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Arguing With God

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Title: Arguing With God
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But I would speak to the Almighty,
And I desire to argue my case with God
(Job, 13, 3)

My favorite moment in all of literature occurs in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. Ivan Karamazov, dreaming or delirious, is arguing with the Devil. The Devil, however, is quite coherent, even eloquent. At one point, in response to an accusation, the Devil responds, "God forbid I should I philosophize!" (Dostoevsky 1970, p. 772. In Constance Garnett's and Robert McDuff's translations, it comes out closer to, "God save me [from philosophizing].") There's something about the image of the Devil appealing to God to save him from philosophizing that I find hilarious. And maybe a bit troublesome. But certainly deeply intriguing.

The role of the Devil in Judeo-Christian theologies is problematic. A central strand, however, is determined by Satan's role as "the Adversary." One thing the Adversary does is argue with God—and not just in the role of Devil's Advocate in the judgment of souls, but in the genuine give-and-take of rational debate. How can you argue with God? Surely, there could be no unconsidered counterconsiderations, no unanticipated objections, no dubious premises among the divine ideas, or, God forbid, any fallacies in the reasoning of a Being with all Perfections. So what could be the point of arguing when the outcome is foreordained? Why argue when you know going into it that it cannot *possibly* end with a "See? I was right and you were wrong"? If you find yourself arguing with omniscience, you must be wrong!

And yet the Bible includes many examples of arguing with God. Besides the Adversary, for whom arguing is part of the job description, many of the characters with whom God speaks argue: Abraham, Moses, Job, Elijah, Jeremiah, and David all argue with God, not to mention Jacob who wrestles with God physically and not just verbally. Moreover, subsequent literature also provides us with coherent, even deeply meaningful, examples. These range from the familiar *schmoozing* and bargaining of Sholom Aleichem's Tevye the Dairyman to the profound exchanges Dostoyevsky crafted between Ivan Karamazov and the Grand Inquisitor, both in the 19th century, and beyond them, in our own time, to the dark, adversarial, and personal challenges of Peter Shaffer's Antonio Salieri in *Amadeus* and Elie Weisel's post-Holocaust moral protests to God. I would like to juxtapose a couple of these in order to construct what I hope is a helpful matrix for thinking not so much about God, but about arguments. The extreme and distorted case of arguing with God sheds light, by contrast, on other sorts of unwinnable arguments, including, I believe, many philosophical arguments.

I. Moses.

The first case I want to consider, and the easiest to analyze, involves Moses. He argued with God when he offered reasons why he should not be the one chosen to lead the people out of Egypt — the Israelites will not believe you sent me, Pharaoh will not listen to me, I am not eloquent (*Exodus* 3,10-4,17). It does not take foreknowledge to expect that each reason Moses

could offer would be met with a cogent reply. The analysis is straightforward: one party offers a thesis (actually, a command, but assertions are not the only speech acts for which we can argue); an objection is raised by the second party and it is countered by the first; a second objection is raised, and it too is countered; a third objection meets the same fate; and finally there is acquiescence. One side in the argument is overmatched. God has the stronger argument. It cannot be defeated by any of Moses' objections. And God is the better arguer insofar as God can answer every objection to Moses' satisfaction. The result follows accordingly. Perhaps the lesson to be learned is that there is just no arguing with God.

In one sense, this is right: it is impossible to argue with God. There are, however, several senses available. Obviously there has to be some sense in which it is possible, if we grant that Moses did it and that there are other coherent stories to be told using this theme. The first sense that suggests itself is that what is impossible is winning an argument with God. (There is a counterexample to this at *Exodus* 32, 11-14. Moses apparently wins an argument with God insofar as God is persuaded not to destroy the Israelites who fashioned the Golden Calf.) But isn't that, by definition, each disputant's goal? That would make the act of arguing with God pointless. Or is the impossibility of arguing with God predicated on the impossibility of engaging God in argument? While we may argue with the absent and the dead, they do not argue back. They engage us; we do not engage them. A Transcendent God is altogether unreachable. Or does the impossibility have something to do with God's nature? You cannot argue with the weather, no matter how immanent a part of our lives it may be.

