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HOW TO PROVE THE EXISTENCE OF A SUPREME BEING?¹

Summary: This essay undertakes the task of unravelling the history of the concept of the “Supreme Being” from the beginnings of Greek philosophy to the emergence of Christianity, with a special attention to a system of argumentation meant to demonstrate the existence – and eternity – of such a being. Referred to here as the “gradation argument”, it is related to the ontological proof, and thus our inquiry belongs to the discussion about the prehistory of the latter. The key authors in the development of the argument discussed are Xenophanes, Plato, Aristotle, and Cleanthes, but I devote a short excursus to the presence of the concept of the Supreme Deity in pseudo-Pythagorean and Middle Platonist authors, and to the epistemological aspect of the concept that connects it with the *via eminentiae*. Besides the historical inquiry, I examine the validity of the proof and propose a mathematical model that helps us to see its merits and limits.

Key words: Theology, theism, proofs for the existence of God, ontological proof, Xenophanes, Plato, Aristotle, pseudo-Aristotle, Cleanthes, Zeno, [Onatas], Albinus, Maximus of Tyre, Cicero.

8th July 1794 was meant to be one of the most distinguished dates in human history. On this day, initiated by Robespierre, the religious and cultic reforms of the Republic were solemnly introduced. The feast of the Supreme Being inaugurated the series of the new cultic days, that of the *décadis*. To address the question of why the ceremony organised by David in Tuileries Gardens turned into a fiasco, and why the glorious statue of Virtue emerged with a smoky face, is not among the goals of this paper. I am rather interested in the possible arguments behind the rational religion proclaimed on that day.

The feast had been instituted by the Convent a month earlier. The decree did not, however, order the feasts alone. In an unusual way, it ratified two postulates of religious philosophy: the existence of the Supreme Being, and the immortality of the soul.² Unfortunately, the honourable legislators did not observe Plato’s advice in the

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² See M. BOULOISEAU, J. DAUTRY, G. LEFÈBVRE, and A. SOBOUL, eds., *Ouvres Maximilien Robespierre* (Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1969), vol. X, 462–465.

Laws concerning the law against *asebeia*³, and, unlike him, they did not attach any reasoning to the article. Nonetheless, from the speech of Robespierre preceding the vote, we can obtain a few ideas about the possible reasons.⁴ Even this thrilling oration makes recourse, for the most part, to arguments *ad hominem* (i.e., that only the enemies of the New Order and people of loose morality deny the existence of the Supreme Being), and where it comes closest to a philosophical argument, it is by the reference to the *consensus sapientium*⁵ and a version of the ontological argument: the postulate argued for is too beautiful not to be true (or, to formulate it more properly, it is not according to nature that something unreal would be more beautiful and useful than something real).⁶ In its totality, however, the speech – not counting the allusions to actual politics – is based on classical references. The author identifies himself chiefly with the Stoics, especially with their polemics against the Epicureans.⁷ This is confirmed by the fact that according to the decree proposed by Robespierre, one among the *décadis* should be dedicated to Stoicism. Moreover, each of the rest of the feasts is devoted to a personified virtue, which again reminds us of the religious philosophy of the Stoa, where cultic gods besides the one cosmic god are reduced to his personified aspects and activities.⁸ Thus, I do not propose here to trace all the direct sources of Robespierre or the ones mediated by Rousseau, but aim only at presenting the Antique background behind the idea of the Supreme Being, and especially the arguments for it.

I. THE CONCEPT

I 1. The Aristotelian definition

The definition of God as the “Supreme Being” can be traced back to Aristotle. His exact wording in *Metaphysics* Λ is the following: “God is the supreme/best eternal being” (ζῶον αἰδίων ἀριστον).⁹ Although this is articulated in the context of describing god in terms of the νόησις νοήσεως, its origin is to be sought elsewhere. As a concept of god, it can be distinguished from the concept of a cosmic god (*Dieu cosmique*), which defines him as the cause (or specifically mover) of the world. This latter concept is bound up with the cosmological/teleological proofs, while the idea of the Supreme Being is coupled with another system of argumentation, one that is related to the ontological proof and will be referred to here as the “gradation argu-

³ Plato, *Laws* X. 885ce.

