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Proofs of God in Early Modern Europe

An Anthology

Lloyd Strickland

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Love you more

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PREFACE

It would scarcely be an exaggeration to say that proving the existence of God was something of an industry in early modern Europe, as numerous thinkers of the age concerned themselves with developing new proofs and reworking existing ones. This much is well known today. But to truly understand the early modern age and its concerns, it is important to know not just *that* its thinkers sought to prove the existence of God but *how* and *why* they did so. The present volume contributes to this aim by collecting the proofs offered by nineteen early modern thinkers (thus helping to answer the "how" question) along with an introductory essay that seeks to uncover the motivations behind the development of these proofs (the "why" question). The need for such a volume is clear: despite the importance of such proofs in early modern thought and the bewildering range that were developed, there is an entrenched tendency today for scholars to focus on the proofs offered by the "canonical" thinkers, Descartes, Locke, Leibniz, and Berkeley, a focus that is often replicated in university courses. This focus, while understandable, is unfortunate in that scholars and students often miss out on the richness and variety of the proofs that early modern thinkers developed. This book offers a larger window onto the early modern endeavor of proving God's existence by presenting the reader with the texts of a wide range of thinkers, some canonical, many not. My hope is that by including a number of texts by noncanonical thinkers, this volume will help to stimulate the study of less familiar (and in some cases marginalized) figures, whose work is often a treasure trove of novel ideas and arguments.

The roots of this volume go back to 2007, although at that time it was conceived in slightly narrower terms, as an anthology of texts on natural theology from early modern times to the present day. As the focus shifted, so did the texts I wanted to feature in it. I have to thank Timothy McGrew for alerting me to the text by Susanna Newcome, which at the time of writing still appears to be a well-kept secret (so much so that it seems to be unknown even to those who write about the contributions of women to early modern philosophy). I also have to thank Austen Haynes for telling me I should include an essay by John Norris, and Carey Newman of Baylor University Press for asking me to include the texts by Spinoza and Voltaire—all examples of excellent advice that I was delighted to take. I also thank Carey for the enthusiasm he showed for this project, which was precisely the spur I needed to finish it.

Other debts of gratitude have been incurred along the way, and it is a pleasure to record them here. John Rudd read through the entire manuscript, and his comments and suggestions resulted in a number of improvements. Austen Haynes read many of the texts in this volume and provided helpful feedback. Daniel J. Cook, Gavin Hyman, and Matthew Levering read the introductory essay and made a number of observations and suggestions that were very helpful. An earlier draft of the materials in this book was used as the basis of my half of a third-year undergraduate module I taught at Manchester Metropolitan University in 2017; my thanks to the students who chose to study that module and work through the draft materials, in particular Greg Dunne, Layla Khan, Mariam Mustafa, and Kyril Whittaker.

INTRODUCTION

Proving God in Early Modern Europe

Whether God exists or not is one of the greatest and most important philosophical questions there is. The tradition of trying to establish God's existence via proofs (i.e., via arguments or other evidence) is a long one, stretching back thousands of years, and continues to this day.[1] But if ever there was a golden age for devising proofs of God's existence, then early modernity—roughly, the period from the mid-seventeenth century to the latter part of the eighteenth—would be it.[2] A great many of the proofs devised and utilized in this period can be found in the texts collected in this book. These texts show that the leading and lesser lights of early modernity produced an impressive range of proofs, ranging from versions of what we now call the ontological

[1] For a survey of this tradition, see Matthew Levering, *Proofs of God: Classical Arguments from Tertullian to Barth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016).

