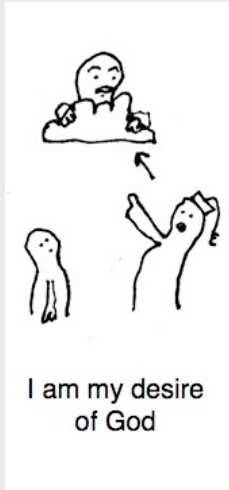


Proof Enough for Me

When the usual proofs for God don't do the trick, sometimes you have to think up your own.

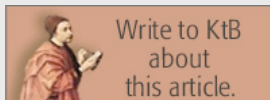
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When I was eighteen years old, I thought that I'd discovered a proof for the existence of God. The possibility jazzed me in secret for years, and I've told few about it out of fear that someone might untangle its logic and ruin it. But by now, there isn't any going back. The proof has already had its way with me.

At the time, I knew a little about the classic proofs—a holy trinity with beguiling names like the cosmological, the teleological, and the ontological. Most of the best-known philosophical efforts to demonstrate and explain the existence of so-called God fit into one of the three. But what I had stumbled on, it seemed to me, was altogether different.

The moment I finished my last high school exams, I ran off for two weeks to a nearby Catholic monastery, where the monks had permitted me to work, pray, and live among them though I was neither Catholic nor much of anything else. The idea of going came one day in the shower, inexplicably. I had come to the end of a basically secular upbringing, one colored more than I yet knew by my parents' forays into Asian spiritualities and their exhausting appreciation for medieval architecture. That summer hit my secularism like a truck. I spent weekends at Buddhist and Christian monasteries, and every contradictory thing I learned convinced me of itself. The substance of the world felt charmed and purposeful, with signs from above appearing at every stop on my travels—from the names of churches to the warning of a traffic cop in Kentucky. My insides were desperate and rowdy, unable to rest until resting in some divine embrace, whichever it happened to be.

Soon I was a freshman in college, and nothing was decided. I went to every religious service on campus I could find. My restlessness wanted a home. Not certainty so much as a starting point, a community, and a discipline. An axiom on which to build my propositions, my lemmas, and my conclusions. Not so different from any other college freshman, I can admit (now if not then), I was the stranger in a strange land.

With the memory of September 11th still only a year old, I signed up for an introductory class on Islam, alongside courses in philosophical logic, multivariable calculus, and fiction writing. Each contributed, in its way, to the idea that quietly grew in me over the course of my first semester. My head was full of proofs, and when mathematics reached its limit, fiction would take over. In Islam class, I became fascinated by stories we read about the education of muftis, how the students would gradually shed their endless doubts through years of questioning their teachers. One day, as finals came around, I went to talk with the professor about my paper for the course, which was about ritual prayer in the formation of Muslims' faith. Afterward, just as the door of the department closed behind me and I stepped out into the bright of day, the proof finally took hold of me.

Here goes.

First, an observation: There are those who insist that they believe in God, or act as if God is. They are often intelligent people, ones whom I may respect. (Here I thought of the old Muslim clerics and of the monks I knew in Virginia.)

Then, a dialectic: If I come to a believer and say that I do not believe, the believer can say that I am missing something. Maybe I misunderstand, or maybe I lack faith, or maybe I need to practice rituals. Then the truth of God, or what is meant by God, will shine apparent to me.

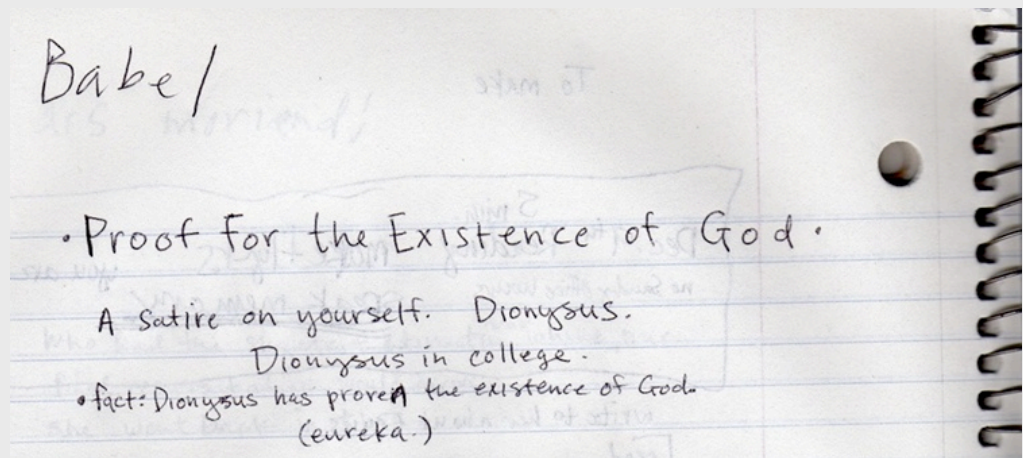
Next, a quandary: If I don't believe in God, maybe the only reason is that I haven't undergone

