. The source of that spark of conscience, theists contend, is God. The most celebrated exponent, Immanuel



God: William Blake



God: Michelangelo



God: 13th century France



God: Lucas Cranach

for theism that have been largely unfashionable since the Enlightenment, using modern techniques of analytic philosophy and symbolic logic that were once used to discredit belief.

A generation ago, atheistic empiricists like Harvard's Willard V. Quine were influential simply because "they were the brightest people," says Philosophy Professor Roderick Chisholm of Brown University, adding that now the "brightest people include theists, using a kind of tough-minded intellectualism" that was often lacking on their side of the debate.

The proofs of God's existence, long pursued in impenetrable books and journals, are engaging wider audiences. Last week Mortimer Adler, popular philoso-

Religion

Kant (1724-1804), wrote that each person's quest for the "highest good" implies the existence of a moral being as the necessary condition for this idea, who is himself the source of all morality.

Updating Kant, Dartmouth Scholar Ronald Green argues in *Religious Reason* (Oxford; \$12) that though skeptics may think primitive instincts or emotions are the basis for religion, faith actually stems from the sophisticated reasoning process that distinguishes humans from animals. To Green, man must seek an independent, coherent source for his morality. Although Kant ended with a personal God, Green will only go so far as to postulate "some kind of supreme moral causal agency," whether a personal deity or Hinduism's impersonal karma.

The Mental Proof. In this formulation, an all-intelligent Being is offered as the only explanation for the power of reason and for humanity's other nonmaterial qualities of mind and imagination. A contemporary restatement is the 1947 classic *Miracles* by the late English literary critic C.S. Lewis, the century's most read apologist for God. Lewis dismissed the philosophy that mind results from nature: "If any thought is valid, an eternal, self-existent Reason must exist and must be the source of my own imperfect and intermittent rationality."

America's leading orthodox Protestant philosopher of God, Alvin Plantinga of Michigan's Calvin College, develops a related argument from one of the pressing issues in modern epistemology. Though it sounds strange to the man in the street, philosophers ponder how an individual can know that there is any creature besides himself who thinks, feels and reasons, or how he can know that anything ever existed in the past. How, for instance, can we know if another person is in pain? Plantinga answers that such knowledge is acquired through analogy, and in *God and Other Minds* (Cornell; \$13.50) he makes an intricate case that this is the way believers know God. Since it is perfectly plausible to infer that other minds exist, he thinks it is reasonable to believe that God does as well.

The Experiential Proof. Because religious experiences are so widespread, this argument runs, there must be something (or rather, Someone) inspiring them. Skeptics, of course, reply that experiences are subjective, hence unreliable as evidence, and besides they can be explained apart from God. Harvard's Quine, for example, dismisses beliefs as the product of "tradition, wishful thinking or something in the genes." However, one of Britain's most

distinguished zoologists, Alister Hardy, begs to wonder. A project he founded at Oxford has issued a rigorous scientific study of 3,000 religious experiences, and reports a striking—and intriguing—commonality among them.

The Teleological Proof. Here the infinitely complex structure of the universe is used to argue the necessary existence of an intelligent Designer. In English Archdeacon William Paley's famous analogy of 1802, anyone who sees a watch is forced to assume the existence of a watchmaker who made it. The marvels of nature's design, from snowflakes to developing embryos, are comforting buttresses to faith for many people.

Since the Enlightenment, though, philosophers have not been impressed. The great skeptic was David Hume (1711-76),

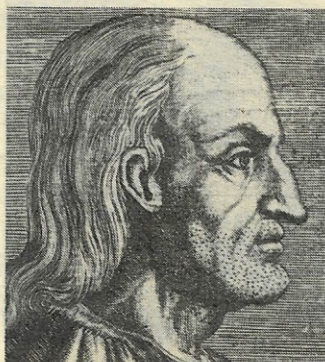
tends that narrowly antireligious Darwinism ignores the way in which inanimate nature is in harmony with organic evolution. Nor, he asserts, can evolutionary theory possibly explain the rapid emergence of the large brain in the developing human species.

The Ontological Proof. This, the most controversial approach, moves from a mental concept of God to his actual existence. It was originated by Anselm, the 11th century Archbishop of Canterbury who defined God as "a being than which nothing greater can be thought." The Archbishop reasoned that since existence would have to be part of any such perfect and necessary being, this being must actually exist. This is "too good to be true," says one skeptic, and even one of its current defenders admits that it "looks too much like word magic."