As Trudy Govier perceptively notes, the act of arguing involves an implicit acknowledgement of the possibility of disagreement about the question at hand. Writing on the genuine engagement that characterizes the sort of rational exchanges we hope for, she writes,

The practice of argument implies a recognition that there may be legitimate doubts about some of our beliefs and that other persons, *reasonable persons* with whom we stand in a *relationship* in virtue of the fact that we are speaking to them or writing for them, and they are listening to us or reading our work, can differ from us in their beliefs, judgments, values and opinions. (Govier 1999a, p. 47. The emphasis is in the original text)

That is, the act of engaging in argument puts the disputants into a personal relationship of approximate parity. There are three parts to this: the personhood of argument-mates, a personal relationship between them, and the parity of the disputants. All of these can be called into question when one of the arguers is God.

Some preliminary comments on argument analysis are needed. The word "argument" can refer to either the content of what someone presents or else to the communicative exchange, the episode in discourse. In the burgeoning literature of argumentation theory, these are typically distinguished as argument-1 and argument-2. (The distinction between argument-1 vs. argument-2 was originally made in O'Keefe 1977, pp. 121-128). The paradigm case of an argument in the first sense is a mathematical proof: given premises, explicit inferences, and a final conclusion. It is almost as if arguers were an optional extra. The extreme case of the second might be a longstanding feud over a long-forgotten slight: all conflict without substance or reasons. The arguments in which we find ourselves typically involve elements of both: we argue both about something and with someone.

Govier's point calls attention to the arguers, not just the arguments they present. The act of arguing presupposes that there is another person with whom we have a relationship that includes

the possibility of rational disagreement. We often provide that second voice to ourselves, so we can be, or fill the role of, that other person in our own arguments. Can God be that person?

Part of what is funny about arguing with God is the idea of God as an arguer. There is a tension between the more abstract, deistic concept of God developed in the universities and academies of the Ancient Greek and Medieval Latin philosophical traditions, and the more personal, theistic concept of God that was earlier presented by the Judaeo-Christian religious tradition. Tevye, rooted in one tradition, could argue with God, but he could also confide in God, negotiate with God, and even joke around with God. Imagine trying to *schmooze* with Spinoza's Substance-Itself, the epitome of the other tradition! Arguing with God presupposes that God is a person. Arguments are not abstract sets of propositions juxtaposed in logical space; they are instantiated in the complex relations between persons. (This has become a well-accepted tenet of argumentation theory, but it has not always been so, and its significance is debated. Gilbert 1997, esp. chapter 3, champions the idea that the social dimensions to argument must be prominent in argumentation theory.) Propositions do not argue any more than rocks or trees do. If we find an argument in the impersonal world, it is one more case of how we can find the strange in the ordinary, just as we can see a bicycle seat or a urinal as a work of art, or read a biography as a novel. (Perloff 1996, Chapter 2, discusses finding the strange in the ordinary in relation to Wittgenstein's discussion in the *Investigations* of "ordinary" language; Danto 1983 brings the notion of *reading-as* into clear focus. The notion of reading something *as an argument* is not explicitly addressed, but perhaps it should be.) For our part, we can argue *at* the world, but we cannot really argue *with* it.

Arguers are persons, then. And Moses' God was indeed a personal God. The relationship that the Ancient Israelites had with God was based on a Covenant, and a covenant presupposes that same kind of personal relationship. We cannot enter into a Covenant with Spinoza's impersonal God any more than we can argue with it. Interestingly, the Covenantal relationship is missing from, or altered in, the New Testament, and so, for the most part, is arguing with God. (If Jesus' cry on the cross, "Why hast thou forsaken me?" is read as an argument, then it is a notable exception. Jesus, of course, was Jewish.)

There is still something very odd about a mere human arguing with even a personal God that does not apply to, say, arguments that Gods might have among themselves. The disparity seems too great. But it is not only the difference between the disputants that generates the problem because there is no comparable problem in arguing with Zeus or Odin. The concept of an Omni-God that emerged in the Judaeo-Christian traditions is not one among many, and could not be. It is arguing with *this* God that seems pointless. More specifically, what is absurd about arguing with a personal but perfect God is not the idea of God giving reasons to humans, nor even the notion of God as judge hearing reasons from humans, but the image of humans offering reasons to God. What could we hope to accomplish?

