

## 2.4 Proving the Existence of God (b) (p. 62)

### *God and Wales*

HERE, HOWEVER, IS AN unfamiliar and interesting version of the Argument From Design.

Imagine you are taking a train west from London. You doze off for a while, and then you wake up and look out the window. Adjacent to the tracks you see a field of flowers in bloom, spelling out in different colours, “BRITISH RAIL WELCOME YOU TO WALES.” You believe as a result of seeing this that you are entering Wales.

It’s reasonable for you to come to this belief, but only if you think that somebody planted the flowers to spell out that message on purpose. But if, by an incredible coincidence, a field of wild flowers just happened by accident to spell out that message, you wouldn’t be justified in coming to believe that you were entering Wales. Of course, it’s also reasonable for you to think that the flowers were arranged that way on purpose by somebody who wanted to give you the message they spelled. The point here is that we wouldn’t be justified in taking things as *signs*, as giving us *information*, if we didn’t think that they were arranged that way on purpose by an intelligent designer to communicate something to us.

Now, note that we often find out information from the *natural* world—from features of the world that we know were not designed and arranged by people. For example, the appearance of a particularly shaped hill that you recognize from the train window would tell you that you’re on the outskirts of a certain town. So it must be that even certain features of the natural world—the ones we justifiably get information from—were made on purpose by an intelligent designer. But they weren’t designed by people; they must have been designed by another being, one even more clever and powerful than we are. They must have been designed by God.<sup>1</sup>

**SOME QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT:** I don’t think these arguments work. If you share my reaction, you might try to figure out exactly where it goes wrong. Perhaps you should think about the principle that only what’s designed and put there on purpose can give us information. The train story is intended to convince us that this principle is right; are you convinced? Why/why not?

### *Chrysippus on the Existence of God*

THE ROMAN PHILOSOPHER CICERO attributes a proof of the existence of God to Chrysippus, a third-century BCE Greek Stoic philosopher (who, Cicero remarks, had a “very keen” mind):

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<sup>1</sup> I have seen this argument attributed to Antony Flew.

“If,” [Chrysippus] says, “there is something in nature which the mind, the reason, the strength, and the power of man would be unable to produce, surely that which does produce it is higher than man; now the heavenly bodies, and all those phenomena which observe an everlasting order, cannot be created by man; consequently that by which they are created is higher than man. And what could you say this was rather than God? For if there are no gods, there can be nothing higher in nature than man, since he alone possesses reason, and nothing can surpass reason in excellence. But that there should be a man who thinks that in the whole universe there is nothing higher than himself shows senseless arrogance. There is, then, something higher, and therefore there is assuredly a God.”<sup>1</sup>

Do you find this convincing?

### ***God and the Perfect Pizza***

THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT IS a comparatively unfamiliar proof of God’s existence. It’s puzzling: many philosophers are convinced that there’s something wrong with it, but it’s difficult to say exactly what. Here it is:

‘God’ means *the perfect being*. That’s merely a matter of definition. Now, being perfect includes existing. Non-existence is a defect, after all. If I told you about a pizza that was perfect in every way except for the fact that it happened not to exist, you would take that as a very serious flaw.

Well, because existence is one of the things implied by “perfection,” and because God is, by definition, perfect, God must exist—by definition. To say that God doesn’t exist is to utter something that couldn’t possibly be true—just as it couldn’t be true, by definition, that somebody’s sister is male.

I said that it’s difficult for those who think that this argument makes a mistake to explain exactly what that mistake is. But perhaps this will convince you that something has gone wrong: if the argument works, wouldn’t it prove the existence of the perfect pizza as well? But that’s absurd. So something must be wrong in here.

Amazingly, Bertrand Russell, known for his highly critical attitude toward religion, at one time thought the Ontological Argument was a good one. He wrote:

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<sup>1</sup> Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* 2:6 (*On the Nature of the Gods*, 45 BCE; translated by Francis Brooks, on the website of the Liberty Fund: <<http://oll.libertyfund.org>>).

“I remember the precise moment, one day in 1894, as I was walking along Trinity Lane, when I saw in a flash (or thought I saw) that the ontological argument is valid. I had gone out to buy a tin of tobacco; on my way back, I suddenly threw it up in the air, and exclaimed as I caught it: ‘Great Scott, the ontological argument is sound.’”<sup>1</sup>

### *It’s Way Better Not to Exist*

HERE IS ANOTHER NOT entirely serious version of the Ontological Argument with the conclusion that God *doesn’t* exist.

Consider what makes a creator praiseworthy—a *really good* creator. There are two things: (1) the goodness of what’s made by the creator, and (2) how extraordinary it is that the creator created something that good, under the circumstances. So, for example, what makes Mozart a great creator of music is (1) the music he created is really terrific, of course; and (2) that some of it (not his best, admittedly) was written when he was just a little kid.

Now, God (as is supposed in the Ontological Argument) is the maximally great creator. (1) God’s creation is really pretty good—just you try to build a hippopotamus. But (2) it would also add to God’s greatness if the universe were created *in the worst possible circumstances*. It would be a really great God if he had created this when he was just a baby—see “God When He Was a Baby” (p. 52). But that feat would be even more stupendous if God did it when he didn’t even exist! So the most extraordinary, absolute best, sort of God is one who is nonexistent. And, because ‘God’ is defined as the best possible being....

“I remember being handed a score composed by Mozart at the age of eleven. What could I say? I felt like de Kooning, who was asked to comment on a certain abstract painting, and answered in the negative. He was then told it was the work of a celebrated monkey. ‘That’s different. For a monkey, it’s terrific.’”—Igor Stravinsky<sup>2</sup>

**FOR FURTHER READING:** Just about every general introductory philosophy book contains something about the Ontological Argument. But do take a look at the source of the title for one of the sections in this chapter: *God, the Devil, and the Perfect Pizza: Ten Philosophical Questions*, by T. Govier (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 1989). The argument about miracles—the serious one, not Russell’s joke—is in Section X, called “Of Miracles,” of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748) by the great eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher David Hume.

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<sup>1</sup> Bertrand Russell, “My Mental Development,” in *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*, ed. Paul A. Schilpp (Evanston, IL: Library of Living Philosophers, 1944), p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> *London Magazine*, March 1967.

Hume's thoughts on the baby or inferior or aged deity are from his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), Part XI.

The French Enlightenment philosopher Denis Diderot (1713–84) paid a visit to the Russian Court at the invitation of the empress; there he freely and enthusiastically expressed his atheist views. The empress was much amused, but some of her councillors suggested that it might be desirable to check these expositions of doctrine. The empress didn't want to ask Diderot to stop saying those things, so she contrived a plot to quiet him. Diderot was informed that a learned mathematician had an algebraic proof of the existence of God; would he like to hear it? Diderot said he would, so the great mathematician Leonhard Euler (1707–83), who was in on the plot, came to court, and announced gravely to Diderot, “Monsieur,  $(a + b^2)/n = x$ , therefore God exists. Any answer to that?”

Diderot, who knew absolutely no algebra, was embarrassed and disconcerted, and returned to France at once.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The source for this anecdote is Thiebault, “Souvenirs de vingt ans de séjour à Berlin,” 1804, reported by James Newman in *The World of Mathematics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956).