[2] Unfortunately, this is far from evident from the secondary literature on the topic. Survey articles of proofs developed in this period invariably mention only a handful of those featured in this volume; for example, Armogathe's essay discusses six (Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke, Berkeley, and Fénelon), while Antognazza's discusses only two (Wolff and Voltaire). The most extensive coverage is to be found in the survey article by Lascano, which discusses the proofs of seven of the thinkers in this volume (Descartes, Locke, Spinoza, Leibniz, Berkeley, More, and Norris). See Jean-Robert Armogathe, "Proofs of the Existence of God," in *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, ed. Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1:305–30; Maria Rosa Antognazza, "Reason, Revelation, and Arguments for the Deity," in *The Routledge Companion to Eighteenth Century Philosophy*, ed. Aaron Garrett (New York: Routledge, 2014), 145–66; Marcy P. Lascano, "Arguments for the Existence of God," in *The Routledge Companion to Seventeenth Century Philosophy*, ed. Daniel Kaufman (London: Routledge, 2017), 505–35.

and cosmological proofs to an array of design arguments, as well as arguments from eternal truths and many others besides.[3] By way of an introduction to these texts, I will consider not the proofs found therein (since these are discussed in the headnotes to each of the texts) but a separate question: What prompted so many thinkers of early modernity to develop proofs of God's existence at all? The question is an important one because, despite the religious upheaval of the Reformation, early modernity was a time in which religious belief was still widespread in Europe and the idea of someone sincerely denying God's existence was generally considered to be absurd if not unthinkable.[4] Why, then, did so many thinkers feel the need to construct proofs for something that was already widely believed to be true?[5] In many cases, an examination of the proofs themselves will not yield an answer; only when we consider the works in which these proofs are found, the authors' broader oeuvre, and the preoccupations of the age, is the answer forthcoming. When contextualized in this way, we find that the proofs were intended to serve one of three functions: (1) as a corrective against atheism, (2) as the first step in a program of Christian apologetics, or (3) as the foundation of a philosophical system or philosophical explanation of the world. Let us consider each of these in turn.

[3] Note that early modern thinkers did not tend to give their arguments names. The names "ontological argument," "cosmological argument," "design argument," etc. were coined much later, the first two by Immanuel Kant in his *Der einzig mögliche Beweisgrund zu einer Demonstration des Daseins Gottes* [The only possible argument in support of a demonstration of the existence of God] (1763). See Immanuel Kant, *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755–1770*, trans. David Walford and Ralf Meerbote (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 199.

[4] See Thomas M. Lennon, "Theology and the God of the Philosophers," in *The Cambridge Companion to Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Donald Rutherford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 277.

[5] A secondary reason for asking this question stems from the fact that the thinkers who advanced these proofs typically had a lifelong belief in God, which means that they could not have come to believe in him as a result of the proofs they subsequently put their name to. They were therefore developing routes to God different from the ones they themselves had taken. The only exception to this I am aware of is André-Pierre Le Guay de Prémontval, who was, by his own admission, an atheist for a time in his youth before becoming a deist and then converting to an unspecified form of Protestantism at the age of thirty. In his case, it is possible—though unconfirmed—that his belief in God was grounded in the proof he offered in later life. See the headnotes to Prémontval's selection in this volume for more information.

A corrective against atheism

When reading the works of many early modern thinkers, one is often struck by the extent to which they were preoccupied with atheism. Yet this preoccupation was not just with unbelief, for in early modernity "atheist" was an elastic term applied not just to those who denied the existence of God (which is invariably how it is used today) but also to those who denied divine providence, held heretical religious beliefs, or endorsed heterodox conceptions of God.[6] As such, it often functioned more as a smear than a description of genuine unbelief. The two thinkers of early modernity most often accused of atheism were Thomas Hobbes and Baruch Spinoza. Those who accused them of atheism did so not because either Hobbes or Spinoza denied the existence of God (something that both in fact affirmed) but because they held highly unorthodox conceptions of God; while Hobbes conceived of God as corporeal,[7] Spinoza claimed that God and the physical world (nature) are just different aspects of a single being, which acts out of necessity rather than free will.[8] Hence, in early modern Europe, when particular individuals were identified as atheists, it was invariably because they were thought to have dishonored the deity rather than because they had explicitly denied its existence. In a survey of atheism in modern times, a recent commentator notes that while

> at the outset of modernity, minds in England and France are beginning to be afflicted and plagued with doubts, the term "atheism" is being used here more in the manner of an accusation, a term of abuse. As a term of self-definition, a declaration of one's own belief (or lack thereof), it does not really appear until the mid-eighteenth century when it is found among Parisian intellectuals, particularly Denis Diderot, who is widely recognized as being the first explicit and self-confessedly atheist philosopher.[9]

Needless to say, the lack of explicit avowals of atheism in early modernity does not necessarily mean there were no atheists, but it does hamper efforts to get a

[6] As Voltaire put it in 1764, "Formerly, whoever possessed a secret in some art was in danger of passing for a sorcerer, every new sect was accused of slaughtering infants in its mysteries, and every philosopher who departed from the jargon of the school was accused of atheism by fanatics and rogues and condemned by blockheads." [Voltaire], *Dictionnaire philosophique, portatif* (London: n.p., 1764), 33.

