NORMAN GEISLER'S NEO-THOMISTIC APOLOGETICS

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Norman L. Geisler has done an extraordinary thing in the contemporary world of apologetics. Discontent with the often uncritically-accepted Humean and Kantian analyses of Thomas Aquinas' theistic proofs, he has attempted a twentieth-century reconstruction of the cosmological argument based on "existential causality"—a concept he considers misunderstood and frequently confused with Leibniz' law of sufficient reason.

In doing this, he has gone against the tide of Protestant apologetics and attempted to bridge Protestant and Roman Catholic apologetics.[1] His work therefore is immensely important as a clarification of the Thomistic proofs for theism.

I. LEIBNIZ ON SUFFICIENT REASON

Leibniz divided reason into two laws: (1) contradiction, and (2) sufficient reason—which asserts that the existence of facts and the truth of propositions are contingent on "sufficient reasons."[2]

According to Geisler most apologists follow Leibniz, basing their cosmological argument on the law of sufficient reason and falling prey to at least two of Kant's criticisms: (1) infinite regress (of sufficient reasons) and (2) restriction to the conceptual realm. Kant argued that there is no way to pass from the conceptual to the ontological realms.[3] The ontological argument does not help here. The reason follows.

II. THE MISSING PREMISE IN THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

The traditional ontological argument of Anselm was stated in two forms.

The first form begins with the definition of God as an absolutely perfect Being. Since existence is a necessary predicate of perfection, it follows that God exists necessarily. Kant, however, denied that existence is a predicate on the ground that it adds nothing to the concept of a thing.

The second form premises the conceivability of a necessary Being and concludes with the necessary existence of this Being.

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[1]N. Geisler, "A New Look at the Relevance of Thomism for Evangelical Apologetics," *Christian Scholars Review* 4 (1975) 3. See also N. Geisler, "Analogy: The Only Answer to the Problem of Religious Language," *JETS* 16 (1973) 3.

[2]G. Leibniz, *Monadology and Other Philosophical Essays* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965) 32-39.

[3]I. Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956) 507.

At this point, Geisler breaks in with his "implied premise." He argues that "the ontological argument does not claim that whatever is *possible* to conceive as existing must necessarily exist but only what is *necessary* to conceive as existing must necessarily exist."[4] The mistaken major premise is that the rational is the real.[5] The premise that is true is that "the *rationally inescapable* is the real."[6] The "rational" guarantees the logically possible; only the "rationally inescapable" guarantees what is logically necessary.[7]

Is it true that "the rationally inescapable is the real"? This proposition cannot be affirmed on the basis that it is "rationally inescapable" for, as Geisler correctly observes, this would be circular reasoning.[8] Furthermore, he concedes, there might yet be a disjunction between logical necessity and the existence of God.[9] Two problems remain: First, Geisler must prove the major premise; second, he must prove that, granting the logical necessity of thought about the existence of God, it follows that God actually exists.

The proof of the major premise is tedious, but Geisler's clarity is impeccable. There are only three possible views concerning the relation of logic to reality: Logic either (1) cannot, (2) may not, or (3) must apply to reality.[10] The first view he dismisses as self-defeating since it is offered as a noncontradictory statement about reality—its truth implies its falsity. The second statement is equally meaningless because both "reality" and "possibility" have no meaning apart from logic. Consequently the third view must be true, because the other positions are not meaningfully affirmable.[11]

What does Geisler mean by "meaningfully affirmable"? Consider the following comparison:

> [I]t is *conceivable* that nothing is real (i.e., that nothing exists). But it is not *affirmable* that nothing is real (or exists), for one cannot deny his own reality (or existence).[12]

The inadequacy of rationalism is that existence is not logically necessary: "What is not contradictory," according to Geisler, "could possibly be true."[13] Centaurs, for example, are possible (conceivable) but not actual. But there is no logical justification for the claim that anything is real. He explains:

[4]N. Geisler, "The Missing Premise in the Ontological Argument," *RelS* 9 (September 1973) 290.

[5]Ibid., p. 291.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Ibid., pp. 291-292.

[9]Ibid., p. 292.

[10]Ibid.

[11]Ibid., p. 293. See also N. Geisler, *Philosophy of Religion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974) 98-100.

[12]Ibid., p. 100.

[13]N. Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976) 42. "True" means "existing" here.

