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How to Argue for God's Existence: Reflections on Hartshorne's Global Argument

DONALD WAYNE VINEY

SINCE THE TIME of David Hume and Immanuel Kant, arguments for the existence of God have fallen on hard times. Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* were a skeptical *tour de force*. Published posthumously in 1779, the *Dialogues* skillfully dismantled the favored theistic arguments of the time. Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (published in 1781) added the formidable weight of the Germanic mind to the case against natural theology. Building on Hume's attacks, Kant erected an intellectual edifice within which theistic proofs had no niche. In simplest terms, Kant argued that one cannot proceed *from* human experience to a reality that transcends human experience. Of course, there was the popular design argument. In its more modest forms there was no attempt to argue for a transcendent being, only a being intelligent and powerful enough to fix the order of nature as disclosed by science. However, this last bastion of natural theology fell to the success of Darwin's evolutionary theory. Natural selection was better than God for explaining the variety and distribution of species around the globe. Thus God was dethroned from both Her-His metaphysical and scientific dais.

The results of these intellectual revolutions filtered down into the stock of conventional wisdom with the result that it has almost become a platitude that God's existence cannot be proved. On the heels of this

denial comes the consolation: It's all a matter of faith. When reasoning and argument are unavailing, one leaps beyond the evidence, blindly trusting that there is something or someone to leap to. Faith fills the hiatus left by reason's failure. Put less charitably, when there are no good reasons for believing in God, believe anyway! For many of us, this is not good enough. As Hartshorne says, "The impossibility of a theoretical argument for a conclusion would be no mean theoretical argument against it." (*Natural Theology*, 49). This is not to say that faith in God is solely a matter of rational argument. However, if faith is not to become the plaything of rival emotions, it must have some degree of support. Given the legacy of Hume, Kant, and Darwin, how is one to support the rationality of theistic beliefs?

Charles Hartshorne's work in natural theology is a step toward re-establishing the intellectual respectability of theism. Hartshorne's persistence, clarity, and originality, in dealing with the theistic question are reminders that philosophers and scientists of the past two centuries did not say the final word in natural theology. There is progress in philosophy and theology as surely as there is progress in science, although progress is measured in different ways. According to the most influential view, science advances by testing hypothesis against observations. In philosophy and theology, progress is the refinement of perspectives on God and the world. As we shall see, there is probably no definitive way to find *the* true perspective. This is to be expected in disciplines where ultimate questions of being, knowledge, and value, converge. Thus, in philosophy and theology progress is not so much the fruit of applying a method (as in science) as it is the articulation and development of perspectives on the human and divine relationship. Hartshorne's contributions to this enterprise are cause

for a cautious optimism. Let me summarize four of the central ideas in Hartshorne's attempt to revitalize the rational case for theism that fuel this optimism.

Hartshorne's case for God's existence is called the global argument. In fact, it is not a single argument at all, but a nexus of interrelated arguments. Traditional attempts to prove the divine reality proceeded piecemeal, one argument at a time, as if the entire weight of theistic belief must rest on a single proof. Although there were exceptions (for example, in Duns Scotus and F. R. Tennant), the general trend was to attempt to settle the theistic question with a single air-tight argument. Not surprisingly, skeptical assaults, like those of Hume and Kant, followed suit focusing on individual arguments rather than the arguments taken in conjunction. The single-argument strategy makes the case for belief in God appear much weaker than it is. For the failure of an argument to prove its conclusion is taken as a sign that the argument is of no value. The cumulative argument strategy, on the other hand, finds value even in failed attempts at proving God. Each of the proofs contributes its share to the case for belief in God. Natural theology should follow other areas of enquiry, whether in courts of law, scientific laboratories or even complicated mathematical proofs, where many strands of evidence are used to build convincing arguments. As Hartshorne notes, the strength of a cable lies in the combined strength of its several fibers. So it is with belief in God.

The interrelations of the proofs in a cumulative case are central to a convincing argument. The cumulative effect of the proofs lies not in the number of proofs but in the ways in which they support each other. The weak spots in one proof should be buttressed by the strengths in other proofs. For example, in Hartshorne's global argument, the ontological proof turns on the premise that it is conceivable that a perfect

being exists. However, many atheists argue that the concept of a perfect being does not make sense. Thus, Hartshorne's other arguments serve to answer the atheist's rebuttal and lend support to the ontological argument's weakest premise. Similar examples are sprinkled throughout the global argument, thereby weighting the balance of evidence, in Hartshorne's opinion, toward the theistic conclusion.