⁴ “Sur les rapports des idées religieuses et morales avec les principes républicains, et sur les fêtes nationales” in Maximilien Robespierre, *Textes choisis*, intr. and notes by Jean POPEREN (Paris: Éditions Sociales, 1958) vol. 3, 155–180.

⁵ Robespierre, *Textes choisis*, 169.

⁶ Robespierre, *Textes choisis*, 167.

⁷ Robespierre, *Textes choisis*, 170.

⁸ Diogenes Laertius VI 147; Cicero, *ND* I 15. 40 (Chrysippus); II 23. 61–62; 26. 66; III 25. 64.

⁹ *Met* Λ 7. 1072b28–29.

ment”.¹⁰ It has in common with the ontological argument the notion of the supreme. We shall also see that in this discourse the other term of the Aristotelian definition, the ‘eternal’ (i.e., eternally existing), turns out to be the consequence of the attribute ‘supreme’. Thus our inquiry belongs to the ongoing discussion of the prehistory of the ontological argument.¹¹

1.2. Xenophanes

The pseudo-Aristotelian treatise *On Xenophanes* attributes to Xenophanes both the concept under investigation and the related argument. Elsewhere I have argued that this treatise forms a single work with two other discourses, *On Melissus* and *On Gorgias*, and can be dated to the period between the third and first century BC.¹²

¹⁰ In the case of the passage from Cicero’s *ND* discussed below (p. 214–215), P. Boyancé uses the expression “l’argument dit de l’échelles des êtres”; see Pierre BOYANCÉ, “Les preuves stoïciennes de l’existence des dieux d’après Cicéron,” *Hermes* 90 (1962): 60.

¹¹ On the history of the question of the ontological argument before Anselm, see Jacques BRUNSCHWIG, “Did Diogenes of Babylon Invent the Ontological Argument,” in *Papers in Hellenistic Philosophy* (Cambridge: UP, 1994), 171 n. 2.

¹² “Unus et omnia: Kozmológiai-teológiai tárgyú értekezések a hellenisztikus kori peripatetikus irodalomban” [Unus et Omnia: Cosmo-theological Treatises in the Peripatetic Literature of the Hellenistic Period] Ph.D. Diss. Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest, 1999. I have argued extensively against Mansfeld that the author would be a neopyrrhonist: Jaap MANSFELD, “De Melisso Xenophane Gorgia: Pyrrhonizing Aristotelianism,” *Rheinisches Museum* 131 (1988): 239–276, cf. *id.*, “Historical and Philosophical Aspects of Gorgias’ ‘On What is not’,” in *Gorgia e la Sofistica: Atti del convegno internazionale (Lentini–Catania 12–15 dic. 1983)*, ed. L. MONTONERI, F. ROMANO. *Siculorum Gymnasium*, no. 38 (Catania: Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia Università di Catania, 1985), 243–271; *id.*, “Theophrastus and the Xenophanes Doxography,” *Mnemosyne* 40 (1987): 286–312 and *id.*, “Compatible Alternatives: Middle Platonist Theology and the Xenophanes Reception,” in *Knowledge of God in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. R. VAN DEN BROEK, T. BAARDA and J. MANSFELD. *Études Préliminaires aux Religions Orientales dans l’Empire Romain*, no. 112 (Leiden: Brill, 1988), 239–276. The choice of subject, the method and the vocabulary of the author can be well explained on Aristotelian grounds. The author seems to practise Aristotelian dialectics. He may be influenced by the Megarians (Mario UNTERSTEINER, “Senofane e Melisso nel De Melisso, Xenophane, Gorgia. Una polemica Megaraica?,” *Antiquitas* 8 (1950): 22–28) or the sceptical Academy (H. DIELS, “Aristotelis qui fertur de M.X.G. libellus: Praefatio” *Abhandlungen der Königlich Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* (Berlin, 1900): 10–12) in finding his main interest in this field of Aristotelian learning, as Lyco was also known as a rhetor rather than a philosopher (cf. Cicero, *Fin* V 5.13; DL V 65–66, though according to V 68 Lyco was a student of the dialectician Panthoides, who became a target of Chrysippus’ criticism: *ibid.* VII 193). Nonetheless, the typical vocabulary of the Sceptics is totally absent from the treatises, which is especially conspicuous in the case of *On Gorgias*, where the author has ἀγνωστον for Sextus’ ἀκατάληπτον, which becomes standard in sceptical and anti-sceptical discourse from Arcesilaus onwards. At one point the author calls a theory mentioned but finally rejected by Aristotle (*GC* A 10. 327b30sq) “probable” (εἰκός *M* 977a4–10, for another use of probability see 975a6–7). Although he does not use the Carneadean term (πίθανον) here either, one may again assume an influence on his attitude from the sceptical Academy. The author is strikingly ignorant of some Aristotelian esoteric passages, and especially metaphysics seems to be alien to him (e.g., he in *X* 978a16–20, contrary to *Phys* Θ 10. 267b19–24, cannot conceive that the divine is without magnitude, although has exegetical and eristical reasons for excluding this solution). He seems to be interested only in such physical theories as that of empty space (*M* 976b14–19) and mixture (*M* 977a4–11), that were extensively discussed under Strato (fr. 54–67). With this description of the attitude of the *MXG* in mind, one may recall Strabo’s words on post-Theophrastean Aristotelians, who, with little knowledge of the esoteric writings, restricted philosophy to dialectics (θέσεις ληκυθίζειν),