It is always *logically* possible that nothing ever existed, including myself, the world, and God. . . . Nonexistence of everything is a conceivable state of affairs.[14]

Thus "logic can only demonstrate what is *possibly real* but not what is *actually real*."[15] Moreover, logic cannot be used to prove logic (which would be circular).[16]

If logic does not prove what is "actually real," then what does? Geisler suggests an existential proof. The test for truth is "undeniability" while the test for falsity is "unaffirmability." Accordingly:

Existence, at least my existence is actually undeniable. . . . I must exist in order to make the denial. Nonexistents do not affirm or deny; they are not and they speak not. Whenever I attempt to deny my existence, I catch myself in the process of making the denial.[17]

This is an existential proof, not a logical proof: "It is logically possible that I do not exist; but since I do exist, it is actually undeniable that I do exist."[18]

III. THE RECONSTRUCTED COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

The importance of the cosmological argument is stated by Geisler as follows:

[I]t makes no sense to speak about an act of God (i.e. a miracle) confirming that Christ is the Son of God and that the Bible is the Word of God unless of course there is a God who can have a Son and who can speak a Word. Theism, then, is a logical prerequisite to Christianity.[19]

In other words, if the reconstructed cosmological argument is invalid, then there is no proof for the truth of Christianity. It is crucial therefore to critically examine this reconstruction.

To repeat, evangelical scholarship has misinterpreted Thomas Aquinas. Thomas based his cosmological argument not on the law of sufficient reason—as did Leibniz—but on the law of existential causality. While the law of sufficient reason may be extended to an infinite regress without contradiction, "there cannot," Geisler asserts, "be an infinite regress of causes of being."[20]

The reconstructed argument begins with the truth, "I exist," based on the truth-test of existential undeniability (see previous section). But the argument hangs on this next statement: "I am not a necessary existence" because "I am a changing being."[21]

Now "changing being" does not imply "continuous annihilation and recreation."[22] There is a distinction, Geisler points out, between change in being and change of being. Change of being is annihilation and recreation. But change in being "denotes not . . . origination . . . but continuation."[23] Let us get some clarification:

[14]Ibid., p. 137.

[15]Ibid., p. 45.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Ibid., pp. 143-144.

[18]Ibid., p. 239.

[19]Ibid., p. 7.

[20]Ibid., p. 197.

[21]Ibid., p. 241.

[22]Geisler, *Philosophy* 193.

[23]Ibid., p. 197.

> No one receives his whole being at once, nor even the next instant of it. Each crea-
> ture has a present "being." Existence comes only a moment at a time.[24]

It is more appropriate to say that a creature is "existing," implying an empiri-
cal process.

Now for the cosmological argument: "Whatever has the possibility for nonex-
istence is currently caused to exist by another."[25] Potential existence must have
an external cause that causes the actualization of the potential. Geisler defines
"existential causality," therefore, as "the cause of the being of things and not the
cause of their becoming."[26] Obviously a potentiality cannot actualize itself since
"something cannot come from nothing; the mere potential for being cannot ac-
tualize itself"[27] since "potentialities do not exist independently, apart from the
actuality which can and does actualize them."[28] Therefore a self-caused being

> would have to be ontologically prior to itself. It would have to be simultaneously in a
> state of actuality and potentiality with regard to being, which is impossible.[29]

Now since potentials need an actualizer and the actualizer cannot be self-
causing, the First Cause must be an uncaused Being—Pure Actuality (no poten-
tiality). And "it should be stressed that all causality of existence is *current*. What
is called for is not a cause for my *becoming* but for my continued *be-ing*."[30] This
explains why causes of becoming regress indefinitely while causes of being do not.
Causes of becoming are temporal and precede their effects, but causes of being
are concurrent.

This First Cause is the infinite God. Theism has hopefully been established on
"the undeniable a posteriori fact that something exists (e.g., I exist)" and "the a
priori self-evident principle of existential causality."[31]

IV. DETERMINISM AND FREEDOM

Geisler's reconstructed cosmological argument has immediate implications
for the problem of determinism versus freedom.

Specifically, the delimitation of existential causality to being results in free-
dom of a sort: "I cause my own *becoming* (which is what freedom is), but only the
necessary Being is the cause of my be-ing."[32] Moreover, "we are the cause of the
becoming of good acts via our free choice, but the Creator is the cause of the *be-
ing* of all good."[33]

What about evil? Here Geisler makes some rather enigmatic statements. He
says, "God must be charged with the responsibility of creating the possibility of
all the evil that did actualize."[34] God, he says, is responsible for creating freedom,
which is the possibility of evil.[35] Later he adds that "freedom is the *cause* of

[24]Ibid., p. 222.

[25]Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* 242.

[26]Geisler, *Philosophy* 197.

[27]Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* 243.

[28]Geisler, *Philosophy* 225 n. 2.

[29]Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* 243.

[30]Ibid., p. 244.

[31]Ibid., p. 258.

[32]Ibid., p. 247.

[33]Ibid., p. 249.

[34]Geisler, *Philosophy* 317.

