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AN ETHICS-BASED 'IDENTITY-PROOF' OF GOD'S EXISTENCE. AN ONTOLOGY FOR PHILOTHERAPY[1]

ABSTRACT
A resurgence of scholarly work on proof of God's existence is noticeable over the past decade, with considerable emphasis on attempts to provide 'analytic proof' based on the meanings and logic of various identity statements which constitute premises of the syllogisms of the 'proof'. Most recently perhaps, Emmanuel Rutten's 'modal-epistemic proof' has drawn serious academic attention. Like other 'analytic' and strictly logical proofs of God's existence, Rutten's proof has been found flawed. In this paper I discuss the possibility of an 'ethics-based' identity proof of God's existence. Such a proof, the first version of which, I believe, has been offered, indirectly, by Nikolai Lossky, utilizes the form and structure of the analytic proof, but fundamentally rests on the perception of moral values we associate with God and Godliness. The nature of the proof shifts the focus of the very attempt to 'prove' God's existence from what I believe is an unreasonable standard, unattainable even in 'proving' the existence of the more mundane world, towards a more functional, practical and attainable standard. The proof proposed initially by Lossky, and in a more systematic form here, I believe, shows the indubitable existence of God in the sense of his moral presence in the lives of the faithful, at least with the same degree of certainty as the presence or 'existence' of anything else that can be epistemically proven in principle.

One of the less widely discussed forms of philosophical proofs of God's existence is the so-called 'identity proof'. The proof seeks to establish a crucial identity between God and something else, the existence of which is either experientially obvious, or can be logically derived from the way we think about God. The proof is of the following logical form:

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P1: God is (said to be identical with) x.
P2: X exists.
C: God exists.
One alternative is:
P1: God is (said to be identical with) Being.
P2: Being exists.
C: God exists.

Prima facie, there are clear problems with this type of proof. While the identity proof may be logically sound, its substantive value depends almost solely on the merits of the initial identity statement. In fact, it is difficult to even imagine what could be identical with God, given that we know so little about what God is. One way forward may be to identify God with the most general logical categories, such as that of 'Being'. If God is identical with Being, and we hold that Being exists, at least as a logical category which we use in our everyday thinking, then one could conclude that 'God exists'.

The proposition that 'God is Being', while seemingly ontologically strong, is in fact vacuous, because it does not specify what 'being' is, or what kind of being pertains to God. Without such specification, it could be argued, it is difficult to understand what 'God is Being' even means, for 'being in general' transcends our experience and our conceptual capacities which we use to organize that experience. The proposition thus appears reduntant. The argument is logically similar to a recent 'modal-epistemic' argument, proposed by Emanuel Rutten, the abridged form of which is the following:

P1. All possibly true propositions are knowable.
P2. The proposition that God does not exist is not knowable.
C: The proposition that God exists is necessarily true (Rutten 2014).

Rutten's argument appears similar to the identity proof of God, however its first premise is question-begging, which reduces the strength of the argument considerably (Wintein 2018). The first premise of the identity proof is similarly question-begging (God is Being).

Unlike Rutten's argument, which, as Wintein has shown, is fundamentally flawed, I believe that the identity proof of God can be saved if the initial premise is specified to 'God is the Perfect Being'. This turns the argument from a modal one to a more classical type of argument from God's attributes and makes it more plausible.

There are two main problems with identity proofs. The first one is that we must first argue the feasibility of the identity (such as in the case of 'God is Being') in order to make the 'proof' even intelligible. The more general the category used for the identity statement, the more difficult it is to elucidate its exact meaning in terms relevant for God's existence so that the argument becomes sufficiently compelling. If 'God is Being' and 'Being exists', this may well logically prove the statement that 'God exists', but it does little in substantive

terms to prove the existence of God without a successful argument that God indeed is (a particular type of) 'Being', and that this (comprehensible type of) 'Being' actually exists in a way which is relevant for our understanding of God. The detached nature of this 'proof' from experiential reality causes the 'proof' to appear vacuous.

