Towards a Propaedeutic for Arguments about the Existence of God

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Abstract

This article sets the groundwork of the theoretical elements that are needed in order to defend the use of "arguments" instead of "proofs" in the discussion about the existence of God. A philosophical standpoint concept of God was followed, where any belief or religion could be included. We defended the validity of rhetoric within the philosophical discourse, remarking the main points of the new rhetoric stated by Perelman in the 50s.Traditionally we have talked about "proofs" of the existence of God, such as St. Anselm proof or the five ways of St. Thomas Aquinas. We considered "proof" as the argument that tries to establish a certain conclusion in a necessary way. And "argument", as the set of propositions that justify or refuse a proposition. We believe that talking about "arguments" is more appropriate in this topic rather than the traditional "proofs". The concept "argument" is, in the first place, wider than "proof", and so includes it. On the other hand, talking about "proofs" seems to imply the irrefutable truth of its result thanks to the rules of logic. Nevertheless, the existence of God belongs to the field of the probable, plausible, that cannot be proved in an empirical way.

Keywords: Argumentation – God – Rhetoric – Proof

Questioning the existence of God has been a constant and relevant issue in the history of humanity. Even today, when Europe lives a period of a strong agnosticism and atheism, of rejection towards all kinds of religion, specially the catholic one, we can affirm that an eagerness of transcendence is arising. Yoga, oriental meditation centers, self-help books, etc. proliferate everywhere. Behind this, a search of a God that manifests himself in "a different way" is hiding. Since philosophy deals with subjects that can help us give a sense to our lives through a deeper sight of the world, the discussion about the existence of God is still valid today.

In a theological essay we would start assuming the existence of God in order to analyze his attributes, his relationship with human history, with nature, with the universe. We would then consider the revealed truth (included in holy texts such as the Bible or the Koran), analyzing it from a religious standpoint. On the other hand, a philosophical theodicy analysis would start from a conception of God that is not compatible with the existence of the evil. Then, it would try to find a solution to the following problem (as stated by Ricoeur, 2006): how to affirm in a joint way and without contradiction that God is almighty, God is absolutely good; yet the evil exists. This would lead us more to the analysis of the attributes of God, included in this concept, rather than to questioning the existence of God himself. In this article, though, we would consider the concept of God from a philosophical standpoint, avoiding following any religion in particular. We would consider then the definition stated by Findlay (1948): "adequate object of religious attitudes" (p.177).

We pretend to lay the groundwork of the theoretical elements that are needed in order to defend the position adopted by J.H. Sobel (2004)in his work *Logic and theism. Arguments for and against beliefs in God.* In this book, Sobel talks about "arguments" instead of "proofs", as it has been made traditionally. Sobel, though, talks about "arguments" from a logical standpoint, but we want to analyze the implications of this change from a rhetorical point of view.

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In order to do this, we will start describing the traditional proofs that have been presented for the existence of God. We will then approach the concept "proof". After this, we will present the concept "argument" within the argumentation theory. We will defend the validity of rhetoric within the philosophical discourse, remarking the main points of the new rhetoric stated by Perelmanin the 50s. At this point, we will be ready to deal with the convenience of talking about "arguments" instead of "proofs" in the discourse about the existence of God.

1 The Proofs of the Existence of God

Traditionally we have talked about "proofs" of the existence of God. Ferrater (1994, pp. 908-909) describes, to start with, the "traditional proofs": 1) St. Anselm proof, called "ontological" after Kant; Descartes, Malebranche, Leibniz and Hegel defended this position. 2) Proof *a posteriori,* such as the five ways of St. Thomas Aquinas.3) Proof *a priori*, defended by Duns Scotus and other authors. There are some more kinds apart from these traditional proofs, like the "proof by feeling", the "proof by tradition" and others: moral, physic-theological, teleological, cosmological, psycho-theological, etc.

2 The "Proof" Concept

Ferrater (1994) establishes a relationship between "proof" and "demonstration" (pp. 810-811). In the Platonic theory, "demonstration" is almost equal to "definition": in order to prove that one thing is what it is you need to establish what the thing is. On the other hand, for Aristotle "demonstrate" is to show that something is necessary, showing its principles. Later, the scholastics adopted the thesis that a "demonstration" is an argumentation that allows extracting a conclusion from premises that are true.

In the modern age several types of demonstrations have been stated. The empiricist demonstration passes from the observation of an object to its mental idea, which represents the way how the mind reflects the presentation of something. On the other side, the rationalist demonstration is usually based in the principle-consequence relationship.