[35]Ibid., p. 329.

evil."[36] Historically, "free will is the reason why evil natures exist and it is not meaningful to ask why of the reason why."[37]

Is there any meaningful determinism left? According to Geisler, God "has determined that men be free" and "controls the world by what he knows men will freely do."[38] But, he insists,

> knowing what men *will* do with their freedom is not the same as ordaining what they *must* do against their freedom. . . . God may cause human free acts *indirectly* by way of his knowledge of what they will freely do; men cause them *directly* by way of what they choose to do.[39]

In contrast with Reformed theology, foreknowledge is not causative: God "permits" but does not "produce" evil; he "orders" but does not "originate" it; he can "foresee something *will* happen without foredetermining that it *must* happen."[40] Thus "sin is unavoidable, not because it is necessitated by God . . . but because it is known by God."[41] Also, "sin is inevitable in general but . . . each sin is avoidable in particular" because "fallen man has the God-*given* ability (whether he has received it or not) to resist each particular sin he encounters."[42]

Finally, Geisler follows Augustine and Aquinas in refusing to assign a metaphysical status to moral evil:

> Evil is not a real entity but it is a reality. Evil is not a thing but it is a real lack. Affirming that evil is no thing does not mean that evil is nothing at all. . . . It is the capacity or potentiality for something . . . the privation of something that should be there.[43]

For all this explanation, Geisler asks: "Why . . . did God allow the possibility of evil to be actualized?"[44] His chapter dedicated to the answer—that an imperfect world is the perfect means to achieve a perfect world—is not essential to the present discussion.

V. CRITIQUE

Geisler has attempted to prove that "the rationally inescapable is real" on the basis of the existential undeniability of the fact that "something exists"—only a possibility as far as logic is concerned.

Has he escaped circularity? When he says, "I must exist in order to make the denial. Nonexistents do not affirm or deny; they are not and they speak not," he is not affirming a necessary connection between speech and existence since all that makes speech significant is the subject, "I," which stands behind it. There is a connection here (i.e., identity) but it has nothing to do with the necessity of existence. As such, it is a fallacy. The underlying subject, "I," occurs as both premise and conclusion. (The same is true of Descartes's "I think; therefore I am.")

[36]Ibid., p. 339 (italics mine).

[37]Ibid.

[38]Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* 231.

[39]Ibid.

[40]Geisler, *Philosophy* 350, 340, 316.

[41]Ibid., p. 321.

[42]Ibid.

[43]Ibid., p. 346.

[44]Ibid., p. 345.

These assertions reduce to "I exist, therefore I exist," or, more simply, "I, therefore I." This is circular. To say, "I exist on the basis of existential undeniability," therefore, is no more than to say, "I exist on the basis of existence" or "I exist because I exist." This fallacy is implicit in such concepts of Geisler as "actual being," "actual truth," and "existential undeniability"—all of which are tautologies: "actual" meaning "existing," "truth" meaning "existence" and "existential" meaning "undeniable" (see, e.g., n. 13).

Furthermore, if existence and nonexistence (being and nothing) are contradictories, then it is logically impossible to conceive of things as nonexisting, contrary to Geisler's contention that it is logically conceivable that neither I, the world, nor God exist. To say that these "things" are "possible realities" is contradictory (the possible is not the real); to say that these are "actual realities" is as pleonastic as "existential undeniability." "Real existence" is a tautology—another way of saying "real reality." These artificial antitheses do not advance but destroy the "missing premise."

The Cosmological Argument. If the "missing premise" is circular, the cosmological argument is extrinsically fallacious. But does the argument have its own fallacies? Let us consider the Thomistic concept of potentiality.

"I am not a necessary existence," Geisler explained, because "I am a changing being" (see n. 21).

There is no causal inference here since nonnecessity and change are identical (synonymous); therefore one cannot prove the other. In any case, Geisler assumes that we are changing not just in thought, word and deed, but also in being.

But how is it possible to change in being? Change of being is clearly understood as annihilation or recreation, and this we do not do (fortunately). But Geisler never adequately defines change in being. At no point does he intelligibly explain "change in," "continuation of," or "moment by moment process of" as qualifiers of being. Being, Nothing, Annihilation and Creation exhaust the logical possibilities. But what other change, continuation or process—undefined synonyms—underlies being is outside the pale of logical reality. Furthermore, to denote "existence" as "continuation in being" or "continuation in existence" explains neither existence nor continuation.

Finally, to speak of God as "Be-ing" (*Philosophy,* p. 222, paragraph 2, 1. 26) seems to contradict the assertion that God is pure actuality, meaning not in process.

