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Lucian Blaga on the Existence of God

Michael S. Jones, 8 March, 2008

Introduction

One of the perennial and most prominent issues in Western philosophy of religion regards the question of the existence of God. Most of the great minds in the Western intellectual tradition have attempted to address this question. While the question of Blaga's position on the existence of God is itself controversial, there are elements of his philosophy that point towards an answer to both questions. The answer provided by Blaga's philosophy to the question of the existence of God, and the epistemology that leads to this answer, are unique, interesting, and make a constructive contribution to the discussion.[1]

Philosophical Arguments and the Existence of God

Traditional arguments for the existence of God—the cosmological argument, the teleological argument, the ontological argument, the moral argument, arguments from religious experience and from supposed miracles, and other similar arguments—have a long history and continue to enjoy considerable support. The cosmological argument argues that there must be an originator of the universe since the only alternative explanation for the existence of the universe is an infinite regress.[2] The teleological argument argues that there must be a designer of the universe, since the universe exhibits the characteristics of something that was designed rather than of something that occurred accidentally.[3] The ontological argument argues that God is the being greater than which none can be conceived, and that since an existent being is greater than a nonexistent one, God must exist, otherwise it would be possible to conceive of a being greater than God.[4] The moral argument argues that morality presupposes an objective standard of right and wrong, and that such a standard necessitates the existence of a transcendent source of moral standards.[5] Arguments from experience typically follow lines of reasoning that are basically

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[1] A much more detailed account of Blaga's philosophy and its implications for religion can be found in my book, *The Metaphysics of Religion: Lucian Blaga and Contemporary Philosophy* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickenson University Press, 2006).

[2] See, for example, Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, book 2, chapter 2, and book 11, chapter 6, in *Aristotle: On Man in the Universe*, ed. Louise Ropes Loomis (Roslyn, NY: Walter J. Black, 1943), 13–14, 33–34; J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City: A Defense of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1987), 15–42.

[3] See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica,* part 1, question 1, in *Introduction to St. Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Anton C. Pegis (New York: Modern Library, 1948), 20–27, especially his "fifth way," 27; Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City*, 43–75.

[4] See Gregory Schufreider, *An Introduction to Anselm's Argument* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978); John Hick and Arthur C. McGill, eds., *The Many-faced Argument* (New York: Macmillan, 1967); Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 85–112.

[5] See Kant, "The Canon of Pure Reason," section 2: "On the Ideal of the Highest Good, As a Determining Basis of the Ultimate Purpose of Pure Reason," in *Critique of Pure Reason*, 735–46; C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 31–35; Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City*, 105–32.

empirical, arguing that the best possible explanation of religious experiences is that they are experiences of something transcendent, just as immanent experiences are usually understood as experiences of immanent objects.[6] The arguments from miracles argue that miracles have a supernatural source; assisted by other specific details it is often argued that this source is God.[7]

The above arguments have all been challenged by philosophers who question their validity or conclusiveness.[8] Neither the supporters nor the opponents of the traditional theistic proofs have been able to present a case that satisfies all or even most of the parties involved in the discussion. The conclusiveness of the theistic proofs remains an open question.

In addition to those who argue that the theistic arguments are unable to prove the existence of God, there are philosophers who, for a variety of reasons, argue that theistic proofs are inappropriate or pointless. Perhaps the most famous such objection is Kierkegaard's. According to Kierkegaard, the type of belief in God that is really important involves an active choice to believe, in spite of evidence contrary to what is being believed. Therefore, according to Kierkegaard, the attempt to rationally ground religious belief is playing into the hands of the enemy, and is mistaken, inappropriate, and futile. It is mistaken because it believes that the type of belief that is involved is evidential. It is inappropriate because it tries to provide evidence for something that necessarily involves a lack of evidence. It is futile because even if evidence can be provided, such evidence can never result in the requisite type of belief. According to Kierkegaard, God does exist, but the belief that God exists is a choice of the will.[9]

A recent proposal by a group of analytic philosophers from a Reformed Christian background also calls into question the propriety of theistic proofs. According to Reformed epistemology, belief in God is "properly basic" and therefore occurs at the foundation of one's noetic structure. Such basic beliefs are not and do not need to be supported by evidence.[10] According to the proponents of Reformed epistemology, God exists, but the belief that God exists (or knowledge of God's existence) is implanted in the believer by God.