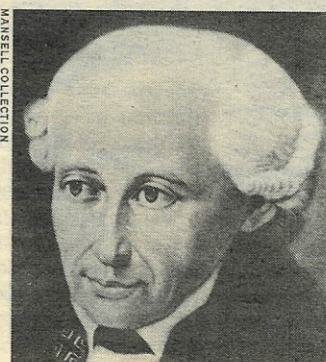
The method lay in disrepute after Kant supposedly demolished it, until Norman Malcolm, then at Cornell, suddenly claimed in a 1960 article that it was partly defensible. Since then it has been the most debated proof among philosophers. Three current advocates renovate it by applying a technique known as modal logic: Plantinga; Unitarian Charles Hartshorne, a follower of Alfred North Whitehead's "process" philosophy, now retired from the University of Texas; and Roman Catholic Layman James F. Ross of the University of Pennsylvania.

In *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford; \$8.50), Plantinga, who had long opposed ontological theories, explains that his mind was changed through the curious logical process of speculating about "possible worlds" in which things could be different. For example, he says, Raquel Welch has "impressive assets" in our world. But there are possible worlds in which she is "mousy and 50 lbs. overweight," and others in which she is totally nonexistent, adding: "What Anselm means to suggest is that Raquel Welch enjoys very little greatness in those worlds in which she does not exist."

Ross, a leader in modernizing the thought of medieval scholars, favors the revision of Anselm done by John Duns Scotus (1265-1308) but does some renovation himself. In the forthcoming new edition of his *Philosophical Theology* (Hackett; \$17.50), Ross is bold enough to claim that he has an airtight proof that "remains unscathed" after a decade of scrutiny. Ross does this with his "Principle E" (for explicability), which is virtually inexplicable to the uninitiated. Roughly, it means that it is possible for everything, including God's existence, to be



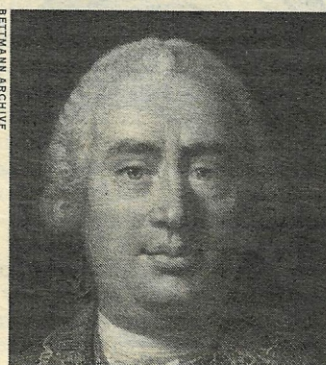
Anselm of Canterbury



Immanuel Kant



Thomas Aquinas



David Hume

who scoffed at the design argument because nature is so savage and wasteful that it might have been the work of "some infant deity who afterwards abandoned it, ashamed of his lame performance." Turned inside out, the proof is really a question: Could this intricate universe have evolved by pure trial and error? The last major philosopher to promote the argument, Britain's F.R. Tennant, wrote in 1934: "Presumably the world is comparable with a single throw of the dice. And common sense is not foolish in suspecting the dice to have been loaded."

Forsaken by philosophers, the proof was brought up to date last year by James E. Horigan, a Denver lawyer intrigued by scientific theory. In *Chance or Design?* (Philosophical Library; \$13.95) he con-

explained, but that God's nonexistence does not admit of explanation. Even atheistic philosophers grant that by the latest rules of logic, the updaters of Anselm are right: if it is even possible that a highest conceivable being exists, then he must exist in actuality. The trouble is, the atheists do not accept that he is even possible.

The Cosmological Proof. The term applies technically to any argument for God through reflection upon the natural world. But most often "cosmological" refers to sweeping generalizations about ultimate origins and why the cosmos exists at all. Evolutionary schools of thought do not entertain such notions because they fall, by definition, outside what can be observed or tracked. If such questions are never asked, of course, they require no answer. Bertrand Russell once remarked in a BBC debate that the universe is "just there, and that's all." He was convinced that "all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noon-day brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system."

The classic cosmological inquirer was Thomas Aquinas (1224-74), and the classic modern innovator is Canadian Jesuit Bernard J.F. Lonergan, whose "transcendental Thomism" in *Insight* (Philosophical Library; \$10) justifies Aquinas to the modern world through a complex philosophy of human understanding. Chicago's Mortimer Adler has long been interested in Aquinas' thought. Though not formally religious he nonetheless pondered the God problem for most of his 75 years before writing his readable *How to Think About God*.

Aquinas reasoned that each effect must have a cause and that an endless chain must proceed back to a primordial First Cause or Prime Mover. In *How to*, Adler rejects that starting point because a universe with a beginning presupposes the Creator that it seeks to prove. Therefore Adler assumes that the universe had no beginning. He also rejects the idea that a higher cause underlies and explains all phenomena in the universe, on the ground that natural processes provide sufficient explanation.