The second challenge is that the validity of the 'proof' depends on the interpretation of the identity statement. In the seemingly strange identity proof of the form:

P1: God is I.
P2: I exist.
C: God exists.

if 'God is I' is interpreted as meaning not that God is identical with a particular human person, but that godliness is already in the humans, albeit in potential form, which still needs to be actualized through a virtuous life, then the 'proof' might become more intelligible. Such interpretations, however, depend on too many external assumptions to justify the cryptic logical form 'God is I' being used as a premise in the context of a proof of God.

In this paper, I suggest that identity proofs have considerable potential, but only if the identity statements are not too general, well aligned with experiential reality, and are more informed by *ethical values* associated with God. I thus suggest that a more viable form of identity proofs of God is based on God's identity with absolute values, that is, on ethics. This is a type of argument advanced initially by Nikolai Lossky (Lossky 1994).[2] I believe that Giorgio Agamben has also contributed to the same type of argument, though perhaps inadvertently, in his recent theory of 'effectivity' of God (Agamben 2013). My argument here builds on their two complementary arguments to show how *values* can bridge the gap which is apparent in the more general identity proofs and furnish us with a more useful identity proof of the existence of God.

An example of identity proof based on God's attributes is: 'God is Goodness', or 'God is Mercy'. At least in the Christian faith, there are both dogmatic and mystical legacies which firmly set out God's attributes as values for all who live a Christian life: A Christian tries to be morally 'good' because one wants to approximate in his life God's attribute of (perfect or infinite) Goodness. As Goodness obviously exists, God, therefore, exists. Similarly, being merciful is motivated by the desire to approximate God's perfect or infinite Mercy: as mercy obviously exists, to various degrees, God also exists as he is identifiable with the ultimate or perfect Mercy. Finally, I argue, along with Lossky, that God's effects on our lives change our experience in ways which the Scriptures envisage as God's intent for us; this leaves little doubt as to the 'reality' of Goodness, Mercy, etc., and thus further, indirectly, corroborates the identity proof of God based on his attributes.

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2   Year of initial publication in Moscow: 1941.

1. God, Values and Experience

According to Lossky, the existence of God is demonstrated through God's effects on our lives. The question about the 'reality' of 'existence' of the values associated with God or Godliness is in effect the same as the question about the existence of God himself. If one wonders about the 'reality' of beauty as a value, consider the effects beauty has on our lives: according to Lossky, beauty has the capacity to change our experience even in the darkest circumstances; the very idea of something beautiful, or sublime, or inspiring, whether a reminiscence, a specific memory or simply a recollection of the value in our mind, either in general form or as an instantiation in an object or person, may transform our experience, and thus our life, from one of utter despair to one of hope. Such ideas have a real capacity to change the quality of our lives; just as the reality of the experience of suffering is, in a sense, not questionable (suffering is contained in the experience of suffering), the reality of beauty, sublimity, love or mercy is contained in the experience of these values; thus their reality is ultimately not questionable.

Lossky illustrates the practical identifiability of God with his more general attributes, such as Goodness, by elaborating the way in which Goodness is described in Christianity: God's Goodness is general in the sense that it tends to "lend itself to everything", it "gives itself away" if there is will to accept it in the person who is to receive it. Goodness does not deny itself to anyone wishing to receive it. This dialectic is the same as that of God's influence on our lives: God is said to give himself to all those who seek him in much the same way as the virtue of goodness spreads among those who desire to be good without any intermediary steps: wishing to be good is sufficient to welcome goodness in one's life, in the same way as longing for God is sufficient to receive God in one's experience. God, in this sense, is practically identifiable with the values which he brings into our lives: "This is the nature of the good: it strives to give itself away to everything around it. As St. Thomas Acquinas put it: 'The good by its essence tends to spread outside itself [...]'" (Lossky 1994: 323).[3]

Acquinas' and Lossky's views on Goodness as a key attribute of God have correlates in other religions. In Buddhism, too, there is an assumption of (moral) goodness being an element of godliness, while evil and destruction are seen as secondary and more reactive than proactive inclinations which, in a sense, deviate from the path of enlightenment. Buddhism recognizes hatred as one of the root motives for human behavior, however it conceptualizes hatred as inextricably linked with experiences of frustration or desperation. Buddhism takes evil as a deviation from the correct order of things, while Christianity recognizes evil as a separate, self-sufficient principle which opposes the good, and constitutes the polarity within which the human freedom of choice is exercised (God or Devil). The latter view is exemplified in science in Freud's