In the contemporary period, some demonstrations have been based in the classical positions or combinations of them. Others are based in a pragmatic proof theory that shows the truth of a proposition through the effects that it produces (or how reality responds to it).

In logic, "proof" is considered as the process that establishes that the conclusion is derived from the premises. In order to make a proof, some inference rules should be followed. The proof cannot be based in an "intuition" of the truth of a proposition.

Additionally, Enrique Alonso (2011, pp. 497-501) indicates the three senses that have been usually assigned in the logical tradition for the term "proof":

1. Proof as a derivation within a formal system. In this case, the proof consists in a finite sequence of formulas $<f_1, f_2, f_3 \dots f_n>$ such that each of them is previously present either explicitly or it has been obtained from others already present in the sequence using a system inference rule. It is said that a formula A is derivable within a certain formal system if there is a proof $<f_1, f_2, f_3 \dots f_n>$ such that f_n is A.
2. Proof in a metatheoretical use. In this sense, proof is a certain kind of an argument that wants to establish the necessity of accepting a determined conclusion from some initial conditions that have been rigorously defined.
3. Proof in an informal sense. This refers to any kind of argument that tries to establish a certain conclusion in a necessary way. Since it wants to have a relevant similarity with the logical or mathematical proofs, it is close to what Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) call "quasi-logical arguments"(p. 193) that present themselves similar to formal, logical or mathematical reasonings in order to pretend certain kind of conviction. This means that this similarity is used deliberately as a rhetoric maneuver to infuse in the argument a bigger acceptability.

3 Argument and Argumentation

Vega (2011) defines argument as the basic discursive unit of the argumentation, considered either as the action of arguing, either as the textual corresponding product (pp.66-68).

Argumentation can be defined, according to Van Eemeren & Grootendorst (2004):

Argumentation is a verbal, social, and rational activity aimed at convincing a reasonable critic of the acceptability of a standpoint by putting forward a constellation of propositions justifying or refuting the proposition expressed in the standpoint (p. 1).

On the other hand,Alcolea (2015) defines argumentation as the rhetorical process that an agent follows when he is trying to persuade or convince a co-agent, with an argument (or a set of arguments), to accept that a proposition has been justified, to adopt a certain belief or to follow a determined course of action (p.9).

Regarding the arguments, they can be logical (if they fit into a certain logical argumentative shape), rhetorical, a rhetorical figure or an argumentative scheme. The argumentative agents will use one or another depending on the goals that they want to achieve. According with the conception of rhetoric in Aristotle, its function is "to see the available means of persuasion in each case" (2007, 1355b, p.36). Logic and rhetoric are not poles apart, but aspects of the argumentative activity that require each other (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Argumentativeprocess(rhetoric)
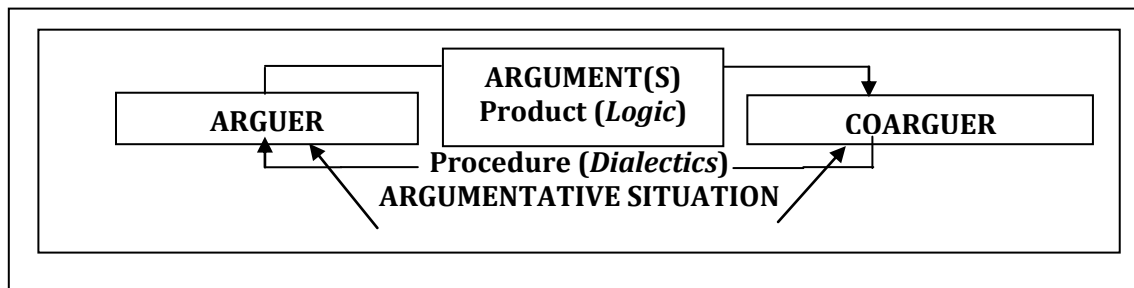
(Source: Alcolea, 2015, p. 10.)

Logic pursues the validity of the arguments, the connection between premises and the conclusion of these premises (whether they are true or not). On the other side, rhetoric recognizes the value that the argumentative agent and the audience ascribe to the premises of these arguments. At the same time, dialectics introduces the dialogical character in the argumentation, searching the common adherence of the participants.So the rhetoricaldimension of a speech makes it persuasive according to its substance and shape. Logic considers its informative content (*narratio*) and its logical structure (*lógos*). Rhetoric considers what comes from affectivity (*ethos* and*páthos*), from ordination and construction (*dispositio*), from style and elocution (*elocutio*). (*Ibid*).

3.1 Validity of Rhetoric within the Philosophical Discourse

Jesús González Bedoya (1989, p. 16) establishes the importance of the work done by Perelman rehabilitating rhetoric in the 20th century from the marginalization that it suffered in the Modern Age, marked by the hegemony of rationalism.

