

[MJTM 23 (2021–2022)]

BOOK REVIEW

W. David Beck. *Does God Exist?: A History of Answers to the Question*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021. xvii + 309 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-0-8308-5300-7. \$29.99.

Humanity has perennially wrestled with the question of the Divine. Its proposed answers have varied greatly, from polytheism to outright rejection in favor of more naturalistic worldviews. In *Does God Exist?*, philosopher W. David Beck endeavors to provide a robust history of philosophical thought regarding the existence of God from a myriad of perspectives—both Christian and not. Beck focuses on four core types of arguments (one per chapter) that have been debated in Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Greek, Atheist, Islamic, and Christian circles: cosmological; teleological; moral; ontological (xv).

Like other history of philosophy texts, Beck's work follows the thoughts of philosophers themselves and not of *ideologies* per se. This focus allows readers to observe how each specific philosopher handles each argument. Although the number of individuals Beck engages with is too many to list, the most prominent include Aquinas, Aristotle, Collins, Oppy, Pruss, Koons, Leibniz, Rowe, Craig, Hume, Swinburne, Sober, and Paley.

Does God Exist? also includes a brief introduction (overviewing the origins of such arguments) and a final chapter delineating a forward-looking view of how these arguments may continue to develop. Unfortunately, there are no indices. Beck asserts that the core purpose of the text is:

To see how the justification of the claim that God is a reality has developed over the years, how objections to it have been placed, and how they have been answered and often changed the narrative in important ways. Then . . . we will need a final assessment as where things stand today (6).

Chapter 1, "The Beginnings of the Arguments," provides

readers with a guideline as to how God is to be defined within this landscape. Beck takes a *minimalist* (thin) view by not providing a starting definition at all, but merely allowing the arguments to define his proposed view of God (4). Beck effectively outlines how these arguments have stemmed from humanity's basic observations of the world, using Jewish, Christian, Islamic, and Greek sources (7–18).

In chapter 2, “Cosmological Arguments,” Beck spends considerable time explicating the well-known five ways of Aquinas (26–38) as well as the infamous (and impenetrable) work by Duns Scotus (38–41) without delving into arcane jargon that would only serve to confuse.

Moving into chapter 3, “Teleological Arguments,” Beck examines the development of various teleological arguments for the existence of God. These include “simple design” arguments (110–27), analogy arguments (128–46), probability and fine-tuning arguments and their rejoinders (147–67), and multiverse arguments and rebuttals leading to the current debate (168–90). Beck's extensive analysis between Paley and Hume regarding simple design arguments is laudable, as it sets up readers with sufficient background knowledge to follow the current fine-tuning debate (128–41).

The following chapter, entitled “Moral Arguments,” analyzes the history of the moral argument for God's existence. Beck begins by commenting on early moral design arguments set forth by Zeno and other early thinkers (191–96) and then moving into complex developments. Such developments include Kant's argument from practical reason (197–200) and more modern philosophers such as C. S. Lewis and—most importantly—David Bagget and Jerry Walls (212–33).

The final two chapters of the text, “Ontological Arguments” and “The End of the Story—For Now,” focus on the ontological argument and additional views on the arguments as a whole—such as cumulative case approaches and how the arguments relate to faith—respectively. Beck continues to demystify even the most arcane topics in philosophy of religion. In this case, specifically, his analysis of Anselm's *Proslogion* and Gaunillo's reply *In Behalf of the Fool* leaves little to no room for critique

(237–51). To this reviewer, much of this success is due to Beck's prudent/judicious choice to not use modal logic.

One notes that Beck includes an *annotated* further reading guide at the end of each subsection. Via this method, the reader is not only given a philosopher's view of the evolution of the arguments for God's existence, but also an intimate insight into how such a person chooses and evaluates their research material. This point alone makes the text a worthy read.

By way of criticism, two deficiencies come to mind. First, as previously mentioned, Beck begins his exploration of these arguments by analyzing simple observations that differ from formal arguments. These observations come in the form of poetic stanzas on God's glory being revealed from the psalmist, as well as Paul's admonition that all people intuitively know God (Rom 1) (7–9). It is crucial to point out that Beck's definition of an argument is "any pattern or sequence of reasoning that implies a conclusion" (3). Given this definition, it becomes difficult (nearly untenable) to maintain a separation between these divine observations, which he denotes as the beginnings of the arguments, and any sort of actual argument.

This tension becomes more palatable when one reviews the early works that beckoned toward the divine using their observational data, such as Marcianus Aristides: ". . . and had surveyed the sun and the rest of creation, I marveled at the beauty of the world. And I perceived that the world and all that is therein are moved by the power of another" (115).

There is no relevant difference between the observation and inference of Macianus and that of the Apostle Paul, who exhorts that all people know God as He has made it plain to them, as both involve an inference leading to a conclusion (9). By holding to a definition of a pre-argument as pure observation, the concrete examples that Beck uses to illustrate this begin to crack the mold they are placed into.

A second criticism worth mentioning is Beck's continuous assertions that those who disagree with an argument have either already been answered previously, or that their rebuttal has been circulating in the literature long enough to lose its potency. To be fair, Beck's previous experience of teaching the arguments for

God's existence for nearly five decades substantially increases the prior probability of his assertions being generally reliable. However, when one considers the concrete statements made, such as his comment that since Sober's observational selection effect argument has been around for a long time, "Clearly it cannot be too daunting either," (166) then the sentiments expressed engender skepticism; rightfully so. The time an argument has been around may speak to its ability to be simply reclothed and regurgitated. Or it may equally mean that the argument has force behind it, and others recognize that. Beck's assertions are not enough on their own to make a case for the weakness of the rebuttals.

As an aside, Beck's analysis, as with his work in other chapters, is straightforward and insightful but lacks some nuance. While Beck alludes to common-sense terms such as "free will" (191) or "free decision making" (226) not enough attention is given to what *constitutes this freedom*. Is a mere Hobbesian approach of unimpeded desire fulfillment enough, regardless of the causal chain behind the agent? Using a highly intuitive notion of freedom of the will can allow for ease of explanation, but the cost is confusion regarding *precisely* what is meant.

Taking all aspects into account, *Does God Exist?* is a text that every researcher, budding philosopher, and layperson interested in philosophy of religion or Christian apologetics, should have on their shelf. Beck's wide and deep commentary of the central figures who argued against or for the Divine invites the reader to slowly wade into the weeds of philosophy without feeling at a loss—a remarkable feat! Its intended audience is focused researchers, aspiring laypeople, and invested pastors. Highly recommended.

Brett Surbey
Sexsmith, AB, Canada