

Theistic Arguments and the Theoretical Function of God in Early Modern Philosophy: an Example of Christian Wolff

In contemporary philosophy, proofs for the existence of God are generally positioned within the field of Philosophy of Religion. This appears obvious. God, after all, is a key element of organised religions, at least Abrahamic ones, so the proofs for the existence of God should be seen as rational (i.e. not faith-based) reasons for accepting or refuting the proposition "God exists". Religion tells us what God is, or is like, and job of philosophy is to scrutinize these claims. The function of God in contemporary philosophy is, it seems, exclusively religious, i.e. God is discussed and analysed in service of, or against the claims, of organised religion(s).

The narrative I would like us to rethink states that throughout the history of philosophy, proofs for the existence of God have been developed in service of this function. Whenever they appear, their purpose is to rationally support the claims made about God by organised religion. Historically, however, this narrative cannot hold. Firstly, since the arguments for the existence of God can be found in philosophy as far as Aristotle's *Physics*, they pre-date what we would now recognise as organised religion. Secondly, if we take a look at some of the most famous members of the Early-Modern canon, the arguments for the existence of God were provided not in parts of their work dealing with religion, but metaphysics. Descartes develops proofs for the existence of God in his *Meditations* 3 and 5 for the purpose of grounding the veracity of clear and distinct ideas; in his *Treatise* Berkeley infers "some eternal spirit" after showing that all things must be understood as idea; Spinoza presents his argument for the existence of God at the very beginning of his *Ethics*. This suggests that God, at least in some Early Modern thinkers, has not been invoked to serve a religious function, but a theoretical one.

By a theoretical function of God, I understand, first and foremost, the treatment of God in a way different from both the religious function described above, and from the practical function. The practical function of God concerns the role God plays in establishing systems of morality. Theoretical function, therefore, is a function that God plays in a philosophical system for the purpose of grounding a metaphysical or an epistemological theory. The most well-known example of this is likely Kant's treatment of God as an 'idea of reason' that provides systematic unity to scientific thinking, but the same can, I argue, be seen from the examples above.

In this paper, I will present the idea of the theoretical function of God within philosophy and argue that some Early Modern treatments of God were undertaken primarily to establish God that would underpin a system of metaphysics, rather than a system of religion. Similarly, the arguments for the existence of God should be seen as arguments formulated in order to establish God as conceived philosophically, rather than to rationally underpin the Revealed conception of God. To illustrate this, I will focus on Christian Wolff's philosophy.

While Wolff does relegate his treatment of God, and of proofs for the existence of God, within his Natural Theology, I argue that it can be shown that the conception of God he develops primarily serves to underpin his overall rationalist system of metaphysics. I will do so by consulting his Natural Theology, as well as his German and Latin Logic and

Metaphysics. For Wolff, I argue, the purpose of arguing for the existence of God is to develop a concept of God that could provide a ground for the possibility of ontology, conceived as a science of an entity *qua* entity. If this philosophical conception of God were to clash with a religious one, it is the latter that will probably have to give way.

If my hypothesis regarding the theoretical function of God in Early Modern philosophy holds for Wolff, and can be generalised more widely, it would allow us to rethink the narrative of the singular, religious purpose of theistic arguments within philosophy and to start a wider debate of the position and nature of God within philosophical systems.