the proper preparation. If this is the case, how can I trust my unbelief?

Finally, a recognition: If I am properly prepared, I will believe that God exists. Then I will know that God exists—it will be proven, sort of. Q.E.D.



Hurrying across campus in that luminous moment of discovery, I had no idea how to write my ecstasy down. Recently, looking through my notebooks, I found the first mention of it in plans for a story, a satire, about someone named after a Greek god who had discovered my proof. That was being cautious. A few months later, back at my mother's home on vacation, I began to write about my discovery in an all-out philosophical treatise, which went unfinished.



I know it isn't much of a proof. If it were, it could be grounds for proving the truth of anything, so long as somewhere someone believed in it; anything, from a political opinion to the existence of a china teapot orbiting the earth. Even God's nonexistence. (The eleventh-century monk Gaunilo pointed to similar difficulties with Anselm's version of the ontological proof.) Yet this way of thinking made powerful sense when I thought of it. Not very concerned about correctness, I was glad to have any proof of my own at all. It was proof enough to compel drastic things. By the time I went home for break after my first semester at school, I was taking catechism classes with a Catholic priest. Of all the traditions I'd sampled, that one held its allure. It had the best proofs. My priest and I had begun to build a lasting friendship over them in long conversations, agonies, and quiet weekday masses. The following Easter, in front of my bewildered friends and family, he baptized me.

I had to know if the proof would work. That is, whether God and God's kingdom would exist if I made the effort to see, if I prepared myself. And in its way, it did. When asked in subsequent years why I chose Catholicism among the religions that I flirted with, I would say, "It was where I was able to see God." What could anybody say to that? What could I even say to that?

I have never thought like a scientist, adding up the evidence and following where it goes. Proof has never served that purpose for me. Instead, I get swayed by the silver-tongued, the elegant, and the enticing. Over the years, these qualities have made me never tire of arguments about

God. They are, to a certain kind of glance, great Babel towers of the mind, sneaking closer to heaven like thieves and trying to touch it.

Though it managed to convert me, I never imagined my proof would do much for converting the world from its errors. But neither have the classic proofs—the -ological ones—single-handedly changed many hearts over the centuries. For believers who are compelled by them, this has been a great mystery. Why, when we possess such wonderful proofs, do they not vanquish hardness in the hearts and minds of others? In the Middle Ages, Christians and Muslims asked this of one another, just as they asked it of the pagan Greek philosophers on whose ideas their proofs were based. The same trouble goes for arguments against traditional gods. As modernity crept through Western Europe, Deists and freethinkers were appalled at how many still kept old-time religion around, refusing to hear the voice of their own reasonable proofs. Believers went on believing and hawking their proofs despite the French Revolution, Darwinism, encounters with Asian and African religions, two world wars, quantum physics, secularization, and the rest of it.

The habit of proof shows no sign of stopping. Politicians proclaim their support for Intelligent Design theory, which seeks to slip a teleological proof back into biology—the complexity of organisms implies the participation of a super-intelligent designer. After leading the effort to sequence the human genome, biologist Francis Collins pointed to a different "language of God" in DNA, which amounts to essentially the same thing. Anthony Flew, a philosopher who had been a hero to atheists, claims in his old age to have been convinced by evidence of such divine design. On an internet packed full with proofs of all kinds, celebrity evangelists Kirk Cameron and Ray Comfort appear on YouTube holding up a banana as testament to God's necessary existence. Meanwhile, so-called "New Atheists" like Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris wheel out their arguments to the contrary with ferocity that dismay the faithful and doubters alike. "Scientific proof for the existence of God will soon be announced by the White House!" proclaimed the title of a book by a California guru, poking fun at it all. My proof is only a tiny sideshow in the circus of all the others on offer.

