

# Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

---

Volume 3 | Issue 2

Article 6

---

4-1-1986

## Dore, THEISM

William Rowe

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

---

### Recommended Citation

Rowe, William (1986) "Dore, THEISM," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 2 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol3/iss2/6>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Theism*, by **Clement Dore**. Dordrecht: D. Reidel Pub. Co., 1984. Pp. xi, 198. Cloth, \$34.50.

Reviewed by WILLIAM L. ROWE, Purdue University.

Dore has written an interesting and important book, a book that should keep many a seminar (or upper level undergraduate course) in philosophy of religion hard at work for some time to come. The main aim of his book is to establish theism, the view that there exists a being whose greatness is such that it is impossible that there should be a being equal or greater. In pursuing this end he follows the "high *a priori* road," finding fault with the arguments (Cosmological and Design) that reason from the world to God. Although he does press a novel version of the moral argument, the heart of his efforts to establish theism resides in three chapters: one of which presents a modal argument for God's existence, a second, several versions of Descartes's Meditation V argument, and the third, an argument for the thesis that God's existence is logically possible. The book begins with a reply to the claim that suffering constitutes evidence against God's existence, and concludes with a brief discussion of agnosticism and a lengthy examination of perceptual skepticism. In an appendix, Dore discusses Anselm's two arguments.

Every chapter in this impressive work is filled with interesting arguments, objections, and replies. In this review, I will begin with a discussion of Dore's criticism of the Cosmological Argument and of his novel version of the Moral Argument. I will then focus on Dore's two *a priori* arguments for theism, as well as his argument for the possible existence of God.

In an interesting, brief chapter on the Cosmological Argument, Dore criticizes the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR) and supports one of Hume's important criticisms of the argument. Hume contended that for a collection to have an explanation it is sufficient that each member in the collection be explained. Thus, if the collection of men is infinite and each man's existence is explained by his being generated by a previous member of the collection, the infinite collection would be thereby explained. Dore rejects my claim that Hume is mistaken about this. I have argued that in asking for an explanation of the infinite collection of men we are, in part, asking why men exist at all, a question not answered by noting that men exist and their existence at any time is explained by generation from men who exist at a previous time. If the question is why there are or have ever been men, it is no answer to note that men have always been producing men. The answer lacks that degree of illumination we require in genuine explanation.

On Dore's side, it must be admitted that my argument is not conclusive. A conclusive argument would have to state necessary conditions of explanation and show that one of these conditions is lacking in Hume's proposal concerning the explanation of collections. But Dore's main interest is the question of whether, assuming that an infinite collection can only be explained by something outside the collection, a principle *requiring* such explanation (PSR) is at all plausible. His conclusion is that such a principle is "totally unworthy of belief" (p. 18). His argument for this view considers a supposed infinite collection of "things which are at least as large as a quark" ( $W'$ ). He points out that physicists do not know if there are any things smaller than quarks, and claims that it would be "incredible" that philosophers could settle the matter by using PSR to infer such a thing as the explanation of the supposed infinite collection.

Of course, as Dore goes on to note, the proper inference from PSR and  $W'$  (supposing that each member of  $W'$  is explained by some other member of  $W'$ ) is not that what explains  $W'$  is something *smaller* than a quark, but either something sizeless or something smaller than a quark. He still finds this incredible on the grounds that we would have *some* evidence for each of these disjuncts. But if this is all there is to Dore's argument, it is hard to see that it does much to discredit PSR. Most false propositions, even some manifestly false propositions, are such that we have *some evidence* to think them true. So, even if we *know* that there are no things smaller than quarks, it does little to discredit PSR that it, in conjunction with something else, might give us *some reason* to think that there are such things.

The moral argument for the existence of God has generally relied on the idea that we have a moral obligation to achieve an end which, in fact, we cannot achieve in this life, and cannot achieve without the assistance of a God-like being. Since ought implies can, so the argument goes, a God-like being and our immortality must be real. Dore does not discuss this version of the moral argument. He presents a novel version of the argument, a version whose central premise is that if a person has an *actual* obligation to do X then that person's self-interest will suffer if she fails to do X. Given this central premise he reasons, with considerable skill, to immortality and a God-like person. But what about this central premise? Dore says it is an *obvious* truth. I cannot see that it is obvious, and the dictionary passages he cites in its support fall short of showing it to be implied by the concept of moral obligation. Nevertheless, the argument is subtle and interesting, and deserves a more extended discussion than I can here give.

In Chapter V Dore sets forth his modal proof. Given  $S_5$ , which Dore accepts, if he can establish both that God's existence is logically possible and that if God exists then God's non-existence is logically impossible, then he will have established theism. Accordingly, in Chapter V he undertakes to prove the latter, and

in Chapter VI he argues that God's existence is logically possible.

Although the argument in Chapter V is complicated, I believe it can be stated as follows:

1. It is a necessary truth that if God exists then God's non-existence is impossible.
2. There are only two kinds of impossibility: physical and logical.
3. From the fact that X's non-existence is physically impossible it follows that it is possible in principle for there to be a causal explanation of X's existence.
4. It is not possible in principle for there to be a causal explanation of God's existence.  
therefore,
5. It is a necessary truth that if God exists then God's non-existence is logically impossible.

This is an interesting and important argument. I have doubts, however, about its second premise. Perhaps there is a *tertium quid*: metaphysical impossibility. Let us say that the existence of X is metaphysically possible just in case there exists something that has the power to bring about the existence of X. Accordingly, the non-existence of X is metaphysically possible just in case there exists something that has the power to bring it about that X does not exist. Clearly, on this account, if God exists, his non-existence is not metaphysically possible—nothing has the power to bring about the non-existence of God. His non-existence is metaphysically impossible. Now metaphysical impossibility, so characterized, does not imply either physical impossibility or logical impossibility. So it seems we can allow a clear sense in which God's non-existence is impossible, without being forced to conclude that God's non-existence is logically impossible. In short, Dore's thesis that physical and logical impossibility are the "only kinds of impossibility there are" seems doubtful.