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3   "Такова природа добра: оно стремится раздавать себя всем. Св. Фома Аквинский говорит: 'Добро по существу своему склонно распростра няться из себ [...]'".

conceptualization of the 'death instinct', or spontaneous root evil which moves people to destruction and self-destruction (de Silva, 2014: 53–55).

If Goodness is God's fundamental attribute, and if it is practically identifiable with the presence of God as an experiential reality (the experience of God in life), then the identity statement:

P1:Good is Goodness.
P2: Goodness exists.
C: God exists.

starts to make some viable sense, even if it remains insufficiently compelling to be a proper 'proof of God's existence'.

The experiential context in which Lossky suggests (but stops short of explicitly proposing) this type of 'proof of God' is the particular Christian concept of the human personality and the highly personal relationship between man and God: the human personality is not 'closed into itself'; it is capable of knowing and, in a sense, 'receiving' God, in terms of sensing the godliness of certain values and experiences, thus knowing that such experiences originate from God himself; it is also capable of knowing and receiving other personalities and natural objects (Lossky, loc. cit.). The understanding of God in terms of the values which, imperfectly, exemplify his ultimate goodness (similar to Plato's imperfect experiential ideas approximating the 'perfect forms') allows the obviousness of the existence of the relevant values and experiences (those of the good, or goodness) to serve as 'proof' of the existence of God, whose core attribute is that of 'perfect goodness'. The 'proof' here is compelling only for those who actually conceive of God in terms of perfect goodness; yet God is described as fundamentally good. Perfect evil is how the Devil is described, and the same type of proof could be derived for the existence of the Devil. The existence of evil in our experience points to the assumption of what it is to be 'perfectly evil' (on the basis of which we can only consider the degrees of evil in specific experiences), and thus proves the existence of the Devil. This is the kind of identity proof which can be offered in frequent situations when people question the existence of God by reference to evil experiences. The objection takes the form: "How can there be a God, when there is so much evil in the world", or "Why doesn't God conquer all the evil if he is indeed God?". Lossky's answer to both questions would likely run as follows: Yes, there is God, but there is also the Devil; the existence of the good points to the reality of a perfect Goodness (God), just as the existence of evil presupposes the reality of a perfect evil (the Devil): it is a matter of choice whether one seeks God or Devil, Good or Evil, rather than a matter of which one of them is more real. The argument, or 'proof', thus has practical applications which are not trivial as might seem at first from the form of the argument alone.

Nevertheless, Lossky's argument presupposes a shift of perspective from a purely logical one ("Good is Being", or "God is I" – based on value-neutral statements), to an experiential, value-laden one ('Good is Goodness, Mercy,

Love, etc.'). This shift to experience is 'engaged with life' in a sense which requires a passionate understanding of God and the values associated with him: a perspective which Giorgio Agamben has called "effectivity".

2. The Concept of God's 'Effectivity'

Agamben emphasizes the active, experiential aspect of our relationship to God and of God to us, the human persons, which is characterized by what he calls "special actions". According to Agamben, the living experience and understanding of God can never be merely theoretical: it is a fundamentally active experience which takes place through our understanding of and participation in "special actions" which characterize the relationship between God and man. For the human beings, such actions include the exercise of virtues (for Christians, they include, i.a., humility, obedience, restraint from judging others, solidarity with others in good purpose, etc.) and, most importantly, participation in the liturgy. For Christians, the liturgy is an active union with God where God is not only 'understood' in a contemplative way, but is felt as present, at each liturgy, through the repetition of the experience of the Last Supper: the communion is the ultimate sacrifice which God makes again and again, at every liturgy; it is not a mere *recollection* of his sacrifice which was made a long time ago. According to Agamben, the Christian dogma sees the liturgy as the ultimate 'effectivity' of God's fatherly, self-denying relationship to us:

> The liturgy is, in truth, not very mysterious at all, to the point that one can say that, on the contrary, it coincides with perhaps the most radical attempt to think a praxis that would be absolutely and wholly effective. The mystery of the liturgy is, in this sense, the mystery of effectiveness, and only if one understands this arcane secret is it possible to understand the enormous influence that this praxis, which is only apparently separate, has exercised on the way in which modernity has thought both its ontology and its ethics, its politics and its economy. (Agamben 2013: xii)

The congregation's understanding of God takes place through this special action and through the less dramatic experiences of God's care and involvement in their lives through events which arise from who God is: a caring, but strict spiritual parent. On behalf of the congregation, the special actions that make up their faithful relationship to God, again, are marked by effectivity, by action: they involve prayer, exercise of virtues and an obedience of God's moral commandments. Agamben points it out that our understanding of God is embedded in process, rather than static meanings:

> Operativity and effectiveness define, in this sense, the ontological paradigm that in the course of a centuries-long process has replaced that of classical philosophy: in the last analysis [...] being and acting today have for us no representation other than effectiveness. Only what is effective, and as such governable and efficacious, is real [...]. (Agamben 2013: xii–xiii)

The process-context means that what we perceive as real about God is a performative, rather than propositional content: it is the experience and value of God's presence in our lives that feel real, rather than as abstract definitions of God, or as logical inferences to prove that there is a God. Even if a "mathematical proof of God's existence" (see Robertson 2008) was indeed possible, it would not be what is in fact required for the sense of a true reality of God's existence. A mathematically proven God would not be real to the congregation without his effectivity in impacting the lives of ordinary members of the congregation; conversely, the existence of God's attributes and their performative role in the individuals' lives make the presence of God 'real' with no need for a mathematical proof. The liturgy, as the culmination of the process-understanding of God, is the effective soteriological act and at the same time an act of service, exemplifying the virtue of serving which the Christian God asks of his faithful ones (Agamben 2013: 19). The exercise of the Christian virtues, on the other hand, is what exemplifies or 'proves' one's faith. Just as faith cannot be proven in a propositional manner, so, in the perspective of God's effectivity, any attempt to prove God's existence in a propositional manner is misdirected: faith is 'proven' by living faithfully, and the existence of God is proven by the actual occurrence of God's promised effects on our lives, both those that reward and those that penalize us.

3. The Merits and Limitations or the Identity Proof Based on God's Attributes

One may wonder how a proof from God's alleged attributes can be a proof of God's existence when it does not prove the crucial link between the attributes and God: while goodness, humility, care and self-sacrifice for others undoubtedly exist, could we not claim that they would exist even without God; surely God must be something or someone else, or more than, these values? If God is a person, then the various attributes may apply to him, but he himself would not be identical with his qualities. On such account, it might seem that proving that goodness or any other God's attribute exists would not prove that God exists, even if God is good, because there are other persons who are also good, and goodness does not prove their existence; neither does love, humility or solidarity with those in need. Surely it is one thing to exist, and quite another to have or not have certain qualities. This reasoning underlies the seeming lack of rigor of the identity proof.

It seems to me that this point in the argument is critical for the overall understanding of what a "proof of the existence of God" can do. There are two sides to this critical argument which need attention.

The first aspect of the identity proof based on the attributes that needs to be clarified is that the qualities considered are *absolute* qualities: thus the statement "God is Love" implies that God is perfect, ideal love as he is described in the Scriptures (this does not necessarily prejudice the various conceptions of perfect Love). Love in this context is not a quality: it is the *principle* or the value

by which we judge the ordinary ascriptions of the quality of love to human relationships. The same goes for Goodness, Mercy, or any of the other core attributes of God. The reason the proof rests on particular attributes is that, in a particular religion, God is described in terms of such attributes. We thus prove the existence of this-or-that God as he is described in a particular religion.

The first misconception which makes the proof based on attributes look insufficiently convincing is that the task of the proof is to prove 'God in general'. As God is a transcendent presence which is described to us through the lens of religion all a proof can do is seek to address the way in which religion presents God to us; it cannot venture into 'proving' a transcendent reality.