A third position opposing the traditional theistic proofs argues that such proofs are irrelevant to religion itself, that actual religious people are not religious because of the theistic proofs, and that if the proofs were to be shown to be invalid, there would be little effect on religion and religious belief. Since religious people do not base their belief on the theistic

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[6] See "Religious Experience: What Does it Mean to Encounter the Divine?" ch. 2 in Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, and David Bassinger, eds. *Reason and Religious Belief: An Introduction to Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Collier Books, 1961), 74–5, 326–31.

[7] See, for example, Joseph Butler, "Of Revealed Religion," section 2 in *The Analogy of Religion* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1961), 125–259; Gary Habermas, *The Resurrection of Jesus: An Apologetic* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1980).

[8] See, for example, Antony Flew, *God and Philosophy: An Audit of the Case for Christian Theism* (New York: Harcourt & World, 1966), which criticizes all of the above arguments.

[9] Sören Kierkegaard, *On Authority and Revelation*. Translated by Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), 57–68.

[10] This is the main point of Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1976).

arguments, the failure of such arguments would (it is argued) have little impact. The theistic arguments are of interest to philosophers, but their success would not significantly increase religious belief, nor would their failure disprove belief in God.[11]

Blaga's Contribution to the Discussion

Three central questions regarding the existence of God have been discussed here. They are: Is it appropriate to attempt to prove that God exists? Can it be proved that God exists? Does God exist? The weighty intellectual exertion that these questions have provoked throughout the history of philosophy is an indication that this is an important philosophical issue. Many solutions to these problems have been suggested. Blaga's philosophical system suggests solutions to these problems that have certain advantages over other solutions that have been suggested. In this discussion it will be assumed that there is a sufficient parallel between the general concept "God" and Blaga's "Great Anonymous" in order to apply what Blaga says about the latter to the general philosophical discussion of the former. That Blaga's conception of the Great Anonymous is not exactly the same as the Christian conception of God is readily admitted.[12]

Regarding the propriety of the theistic arguments, Blaga would not side with either Kierkegaardian existentialism or Reformed epistemology. Nor would Blaga dismiss proof as irrelevant to religion. Blaga's metaphysical vision pictures humanity as drawn to the transcendent.[13] This drawing results in attempts to "reveal" the transcendent in ways that include the cognitive tools available to humans.[14] Evidence and proof are common elements of human attempts to fathom existence. That they are applied to the question of the existence of God is not surprising, and Blaga would probably not consider this inappropriate. The answer to the first question, therefore, is "yes, it is appropriate to attempt to prove that God exists." Whether this attempt can succeed is a separate issue.

Blaga might object that Kierkegaard's position, that belief based on evidence is not true religious belief, grants too much authority to the evidence involved (as will be seen, on Blaga's philosophy such evidence has very little authority). He might object that the Reformed epistemology position is incorrect if it assumes that all belief in God occurs at the foundation of a person's noetic structure or if it asserts that all belief in God *should* occur at the foundation of a person's noetic structure (in Blaga's case, the Great Anonymous postulate does not seem to be properly basic). He could point out that the position that says that proofs are irrelevant to religion errs by overlooking those religious people to whom such proofs are an important part of their religious experience.

For some reason, throughout history a very significant number of people have felt compelled to attempt to prove (or at least substantiate) the existence of God. Some of these people have been among the most creative and intelligent of thinkers. Blaga's metaphysics

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[11] Steven Cahn, "The Irrelevance to Religion of Philosophic Proofs for the Existence of God," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (April 1969): 170–72.

[12] See Michael S. Jones, *The Metaphysics of Religion: Lucian Blaga and Contemporary Philosophy* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickenson University Press, 2006), 70-74.