Dore dismisses a contingent, uncaused, first cause as a counter-example (it's impossible for there to be a causal explanation of the existence of a first cause) on the grounds that its non-existence is not *impossible*. But if there were such a being and nothing else existed with the power to bring about its demise, its non-existence would be metaphysically impossible in the sense I have suggested.

In Chapter VI Dore considers the claim that the existence of God is a logical possibility. He gives forceful arguments for the view that it is not enough to say that the claim is acceptable in the absence of a proof of God's necessary non-existence—especially if one wishes to convince the non-theist that God exists. Dore supports the thesis of this chapter by arguing that people have experiences of God and that it is not possible to experience what is logically impossible. He notes that his argument is successful only if people experience God *qua* a being

that which none as great is logically possible. Since he thinks this is what these people *mean* by 'God,' he concludes that they do so experience God. I'm rather doubtful that many religious people who claim experience of God do mean this by 'God.' Moreover, the principle that if I experience X and 'X' means 'Y' for me then I experience X *qua* Y seems doubtful. I might mean by 'Purdue University,' 'The University founded by John Purdue.' Although I've often experienced Purdue University, I don't think I've experienced it *qua* University founded by John Purdue.

Chapter VII is an impressive defense of Descartes's version of the Ontological Argument. Basically, Dore argues that 'God exists' expresses a *conceptual* truth, and since it therefore cannot be interpreted as the vacuous 'If God exists, then God exists,' it follows that God actually exists. He notes a criticism of mine to the effect that 'God exists' may be interpreted as the non-vacuous, conceptual truth, 'No non-existing object is God.' On the view I was advancing, a proposition of the form 'No non-existing object is an X' may be true without the proposition 'Some existing object is an X' being therefore true. If we define a 'magician' as 'an *existing* magician,' and suppose no existing thing is a magician, it's true, I argued, that no non-existing thing is a magician, and also true that no existing thing is a magician.

Dore argues that this view is conceptually incoherent, since if magicians are neither existing objects nor non-existing objects they would have to be impossible objects. But since the existence of magicians is logically possible it would be possible that logically impossible things (magicians) exist.

Of course, if *some object is a magician*, then that object is either a non-existing object or an existing object. The point of my argument was not that (on the supposition that no magicians exist) magicians are impossible objects. The point was that as a matter of contingent fact no object at all is a magician. Some possible non-existing objects are magicians, but none of those is a magician, and since no existing object is a magician, none of those is a magician. On the supposition that no magicians exist, the concept 'magician' is not satisfied by any object at all, existing or non-existing.

Dore is mistaken to ascribe to me the view that magicians are impossible objects. He is right, however, to sense an air of paradox in my view. It turns out (on the supposition that no magicians exist) that the proposition that it is logically possible that magicians exist is true, but the proposition that some possible object is a magician is false. For the latter proposition is equivalent to the proposition that some actual object is a magician.

On the view I presented, all Descartes's argument establishes is that no non-existing object is God. To conclude that God actually exists, it must be established that some possible object is God. And to establish the latter, more is required than to show merely that the concept of God is coherent. The concept of a

magician is coherent. But if no magicians exist, no possible object is a magician.

This is a fine book and is strongly recommended for use in advanced courses in philosophy of religion. Dore proposes to meet the atheist on mutually acceptable ground and to serve as a guide through quite difficult paths of reasoning to the land of theism. Along the way, even if one finds himself thinking that a particular path doesn't quite lead to theism, one meets with a number of cogent philosophical arguments, careful distinctions and illuminating discussions. Anyone with a serious interest in philosophical theology should come to grips with this thoughtful work.

*Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, edited by **Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff**. University of Notre Dame Press., 1983. 321 pp.

Reviewed by STEPHEN WYKSTRA, Calvin College.

In 1980-81, the Calvin Center for Christian Studies assembled a team to work "Toward a Reformed View of Faith and Reason"; whence these essays, by historian George Marsden, theologian David Holwerda, and philosophers William Alston, George Mavrodes, Alvin Plantinga, and Nicholas Wolterstorff. Not all these scholars are in the "Reformed tradition" of Calvin, Kuyper, and Bavinck; but each does care deeply about what this tradition offers current thinking about rationality and religious belief. This volume shows that it offers *much*, especially on something called "evidentialism." Wolterstorff, introducing the essays, says that in them "the evidentialist challenge of the Enlightenment is challenged and overcome." In this review I shall critically survey their counter-challenge.

Plantinga's "Reason and Belief in God" amplifies almost everything he has written on evidentialism over the last seven years. Many charge that belief in God is irrational because there is insufficient evidence for it. Theists often respond with arguments for theism, but Plantinga's way is different: he challenges the underlying supposition—"evidentialism"—that theism *needs* evidence. Against all evidentialists—theists and nontheists alike—he urges that theistic belief "can be entirely right, rational, reasonable, and proper without any evidence or argument whatever." More technically, Plantinga holds that theism is "properly" believed in a "basic" way, rather like the way we believe that others have feelings, or that there is an external world. (Thus, when Plantinga says theism can be proper "without any evidence whatever," he uses "evidence" in a narrow *inferential* sense: in a wider sense that includes "non-inferential" evidence, the theism Plantinga commends *is* based on evidence—which he calls "grounds.") Plantinga's first section, discussing Scriven, Flew, and other atheists, uses parallels