[7] See Thomas Hobbes, *An Answer to a Book Published by Dr. Bramhall, late Bishop of Derry; called The Catching of the Leviathan* (London: W. Crooke, 1682), 31.

[8] See Baruch Spinoza, *Complete Works*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), 234–35, 321.

[9] Gavin Hyman, "Atheism in Modern History," in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, ed. Michael Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 30.

clear picture of the scale of unbelief. Thinkers of the age varied wildly in their estimations: some (as we shall see) denied that there were any atheists at all, while others claimed that Europe was overrun with them. Both claims should be treated with caution but especially the latter, since those who sought to identify atheists invariably named those who espoused heterodox views rather than genuine unbelief or—more often—those who believed in a God different from their own.[10] But even if atheism, in the sense of a genuine denial of God's existence, was not widespread in early modern times, the fear of it was. This fear induced a number of thinkers to write works that sought to show—through a suite of proofs of God's existence—that such atheism was intellectually untenable. These proofs were intended to serve as a corrective against atheism. Of the selections in this volume, the one by Henry More is the best example of this. His selection comes from a book entitled *An Antidote to Atheism*, in which he addresses an adversary he refers to only as "the Atheist," here used not as a term of abuse but more straightforwardly to refer to anyone who denies that there is a God. More does not claim that he personally knows anyone who answers to this description or even that he is aware of anyone who does: accordingly, More's "Atheist" comes across as less a real person than a "foil."[11] More seeks to bring his adversary around by offering a suite of different proofs of God's existence, and to increase his chances of success, he deliberately restricts himself to the same natural phenomena that he supposes his adversary would accept and so expressly avoids any mention of supernatural phenomena, like the miracles described in Scripture.[12] This ensures that dialogue is possible with "the Atheist," who after all could be expected to reject any appeal to the supernatural from the outset. By carefully selecting those proofs of God's existence to which he believed "the Atheist" would be receptive, More thinks himself able to vanquish his opponent and show atheism to be groundless.

[10] Hence, among those whom the Jesuit François Garasse identified as atheists were Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, Martin Luther (all leading figures in the Reformation), and Mohammed. See François Garasse, *La doctrine curieuse des beaux esprits de ce temps, ou pretendus tels* (Paris: Sebastian Chappelet, 1623).

[11] As one commentator puts it, the atheist was "most often a foil rather than an encountered mind until the turn of the eighteenth century." Alan Charles Kors, "The Age of Enlightenment," in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, ed. Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 195.

[12] Henry More, *An Antidote against Atheism; or, an Appeal to the Natural Faculties of the Mind of Man, Whether there be not a God*, 3rd ed. (London: James Flesher, 1662), 7.

A similar tack was taken by François Fénelon, another of the thinkers featured in this volume. In the preface to his book entitled *Demonstration de l'existence de Dieu* (Demonstration of God's existence), Fénelon writes:

> The idea of ourselves is so perfectly connected with the idea of God that one can barely consider the first without being struck by brilliance of the latter. One cannot hide from its brilliance, and while there have been hypocrites who have professed atheism there have never been true atheists. . . . Therefore, it is certain that as there are no true atheists, it is not for their benefit that books on God's existence are written, and that when one endeavors to prove it, the aim is not to undeceive those convinced of atheism but to strengthen those who are wavering. Hence one does not seek to fight an established error but to prevent and dissipate doubts.[13]