That leaves the most esoteric of Aquinas' "five ways" of proving God, from "contingency." Things can be divided into two categories: "contingent" ones that could either exist or not exist, and "necessary" ones that cannot not exist. The latter is a category of one, namely God. The reason that anything at all exists, cosmologists argue, is that there must be a "necessary" being.

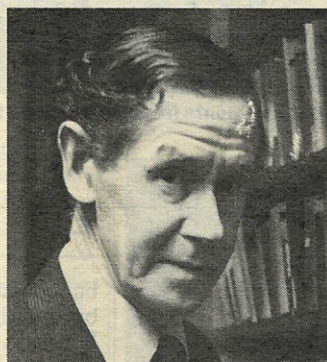
At one time Adler embraced Aquinas' proof, then for decades he thought it did not work because although everything in the universe is contingent, nothing ceases to exist absolutely (e.g. burning wood only changes form), so no God is needed to explain the existence of contingent things. Last May he suddenly changed his mind again after applying the "possible worlds" approach. Adler speculated that the universe is only one of many possible universes, any of which—including this actual universe—can just as easily not exist as exist. The universe is "radically contingent," the only thing capable of not existing and leaving behind absolutely nothing. An "efficient cause" is needed to explain "the actual existence here and now of a merely possible cosmos," something that preserves it in being and prevents it from being replaced by nothingness. Color that cause God. Philosopher Ross

what nature and history show to be quite likely—that there is a God who made and sustains man and the universe." Basil Mitchell, a philosopher of religion at Oxford, advocates a "many-stranded rope of reason" like that employed by historians or scientists to develop the best explanation of evidence. Among his strands: individuals' experience of a mysterious "other" outside nature, the simple faith of believers and "cosmic awe" in encountering unusually saintly persons.

The procedure is double-edged. Oxford's J.L. Mackie, perhaps the ablest of today's atheistic philosophers, offers nonsupernatural explanations for such evidence, and raises the problem, as old as the *Book of Job*, of evil. The existence of evil is no "knock-down disproof of an omnipotent and wholly good God," he says, but it does make God improbable.

Plantinga renovates the theist's classic reply to this: the free will argument. Examining whether a semifictional, corrupt Boston mayor would have taken smaller bribes in other "possible worlds," he argues that even an all-powerful God cannot create a world in which mayors can choose to take bribes and that also contains no evil. In religious circles, natural theology is not in vogue. Not all Roman Catholics, for example, can wholeheartedly accept the First Vatican Council's decree that "man can know the one true God and Creator with certainty by the natural light of human reason." At the same time, though few people come to believe through the exercise of reason, cathedrals of thought can provide sanctuary for many when faith falters or is attacked by skeptics. Jude Dougherty, dean of philosophy at the Catholic University of America, also sees value in continuing to labor to reason God out in a day when all sorts of bizarre cults flourish. "If religion is not placed on a rational footing then *anything* can be considered religion."

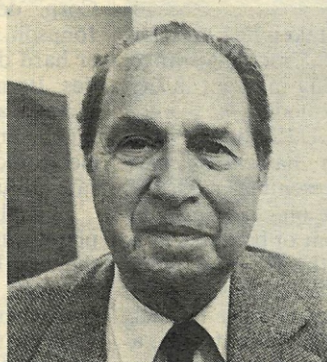
Probably the major failing of such enterprise is that the results, however persuasive, tell too little about the nature and will of God. Blaise Pascal, anticipating modern objections to natural theology, believed that one cannot worship a dry concept, only the living God. Though a genius in science and mathematics, Pascal believed that "the heart has its reasons, which reason cannot know." But if in an age of science, faith in God can be more rationally grounded, as a growing number of philosophers now attest, then the reasoning soul who is so inclined can more surely and assuredly feel comfortable in moving beyond reason. ■



England's J.L. Mackie



West Germany's Hans Küng



Chicago's Mortimer Adler



Michigan's Alvin Plantinga

contends that this interesting argument was stated more successfully in the 13th century by his hero, Duns Scotus. Adler does not think so.

Other scholars use what could be called the cumulative argument: they contemplate the comparative plausibility of various arguments and evidences using Adler's favored standard of judgment, the jury's proof "beyond a reasonable doubt." This permits atheists to avoid having to disprove God absolutely, which is as hard to do as prove his existence, and lets theists cite human phenomena that strict empiricism used to rule out. In *The Existence of God* (Oxford; \$37.50), Richard Swinburne of England's Keele University concludes: "The experience of so many men in their moments of religious vision corroborates