

Issue 2 – What Constitutes Good Proof? Ron Nash

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## What Constitutes a Good Proof?

by Ronald H. Nash

[T]he phrase *good proof* can be used in two different ways. On the one hand, we could say that a good proof is a good (sound) argument that any reasonable person should accept. We might call this the objective notion of proof. While in many contexts, this is a perfectly legitimate notion of proof, it fails to capture the essence of what we take to be proving something in other contexts. Most of us, I imagine, have been in situations where we offered perfectly good arguments (or so we thought) that perfectly reasonable people failed to accept. Was there anything wrong with the people who were unconvinced by our argument? It would be hard to justify such a conclusion *in all* such cases. Or was there something wrong with our argument? Not if it really was sound.

Fortunately, there is another way of understanding the notion of a good proof. In this second sense, we can say that a good proof is a good (sound) argument that actually leads another person to accept its conclusion. In other words, in order to be a good proof (in this second sense), an argument must not only satisfy certain logical criteria, it must also meet an important *psychological* test; it must actually succeed in persuading someone to accept the conclusion. Consider the strangeness of a situation where a person responds to an argument by saying, “Although you have offered a good proof for your position, I remain unpersuaded.” In this subjective sense of *proof*, any argument (even a good one) that fails to persuade its targeted audience falls short of being a good proof. A good proof is an argument that works.

Note several other points about this subjective notion of proof. For one thing, *proofs are person-relative*. This claim actually says two things. (1) *Proofs are relative*, which is simply

to admit the obvious, namely, that the same argument may function as a proof for one person and result in little more than contempt from someone else. (2) *Proofs are relative to individual persons*. Even when an argument is directed to some large audience, the people in that audience must always respond as individuals. And their response will reflect varying features in their past and present personal history. In fact, we could take this point even further and state that proofs are relative to individual persons in particular circumstances. Had someone presented one of the more complicated arguments for God’s existence to me when I was too young or too unprepared to appreciate it, the argument would undoubtedly have failed as a proof. Before an argument can function as a proof, any number of conditions must be satisfied. The person must understand what is being said; he must “see” that the key claims in the argument are true; he must believe that the argument is sound; and he must not have a strong emotional aversion to claims made in or implied by the conclusion.

All of this is to say that proofs must pass tests that are both logical and psychological. No argument can become a proof *for some person* until it persuades that person. In the real world, unfortunately, the logical and psychological requirements we have noted often get separated. While many perfectly good arguments fail to persuade large numbers of people, many perfectly bad arguments persuade people by the millions. Examples of the latter are readily available in television commercials and the speeches of politicians. As experience so clearly shows, any argument may function as a proof with some person or other. So let us agree that no proof (that is, an argument that has persuaded someone) can be a *good* proof unless it is also a

good argument. But our analysis also forces us to admit that no good argument can also be a good proof unless it also persuades someone to accept its conclusion.

Given the person-relative nature of proofs, then, it seems highly unlikely that there is any such thing as a proof for God's existence that will convince everyone. Perhaps we should approach cautiously the efforts of theologians and philosophers who seem to be seeking arguments that will prove the existence of God to *everyone*.

George Mavrodes suggests that we view proofs in the same way we look at tools.<sup>1</sup> Some people become so personally attached to their proofs that they feel threatened when those proofs fail to gain universal acceptance. But, Mavrodes observes, this is not how we react when we find that a particular tool (a hammer, let us say) cannot do a job as well as some other tool. What we do is temporarily discard the first tool and look for another more suited to the job at hand. Mavrodes suggests we adopt the same attitude toward our proof. If a proof works, that's fine. But if it doesn't, discard it and look for another. People shouldn't lose confidence in their arguments simply because some other person fails to find them convincing. We shouldn't become so personally attached to our arguments that we cannot set them aside for the sake of something better. Some people evidence stress when some pet argument is rejected by others. Some even come to doubt the beliefs their arguments were thought to support. But why would anyone in his right mind allow the simple fact that someone else rejects one of his arguments to produce doubt in his own mind? Why allow the noetic problems of other people to act as constraints on one's own intellectual life? Even should I fail to discover an argument that proves God's existence (or the truth of some other essential Christian belief) to some person, it is doubtful that anything of philosophical significance would follow.

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**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup>See George Mavrodes, *Belief in God* (New York: Random House, 1970), chap. 2. In order for some argument to be cogent for some person such as Jones, two conditions must be met: (1) the argument must be sound; and (2) Jones must know that the argument is sound. If some argument is sound and Jones fails to recognize its soundness, the argument will not be cogent for *Jones*. Obviously, the same argument may be cogent for one person and not cogent for another.