Fénelon's claim that there were no true atheists in his day may seem striking, but it was not an unusual one: a good many of his contemporaries said as much.[14] Perhaps even more striking is his apparent insinuation that atheism, understood as the denial of God's existence, is not even possible because the evidence of God is so manifest. That Fénelon did not want to be understood that way is clear from the Prayer to God at the end of his book, where he exclaims that if people do not discover God, then the fault lies with them rather than with God; while the evidence of God's existence is manifest to all, he insists, it still requires some attention and thought on our part, and those who are concerned only with things of the senses will fail to see this evidence (such people see the shadows but not the light, as he puts it).[15] The implication is that atheism is in fact possible, even if—as he claims in the preface—it could boast no true adherents at the time his book was written. Accordingly, Fénelon's aim in advancing his proofs of God's existence is not to fight the "established error" of atheism but rather to ensure that such an error never becomes established in the first place.[16]

[13] François de Salignac de La Mothe-Fénelon, *Demonstration de l'existence de Dieu, tirée de la connoissance de la Nature, & proportionnée à la foible intelligence des plus simples* (Amsterdam: François L'Honoré, 1713), "avertissement" [notice] (n.p.).

[14] See, e.g., Jean de La Bruyère, *Les Caractères de Théophraste traduits du Grec*, 6th ed. (Paris: Estienne Michallet, 1691), 570; Michel Levasseur, *Entretiens sur la religion contre les athées, les deists, et tous les autres ennemis de la Foy Catholique* (Blois: Louis Guerin, 1705), 3–8. Other thinkers insisted that while there were those who *lived* as if there were no God and *wanted* there to be no God, there were none who sincerely *believed* there was no God. See, e.g., François Lamy, *Vérité évidente de la religion chrétienne* (Paris: Edme Couterot, 1694), iii–iv.

[15] Fénelon, *Demonstration de l'existence de Dieu*, 274–79.

[16] Other thinkers of the period who likewise advanced proofs of God's existence as a corrective against atheism include Isaac Jaquelot, William Derham, and Bernard Nieuwentyt.

The first step in Christian apologetics

Yet we should not suppose that atheism was the only specter that haunted the learned minds of early modernity. While some early modern thinkers were concerned to put the atheist genie back in the bottle (or, in the case of those who thought it had not yet emerged, to stop it from getting out in the first place), others focused their energies on combating a different but equally worrisome group, namely, those whose views were at odds with Christianity or some branch thereof. This group included freethinkers such as deists and skeptics, who challenged or rejected many key Christian dogmas,[17] as well as those who held heterodox religious views such as the Socinians, who rejected the doctrine of the Trinity, denied the divinity of Christ, and restricted God's foreknowledge to what was necessarily true (thus denying that God could have any foreknowledge of contingent truths such as what creatures endowed with free will would do in the future). While the labels "freethinker," "deist," "skeptic," and "Socinian" were freely bandied about as terms of abuse in the same way "atheist" was—it became almost a pastime in early modernity to show that someone with whom one disagreed fell under one or other of these descriptions—there were also people who self-identified as freethinkers, deists, and so on, as well as others whose thought made it plausible to identify them as such even if they publicly resisted the label. Such people did not deny the existence of God per se but were widely seen to be enemies of

See Isaac Jaquelot, *Dissertations sur l'existence de dieu, ou l'on demontre cette verité par l'histoire universelle de la premiere antiquité du monde: par la refutation du systeme d'epicure et de spinosa: par les caracteres de divinité qui se remarquent dans la religion des juifs: et dans l'etablissement du Christianisme* (The Hague: Etienne Foulque, 1697); William Derham, *Physico-Theology* (London: W. Innys, 1713), and *Astro-Theology; or, A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God, from a Survey of the Heavens* (London: W. Innys, 1715); Bernard Nieuwentyt, *Het regt gebruik der werelt beschouwingen, ter overtuiginge van ongodisten en ongelovigen* (Amsterdam: J. Wolters and J. Pauli, 1715).

[17] In his Boyle lectures of 1705, Samuel Clarke identified four kinds of deists: (1) those who claim that God creates the world but does not concern himself with it thereafter; (2) those who claim that God creates and controls the world but lacks the moral attributes of goodness or justice; (3) those who hold that God is infinitely powerful, infinitely wise, and infinitely good but deny that human souls are immortal and assert that God's goodness is not the same as the human conception of goodness; (4) those who hold that God is infinitely powerful, infinitely wise, and infinitely good (in accordance with our conception of goodness), creator of the world on which he dispenses his providence, and that the human soul is immortal and destined for rewards and punishments according to desert, but claim that all this is known by reason rather than by revelation. See Samuel Clarke, *A Discourse Concerning the Unchangeable Obligations of Natural Religion* (London: W. Botham, 1706), 17–45.

