

36 arguments for the existence of God

R. Goldstein

April 4-5, 2010

Rebecca Goldstein is a philosopher and novelist, who in her career has weaved philosophy with fiction writing, supposedly to convey the rather dry and abstruse insights of academic philosophy to a more general public. *36 arguments* is her latest. In an appendix she goes through 36 arguments purporting to prove the existence of God, showing their intrinsic flaws. This is not a very demanding exercise, and any competent mainstream philosopher should have no problem rejecting such audacious schemes. Audacious, especially from a religious point of view, because it makes the existence of God somehow a matter of permission given by human reasoning, the faith in which necessarily must predate faith in God. Now when one speaks about God, it seems as if it is clear to anybody what is meant by God, although what can be achieved by such abstracts argument cannot really go beyond the notion of a fairly abstract entity, such as Truth, or Spinozas God. The author acknowledges this in the appendix, admitting Spinozas argument, which is really that of a rational mystic, and concluding that God exists, but it is an atheistic God. Supposedly the fictional part is meant to illustrate the question of faith and religious feeling in a way that a purely rational survey of the standard arguments does not manage, but I fail to see how it really does.

The fictional part is written competently, and comes across as a mixture of Philip Roth and David Lodge, authors one suspect she has been strongly influenced by. It is a narrative that is jumbled in its chronology, a standard trick to ease the demands on the readers attention span, and provide delightful surprises. I suspect that a chronological account would have been much more tedious. It is part academic satire of the light-hearted variety we are familiar with from Lodge, part a rumination on Hasidic Judaism, in which the author invents a Hasidic community along the Hudson - New Walden, meant to be an analogy to the Pennsylvania Dutch. The academic part has its stock-character. The protagonist - Cass Selzer, is a middling professor on religious psychology at a minor institution, which in midlife finds his work to be of immense topical interest and is elevated to National status. His girlfriend, a mathematical psychologist using game theory and rational choice to get to the heart of human psychology; a former girlfriend an anthropologist with an interest in eternal physical youth, and also fleetingly recaptured a French poet who grew up in Bures-sur-Yvette. More interestingly though might be the figure of Kappellen, who has been lured from Columbia to constitute the entire department of Human Value as an Extremely Distinguished Professor. He is of course an egomaniac, whose graduate students never finish, and who has no contact whatsoever with the outside academic world, but whose interests become more and more rabbinical. One may speculate whom could have been the inspiration, the name of Harold Bloom suggests itself. The other part is a description of the Hadisic religious community, which remarkably contains a child math prodigy, who, when growing up is facing an almost irresolvable problem, whether to continue the tradition of being the Rabbi and the spiritual leader, or whether to pursue a promising mathematical

career. The author indicates that he choses the former, and are we to understand that she approves? The protagonist wins a debate against an arrogant economist, a former co-worker of his girl-friend. His euphoria, however, comes to an abrupt end, when he proudly shows his high-shot girlfriend his invitation letter to Harvard. Instead of being overjoyed, as he had hoped, she feels outcompeted, and on unfair grounds to boot, and breaks up then and there. (But one does expect that he will tie up with his previous girlfriend, whom his mother likes as well.)

It takes a day to read the book. Is it worth it? As noted the author is competent to spin a yarn, but she is hardly a new voice. Her attempts to infuse philosophical ideas in her story are in my opinion rather superficial, not going beyond the Lodge level (although in the concluding debate she manages to provide her protagonist with a coherent script and win an easy victory over a man predictably made of straw.) In fact they are mostly on the name- and fact-dropping level. She obviously possess erudition, but it does not weigh lightly on her sleeves, instead it is manifested through undigested lexicon-like notes pasted on the narrative.

Artistically the book fails.

April 5, 2010 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se