Nonetheless the treatise *On Xenophanes* seems to be the most original, while the other two – conceivably with a lost treatise *On Zenon* – are probably closely based on discourses with identical titles mentioned in the Hellenistic catalogues of the writings of Aristotle. Correspondingly, the accounts of the Presocratics in the other two tracts seem to be fairly reliable,¹³ while the summary of Xenophanes' theology in *X* is openly in conflict with Aristotle's words in *Metaphysics A*.¹⁴ Here I am concerned only with the question of how far the version of the gradation argument presented in *On Xenophanes* can be traced back to Xenophanes or Aristotle, and what is the position of this treatise in the history of the problem under investigation.

The train of thought has been to some extent muddled in the account of *De Xenophane*, but it can be unravelled in the following way. The Xenophanes of the reconstruction identifies the Existent with God and thus in lines 977a14–23 argues not for the existence but only for the eternity of his god. While proving it, he denies generally that anything existing can change for the better or the worse. Although in this context he does not operate with the concept of the Best Being – unlike Plato or Aristotle, who do so in a related argument, as we shall see –, in the following section (ll. 23–36) he bases his proof of the uniqueness of god on the concept of the supreme being.

Here I have to add a brief terminological excursus. In Greek the ἀμείνων-ἄριστος (cf. ἀρετή: virtue, excellency), the βελτίων-βέλτιστος, and the κρείττων-κράτιστος (cf. κράτος: power, supremacy) form-pairs can all be considered as comparative and superlative forms of ἀγαθός (good). Of these Aristotle applies the first in

and even in the revival of the early first century BC “called most things probable” (τὰ πολλὰ εἰκότα λέγειν): *Geographica* XIII 1,54,26–30. Contrary to Barnes and encouraged by the *MXG*, I take these words at face value: cf. Jonathan BARNES, “Roman Aristotle,” in *Plato and Aristotle in Rome*, ed. Jonathan BARNES and Miriam GRIFFIN (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 2 n.1. On *X* see also n. 14 on p. 206.

¹³ For a general assessment of the reliability of *X* as a source on Xenophanes see Jürgen WIESNER, *Ps.-Aristoteles, M.X.G. Der historischen Wert des Xenophanesreferats: Beiträge zur Geschichte der Eleatismus*, (Amsterdam, 1974); and P. STEINMETZ, “Xenophanesstudien,” *Rheinisches Museum* 109 (1966): 13–73. For the assumption that *G* is based on a hypomnematic work of Aristotle with the same title, see, e.g., Hans Joachim NEWIGER, *Untersuchungen zu Gorgias Schrift über das Nichtseiende*, (Berlin–New York: de Gruyter, 1973), 2. n. 6. There has been little discussion about *M*, since it squares reasonably well with what we know about Melissus from fragments of his own words, although an indirect source is likely here, too.