Another advance over previous attempts to prove the divine reality is Hartshorne's insistence that the theistic question is conceptual, not empirical. I have already pointed out that the ontological argument requires support from the other proofs. In return, the ontological argument supplies the premise, integral to any sound argument for deity, that God could not exist as a mere accident of the universe. God exists, if at all, as a necessary being, not a contingent being. This means that the question of God's existence is conceptual in nature. If God exists, then Her-His existence is an essential ingredient in whatever is or can be. The structures of thought themselves must, explicitly or implicitly, require, and thus imply, God's existence. Groveling around in empirical data to prove (or disprove) the existence of that without which empirical data could not even be thought is a colossal mistake. It is, in fact, a category mistake—like using a candle to find some evidence that light exists. This is not to say that the existence of God is obvious. Hartshorne has always admitted that he could be mistaken, and that the atheists (Hartshorne would say the positivists) were right all along. However, if God does not exist, it is not because some contingent fact is incompatible with Her-His existence. Rather it is because the concept of God is itself flawed. If God does not exist, it is for the same reason that square circles do not exist, viz, because they are impossible.

Hume, Kant and most of the tradition from which

they arose and the philosophies they spawned never thought of God as anything but another being in or beside the universe that might or might not exist. Kant rejected the ontological argument (he gave it its name) for several reasons too technical to enter into here. However, it is worth noting that the ontological argument whose validity Kant denied was never defended by Hartshorne. The Hartshornean ontological argument is a syllogism with which Kant was unfamiliar and to which Kantian criticisms are irrelevant (*Anselm's Discovery*, 208-33). Hartshorne was the first to formalize the argument using the apparatus of modal logic (*Logic of Perfection*, 50-51). This kind of technical sophistication and the philosophical justifications underpinning the modal operators advance natural theology beyond Kantian refutations. It is a curiosity that many introductory textbooks in philosophy occupy student's time parroting the Kantian objections to a proof that no one, including theists like Hartshorne, defends. While it is useful to see what went wrong with the argument that Kant attacked, why not allow theism to be judged by its ablest defenders and their arguments? This is a classic example of what Hartshorne calls cultural lag in philosophy.

A third Hartshornean contribution to natural theology concerns the form in which the theistic arguments are presented—what Hartshorne calls a “position matrix.” Each of the proofs is a matrix listing the alternatives to belief in God and last, the theistic option. For example, Hartshorne’s design argument runs as follows:

- A1 There is no cosmic order.
- A2 There is cosmic order but no ordering power.
- A3 There is cosmic order and ordering power, but the power is not divine.

T There is cosmic order and divine power (*Creative Synthesis*, 281).

In each case Hartshorne argues that T (for Theism) is more reasonable than the other alternatives. The advantage of Hartshorne’s approach is that it shows that one must pay a price for rejecting theism. In the design argument, to reject T one is committed (barring agnosticism) to either A1, A2, or A3. A1, that there is no cosmic order, is contrary to experience, especially as enlightened by astrophysics. Moreover, Hartshorne argues that any conceivable science would be against A1 since the concept of an unordered universe is self-inconsistent. A2, that there is cosmic order but no ordering power, leaves the contingency of the natural order unexplained. A3 acknowledges an ordering power that is not divine and thus raises questions as to the nature of the ordering power which it has traditionally been held must be something like God. Thus, atheism is not without its commitments and Hartshorne’s method helps to single out what one is committed to in rejecting belief in God. This is a positive gain whether one accepts theism or not; for it clarifies the available options.

A rule that Hartshorne adopts for evaluating the various alternatives is the principle of least paradox. Every philosophical position, including belief in God, is not without its unanswered questions and paradoxical consequences. What one must decide is which paradoxes are the really fatal ones. Hartshorne openly confesses his inability to solve certain problems surrounding his concept of God. However, he finds the consequences of other theories even more problematic, sometimes insurmountable. Applying the principle of least paradox, then, allows one to acknowledge the difficulties in one’s own viewpoint while refusing to bow to skeptical arguments. A responsible

judgment in theology does not require that all questions be answered.

Significantly, Hartshorne has lately been reluctant to use the word proof to describe his arguments. They are not proofs in the sense that they settle, for all parties involved in the dispute, what is and is not reasonable to believe. "The form I have invented renounces the pretense to settle fundamental questions by deductive logic." (*Charles Hartshorne*, x). Thus, there is no attempt to bully atheists with logic. All that Hartshorne's formulations do is to encourage that one honestly evaluate the merits and drawbacks of each alternative in the argument. With each argument Hartshorne covers, he consistently finds the theistic view more adequate and less paradoxical than its rivals. Thus, by the canons of rationality, he is justified in adopting the theistic option. This remains the case even though others, upon examining the evidence, do not agree with Hartshorne's opinion. Consensus in philosophy (as in politics) is not a prerequisite for the rationality of a belief.