Once we stop thinking of arguments as ordered sets of propositions, as a form whose ideal is realized in proof, then there is room for other, more helpful, models. It is absurd to argue with God, if that means setting forth a deductively connected chain of theses beginning from putatively true ones in order to establish the truth of another. Whatever epistemic value there might be in such an exercise for us, it would surely have none here. It would be pointless to present God with an argument of the first type, a logical proof. Are there any serious and interesting examples of someone trying to demonstrate something to God? (Ayer 1952, pp. 85-

86, citing Hans Hahn, offers the trope of a God altogether bored with any deductive system. There are some fantasies that have reversed the image: Deities spending (post-Gödelian!) eternity exploring the infinite realms of mathematics.) Arguments are not, in general, proofs, so argument analysis has to be more than the analysis of logical implication. The goals of argumentation cannot be assumed to be the same as those of proofs.

In that case, the act of arguing with God need *not* require that God is a person approximately like us. Moses does seem to have labored under that assumption, however. He had space to argue with God in part because absolute omniscience, epistemic infallibility, was not the defining—or even an especially prominent -- characteristic of the God of the books of *Genesis* and *Exodus*. That perfection was added (or, if you prefer, recognized) later. Still, more needs to be said because neither Moses, nor Abraham, nor Job, nor Jeremiah, nor any of the other arguers with God was under any delusions about telling God something new. God was at least sufficiently-knowing to be all-knowing for all practical purposes within the contexts of these arguments. But even absolute omniscience need not exclude argument. Elie Weisel's arguments with God are a counterexample because he presumes omniscience and still argues. Arguing is an interaction between persons that is part of the complex nexus of social relations. There is no reason to suppose that argumentation serves only logical and epistemological purposes, to the exclusion of political, ethical, religious, of other ends.

There is no arguing with God, if the purpose is to give God new knowledge. Job makes just this point about God's role as judge: "Will any teach God knowledge?" (*Job*, 21, 22.) That still leaves actions and attitudes as arguable points. Like absolute omniscience, absolute omnibenevolence, or *moral* infallibility, was not a prominent characteristic of God as portrayed in the Books of Moses. As Anson Laytner (1990) argues, when God has been taken to task in the literary and theological traditions, it has been over values and actions, not facts. Abraham's argument on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah, for example, was about justice, not about exactly how many blameless citizens actually lived in those cities. And Moses' successful argument with God during the incident with the Golden Calf was also about actions, not about the truth of certain propositions.

II. Job

Job's argument with God (, especially chapters 6-7. 9-10. 12-14, and 26-31, and God's response in chapters 38-41) is more notorious and more problematic. There are actually three different sorts of arguments in the *Book of Job*. First, there is God's argument with the Adversary, or Satan. That leads to their wager, and then to Job's travails. It is an argument whose disputants have comparable stature. Second, there are the arguments that Job has with his friends, defending himself against charges that he must suffer quietly under these burdens, that he must have sinned, or that he must not have been pious enough. These arguments, too, are between equals, but they foreshadow the final argument, Job's argument directly with God, in which Job rightly claims that he has been treated wrongly.

Job's argument follows what has been called the "law-court pattern" of argumentative prayers, a pattern established earlier in the *Bible* (See Laytner 1990, esp. pp. xiii-xxii and chapter 1). A complaint is brought before the judge, in this case God, against a defendant, in this case also God. The facts of the case are stated. Reasons are given substantiating the complaint, including such things as God's promises, the Covenant with Israel, and Job's "blameless and

upright” life--to use God’s own words from the argument with Satan. Finally, a petition for redress is submitted for judgment and action. God’s response in this case was manifestly inadequate from a juridical standpoint, and perhaps theologically as well. Moreover, it was also inadequate as an argument--logically, rhetorically, and dialectically. God pulls rank. The response, in essence, is “Who are you to argue with the great and powerful Yahweh?”-- an answer that is no better than “Who are you to argue with the great and powerful Oz?” when delivered by a displaced charlatan from Kansas. This might be read as an appeal to force of, well, Biblical proportions, but I think it is something else. It is more of a failure to engage in argument in the first place rather than a fallacy within an argument that is underway.

