The notion of proof for or against the existence of God has come to be used for a very specific purpose: to convince other people that someone called God either does or doesn't exist. But actually these so-called proofs have to offer -- whether one believes any such proof really proves anything or not -- is more interesting than the statements of faith they are supposed to prove.

While writing "God in Proof: The Story of a Search from the Ancients to the Internet," I found that proofs about God in history reveal a lot more than they're given credit for. Like artifacts from a lost time dug up from the earth, these glimpses into how people imagined their place in the universe and their chances of knowing the divine. For some thinkers, a new proof brought on a sudden, emotional fit of ecstasy; for others, it was the effort to carve out a new way of conceiving of God.

Despite today's unending debates about whether God exists or not, few of the classic proofs were meant to end these debates one way or another. More often, they served to pose more interesting questions: What do we mean by a proof? As many of these attempts at proof reveal, also, the line between God and no God is thinner than we're now led to believe.

10. Aristotle's self-thinking thought

Everyone has heard of Aristotle. Part of the reason for this is that people -- including Muslims, Jews and Christians from the Middle Ages to the 17th century -- have recognized something of their own God in his "prime mover." Aristotle, who believed in a world governed by an absolute order, is where Aristotle's model of physics leads him, from the motion he sees in the world, to the sky and planets and stars, to something perfect and divine that moves without being moved. Aristotle also reasoned that this perfect being must be so perfect that it can only think about what is perfect: itself, and nothing else.

Don't expect to have your prayers listened to -- or your sins judged. But perhaps you can expect God to continue to move in a way we won't always understand.

9. The *kalam* cosmological argument, then and now
There's no more effective debater about the existence of God than William Lane Craig, a conservative evangelical. Sam Harris once called him as "the one Christian apologist who seems to have put the fear of God into my fellow atheists." The centerpiece of Craig's arsenal is the *kalam* cosmological argument. Craig borrowed from thinkers in the medieval Muslim world, mixed with science. The result was a hard-to-beat set of reasons that the universe must have a creator and that the-who-has-called-the-God-of-Islam-"rationally objectionable," doesn't agree with Muslims on nothing.

8. Hindus for monotheism

We're used to thinking of Hinduism as a religion of about as many gods as the population of India, one proof Westerners crave. But in the 10th and 11th centuries, the Nyaya school of Hirakshara Bhatta had a one, personal, transcendent god that looks more like You-Know-Who than anything else. One of the most famous of these was a proof from "composition" -- that for there to be any things in the world, there must sometime have been a first combiner. Not long after, the great Jewish philosopher Maimonides had a similar argument in his "Guide for the Perplexed."

7. The ontological God (or Nature)

When Anselm of Canterbury first alighted on his "ontological" proof for a God -- an idea so perfect that the God he had in mind was the one he prayed to in his monastery. But when the Jewish apostate Benedictus de Spinoza almost the same proof a few centuries later, the God that popped out from the arguments was an infinite being identical with the universe itself and everything in it. It was a devious reversal of Anselm's original idea. There would be no need, for instance, to both you'd be praying, at least in part, to yourself.

6. What Paley really would have thought about Darwin

There is no more notorious example of Darwinian evolution today than design theory, and no one is better able to represent the gist of "ID" so much better than 18th-century theologian William Paley. Paley compared the complexity of the flora and fauna to finding a mechanical watch lying on the ground. Surely, he argued, we are far more likely to deduce that the watch is so complex that it must have been made by an intelligent designer -- and the same can be said of living things. Paley had decades before "The Origin of Species" was published, and ever since his views have been so repeatedly set in opposition to Darwin's. A closer look at Paley's own thinking reveals through the laws of nature, not beyond them like the modern ID theorists' designer. Paley had a
over time. It's only in today's highly polarized culture-war climate that we don't bother to notice intelligent design theory might have been perfectly comfortable with evolution.

5. Why is God so shy?
An argument against God's existence that has gained attention among philosophers in recent years is called "hiddenness": If God existed, shouldn't it be a whole lot more obvious? It is often a crucial part of the problem of evil and suffering in the world that an allegedly good God doesn't lift a finger to prevent well-meaning, smart people who seek good evidence of the divine in the midst of suffering fail also be an obvious one? Then again, other well-meaning, smart people have ended up seeing the evidence, as if hidden in plain sight; Elie Weisel reported a vision of God at Auschwitz, no less: "He hung from the gallows."

4. Or is God really a demon?
In 2009 philosopher Stephen Law proposed another kind of response to the problem of evil: "as he could judge, Law concluded that the strength of the case for an all-powerful, all-good God is negated by an all-powerful, all-evil God. This evil God hides from us on purpose and tries to confuse us by getting people to believe in various opposing religions so we'll do more evil to one another; all freely acting human beings will commit lots and lots of evil acts. The evidence for this, unfortunately, is striking.

3. A proof for the heart
One rejoinder to the evil-god hypothesis lies in our own desire. Just as Augustine famously prayed, "Our heart is restless until it rests in you," some have found in their own desire for God evidence that God exists. This reasoning helped persuade "Narnia" author C.S. Lewis to believe in God, and he used it often to convince others of the reasonableness of Christian faith: Our desires for food, sex and friendship all point to something that can satisfy them, so why not the desire for God? This isn't an argument one finds discussed by many hard-headed philosophers these days, but one professor, Peter Kreeft, finds that it works really well at a music school where he teaches. "They were bored with everything in the course until they came to this," he told me. "The mind of the poet or the musician is attuned to that argument. Even though half of them were on drugs, they loved it!"

2. Good, not God
Artists do seem to have a different way of seeing proofs than the rest of us. When the great Irish novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch took up the old ontological argument that Anselm and Spinoza wrestled with, she came out not with Anselm's God the Father, Nature, but, simply, Good. For her, "No existing thing could be what we have meant by God," and the shadow of what beauty points us toward. ("Only an atheist can believe in what is unintended," What are we left with? "The unavoidable nature of morality," Murdoch says. No matter how wrong pervade the universe. The Good exists, which is precisely why she believed that God does.
1. God discovers godself in proof

There is no proof about God more meticulous or bewildering than that G.W.F. Hegel was publishing when he died in 1831. In an essay called "An Attempt to explicate the proofs of existence," he earlier mused, "The proofs of proofs, an assemblage of canonical arguments about God, together into a three-stage process, one proof leading to, and necessary for, the next for its own completion. The history of philosophical discovery comes to know its creator, and the creator to know itself -- another self-thinking subject. And just as potentially here Aristotle's. By seeking proof of God, people don't just learn about the subject; they in some sense become God, and fulfill God's purpose, which was not what you thought you were doing when you started reading this list.

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