

The proof industry

When modern-day debaters on belief use ancient proofs in their arguments, it's often to make a point they weren't meant to serve



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People have been thinking of proofs for the existence of God for millennia. Today's ongoing arguments conjure notions that date back to ancient Greece, the medieval monasteries, and Abbasid-era Baghdad. They come from some of history's greatest thinkers, polymaths who posited their proofs in the context of broader philosophical systems and bodies of reasoned knowledge. These people were generally less concerned to show whether a God exists or not – most assumed the answer to be yes – than to insist on the capacity of human reason to comprehend the universe.

In our age of televangelists and monkey trials, the proofs have come to take on a different form altogether. They're the weapons with which atheists and believers battle for control of the public square in polemical tracts and newspaper op-eds. What was once the pursuit of obscurantist intellectuals has become a hobby for the rank-and-file, spawning an industry all its own. Recent decades have seen the creation of a whole crop of organisations devoted to promoting arguments for the existence or nonexistence of God. In the process, the meanings and ends of the classic proofs are being transformed.

Leading the proof industry's charge are organisations like the Discovery Institute (of intelligent design fame), creationist Hugh Ross's Reasons to Believe, and Ray Comfort and Kirk Cameron's Way of the Master ministry, equipping Christians with arguments for evangelising. Opposing them, one thinks of the Centre for Inquiry and the upstart Rational Response Squad, a team of atheists who take on believers in public debates. Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris have created their own foundations to promote their brand of thinking. Bob Avakian's Revolutionary Communist party has been putting its energy into the cause of unbelief as well.

When Thomas Aquinas inscribed his famous "Five Ways" of proving the existence of God at the top of his Summa Theologica, however, he wasn't planning on persuading atheists. His audience was fellow Catholics, people for whom God was a fact of life. They disagreed not about whether the divine exists, but on how to comprehend it. In the preceding decades, the scientific and metaphysical works of Aristotle had reappeared in Latin Europe, and some church leaders tried to ban them for fear that they would pose a

The Five Ways marshal the ideas of Aristotle, who lived three centuries before Christ, to argue that certain features of the Christian God can be proven rationally, independent of scripture. Like the proofs of others – from Aristotle and Plato, to Anselm of Canterbury, to Hegel – the Ways principally mattered not for *what* they showed, which most everyone agreed about anyway, but *how* they went about showing it.

Times have changed. We can be grateful to have a society with much more religious diversity than Thomas ever knew. Atheism is no longer a rumour to be spoken of in hushed tones; it is a viable, intellectually-satisfying way of understanding the universe for many people. This means that when the proof industry calls on earlier proofs to adjudicate contemporary quarrels, often it is to make a point they weren't originally concocted to serve. Fair enough; Aristotle certainly didn't intend his arguments to fall into the service of a religion that didn't even exist when he developed them. In the same way, Thomas never meant his Ways to fend off the Rational Response Squad in a debate on YouTube.

Interpreting the proofs in a world of non-profit organisations rather than pre-modern philosophers, though, we stand to forget some of their earlier elegance. The sensuous mysticism of Anselm's ontological argument gets translated by partisans into a sequence of tepid abstractions. As in places like the Creation Museum in Kentucky, the conceptual rigor of the argument from design is sacrificed for the performance value of animatronic dinosaurs.

Modern organisations tend to perpetuate themselves, since people's jobs depend on them and endowments protect them. The proof industry's proliferation probably means that debates will be settled later rather than sooner, and by public relations teams rather than finely-crafted arguments. It is what it is; all the better to have a public sphere vibrant enough to support vigorous debate across ideological lines. But better not to confuse the classic proofs with the uses to which they have come to be put.