Hartshorne's most significant contribution to the rationality of theism concerns his work on the concept of God. Natural theology has as much to do with the concept of God as with the existence of God. If one's concept of God is flawed, it is unlikely one will give a fair accounting of the truth of the idea. For example, if one's concept of God puts religion in competition with science, then the prospects for demonstrating the rationality of theism are grim. So-called creation scientists claiming that one must choose between God and evolution have written the death warrant for their God. The history of the warfare between science and religion shows religion to be the loser whenever it tries to dictate scientific belief. This is not to say that science is better equipped to find truth than religion. However, religion has no business competing with

science. The existence of God is not a scientific hypothesis. We have already seen Hartshorne's arguments that the God question is conceptual, not empirical. To conceive of God as an entity that science might falsify is not to conceive of a being whose very existence is the condition of intelligibility. A God whose existence is incompatible with any conceivable scientific theory is an idol or a fetish with no chance of existing except in the imaginations of the confused.

In his natural theology, Hartshorne attempts to express, in philosophically refined categories, the central meaning behind monotheism. According to Jewish and Christian tradition, God is a being who is in all respects perfect. Medieval theologians followed the dominant Greek tradition in taking this to mean that God cannot change. Aristotle spoke of God as the unmoved mover, meaning that God acts on but is unaffected by the world. Since the medieval period, this Aristotelian idea has been used to talk about the God of the Bible. Thus, God was described as *actus purus* or pure act. This means that the divine being has no unactualized potentialities; anything that God could be, God already is. Hartshorne believes that this is a mistaken view of deity. If God is conceived as a being whose purposes are worked out on the stage of history in loving response to the creatures, then there must be a sense in which God is affected by the creatures. How can one act in time without somehow being qualified by time? Or again, how can one love without being affected by the beloved? Hartshorne, along with the entire tradition known as process theology, conceives God as responsive to, and hence affected by, the creatures.

Medieval theologians denied that God is affected by the world on the grounds that it is a defect or an imperfection to be dependent in any way upon some-

thing else. However, this begs the question against Hartshorne and process theology which hold that, in some respects, dependence is a perfection. For example, it is false that one unmoved by another's suffering is more perfect than one who shares or participates in that suffering. Dependence is not always a defect.

The cornerstone of Hartshorne's theism—what David Tracy calls "Hartshorne's discovery"—is the distinction between existence and actuality. As we have seen, Hartshorne says that God's existence is necessary. He also holds that the divine attributes are necessary. It is necessary that God has the supreme forms of love, power, and knowledge. God exists and hence, loves, influences, and knows, whatever else may exist. However, the particular ways in which the divine existence takes form—God's actual states—are not necessary. The actuality of God is the divine experience of the world; had the world been in any way different, God's experience of the world would have been different. For example, it is necessary that God loves whatever creatures happen to exist; but since the creatures that exist are not necessary, it is not necessary that *they* (and not some others) are the objects of God's affection. One could think of the existence of God as a set whose members are the divine experiences. To say that God necessarily exists is to say that the set of divine experiences can never be empty. But the experiences which fill the set are not necessary. Moreover, as Hartshorne conceives God, the set is constantly increasing, gaining new members with the advance of the temporal process. The actuality of God changes, in the sense that it expands or grows, while the existence of God remains immutable.

If God changes, then it may appear that it is possible to imagine a being greater than God. However,

this is a mistake. According to Hartshorne, the only being capable of surpassing God is God. By means of the divine experience, God includes within Her-His own being whatever value is contained in the world. As the world changes, God changes, incorporating the created value of all that comes to be. Since the divine being itself becomes, God includes all previous states of Her-Himself. Thus, Hartshorne calls God the "self-surpassing surpasser of all" (*Divine Relativity*, 20).

The net result of Hartshorne's distinction between existence and actuality is a departure from traditional ideas about God. If Hartshorne is correct, then the love, power, and knowledge, of God are not as the medievals or Hume and Kant had conceived. If love is defined as a sympathetic participation in the feelings of others and an active involvement in their welfare, then Hartshorne's process theology provides a consistent and adequate interpretation of the New Testament claim that God is love. The responsiveness required by love is possible if God is in dynamic interchange with the world—acting and being acted upon. In accordance with this view, the power of God must be a power over creatures who themselves have power. Thus, God does not determine every detail of the world process. The creatures are co-creators of the world with God and creation is an unfinished business. Moreover, if creaturely decisions affect God, then they create something in God. It follows that the storehouse of divine knowledge is continually increasing. What is not accomplished fact is not known, even by God, as accomplished fact. The future, conceived as that which has yet to be settled by creaturely decisions, cannot be known as already having been decided. God knows free decisions as they occur not before they occur. This is not a limitation on omniscience unless one takes the paradoxical, if not

contradictory, position that temporal events are somehow eternally present. Thus, what emerges from the existence/actuality distinction is a unique and compelling concept of God.

