

The Argument from Biblical Authority

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If a professor teaches a unit on arguments for God's existence in an introductory course, I suspect it consists in the teleological, cosmological, and ontological arguments, but does not include the argument from Biblical authority. If that argument arises at all, I suspect it is because a student has asked, "Doesn't the Bible prove there is a God?" The tacit argument is:

1. Every statement in the Bible is true.
2. The Bible includes the statement, "God exists."
3. Therefore, God exists.

The argument is then shown to be question-begging because the defense of the Bible's authority presupposes God's existence, which is what the argument should prove.

I deal with the argument differently for a few reasons. In the first place, not every attempt to defend the argument's first premise involves the presupposition of God's existence. For this reason some students are apt to be justifiably dissatisfied with assessing the argument quickly as merely question-begging. Secondly, identifying and assessing the ways in which the argument's first premise has or could be defended enables one to teach a number of important points about adequate evidence and critical evaluation of argument. Those students who are inclined to accept the argument from Biblical authority are probably ignorant of at least one canon of evidence (at least as far as the Bible is concerned). The students who reject the argument, at least in my experience, think that the only way to justify their belief is to show that not every statement in the Bible is true. They thus have something to learn, too, since the argument can be shown to be wanting without broaching the question of the truth of the argument's first premise. Thirdly, a student's potential embarrassment can be avoided if the professor treats the argument as a topic, rather than waiting for a student to ask, only to hear a quick rebuttal.

However, the relevant canons of evidence and rationality should arise, at least in part, from the students themselves. Since they need perspective in order to do that, I do not mention the Bible at all until a different argument has been evaluated, to wit:

1. Every statement in Antony Flew's book, *God and Philosophy*, is true.
2. *God and Philosophy* includes the statement, "God does not exist."¹
3. Therefore, God does not exist.

Beginning students need a little background. Before dismantling this argument I have analyzed the question "Does this deductive argument prove its conclusion?" into three constituents: (1) Is it valid?; (2) Are all the premises true?; and (3) Are all the premises known to be true? Since the students have been apprised of the notion of validity, they readily recognize that the "Flew argument" fits the bill. I stipulate that premise (2) is true.

1. Sometimes a student or two will make a first attempt by saying that the first premise is false because the conclusion is false. If this does not arise immediately, it may be worthwhile to mention this maneuver, since the professor (or a student) can point out why this route is unpromising. It puts the burden of the proof on the critic, which in this case requires a proof of God's existence. The students note that the argument can be criticized without establishing God's existence. This means, of course, that even if an argument is valid, it can be assessed critically without alleging that the conclusion is false.

2. The students spontaneously infer, by contrast, that the burden of proof should be shifted, and thus demand reasons for premise (1). If I "defend" it by claiming that the fact that a statement is in the book by itself makes it true, no student is convinced. It can be pointed out that if the fact that something is in print by itself made it true, statements that contradict one another would both be true. Likewise, absurd (but not self-contradictory) statements would be true.

But what makes a statement in print true? What renders it rationally credible? An analogy is set forth in which someone dogmatically believes everything he reads in the *New York Times* and continues to believe a particular story even when the evidence against it is either strong or conclusive.² The students begin to see that the degree of rational credibility of something in print is a function of the evidence for and against it. I add that the evidence could be direct or indirect. If we are inclined to believe what we read in the *Times*, that belief would ordinarily be justified by acquaintance with the *Times'* reputation or track record. But if we have direct evidence of the falsehood of a report therein, that would override indirect information. Similarly, proper appeals to the authority of the scientific community are indirect appeals to the evidence scientists have. Facts make a statement true—and evidence, which can be more or less good, makes a statement (to the appropriate degree) rationally credible.

3. Since it has been established at this point that premise (1) must be proven, I ask the students to assume, for the sake of argument, that Flew demonstrates every statement in his book. What consequences would that have on the "Flew argument?" Naturally, that would show that the "Flew argument" is sound. Usually the students have a more difficult time seeing a further consequence: the proofs of every statement in *God and Philosophy* would render the "Flew argument" superfluous. By hypothesis, one of the statements in the book is "God does not exist"; and if that were proven, there would be no need to argue from

the authority of the book.