Geisler continues with a worse development of potentiality. He says, "What is but could possibly not be is only a potential existence."[45] What does he mean by attaching "potentiality" to existence? If something exists, it is actual and not potential. "Potential" or "possible" existence must be contradictory: "possible-actuality." Now if something "is," we may say that it is possible that that something might not "be" in the future; but to say that it both "is" and "could possibly not be" concurrently is contradictory. When God actualizes he creates out of nothing, but once there is some "thing" it is meaningless to speak of it as potential unless one qualifies as (1) the possibility of God annihilating the "thing" (2)

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[45]Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* 242.

in the future. Thus the potential is in God and in the future, not in the thing concurrently.

Finally, Geisler says that potentials are *"nothing* in themselves" and *"do not exist* independently," yet he inverts these statements with the counter-assertions that potentials exist in "the actuality which can and does actualize *them*," that "potentialities cannot actualize *themselves*," and that "the mere potential for being cannot actualize *it*self."

But there is no "it" or "them" in potentials, so the foregoing assertions reduce to the contradictory statement: "Nothing cannot actualize itself."

We know that "nothing comes from nothing," as Julie Andrews sang in *The Sound of Music*. But now Geisler seems to be saying that potentialities have an extrinsic existence in God, which makes one wonder whether God is Pure Actuality after all.

Determinism. God causes the "be-ing" of good, and the creature causes the "becoming" of good acts. This point is sound only if there is an adequate distinction between "be-ing" and "becoming." But Geisler has not and most likely cannot define "be-ing" (see previous section).

Besides, what would cause us to cause "becoming"? Geisler answers, "Free choice." But freedom explains nothing. The equal possibility of a will to choose either of two alternatives does not explain the actuality of the will choosing one of the alternatives. Yet Geisler says, "[F]reedom is the cause of evil." Freedom, however, is not a cause, and to speak of it as a cause is unintelligible. Cause can only be defined in terms of necessity. Geisler is forced to say, "Freedom is the necessity of evil," which is contradictory.

Moreover, it is meaningless to say that God has created the "possibility of evil." What is meant by the creation of possibility? What is the object of creation? There is no object; possibility is nothing. To say that God created freedom or possibility is to say that God created nothing.

Again, when Geisler says that God has "determined *that* men be free," he explains neither determinism nor freedom. To determine a "that" (men be free) without a "what" (object such as a concrete act, state, choice or event) is inexplicable. The "what" cannot be freedom, for the determinism of freedom is the determinism of nondeterminism, which is logically impossible.

Thus the assertion that "God may cause human free acts indirectly by way of his knowledge of what they will freely do" is contradictory. We could interpret this sentence in the following manner: "God may necessitate human nonnecessary acts indirectly by way of his knowledge of what they will unnecessarily do." Neither "cause" nor "cause . . . by way of knowledge" is explained in the context. Further ambiguity is created when Geisler speaks of "cause . . . by way of observation." What does this mean? How can cause be deduced from observation? There appears to be no connection at all.

It seems unnecessary to add to this discussion a critique of Geisler's metaphysics of evil. Frankly I cannot understand a "reality" that is not a "real entity" (contradiction; and "real entity" is a tautology), a "no-thing" that is not a "nothing" (contradiction), or a "real lack" (another contradiction?).

Determinism does have its problems. But to say that "it is not meaningful to ask why of the reason why" is merely an evasion of the issue. At least existential categories do not adequately refute the Reformed doctrine.

VI. CONCLUSION

It is the conclusion of this study that Geisler has not adequately defended the independence of ontology from logic, the cosmological argument, or freedom.

1. "Existential undeniability" is a tautology founded on the circular methodology of proving existence by existence.

2. The cosmological argument is based on the contradiction "possible-reality" or "potential (or possible) existence" and the tautology "real existence" or "actual 'real' reality."

Change in being is indefinable. To speak of potentials as intrinsically nothing but extrinsically something is contradictory no matter how you juggle the terms. The antithesis between Being and Nothing is absolute.

3. Finally, freedom cannot be defined in any context of determinism.

The distinction between "be-ing" and "becoming" is invalid. Possibility, freedom, potentiality (e.g., "God-given ability") can never account for certainty, necessity or actuality. The latter cannot be derived from the former.

The creation of freedom or possibility is meaningless. Equally objectionable is the creation of a "that" without a "what." "Thats" alone are increate; every creation is the creation of an object. The determinism of nondeterminism (freedom or possibility) is also contradictory. And, finally, cause by way of knowledge of observation is meaningless.

4. In summary, the attempt to construct a model beyond "the rational is the real" by multiplying rational and existential categories winds up in hopeless contradiction or tautology. There is no more "actual (real) reality" versus "possible reality" than there is "rational (logical) logic" versus "irrational (illogical) logic."

On Geisler's own admission, then, Christianity has fallen because theism has fallen.