¹⁴ *Met A* 5. 986b18sq. Nonetheless, there is no negative theology presented in *X*, contrary to Mansfeld. The “neither finite nor infinite, neither moving nor unmoved” postulate is based on a misunderstanding of Theophrastus' proposition (see Xenophanes A 31) that Xenophanes “did not assert either that it was finite or infinite, moving or unmoved”. The Greek usage of οὐ φημι is ambiguous enough to warrant such a misunderstanding. In the background one should not look for contemporary theories on negative theology, but dialectics. Mansfeld has rightly drawn attention to the dialectical exercise in Plato's *Parmenides*. Further, Carneades indeed advances a strikingly similar argument about god (though the conclusion he intimates is that there can be no god: Sextus Empiricus *M IX* 148–51; 178; 180sq. cf. Cicero, *ND III* 30.34). The reasoning of the lemma attributed to Xenophanes in *X* is a dialectical reconstruction based on Eleatic arguments: not infinite following Parmenides, not finite following Melissus, not moving following both. The argument furnishing the “unmoved” attribute is produced by substituting the relevant terms in the “infinite” argument, as there is a similar connection between the “finite” and “moving” arguments.

the definition, while the text examined now uses the other two. This difference, however, is irrelevant to the structure of the argument, and the corresponding variants, both in Greek and in English are interchangeable.

What is it, then, that we can attribute reasonably to Xenophanes from the reconstruction of his thought as we read it in pseudo-Aristotle? At least the concept of the Supreme Being, since fr. B 23,1 states that there is

One God, the greatest among gods and men.

However, Mark Edwards has questioned the authenticity of the fragment,¹⁵ which has been preserved through Christian mediation, and has suspected a Jewish-Christian forger in the background. I have nothing to say about the metrical problems of the second line of B 23,¹⁶ the henotheist idea – conceiving an outstanding, or unique god as opposed to the single God of monotheism – expressed in B 23,1 fits too well with the standard theological position of Greek thinkers, and is not appropriate to a Jewish or Christian forger. Moreover, the message of the fragment is well in accordance with frs. B 24–6, which are transmitted through non-Christian authors, Sextus Empiricus and Simplicius. Although these belong rather to the discourse on the cosmological concept of God, they describe at the same time what the supremacy and uniqueness of the “One God” consists of. From our perspective it does not count that in B23 Xenophanes’ metaphorical language operates with the relation “greatest” (μέγιστος), unlike the account of pseudo-Aristotle, who uses our standard variations of best/supreme. More remarkable is the fact that the pseudo-Aristotelian Xenophanes argues for the monotheistic position (which would suit a Jewish/Christian forger better). Nonetheless, one may note that the god of B 24–6 does not seem to exhibit solely quantitative differences compared to other gods and men, and thus the reconstruction of pseudo-Aristotle may be justified in its ideas, even if not in its words.

Thus we have detected the idea of the Supreme Being in Xenophanes. What is then the case with the argument pertaining to it? Here the preserved fragments and other testimonies hardly support the reconstruction of pseudo-Aristotle. In order to say more than this, we have to start with the proof of the eternity of God. That the Supreme God is eternal for Xenophanes is testified by fr. B 26,1:

He stays eternally in the same place moving nothing.

This is confirmed by a testimony from Aristotle in the context of polytheism: those who teach the birth of gods fall into the same ungodliness as those who speak about their death.¹⁷ A late text, the pseudo-Plutarchian *Stromata* adds an argument to

¹⁵ M. J. EDWARDS, “Xenophanes Christianus?,” *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 32 (1991): 219–228.

¹⁶ Nonetheless I should like to remark that the word δέμας, which Edwards considers suspicious, is used by Critias B25,33 about the heavens, the dwelling place of gods, which, in one understanding of Aristotle’s testimonium on Xenophanes in *Met* A, is exactly the supreme god of Xenophanes. Besides, Critias B17–19 contains an allusion to Xenophanes B 24.

