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Logic and Theism: Arguments For and Against Beliefs in God's Existence

By Jordan Howard Sobel

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[1] This book is a rich resource for those interested in the traditional arguments for and against belief in God's existence. It is especially suited for those strongly inclined toward using the formal apparatus of symbolic logic and probability theory to articulate and analyze those arguments. Surely the author would claim that this is the only proper way such arguments can be adequately evaluated. But this book will not be a smooth read for those who have not already mastered advanced logic. More on that point follows at the conclusion of this review. First, a brief summary of the contents of the book is in order.

[2] The first chapter of this book addresses semantic issues regarding the term 'God' and also discusses different conceptions of God. At the end of this chapter the author reveals (without argument) that in his view, there cannot be an 'objective God' since, 'for Mackiean reasons,' there are no 'objective values.' But the author insists that he will bracket this view for the sake of discussion throughout the rest of the book.

[3] Chapters two through four discuss several versions of the Ontological Argument. Chapter two deals with arguments found in Descartes, Spinoza, and St. Anselm, while chapter three focuses on more recent philosophers such as Norman Malcolm and Charles Hartshorne. A very technical chapter four discusses Kurt Godel's version of the Ontological Argument. Several appendices to chapters three and four present logical apparatus needed to follow the discussion in certain parts, as well as Godel's own notes and other material pertaining to Godel's system. In no case does the author find any version of the ontological argument compelling.

[4] Chapters five and six discuss versions of the Cosmological Argument. Chapter five discusses Aquinas' 'Second Way' or the argument for a first cause, understood either as a generating cause, or as a sustaining cause. Chapter six discusses arguments for an ultimate reason as found in Leibniz and other more recent philosophers such as A.E. Taylor and John Leslie. Again, the author does not find any version of the cosmological argument compelling.

[5] Chapter seven discusses arguments from design, focusing on the version found in Hume's *Dialogues*. Included here is a tangential, somewhat speculative, but very interesting discussion of the historical question of what Hume himself believed regarding the argument from design. A discussion of probability theory

and Bayes' Theorem is included. Toward the end of the chapter, the author considers the impact of 'new theories' such as evolutionary theory and theories regarding the age of the universe that bear on the argument from design. The author claims that such theories supplement and strengthen what the author considers to be Hume's qualified rejection of the argument from design. The appendix to chapter seven critically discusses Richard Swinburne's version of the teleological argument.

[6] Chapter eight has a relatively narrow aim. It is essentially a restatement and defense of what the author calls Hume's 'central thesis' on miracles. Here again Bayes' theorems are involved. The author seeks to formulate in Bayesian terms Hume's thesis regarding when testimony would be sufficient to make reasonable the belief in the occurrence of a 'miracle,' defined as the violation of a law of nature due to a divine power. The author claims that Hume's thesis can be understood as a theorem of elementary modern probability theory.

[7] Chapters nine and ten consider two major aspects of the traditional concept of God. Chapter nine considers the notion of omnipotence, and defends the view that essential omnipotence is impossible. Chapter ten deals with puzzles concerning omniscience. In this chapter, various notions of 'sets,' 'totalities' and even 'nonsets' are discussed. I am not entirely sure what the conclusion of chapter ten is supposed to be.

[8] Chapters eleven and twelve discuss arguments against the existence of God. After a brief discussion of burden of proof issues, the bulk of chapter eleven discusses evidential arguments from evil. Chapter twelve discusses the logical problem of evil. Again, Bayes' theorems are introduced to advance the discussion. The author reaches the conclusion that the problem of evil is serious enough for us to give up on the 'perfect being theism' of classical philosophical theology. The appendix to chapter twelve discusses alleged incompatibilities between divine omniscience and freedom.

[9] Finally, chapter thirteen discusses Pascalian or practical arguments for and against belief in God's existence. Bayes' theorems regarding expected value calculation are applied. Of all the theistic arguments discussed in the book, it appears that the author is most sanguine toward a Pascalian style justification for religious belief. His conclusion is that reasonable people may differ on whether they find belief in (a certain kind of) God to be pragmatically rational for them, given the background beliefs which they bring to their consideration of the 'wager.' The appendix to this chapter discusses hyperreal numbers and claims that they may plausibly be used in decision theory. Again, this conclusion is friendly toward Pascal's wager.

[10] Perhaps it is not accidental that this book is entitled 'Logic and Theism' rather than 'Theism and Logic.' This book makes extensive use of formal apparatus to analyze arguments for and against God's existence. At times the reader may wonder whether the exercise of using formal apparatus is itself as much a part of the author's interest as reaching clarity on the issues themselves. While the discussion is always analytically rigorous, almost always engaging, and quite frequently humorous, the reader may sometimes find himself losing the author's

train of thought in a maze of technical display. The author himself insists in his preface that 'all technical material within chapters can be skipped over without loss of continuity.' However, if the reader were to skip all technical material in every chapter, he would thereby skip a good part of the book. Perhaps one thing that exacerbates the problem is that, generally speaking, the author does not inform the reader at the outset of each chapter what his conclusion aims to be at the end of that chapter. This might have helped the reader to follow the discussion more successfully. One gets the feeling that to some extent the author is less interested in reaching particular conclusions, than in having a somewhat free wheeling yet at the same time formal discussion that leads wherever it may lead. And in a way, this is refreshing.

[11] In the chapter on atheological arguments, the author tells us that in his view, arguments are no less, and no more, needed to rationalize atheism than to rationalize theism. However, the author does not consider the question of whether a belief in God is something that is supposed to be rational in the first place. He considers only in passing the notion that belief in God might conceivably be rationally held, without a basis in any argument. He certainly does not consider what is the role of belief in a religious life. These points are not meant as criticisms but rather as observations. The author assumes that the investigation of arguments for and against God's existence is a worthwhile endeavor, and he cannot be faulted for that. Perhaps the author might have considered such questions, if there had been some formal apparatus applicable to their resolution. Or perhaps such questions are simply beyond the scope of this book.

[12] Assuming that reason should play some role in belief for and against God's existence, it is still a further question as to what extent arguments of such an abstruse degree of formal sophistication have relevance to actual belief (or disbelief) in God as held by ordinary persons. This is not so much a criticism of this particular author, as it is a comment on the genre in which the author is engaged. I am not suggesting here the canard that philosophy has no relevance to everyday life. For example, many ordinary people believe (rightly or wrongly) in God because they think the world exhibits signs of apparent design; this leads naturally to the debate over the argument from design. However, when the discussion of this and similar arguments becomes so technical that only a specialist or perhaps a graduate student in logic might be able to follow it, one may begin to wonder whether such philosophy has relevance not only to ordinary believers, but to believers (and also non-believers) who do not specialize in symbolic logic or probability theory. In addition to being very informative and challenging, this book may leave its reader with the somewhat frightening impression that our spiritual fate might hinge on matters such as which version of modal logic or which theory of infinitesimals we happen to adopt.

[13] In the opinion of this reviewer, the book is valuable not so much for the author's own conclusions in each chapter, as it is for the rich resource it constitutes. Despite the points mentioned above, the author has done a great service by assembling different versions of arguments for and against God's existence,

by discussing the arguments intelligently and critically, and by bringing to bear the formal apparatus of symbolic logic, probability theory, decision theory, etc. I suspect that many philosophers of religion, both theists and skeptics, will be responding to the particular arguments of this book for some time to come.