In its naïveté, my proof thrives among the multitude of other proofs, past and present. In its terms, each represents a possibility, a possible God who might possibly exist. Each possibility represents a journey of preparation whose end is the necessary existence of its God. My little proof welcomes them all, fearing the consequences of dismissing the convictions of their inventors too quickly. It is, after all, the people behind the proofs that pique my proof's interest. If they can be persuaded, perhaps I can be—and will be—too.

In those first months away from home and in the years that followed, I busied myself thinking in proofs, arguments, and demonstrations. I learned rituals and dogmas and sayings and hymns wherever I could find them. All the while, of course, I was thinking among people. The possibilities they presented were not merely possibilities of belief, but possibilities of who I might come to be and be with.

Later, in college and graduate school, I learned that there is a whole field of research that explores how religiosity occurs through encounters among people. A century before me, the sociologist Émile Durkheim set the terms for treating it as "an eminently social thing." Following him, scholars have talked about religion as "a chain of memory," "a sacred canopy," and even as a rational-choice economy in human societies. Meanwhile, a whole cadre of 20th century theologians embraced a kind of sociological God, from Harvey Cox's *Secular City* to liberation theology in Latin America. "We speak of God to secular man," Cox wrote, "by speaking about man." Durkheim was sure to insist that the gods arising in social life are no less real for being social. Dependence on them traffics in our real dependence on other people—such as in family, economics, and language.

The more time passes from the year my proof dawned on me, the more I feel able to assemble its own social origins. Those were the years just after my parents separated. I was hungry for new mentors and, through them, new cohesion—it helped to find a God who sanctified marriage, for instance. I sought these people out and did everything I could to try their worlds on for size. The proof gave me license to take on the worlds and gods that others lived among. They filled an absence in me that I still wouldn't admit was there. But as I look at it now, the proof admits it. Built from the raw material of my homework assignments in logic class and my religious studies readings, I encoded desire in a game of (rather haphazard) induction.

Playing out my proof in the mix of late adolescence, I began to see the living, breathing side of

other ones. The proofs people make for their gods, whether those of great philosophers or of the unwashed internet, arise in eminently social ways—argument, love, politics, or even boredom and loneliness. They are not objects of some pure logic, as philosophers often treat them, but come mingled in flesh, desire, and experience.

This is not a usual claim. Wandering through the pages of professional philosophy journals, or hearing arguments between the friends and foes of some creed, the classic proofs are still spoken of as mathematical formulae, ripped out from their histories and their worlds. Through the ages, I now suspect, these proofs have made a grand conspiracy against the fleshiness of human, social religiosity. They claim that people learn their gods from the ether of abstract reason rather than through mothers' milk, the conversations of friends, and voices calling out from the wilderness. This dark cabal of constructs, by sweet-talking our reasonableness, has made too many of us overlook the real strangeness of religion.

But even as I swear myself to unraveling the proofs' conspiracy, I can't escape their allure. They are elaborate records of people's imaginative journeys that seek to glimpse the unseen. Gathering up the sum of human knowledge, they try to account for the source of it all and all beyond. Right beside the naïveté of a man—almost all the characters are men—huddled over a desk scribbling out the logic of some perfect being, lies an even greater wonder. It bespeaks great and strange ambitions we have for our selves and our minds, while suggesting that their goal is not so far from reach.

As its roots become clearer, I am grateful for my proof. What once felt like an act of logic has come to represent sensations and desires now lost to time. Proofs are precious artifacts. Like pieces of music, they stand for what jazzes us, or others, or what jazzed us once and no longer does. My proof was a little ridiculous, but then, it forces me to admit, so was I.

[Nathan Schneider](#) writes about religion for a variety of magazines and is working on a book about proofs for the existence of God. This is his first piece for Killing the Buddha, although he has been serving as a KtB technological angel. He blogs at [The Row Boat](#).

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