The distinction between failing to engage in an argument and committing a fallacy within in an argument is important. Job was no more successful in arguing with God than Moses was, but for different reasons. Job *tried* to argue with God, but God did not argue back. God’s response responded to Job, the arguer; it did not respond to Job’s argument. It failed to engage rather than missed the point. That is, God’s response was inadequate not because it was a bad argument, but because it was not an argument. It was a response of a different sort, more like walking away from an argument or filibustering to prevent debate than like arguing or debating illogically. The failure to engage in argument is not a fallacy, a logical error *per se* because ***if you do not argue, then you cannot argue poorly***. Failing to argue can be an argumentative failing nonetheless. Arguments, remember, are more than ordered sets of propositions. They are relations between persons, and so subject to extra-logical conventions and imperatives, including the social and ethical. In particular, they are relations in discourse, so they are subject to such linguistic conventions as Grice’s maxims and Peirce’s imperatives of rationality. (Grice 1975 is the *locus classicus* for the concept of conversational implicatures.) What is being suggested here is that the concept be extended to accommodate other speech acts in addition to assertions, and that argumentation may involve very different sorts of perlocutionary, if not also illocutionary, acts. In any case, the principle of cooperation should be read as sometimes mandating argument! The imperatives of rationality would certainly include William James’ “epistemological commandments” to believe the true and disbelieve the false, but also C. S. Peirce’s “Do not block the road to inquiry.” To Peirce’s “Thou shalt not” I would add a “Thou shalt,” viz., “Argue!” Maybe, then, there’s no arguing with God for altogether different reasons! Sometimes it might be because we dare not enter into such an argument, but sometimes because God refuses to argue with us.

A recent contribution to argumentation theory that I find helpful is the concept of a “model interlocutor” to help evaluate arguments. (The term and concept “model interlocutor” is taken from A. Blair and R. Johnson 1987.) Model interlocutors have the requisite background information relative to their communities, raise the right sorts of objections, are open to reason and appreciate the strength of an argument. Roughly, an argument is a good one if it will convince a model interlocutor, in parallel to similar references in epistemology and ethics to ideal observers or perfectly moral agents. The concept of a model interlocutor accommodates the insights that arguments presuppose arguers, and that arguers are always contextually situated in communities. It *needs* to include the insight that there are more argumentative failings than fallacies in reasoning. A truly model interlocutor would not just accept strong arguments and resist weak ones, but would also engage in argument when it is called for and refrain from argument when that is appropriate. Neither obsessive quibblers nor the willfully deaf qualify. When we need to argue, model interlocutors are there for us. Omniscience notwithstanding, and

despite those other perfections, God is not a model interlocutor, at least not for Job. Job asks only two things of God, prior to arguing: “withdraw thy hand far from me, and let not dread of thee terrify me.” If those conditions for arguing are met, Job continues, “Then call, and I will answer; or let me speak, and do thou reply” (*Job*, 13, 21-22). These are eminently reasonable minimal conditions for interlocutors in rational debate. (See also *Job* 23, 3-5.) All Job really wanted was a fair hearing. In the end, (*Job* 38-41), God does answer Job.

III. Abraham

One other Biblical story, involving Abraham, provides a good counterpoint to the arguments of Moses and Job. Abraham, back in *Genesis* set the precedent for arguing with God. Even that Knight of Infinite Resignation could summon up the gumption to argue with God on occasion. He tried, for example, to convince God not to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah in their entirety (*Genesis* 18, 23-33). As in Moses’ case, but not Job’s, the argument was unsuccessful because each objection was successfully countered. But at least the argument was engaged, again as for Moses but not Job.