The proof seeks to show that a belief in God is well-founded in terms of how that belief is defined, namely that the descriptions of God which the religion operates with are valid.

Upon closer inspection of, e.g., the Jewish-Christian Scriptures, one finds that God is nowhere depicted as a substance: the Bible does not say that God is matter, or spirit, or an old man with a beard presiding over the clouds; the only place in the Bible which comes close to depicting God visually is the one where, in the Old Testament, he guides his people, led by Moses, by advancing in front of them as a cloud during the day and as a pillar of fire during the night (Exodus 33:11). The same is the case with the other monotheistic religions that I am familiar with. Thus, based on the way in which God is presented to us by religion, there is nothing to 'prove' in terms of his 'substance', which is mysterious; what can be proven are the *manifestations* of God which religion focuses on and emphasizes.

The second aspect of the seeming lack of force of the identity proof based on God's attributes is connected to the first one: it relates to the degree of expectations that a transcendent, fully 'external' reality can be 'proven'. In fact the limitation to our ability to 'prove' the objective, independent existence of a being such as God applies to any other proof of external reality. This is the old discussion about our ability to truly 'know' the existence of objective reality which is more than our experience and which, supposedly, generally corresponds to our experience. What we work with are representations, not external realities; any 'proof' of external reality is inductive and based on aggregate experiences by various people which contain the same crucial elements: if most people around me experience today as a misty, cold day, I have substantial reason to believe that, if there is indeed a 'day' outside the human representations which we habitually refer to when we talk about 'reality', it is probably a misty and cold day. However I am in no position to 'independently' prove that there is weather or, for that matter, any kind of external reality which would be independent of my experience, much less to prove the exact shape and nature of that reality on a principled level.

Kant has discussed this problem in terms of our ability to distinguish between the 'reality' of our awaken experiences as opposed to the 'unreal' experiences of dreaming. His conclusion is that there is no fundamental, qualitative difference between the two: we are only able to distinguish between

the awaken state and dreams based on the cohesiveness and general mutual congruence between our representations. There is usually a moment, which we can recollect, when our experiences suddenly depart from their long-term pattern (the onset of a dream) and a moment when that temporary sequence of representations comes to an end and the previous longer-term, consistent pattern resumes (we wake up). This is a general problem of knowing the external world which Kant discusses mainly in terms of proving causality, namely how we can possibly prove in principle (or 'know logically', to use his terminology) any claim of 'objective' causality, namely that something (in the outside world) causes something else (whether in the outside world or in our perceptions). Kant is aware of the impossibility of such a proof.

> It is impossible ever to comprehend through reason how something could be a cause or have a force, rather these relations must be taken solely from experience. [...] Therefore, if they are not derived from experience, the fundamental concepts of things as causes, of forces and activities, are completely arbitrary and can neither be proved nor refuted. (Kant 1992: 2, 370, 356)

The problem, of course, arises when we have long dreams. What happens in a hypothetical situation in which we might enter a permanent dream state, a kind of coma with vivid dreamlike experiences? Schopenhauer suggests an experiential answer: "The only certain criterion for distinguishing dream from reality is in fact none other than the wholly empirical one of waking, by which the causal connexion between the dreamed events and those of waking life is at any rate positively and palpably broken off" (Shopenhauer 1969: 16).

On a principled level, one might seek a proof that the idea of God is necessary. The identity proof might serve that purpose by equating God with various ideal values ascribed to God, or a Perfect Being. Our very ability to distinguish between the various degrees of virtue, or value, in our direct experience is only possible if there is an idea of the perfect virtue or perfect value. Such perfect virtues in an agent are only possible in a Perfect Being, and God is the Perfect Being. Thus *the idea of God is an epistemically necessary idea* and is thereby proven in a principled way.