3.2Perelman's New Rhetoric

According to González Bedoya, the new rhetoric consists in a theory of argumentation that is a complement of the theory of demonstration in formal logic. Science is based in theoretical reason, usescategories such as true and evidence and usually follows a demonstrative method. On the other hand, rhetoric, dialectics and philosophy are more based in practical reason, using, instead, categories such as plausible and reasonable decision, along with an argumentative and justifying method. (*Ibid,* p.17).

González Bedoya (*Ibid,* p. 24) remarks that for Perelman's argumentation theory is more important the adherence of the audience to the arguments, than the kind of propositions that have been used. According to Perelman &Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969): "it is in terms of an audience that an argumentation develops" (p. 5).

At this point, we'll consider briefly the framework of argumentation defined by Perelman &Olbrechts-Tyteca(1969, pp. 11-62).

3.2.1 Demonstration and argumentation.

[In modern logic] when the demonstration of a proposition is in question, it is sufficient to indicate the processes by means of which the proposition can be obtained as the final expression of a deductive series, which had its first elements provided by the constructor of the axiomatic system within which the demonstration is accomplished.[…]

But when it is a question of arguing, of using discourse to influence the intensity of an audience's adherence to certain theses, it is no longer possible to neglect completely, as irrelevancies, the psychological and social conditions in the absence of which argumentation would be pointless and without result. For *all argumentation aims at gaining the adherence of minds, and, by this very fact, assumes the existence of an intellectual contact*(Perelman &Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969, p. 14).

3.2.2 The contact of minds.

It's indispensable in argumentation the existence of a common language. Social life pattern leads to an implicit agreement of the rules that establish how a conversation should start. So we must attribute a value to the adherence of the audience and its consent. To Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) "by listening to someone we display a willingness to eventually accept his point of view" (p. 17).

3.2.3 The speaker and his audience.

Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca(1969)remark that "for argumentation to develop there must be some attention paid to it by those to whom it is directed" (p. 18).This contact between the speaker and the audience must happen in the conditions prior to the argumentation, as well as in all its development. Perelman&Olbrechts-Tyteca(1969) define the audience, "for the purposes of rhetoric, as *the ensemble of those whom the speaker wishes to influence by his argumentation*" (p. 19).

3.2.4 The audience as a construction of the speaker.

Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) affirm that "knowledge of those one wishes to win over is a condition preliminary to all effectual argumentation" (p. 20).This includes descriptions of psychological nature (due to differences in character, age, cultural level, etc.) as well as social ones, since the opinions of a man depend to a large degree on his social environment characterized by some dominant opinions.

3.2.5 Adaptation of the speaker to the audience.

At his point, Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca(1969) remark:

In argumentation, the important thing is not knowing what the speaker regards as true or important, but knowing the views of those he is addressing. […] It is indeed the audience which has the major role in determining the quality of argument and the behaviour of orators. (pp. 23-24).

3.2.6 Persuading and convincing.

According to Alcolea (2015), conviction can be considered the superior limit of persuasion, since an agent that has been convinced is also persuaded. Nevertheless, the opposite might not be true, since a persuaded agent can afterwards be discouraged from what he had been previously persuaded (p. 9).Cattani&Alcolea (2011) define the difference between persuasion and conviction: "convincing somebody means to induce a rational assent (after provoking understanding), whereas persuading means to achieve that something is believed or something is done" (p. 450).

3.2.7 The effects of argumentation.

According to Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969):

The goal of all argumentation, as we have said before, is to create or increase the adherence of minds to the theses presented for their assent. An efficacious argument is one which succeeds in increasing this intensity of adherence among those who hear it in such a way as to set in motion the intended action(a positive action or an abstention from action) or at least in creating in the hearers a willingness to act which will appear at the right moment (p. 45).

### 4 Proofs or Arguments in the Discussion about the Existence of God?

Summarizing, we will consider "proof" in the sense defined by Enrique Alonso (2011): "any kind of argument that tries to establish a certain conclusion in a necessary way" (p.501). On the other hand, we will understand "argument" as the product of the argumentation process, as Alcolea affirms (2015):

"An *argument* could be the kind of reasons that are offered to support certain ideas or thesis, or the set of propositions that justify or refuse a proposition. At the same time this would bethe product of the process that could be called *argumentation.*"(pp. 8-9).This last one can be defined, in a pragma-dialectical approach (cfr. Van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004) as:

Argumentation is a verbal, social, and rational activity aimed at convincing a reasonable critic of the acceptability of a standpoint by putting forward a constellation of propositions justifying or refuting the proposition expressed in the standpoint (p. 1).