It is, however, not this argument, but another episode that provides the revealing counterpoint. It is a case of something missing—like the dog that did not bark that allowed Sherlock Holmes to solve one of his cases (“Silver Blaze”). Abraham argued to save Sodom, but inexplicably, and *prima facie* shamefully, he did *not* argue with God when God commanded him to sacrifice his own son. This is a disturbing omission: an occasion where Abraham did *not* engage in argument but where it was surely called for (*Genesis* 22). Arguably, the residents of Sodom did something to deserve their fate; Isaac was innocent. Abraham’s failure to raise objections against God — a logical sin of omission rather than commission — is no less an argumentative failure than God’s refusal to respond to the objections raised by Job. The argumentative counterpart to Grice’s maxim of quantity has been breached, or, on some readings, flouted.

Why didn’t Abraham argue with God? It cannot be because he would not dare such an affront. He had already argued for the residents of Sodom. It cannot be because he did not have the motivation. Isaac was his beloved son. There is a mountain of commentary on the meaning of this episode, but not much directly on the missing argument. (There is, unsurprisingly, a *Midrash* on this, conjecturing that an argument would have been an appropriate response, and continuing to consider what an appropriate argument for Abraham could be. See Laytner 1990, p. 48, fn. 22.) To be sure, Isaac was a gift from God, so perhaps there is a proprietary relation justifying the call for his sacrificial return, but children are not property like sheep or goats. *Perhaps* God’s demand could, in the end, be contextually justified because the story makes a point about human sacrifice, religious rituals, and what was to differentiate Israelite worship of God from the neighboring tribes. *Perhaps* it could be justified by appeal to the notion of piety or obedience or God’s power. *Perhaps*, for each of these cases, but no opportunity for airing any possible justification was ever given, and some justification was manifestly necessary.

The point I want to make is that even if Abraham knew all of these possible justifications beforehand, and so knew beforehand that he was going to lose whatever argument he might offer, he still should have argued. He had an obligation to argue — a moral obligation, certainly, but a rational dialectical one as well — precisely because of the personal relationship he had with God. Their relationship was, among other things, dialogical. Abraham can be faulted here for

failing to argue, so he too falls short of model interlocutor status. Elie Weisel has suggested that Abraham and God were engaged in a game of high-stakes chicken, and that Abraham was calling God's bluff. In that case, the absence of argument flouted the imperative to argue to challenge God's command by implicature rather than directly by argument.

These are, then, all failed examples of arguing with God. Moses' weak argument was unsuccessful because it was defeated. Job's strong argument was unsuccessful because it was ignored. And the argument Abraham should have pressed was stillborn, and so never had the chance to succeed or fail. Abraham's failure differs in that it had nothing to do with losing. The failure was in not arguing.

But why, exactly? What sense are we to make of the idea that there can be a need for argument even when it is sure to lose? Could a losing argument still count as successful? No debate with God can be won, no proofs will surprise or teach God anything, but there are other reasons to argue. There is reason to go down swinging, rather than just going down.

Just as the model of arguments as mathematical proofs has to be abandoned as too constricting to accommodate the full richness of dialectical arguments, so too, we have to abandon the model of arguments as essentially win-lose, adversarial moments in order to accommodate the full social context and the broadly rational purposes of arguers.

IV. Tevye, Salieri, Weisel

This brings me to the main point, which is not about God or arguing with God, but about arguments generally and the specific questions of *why* we argue and how arguments end. There are many different purposes for arguing and many different ways for arguments to reach resolution. Winning and losing are not the only outcomes. There are other outcomes, like negotiation and compromise, disagreement with the promise of continued dialogue, or the suspension of belief and a commitment to further investigation. If an argument is trying to justify an action or explain a position, rather than demonstrate a thesis, then imparting *understanding* or earning an *acknowledgement* may be more appropriate goals than *persuasion*. There are other resolutions with their own criteria for success, so arguers should try to align their reasons for arguing with the desired closure. More attention needs to be paid to "exit strategies" for argument. (Govier 1999b raises the issue of the importance of receiving acknowledgement as an end of argument and how the recognition of that goal should inform how we argue) The impossibility of arguing with God assumes winning is the only successful outcome. (And also, of course, on particular conceptions of God.) When the circumstances are right, you can indeed argue with God.