[13] See Jones chapter 3, "Blaga's Philosophy of Philosophy," and chapter 4, "Blaga's Metaphysics."

[14] Jones chapter 5, "Blaga's Epistemology."

provides the reason for this collective effort, gives it meaning, legitimizing it, and praising it for the height of its reach.

Regarding the possibility of proving the existence of God, it is clear that according to Blaga's system God's existence cannot be proved in any fashion that would lead to apodictic certainty.[15] Therefore any argument posed in a deductive format or claiming to lead to conclusions that are certain will be rejected by Blaga. This can be viewed as a virtue of Blaga's system, since such epistemological restraint is consistent with contemporary postfoundationalist analytic epistemology. On Blaga's epistemology, it does not seem that the existence of God (or of the Great Anonymous) could be an object of ordinary ("paradisaic") cognition, though perhaps some of the *actions* of God could be. Therefore empirical arguments by themselves cannot show the existence of God. On the other hand, the existence of God could be an object of theoretical ("luciferic") cognition, and therefore God's existence can be postulated, and this postulate could be corroborated pragmatically and aesthetically.[16] This form of theistic argument is unlike any of those mentioned. It is more like the hypothetico-deductive method utilized in some scientific investigations. This approach to belief in God's existence is very contemporary: John Hick, after a lengthy discussion of religious epistemology, seems to suggest a similar approach to belief in God in his 1989 book *An Interpretation of Religion*.[17]

Regarding the final question (Does God exist?), it seems that the answer of Blaga the philosopher would be a somewhat tentative "yes."[18] Blaga does not attempt to prove the existence of the Great Anonymous. He does, however, posit the existence of the Great Anonymous, and then constructs a lengthy argument for this hypothesis based on its philosophical fruitfulness. It is almost the case that Blaga's entire system is an argument for the existence of the Great Anonymous, inasmuch as his system is a unitary whole whose pieces justify each other by their coherence and by their fruitfulness as a system explaining a variety of phenomena and resolving an array of problems.

That this possibly controversial interpretation of Blaga's view on the existence of God is correct is perhaps corroborated by his positive attitude toward religion in general, and by his own religiosity at various points in his life. That Blaga's belief in the existence of God is tentative is a result of his acute awareness of the limitations of human cognition and of his belief in the

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[15] This is because of transcendent censorship and stylistic breaking. See Jones chapter 4, "Blaga's Metaphysics."

[16] See the discussion of the pragmatic and aesthetic justification of theoretical beliefs in Jones, ch. 5.

[17] Hick, chapter 13, "The Rationality of Religious Belief," in *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 210–32. The use that Basil Mitchell makes of the classical theistic proofs in *The Justification of Religious Belief* also bears some resemblance to Blaga's approach: "Thus although the cosmological and teleological arguments do not (if our criticism of them was correct) prove that there must be a transcendent creator of the world, they do make explicit one way (arguably the best way) in which the existence and nature of the universe can be explained. . . ." Basil Mitchell, *The Justification of Religious Belief* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), 40–41.

[18] This is again based on the assumption that there is a sufficient parallel between the general concept "God" and Blaga's "Great Anonymous" in order to apply what Blaga says about the latter to the general philosophical discussion of the former.

transcendence of the Great Anonymous, a transcendence that removes the Great Anonymous from direct human contact. Thus Blaga's belief in the existence of God exhibits two epistemological virtues: it is based on an epistemology that is very appealing from a contemporary point of view, and it is appropriately modest, which is laudatory from both an epistemological and a theological perspective.

Evil: An Argument Against God

The problem of the existence of evil is "widely recognized as the most serious rational objection to belief in God."[19] Almost all introductory texts on philosophy of religion discuss the problem of evil as an objection to the existence of God as usually conceived. The general thrust of the argument is that if an omnipotent and benevolent God exists, as is believed in the major monotheistic religions, then this God would be both able and willing to prevent the occurrence of evil. Since evil does occur, such a God must not exist.