We must consider that, as shown in figure 2, any demonstration is a proof, but the opposite is not always true. Similarly, any proof is an argument, but an argument is not always a proof.

***Figure 2*: Own elaboration, taken from a private conversation with J. Alcolea (May 2nd, 2019).**
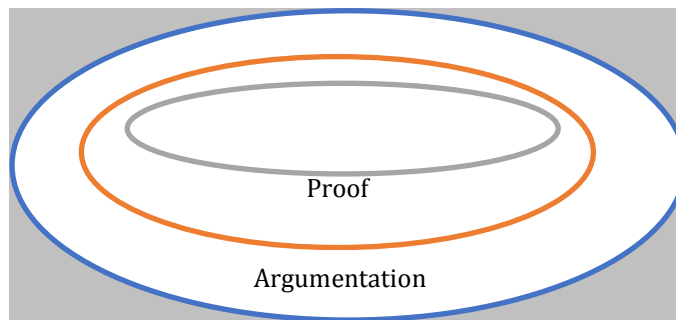
As we have previously said, according to Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969, p.14), in order to demonstrate a proposition in formal logic, it must be stated the steps that have been followed in a deductive series in order to obtain it, following the rules of logic. But in order to argue it is also necessary to consider the psychological and social conditions that affect the opinion of the individuals that form the audience to whom the argumentation is directed.

At this point, we are ready to consider which term ("proof" or "argument") is more accurate for talking about the existence of God. We believe that talking about "arguments" is more appropriate in this topic rather than the traditional "proofs". The concept "argument" is, in the first place, wider than "proof", and so includes it. On the other hand, talking about "proofs" seems to imply the irrefutable truth of its result thanks to the rules of logic. Nevertheless, the existence of God belongs to the field of the probable, plausible, that cannot be proved in an empirical way. In the theory of argumentation, the speaker provides arguments that can only get to be probable, reasonable, preferable and so he adapts his discourse to the audience he is addressing to, so it can accept, or not, in a responsible and shared way, the arguments that have been presented. This way, we can get over the limitation that Descartes set to reason to the field of logic and mathematics; a vision of science based only in evidences, in necessary and true premises, in rational and irrefutable proofs.

Talking about "arguments", according to the new rhetoric stated by Perelman, the speaker is showing the audience that he believes that truth can be achieved through the discussion and contrast of opinions.This is especially important when we talk about the existence of God, since it allows us to overcome the strictness that traditionally has been used to impose the faith, and the opposite reaction that has followed, of rejecting even the possibility of talking about this topic.

Changing "proofs" into "arguments" implies to overcome a scientific vision based in theoretical reason, on the categories of truth and evidence. And it leads us to a philosophical approach, including categories such as plausible and reasonable decision, based on an argumentative and justificatory method.

Finally, argumentation not only aims to justify but also to persuade, triggering a change in the audience. It considers, then, psychological and social factors that determine the cognitive environment within which the argumentation takes place. This dimension is missing in the traditional proofs about the existence of God. Sobel (2004) introduces the concept "arguments" for the existence of God in a logical way, analyzing the weaknesses of the connection between the premises and the conclusion. He does not consider "argument" in the sense provided in this article, but he opened a door that can help us introduce a rhetorical analysis in this discussion. An argumentation that strictly follows the rules of logic might not be enough for the audience to accept it.

We believe this is where the main rejection to faith lays nowadays. It is essential to analyze the cognitive environment where the arguments are made, that surrounds the audience we want to address to. Including rhetorical arguments in our discourse can definitely stimulate the adherence of the audience. We do not only aim to persuade and convince about the existence of God. We want to move forward in the search of a truth that overcomes and transcendences us, and that does not fit in our narrow-predefined schemes.

5 Conclusion

In this article, we pretended to adopt the use that Sobel makes when he refers to "arguments" for and against the existence of God, instead of using "proofs" as it has been traditionally made. Ferrater(1994) defines "proof" as the process by which it is established that a conclusion follows to certain premises according to the rules of logic.

However, we consider that, when we want to discuss about the existence of God, using the term "arguments" is more appropriate, as Sobel (2004) does. This topic does not fit into what is scientifically demonstrable, but this does not mean it should be excluded from the philosophical discourse, aimed to approach the topics that can give a deeper sense to our lives. Sobel limits the use of this concept to the logical field, analyzing the formal coherence of the process followed in the different reasonings. But from this point we can open this study and include rhetorical arguments that allow the discussion about the existence of God to be valid in the current society and can provide an answer to the need of transcendence that citizens show.

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