Christianity just as much as atheists were. In an attempt to turn these enemies into friends and bring them back into the Christian fold, a number of early modern thinkers wrote works designed to establish the truth of Christianity and many of its dogmas. These works typically began with one or more proofs of God's existence, which served as the first step in the broader apologetic aim of proving the Christian religion. While the pretext for starting the apology with proofs was the need to go back to first principles, so to speak, the subtext is that it allowed the apologist to lay down the "right" notion of God at the outset, an important consideration given that the target audience of these works, namely, the heterodox, might have a different notion in mind.

Of the texts featured in this volume, those of François Diroys, George Berkeley, and Susanna Newcome follow the pattern just described: all three wrote works expressly designed to prove the Christian religion, or some branch thereof, and all began their respective attempts at Christian apologetics by offering a proof or proofs of the existence of God, each supposing that proving God's existence was a necessary prelude to—or first step in—the main apologetic task.[18] As Newcome explains to her reader at the start of *An Enquiry into the Evidence of the Christian Religion*,

> In order . . . to find whether the Christian religion be a divine revelation, we will go to the very bottom of things, and first see what is our evidence of a God: and before we examine whether a certain supposed being has revealed himself, we will consider whether we have reason to believe that there is really such a being.[19]

After laying out her proof and securing the existence of God, Newcome continues her apology by arguing that it is reasonable to suppose God would reveal himself and that the Christian religion is a genuinely divine revelation, based as it is on the evidence of miracles and prophecy.

Similar approaches were taken by Diroys and Berkeley in their works from which the selections in this volume were drawn. Both works wear their apologetic aims on their sleeve, as it were: that of the former is entitled *Preuves*

[18] These authors were thus part of a long tradition that held that belief in God's existence is a precondition or "preamble" to faith, rather than an article of faith in its own right. According to this tradition, belief in God's existence is logically prior to belief in his revelation (after all, the thinking goes, one must first have faith that there is a God before one can have faith in his Word), and, since God's existence was demonstrable by the natural lights of reason while the content of his revelation was not, a program of apologetics had to begin by establishing the former before moving on to consideration of the latter.

[19] [Susanna Newcome], *An Enquiry into the Evidence of the Christian Religion*, 2nd ed. (London: William Innys, 1732), 8.

et Prejugez pour la Religion Chrestienne et Catholique contre les fausses Religions et l'atheisme (Proofs and signs in favor of the Christian and Catholic religion against false religions and atheism), while the latter's *Alciphron* has as its subtitle *Containing an Apology for the Christian Religion, against those who are Called Free-Thinkers*, with Berkeley using "freethinker" as a catchall term to cover "atheist, libertine, enthusiast, scorner, critic, metaphysician, fatalist, and skeptic."[20] To win his freethinking opponents over to the Christian cause, Berkeley first advances a proof of God's existence he thinks they will accept, before proceeding to argue that if they accept God, then they should also accept worship of this God and a religion to teach this worship, of which Christianity is advanced as the best on account of its tendency to bring about universal benefit.[21] Berkeley then argues for the truth of Christianity by defending the authenticity of Scripture before tackling possible objections. By contrast, Diroys' apology is rather more complicated, involving as it does a detailed discussion of the claims of rival religions as well as that of his own, though he too begins his apology by offering a series of proofs of God's existence before proceeding to make the case for Christianity and specifically Catholicism. For Diroys, Newcome, and Berkeley, then, their respective proofs of God's existence were intended as the first step of the apologetic program with which they were engaged.[22]

The foundation stone of a philosophical system or explanation of the world

However, if the selections in this volume are anything to go by, the most common motivation for offering proofs of God's existence in early modernity was not theological but philosophical. Most of the thinkers featured in this volume—Descartes, Bossuet, Spinoza, Newton, Norris, Locke, Fontenelle, Leibniz, Regis, Voltaire, Wolff, Du Châtelet, Maupertuis, and Prémontval—sought to prove God's existence because of the central explanatory or theoretical role he played in their philosophical thought. Nowhere is this clearer than in the great system builders of early modernity, Descartes, Spinoza, and

[20] George Berkeley, *Alciphron; or, the Minute Philosopher. In Seven Dialogues. Containing an Apology for the Christian Religion, against those who are Called Free-Thinkers*, 4th ed. (London: J. Beecroft, 1767), advertisement (n.p.).