¹⁷ Xenophanes A 12 = *Rhet* B 23. 1399b5. (cf. A 13 [*ibid.* 26. 1400b5; Plutarch, *de Is. et Os.* 70. 379B; *de superstitione* 13. 171E; [*Apophth. Lac.*], 26. 228E: gods must not be mourned for).

this claim.¹⁸ The proof is adduced, however, not in the context of theology but in that of ontology: what-is is eternal. In attributing this postulate and its demonstration to Xenophanes, pseudo-Plutarch follows a tradition already present in Plato¹⁹ that appears to project back later Eleatic (Parmenidian) doctrine on Xenophanes. Moreover the characteristic feature of the argument in the *MXG*, which operates with the impossibility of something being generated from something inferior/superior or equal – and thus differentiates the pseudo-Aristotelian Xenophanes from Parmenides and Melissus – is missing from pseudo-Plutarch. Whether this distinctive form of the argument can be traced back in some sense to Xenophanes, I cannot decide. At any rate, it is ancient enough, since Plato uses it in the theological inquiries of *Republic* II in the context of polytheism,²⁰ which would be at least perfectly suitable to Xenophanes, as shown by the above mentioned Aristotelian testimony.

Concerning the demonstration of the second postulate, that God is one, we have no source independent of pseudo-Aristotle. The premise of the argument – that gods cannot be superior or inferior to each other – can be found in pseudo-Plutarch as well as in the Euripidean lines apparently paraphrasing Xenophanes, including his B 11:

For my part, I do not believe that the gods indulge in unholy unions; and as for putting bonds on hands, I have never thought that worthy of belief, nor will I now be so persuaded, nor again that one god is naturally lord and master of another. For the deity, if he be really such, has no wants; these are miserable tales of the poets.²¹

The claim of the “divine democracy” is completed – in pseudo-Plutarch as well as in Euripides – with the assertion that gods need nothing (*δεῖται ... οὐδενός/μηδενός*), i.e., that they are perfect²² as in the above mentioned theological section of Plato’s *Republic* II.²³ Both ideas can thus be reasonably attributed to Xenophanes. The demonstration itself, however, seems to be a later reconstruction, and we shall be able to detect its source: the *de philosophia* by Aristotle.

I 3. Plato

I will not undertake here the task of systematizing Plato’s complex theological ideas, as several authors have discussed since Antiquity “who is God according to Plato.”²⁴ I note only that both the idea of the Supreme God and the demonstration of

¹⁸ Xenophanes A 32 = [Plutarch], *Stromata* 4.

¹⁹ Xenophanes A 29.

²⁰ 380C–381D.

²¹ *Hercules* 1341–6, translation by E. P. COLERIDGE, source: www.perseus.tufts.edu.

²² For a discussion of the source-value of Pseudo-Plutarch and Euripides see József MARTICSKÓ: Három új Xenophanész-fragmentum: Rekonstrukciók a 32. testimónium szövegéhez [Xenophanes: Three New Fragments] *Magyar Filozófiai Szemle* 36 (1992): 43–57, with an English summary on p. 57.

²³ «ὁ θεός γε καὶ τὰ τοῦ θεοῦ πάντα ἄριστα ἔχει» 381b4.

²⁴ Here I mention only a few well-known modern contributions: R. HACKFORTH, “Plato’s Theism,” *Classical Quarterly* 30 (1936): 4–9; G. E. MUELLER, “Plato and the Gods,” *Philosophical Review* 45 (1936): 457–472; A. E. TAYLOR, “The ‘Polytheism’ of Plato: An Apology,” *Mind* 47 (1938): 180–199;

the eternity of god based on his supremacy are known to Plato, as is obvious from *Laws*²⁵ and the above mentioned passages of the *Republic*. (It appears that Robespierre was a Platonist at least in the sense that he considered the theory about the Supreme Being a part of politics, indeed of legislation.) The difference between the two works of Plato is that in *Republic* II we are in the context of polytheism, while in the *Laws* he speaks in the framework of henotheism. One could suggest that the all-embracing excellency of the gods does not exclude a hierarchy between them, but I would hesitate to strive to create such a consonance between the two discourses of Plato. Nor do I wish to decide here what the relation is between the Greatest God and the Best Soul of the *Laws* and whether the Supreme Soul is the Supreme God and the Supreme Being.²⁶ I shall be content to have found the basic ideas of the discourse about the Supreme Being in Plato.