Many difficulties of believing in God are removed once an adequate concept of God is developed. The failure of the traditional arguments for divine existence is in large measure the result of an inadequately formulated concept of God. For example, the old design argument was replaced by Darwinian evolution. The problem here was that God's activity was conceived as a scientific explanation of natural phenomena. We have seen the absurdities of this view of God. In retrospect, it is not surprising that the argument failed. The concept of God on which the argument was premised was a mere tutelary of science. When tutelage was no longer necessary, God became otiose. The lesson to be learned from such failures is not that arguing for God's existence is futile but that arguing for the existence of something that corresponds to an absurd idea is futile. Hartshorne's project of revising the concept of God is the needed corrective to such intellectual monstrosities.

A difficulty of believing in God that is diminished, if not completely overcome, by Hartshorne's revised concept of God is the problem of evil. Theist and atheist alike wonder why, if God is at once perfectly good and all-powerful, there must be unjustified suffering in the world. An all-loving and omnipotent God would seem to have both the motive and the means to insure that suffering was never undeserved. Hartshorne's response is to question the ability, even of God, to unilaterally decide the events of the world. What occurs is not wholly the result of divine decisions. As already noted, the creatures are co-creators of the world with God. Suffering and tragedy are, in

that case, the inevitable consequences of multiple creativity. The role of God in such a universe is not to guarantee that things always turn out for the best, since the idea of a best possible world is an impossible goal. Rather, God is the one who is the precondition of there being a universe in which suffering (or joy) can occur. Hartshorne's God does not police the universe, dispensing rewards and punishments; She-He weaves the multifarious strands of creaturely decisions into the processive texture of existence. Moreover, because Deity is affected by creaturely decisions, there is tragedy even for God. Hartshorne is fond of quoting Whitehead's statement that God is the fellow sufferer who understands. Because all suffering occurs within the context of divine sympathy, tragedy is never simply meaningless. The redemption of the world is in its valuation by God.

An issue that concerns some scholars is whether Hartshorne's God of process is an adequate object of religious devotion. Can one truly worship a being who does not know the future completely and does not control every detail of the cosmic drama? Can a being who is so intimately tied to and affected by the world be the transcendent ground of all that is? There are also questions concerning the compatibility of Hartshorne's theism with specifically Christian beliefs. Can the doctrines of the trinity, the incarnation, and the resurrection find a home in process theology? For his part, Hartshorne has no interest in defending Christian doctrines. When I asked him—in April 1984—if he considers himself a Christian, his answer was circumspect: "I believe that the great commandments to love God with all of your heart, mind, and soul, and to love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22: 37-39) express the essential truth in religion." He added that he does not believe in the divinity of Jesus or that Jesus ought to be worshipped. Some of Hart-

shorne's students show greater interest in articulating Christian beliefs within the framework of process theology. For example, Schubert Ogden and John B. Cobb Jr., original and creative thinkers in their own right, believe that something like Hartshorne's God of process is the most adequate philosophical expression of the God of Christian faith.

The question of the compatibility of Hartshorne's theism with specific religious doctrines takes us beyond the scope of this paper. However, there is the logically prior question of what it makes sense to say about God. If the future exists only as what is possible, then it is misguided to demand, even for the sake of religion, that God know the future eternally. If creative power is distributed among the creatures, then it is nonsense to require that God control everything that occurs. The logic of the situation is the same with respect to Christian doctrine. The least one can ask of a rational belief—religious or not—is that it be consistently conceivable. Hartshorne's natural theology is valuable if only because it so stubbornly insists on the criterion of consistency.

The philosophical and theological worlds have yet to digest Hartshorne's (and process theology's) contributions to natural theology. Many able minds still labor under the shadows of Hume and Kant. But as the shadows have grown longer, there have been harbingers of a new dawn in theological thinking. Hartshorne is the chief representative (along with Whitehead) of this neoclassical alternative to classical theism. Hartshorne's defense of the cumulative argument for God's existence, his insistence on the non-empirical nature of the argument, and his use of position matrices and the development of a God concept at once compatible with science and philosophically refined, are promising beginnings to defending again the rationality of belief in God.

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