What is more, the proof of God's non-existence would be preferable to the argument from the authority of *God and Philosophy*. If, say, a version of the argument from evil established atheism, then there would be an argument that could stand on its own merits. If some question arose about whether it proved atheism, the argument could be assessed independently. None of this is true of the argument from the authority of the book. In order to ascertain whether premise (1) is true, one has to consider arguments in favor of the constituent statements. But one cannot establish that the arguments are sound by proclaiming that the book is authoritative.

4. I then ask the students to make the more modest supposition that only some of the statements have been proven. Previously I stipulated that *God and Philosophy* consists of theological and historical statements so that it will parallel the Bible. If someone tried to formulate an inductive argument for premise (1) by proving the historical statements in *God and Philosophy*, then the argument would be poor because there would be no evidential or logical relevance between the historical and theological statements. For example, even if some people attributed to Karl Barth the statement on the first page of *God and Philosophy*, that does not advance the case for atheism.³

If some theological statements are proven, then the same objection, only in reverse, would apply. Since there is a lack of evidential relevance between the theological and historical statements, establishing some theological statements would not prove that every statement in the book is true. Even if the ontological argument is unsound, for example, that does not give us any reason to believe that the First Vatican Council proclaimed that God's existence can be proven.⁴

However, even if proving some of the theological statements does not establish premise (1), doing so might advance the case for atheism, the "Flew argument's" conclusion. That would depend on whether the theological statements are evidentially relevant to atheism. Once those factors are made explicit, however, we discover that the result would be an argument that can be considered entirely independently of the alleged authority of *God and Philosophy*. Suppose, for example, that it were proven that there are no miracles and that if God existed, there is every reason to believe that there would be. We would not need to regard any book as authoritative in order to evaluate that argument or its theistic counterpart. If the Bible's authority is used as the reason for maintaining that miracles occurred, then the argument from miracles is in trouble.

5. Thus far the defenses of premise (1) are attempts to establish it by making a case for the book's constituent claims. However, someone might try to make a case for it without arguing directly for any of its contents. Someone might argue for the authority of *God and Philosophy* by noting that believing it "works" in his life. Naturally, this could also be used to "prove" the authority of the Torah, the Bible, the Koran, or even *The Communist Manifesto*.⁵ Since these books cannot all be authoritative, we need to look elsewhere for credible evidence whereby we can ascertain which, if any, is true.

6. At this point I introduce the argument from Biblical authority. Just in

case the parallels are not evident to all the students, I explain them quickly. To be sure, someone probably will say that the arguments are not parallel because God inspired (or wrote) the Bible. Thus, it is necessary to explain why that defense is question-begging.

A few points that might otherwise elude some introductory students thus can be taught. The argument from Biblical authority is at best a parasitic argument. Even if the argument were sound, we would not know it is sound unless we had good evidence for the truth of the Bible's constituent claims, including a sound argument for God's existence. If the argument from Biblical authority is treated first, therefore, it can serve as a means for motivating interest in the standard arguments for God's existence. An analysis of the argument, furthermore, leads straightaway to principles of rationality, some of which I have enumerated here.

Dismantling the argument also sets the stage for the argument from miracles, if a professor cares to discuss it. There is always the danger that a student will think that the evidence for a miracle need be no stronger than the evidence for a historical statement. An analogy can help prove otherwise. One might compare the evidence one needs to establish that the professor wrote a letter last night with what is required to show that he or she walked on water. This issue sometimes arises unavoidably, but is best reserved for treatment of the argument from miracles.

7. The scope of this article is broader than its title implies, since the same argument can be used to show that no argument from the authority of a religious text proves God's existence.

Notes

1. Although Flew does not write "God does not exist" in *God and Philosophy*, Flew defends atheism in that book.

2. Gilbert Fulmer suggested this analogy to me.

3. Antony Flew, *God and Philosophy*, New York: Delta Books, 1966, p. 9, paragraph 1.1.

4. *God and Philosophy*, pp. 12 and 60, paragraphs 1.7, 4.11 and 4.12.

5. An anonymous referee for *Teaching Philosophy* suggested this analogy to me.

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