Recall the distinction between arguments-1 and arguments-2. It is typically supposed that to succeed in the second of these, a dialectical argument with an adversarial element, you need either the better reasons, i.e., the stronger argument-1, logically, or the better presentation, rhetorically. With both the stronger reasons and the better presentation, you should win the day. That does not always happen, however. There is a third element, the *audience*. Even the most rhetorically gifted among us, armed with the strongest evidence, most compelling reasons, and most cogent arguments will not convince a biased jury, hostile observers, or an uninformed or uncomprehending crowd. Imagine arguing for legalized abortion--before the National Right To Life Party meetings, or critiquing the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum physics--for a class

of kindergartners, or pleading a defendant's case--in English to a jury of monolingual francophones. Regardless of its content and regardless of the performance, the English language defense is not a good argument in that courtroom. Arguments cannot be fully evaluated apart from their specific contexts. An adequate analytic account of an argument has to include at least these three factors: the arguer, the argument-1, and the audience. An adequate analytic account of *dialectical* arguments may have to consider each factor twice. The presented arguments-1 might dovetail, of course, reducing the analytic task. When that happens, it is all to the good, a tribute to the arguers, but it is not always so. Similarly, the disputants may themselves be each other's audience, but that, too, is not always the case. In political debates, the disputants often play to very different audiences, and the success of their arguments has to be judged accordingly.

This analytic framework provides a way to answer our questions. *Arguers* may have all sorts of motives for entering into arguments. There may, for example, be social agendas in effect. Arguing is a way of engaging another person, often negatively, but not necessarily. Arguing can serve a political purpose by challenging someone's authority, apart from the purported issue under discussion. An argument can serve epistemological ends as part of an effort to justify or explain oneself. For some philosophers, arguing seems to serve hedonistic purposes. The presented *arguments* also differ greatly, bringing to bear all the concerns that matter to us: political, ethical, theological, scientific, aesthetic, etc. And, as noted, arguers play to different *audiences*. Recall the debates in the Senate last year on censure as a replacement motion to the articles of impeachment. Democratic senators could argue for a censure motion knowing they would never have to vote on it, while Republicans could argue for impeachment, knowing that their votes would be safely ineffective. Who were these arguments for? Not the other Senators, certainly.

This points to a general criterion for argumentative success, connecting all the resolutions: *an argument is successful when it satisfies its audience*. If the audience is an opponent, that means winning the argument. If the audience is some hypothetical model interlocutor, success means producing a cogent argument. If the audience is oneself, then that means re-affirming that one's decision or conclusion is rational. Deductive validity satisfies just about everyone, but that is rarely what arguments are about.

Apply these distinctions to arguments with God. Who is the audience in each case? For Job, the audience is God the Judge, not God the defendant, but it is also we the readers of the *Book of Job*. The same is true for the others cases. Abraham has an obligation to argue not just for himself and on behalf of Isaac, but *to us*, the readers. We, the audience, are cheated. Similarly, Job argues in order register his protest, to go on record as objecting to his treatment. For that purpose, it is more important that his argument is loud and clear, and forceful and memorably eloquent, than that it persuades God. It needs to speak *to us* and *for us* more than it needs to speak *to God* and *for Job*.

Thus, at the end of this argument, we end up where philosophy starts, with Plato, because Job can be read as more than just the paragon of patience; he can be seen as a paradigm of that most Socratic of virtues, unquestioning faith... in argument! I believe that that is also the faith that Elie Weisel brings to his post-Holocaust arguments with God. He questions God and challenges God, but not as Salieri does, as an adversary. Rather, after the Holocaust, arguing with God is seen as the only alternative to severing all relations completely. No one expects to win an argument with God, but that does not make the act of arguing pointless. Faith in

argument is also the faith that one brings to philosophy. After all, in truth, does any one of us ever really expect to win — permanently and decisively — *any* of the sundry philosophical arguments in which we engage? If that is not altogether beside the point, at least it is not the whole point of arguing — or of philosophy.

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