On an experiential level, the identity proof also works, but it can only prove the existence of the experiences which are attributed to God's existence and influence; in this way the identity proof proves the existence of a representation of God, not his transcendent existence beyond our experience. Good's existence as a transcendent being cannot be proven any more than we can prove the 'objective' existence of our own parents or children: we consider it 'proven' that they exist if we have consistent experiences with them and feel that we 'know' them by the impact which they make on our lives and the lives of others. For some reason, the same kind of experiential 'proof' of God is held to be wanting in some respects, despite the fact that no other kind of proof is possible of any type of reality, in principle. Thus the question seems not to be whether the identity proof from God's attributes either in principle, or in its

experiential version is adequate; the more intriguing question is why there has been such a persistent reluctance to consider such proof sufficient.

Why is everything said so far in the way of proving the existence of God relevant to philotherapy, or philosophical practice? The spiritual aspects of everyday experience repeatedly lead the philotherapist, and any serious psychotherapist, to consider experiences which place pressure on the everyday, on our ordinary ways of explaining causation and events in our lives that cause us pain (Fatić 2022, forthcoming). One especially pronounced area where the spiritual aspects of philotherapy are particularly relevant is death. Whilst facing death, or fear of death, or its suddenness or the loss caused by it, or any of the innumerable other aspects of death, is a prominent part of human experience, the theoretical and therapeutic resources for dealing with death that are not couched in spirituality are extremely scarce. Thus the ability to use, or call for, God, as the ultimate resource in explaining some of our transcendent experiences, of which death is the most obvious and most drastic one, may mark the difference between success and failure in psychotherapy. As I believe that philotherapy, and psychotherapy alike, are most effective when they take the form of education and critical discussion, in which the interlocutor is placed in an argumentative position, and I believe God to be an inescapable topic in such education and critical discussion, it seems that adding a brush stroke to the existing proofs of God's existence is in order for a philotherapist.

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Etički zasnovan 'dokaz identiteta' Božje egzistencije. Ontologija za filoterapiju

Apstrakt

Tokom poslednje decenije uočljiva je intenziviran rad na izvođenju dokaza o postojanju Boga, sa posebnim naglaskom na takozvane "analitičke dokaze", koji su zasnovani na značenjima i logici različitih iskaza o identitetu, koji predstavljaju premise samog silogizma "dokaza". Možda akademski najuticajniji skorašnji analitički dokaz o postojanju Boga izložio je Emanuel Ruten u formi svog "modalno-epistemičkog dokaza".

Kao i za ostale analitčke i strogo logičke dokaze postojanja Boga, i za Rutenov je utvrđeno da je neispravan. Kroz kritiku Rutenovog dokaza, koju koristim kao uvod, ja u ovom tekstu rahzmatram mogućnost dokaza o postojanju Boga koji bi bio zasnovan na etičkim argumentima. Takav dokaz, Like other 'analytic' and strictly logical proofs of God's existence, Rutten's proof has been found flawed. In this paper I discuss the possibility of an 'ethics-based' identity proof of God's existence. Such a proof, čiju je prvu verziju, po mom mišljenju, već izneo Nikolaj Loski, koristi formu i strukturu analitičkih dokaza, ali se fundamentalno oslanja na doživljaj moralnih vrednosti koje povezujemo sa Bogom ili božanstvenošću. "Etički" dokaz pomera naglasak samog rada na izvođenju dokaza o postojanju Boga sa jednog standarda za koji smatram da je nerazuman i koji se ne može dostići ni kada se "dokazuje" postojanje mnogo manje kontroverznih ontoloških kategorija, kao što su različite kategorije svakodnevnog, "običnog" sveta. Istovremeno, etički dokaz pomera naglasak dokazivanja ka jednom funkcionalnom, praktičnom i dostižnom standardu dokazivanja. Ovaj dokaz, i u formi u kojoj ga je izveo Loski, a i u sistematičnijoj formi u kojoj ga ovde izlažem, pokazuje nesumnjivo postojanje Boga u smislu moralnog prisustva Boga u životima verujućih ljudi. "Izvesnost" takvog dokaza nije ništa manja od izvesnosti bilo čega drugog što se uopšte može epistemički dokazivati.

Ključne reči: analitički dokaz postojanja Boga, vrednosti, iskazi o identitetu, interpretacija premisa, Bog.