[21] Berkeley, *Alciphron*, 175–77.

[22] The same is true of the proofs of other thinkers from the period, such as Hugo Grotius and Jacques Abbadie. See Hugo Grotius, *De Veritate Religionis Christianae*, new ed. (The Hague: Anthonium van Dole, 1634), 4–7; Jacques Abbadie, *Traité de la verité de la religion chretienne* (Rotterdam: Reinier Leers, 1684), 1–83.

Leibniz. In his *Meditations*, Descartes insisted that proving the existence of a perfect God was the only way he could be certain of the reality of the external world and that what appeared to him to be true really was true, since it was beyond doubt that a perfect God would not engage in deception (as might an evil demon) or give him senses that were unreliable.[23] Descartes also found in God a fruitful source of philosophical and scientific truths; for example, from God's unchanging nature he derived a number of laws of nature that were themselves unchanging, such as that things always continue in the same state as far as they can, and that the quantity of motion in the world is always preserved.[24] For Leibniz and Spinoza, establishing whether there is a God had important repercussions not just for what we can know about the world but also about how we should live. Leibniz deduced from God's nature that our universe must be the best of all those possible (no other choice being fitting for a perfect being, he averred), and that in spite of how things may seem now, we can ultimately expect perfect justice to prevail, where all virtuous actions are rewarded and all sinful ones punished, as God would allow nothing less. This means that we should be content here and now even if things do not go our way, as we know that they will work out for us if we are good.[25] And, according to Spinoza, the greatest possible contentment we can have in this life comes from our knowledge of the essences of things through an adequate idea of God's attributes;[26] the more we understand things this way, the less troubled we will be by strong emotions and the less we will fear death.[27] For the great system builders of early modernity, then, establishing God's existence was of paramount importance; with so much at stake, there was no reason to treat as a mere axiom or postulate that which could be proved.[28]

Needless to say, not every thinker in early modernity sought to devise a fully fledged philosophical system; but even those whose ambitions did not

[23] See René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984–1991), 2:24–62.

[24] See Descartes, *Philosophical Writings*, 1:240–43.

[25] See Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Leibniz on God and Religion*, trans. Lloyd Strickland (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 135.

[26] See Spinoza, *Complete Works*, 267 and 375.

[27] See Spinoza, *Complete Works*, 379–80.

[28] The same is true of the proofs developed by other thinkers of early modernity, such as Antoine Le Grand and Samuel Clarke. See Antoine Le Grand, *Institutione Philosophiae Continentur*, 4th ed. (London: M. Clark, 1680), 115–27; Samuel Clarke, *A Discourse concerning the Being and Attributes of God* (London: Will Botham, 1705), 18–30.

extend that far still invoked God to explain the world (either its existence, or its features, or both), which prompted them to offer proofs of his existence. Hence, Fontenelle and Voltaire, who harbored suspicion of systems and had no desire to construct their own, still desired an explanation of why the world existed and why it was the way it was. While neither was especially enamored with religion—Voltaire was a deist and Fontenelle was widely suspected of being one—neither could make sense of the universe without a God. Accordingly, their proofs had the same theoretical role as those of the more systematic philosophers mentioned earlier.

In identifying these three functions of the proofs developed in early modernity, it should be noted that while a particular thinker may have had a particular function in mind when offering a proof in one work, he or she may have had a different function in mind when offering the same or a different proof in another work. For example, while Berkeley's proof in *Alciphron* is intended as the first step in Christian apologetics, the proofs he offered in his philosophical works were intended to secure a key part of his philosophical system.[29] Hence, thinkers could and did have different motives for offering their respective proofs for God's existence, the motive typically depending on the kind of work they were producing and its intended audience.