Thinkers sympathetic to the theistic position have generally recognized the seriousness of this objection. Earnest attempts at responding to the problem have been made. One response has become known as the "free will defense." According to the free will defense, the evil that exists is a result of the free choices of volitional beings other than God. God created these beings with free will, and cannot prevent them from doing evil without depriving them of their freedom. Although God created them volitional, God is not responsible for their free choices. The possibility of them making choices that have evil consequences is a necessary part of them having free will. This explanation elucidates a type of situation that would motivate an omnipotent and benevolent God to permit the existence of evil.[20]

Another response to the problem of evil is the proposal that God allows particular instances of evil only when he foreknows that by allowing this evil a greater good will result. This is sometimes referred to as the "greater good" argument.[21] The greater good argument can also be formulated so as to propose that the total sum of all good will exceed the total sum of all evil at some future time of (final) reckoning. The free will defense can be viewed as a type of greater good argument: the good of free will is seen to be greater than the bad that will result from it.

Blaga's theodicy seems to combine elements of both of the above strategies, and it adds several ingredients of its own. Blaga's theodicy begins with the proposal found in his metaphysics that there is a considerable separation between the Great Anonymous and the rest of existence. He argues, on the one hand, that the Great Anonymous does not exercise direct control over the creation process, but rather creates through an emission of differentials that are allowed to combine/interact freely. This approach to creation allows for a great deal of freedom on the part of those things created by the interactions of the differentials. This bears some resemblance to the free will defense. The reason for this distance between the Great Anonymous and the creation process is that it maximizes secondary creativity while protecting the centrality of the Great Anonymous in the universe, something that Blaga argues is essential to the preservation of

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[19] Peterson, et al., *Reason and Religious Belief*, xiii.

[20] Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 7–74. Hick discusses the history of this theodicy, which he characterizes as "Augustinian," in John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (Cleveland, OH: Collins World, 1977), 43–206, 262–78.

[21] Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 207–65.

the universe itself. Blaga also argues that this mode of creation and the world that results from it represent the best solution to the dilemma of how to create the greatest possible world without endowing it to such a degree that it has the ability to destroy itself. The solution to this impasse opted for by the Great Anonymous, according to Blaga's metaphysical speculation, is the endowment of creation with creative and revelatory desires and abilities while at the same time limiting the successes realizable in response to these desires. Although it is undeniable that evil exists in the world, it is in fact the best possible world given the goals of the Great Anonymous: perpetual creation and preservation of that which is created. This strongly resembles a "greater good" theodicy.[22]

One of the benefits of Blaga's approach to theodicy is that it is not merely a defensive postulate, not merely an argument resorted to because of the need to reconcile the existence of an omnipotent, righteous, and loving Being with the presence of evil and suffering in the world. Blaga's theodicy is a positive proposal, advanced as part of a systematic attempt to explain human experience. It is an integral part of and a logical result of Blaga's metaphysical system, and as such is supported by the arguments that support the system

An interesting point of Blaga's theodicy is that it occurs in the context of a philosophical, rather than theological, system. Because of this, the specifically epistemological aspects of theodicy come to the forefront. Whereas many theological theodicies are strongly tied to practical issues, Blaga's theodicy provides an explanation of why humanity cannot reach the transcendent toward which it feels drawn and why any cognitive success that humans experience is always partial.

Conclusion

It has been argued that Blaga's philosophy supports belief in the existence of God in three ways. First, it supports the practice of posing and attempting to answer questions of a speculative or theoretical nature ("luciferic cognition"). Second, it posits the existence of a supreme being (Blaga's "Great Anonymous") that is the source of all else and supports this postulate with several lines of reasoning that are in keeping with contemporary epistemological theory. And third, it defends this belief against the most important argument against it: the argument from the existence of evil.

Nothing has been said about the nature of this supreme being. Some might argue that Blaga's "Great Anonymous" cannot be considered an equivalent to God as God is normally understood because they do not share the same attributes. However, before such a position could be defended it would be necessary to address the question of if and to what extent the attributes of the Great Anonymous can be known. This question remains to be explored.

[22] This also bears a resemblance to the "best possible world" theodicy. Blaga's theodicy is discussed in Jones, chapters 4 and 7.