Now what we can glean from these three different functions of the proofs of God's existence is that those who proposed the proofs had a high level of confidence in their efficacy. Indeed, some thinkers took their proofs to be on a par with mathematical demonstrations, such that those who encountered them could not fail to be convinced by them, so long as their rational faculties were intact. Those who were not prepared to claim mathematical certainty for their proofs still took them to afford something akin to moral certainty of God's existence; that is, they put his existence beyond reasonable doubt. It is worth noting that the confidence shown by early modern thinkers in the efficacy of their proofs stands in sharp contrast to that shown by contemporary thinkers. For example, in *The Existence of God* (1979/2004), Richard Swinburne offers a variety of proofs that together he takes to show that God's existence is more probable than not.[30] And in *New Proofs for the Existence of God* (2010), Robert J. Spitzer advances a series of proofs that together constitute evidence "capable of grounding reasonable and responsible belief in a super-intelligent,

[29] See George Berkeley, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous. The Design of which is plainly to demonstrate the Reality and Perfection of Humane Knowlege, the Incorporeal Nature of the Soul, and the Immediate Providence of a Deity* (London: G. James, 1713), 74.

[30] Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004).

transcendent, creative power that stands at the origins of our universe or any hypothetically postulated multiverse."[31] Both claims would have appeared tame to early modern thinkers, whose unalloyed confidence in their proofs licensed them to use the proofs in the ways that they did, namely, to combat atheism, support Christian apologetics, and ground a philosophical account of the world. Whether one thinks that they overplayed their hand in this regard, one cannot help but marvel at the sheer range of proofs they concocted as well as the sophisticated argumentation to be found in many of them. Whether they achieve their desired end or not, the proofs devised in early modernity are surely testaments to the ingenuity of the human mind grappling with one of the greatest questions—if not *the* greatest—with which it is faced.

[31] Robert J. Spitzer, *New Proofs for the Existence of God: Contributions of Contemporary Physics and Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 1.

A NOTE ON THE TEXTS IN THIS VOLUME

The texts in this volume were selected to give the reader a representative sample of the various proofs for God's existence that were developed in early modernity. Many of those not originally written in English have not appeared in English before,[1] while others were previously available only in dated (and sometimes unreliable) eighteenth-century translations.[2] For this volume I have translated all of the texts that were not originally written in English and modernized the spelling and punctuation of those that were. Each text is supplemented by (a) explanatory headnotes, which provide biographical information about the author and a synopsis of the major proof(s) along with some context, and (b) footnotes providing further historical or philosophical information or details of variants in the text where it was revised by the author from earlier editions. The texts are arranged in three parts: part 1, "Classic Presentations of the Traditional Physical and Metaphysical Proofs," part 2, "Alternative Presentations of the Traditional Physical and Metaphysical Proofs," and part 3, "Other Metaphysical and Moral Proofs." The division of proofs into "metaphysical," "physical," and "moral" follows a categorization that was commonplace in early modern Europe. Metaphysical proofs

[1] The texts by Bossuet, Diroys, Fontenelle, Regis, Voltaire, Wolff, Maupertuis, and Prémontval are appearing in English for the first time.

[2] Such as Samuel Boyse's translation of Fénelon. See François de Salignac de La Mothe-Fénelon, *A Demonstration of the Existence of God; Deduced from the Knowledge of Nature, and more particularly from that of Man: Suited to the most simple Capacities*, trans. Samuel Boyse (London: W. Sandby, 1749).

are those based on metaphysical or immaterial notions rather than data derived from experience, while physical proofs are those based on empirical data. Hence, the traditional metaphysical proofs cover what are today called ontological and cosmological arguments, and the traditional physical proof is what is commonly referred to today as the teleological or design argument. There were other metaphysical proofs, such as the argument from eternal truths and the argument from universal aseity. As for the moral proofs, these were not ones based on morality but rather ones that were thought to afford moral certainty in their conclusions, that is, a very high degree of probability that fell short of the level of certainty one would associate with the proofs of logic or mathematics. The argument *ex consensu gentium* is an obvious example of a moral proof.