I 4. Aristotle

The elements of the concept and the demonstration build up a compact argument in Aristotle's admittedly early work, the *de philosophia*: in the hierarchy of beings there is a supreme element, which is God,²⁷ and he, being supreme, cannot change.²⁸ This second stage of the argument is based on the above mentioned passage from Plato's *Republic*, as noted also by Simplicius, who has preserved the fragment concerned. With Xenophanes,²⁹ Aristotle assumes that the Best Being is indeed perfect (*ἐνδεές ... οὐδενός*). In another fragment of *de philosophia* the concept of the Supreme Being is enriched with an epistemological aspect: the hierarchy of perfection is at the same time the way to know God, or, more precisely, to form a concept about him.³⁰

Francis McDONALD CORNFORD, "The 'Polytheism' of Plato: An Apologia," *Mind* 47 (1938): 321–330; Friedrich SOLMSEN, *Plato's Theology*, Cornell studies in classical philology, no. 27 (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1942); André-Jean, FESTUGIÈRE, O.P., *La révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, Collection d'études anciennes: série grecque, no. 77 (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1990), vol. II, 92–152; W. J. VERDENIUS, "Platons Gottesbegriff," in *La notion du divin*. Entretiens sur l'Antiquité classique, no. 1 (Vandoeuvres-Genève: Fondation Hardt, 1954), 241–293; G. RIDBERG, "Plato's Belief in God," in *Platonica Selecta* (Stockholm, 1956), 109–126; C. J. DE VOGEL, "What was God for Plato," in *Philosophia*. Philosophical Texts and Studies I: Studies in Greek Philosophy (Assen: van Gorcum, 1970), vol. I, 210–242; Richard D. MOHR, "Plato's Theology Reconsidered: What the Demiurge does," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 2 (1985): 131–144.

²⁵ VII. 821a (*μέγιστον θεόν*); X. 897c; 898c (*ἀρσστη ψυχῇ*).

²⁶ At least some middle Platonists (Plutarch, *De E*; Maximus of Tyre, *Who is God according to Plato*) seem to read Plato in such a way that they identify these three.

²⁷ This definition of god is echoed both in Theophrastus *Met* 1,4b,12–15 (god must be grasped by his power and supremacy) and in the *MXG X* 977a27–28 (to be god is to be superior and never inferior).

²⁸ fr. 16: Simplicius, in *de caelo* 288,28–9,15. Aristotle uses all the equivalent terms: *βέλτιον*, *ἀριστον*, *κρείττονος*.

²⁹ See p. 208 above.

³⁰ Sextus, *M IX*, 45: that the passage refers to Aristotle, and most probably to *de philosophia* has been shown by Bernd EFFE, *Studien zur Kosmologie und Theologie der Aristotelischen Schrift 'Über die Philosophie'*, Zetemata: Monographien zur Klassischen Altertumswissenschaft, no. 50 (München: C.H. Beck, 1970), 76–78.

Now we can understand what has happened in the pseudo-Aristotelian *de Xenophane*. Starting from an exoteric writing of Aristotle, the author projects back onto Xenophanes an argument, the elements and premises of which can indeed be detected in Xenophanes. There is only one novelty in *de Xenophane* compared to Aristotle: while – assuming that *Metaphysics* Λ and *Physics* Θ are unitary treatises³¹ – Aristotle could be rather termed as a henotheist³² rather than a monotheist, by pseudo-Aristotle Xenophanes is portrayed as an extreme monotheist. At any rate, in the passages referred to from *de philosophia* and in certain chapters of the above mentioned esoteric writings, Aristotle speaks about a single god. That the idea of monotheism was not unknown by Aristotle's time is shown by the Socratic Antisthenes³³ and probably by Euclides of Megara.³⁴

INTERLUDE: A MATHEMATICAL MODEL

With Aristotle's *de philosophia*, we have reached the complete form of the argument. Before turning to later developments, let us look at the validity of the proof. For that purpose we shall need a few notions from relation-theory.

I shall represent the relation signified in our text by different terms ($\acute{\alpha}\mu\epsilon\iota\tau\upsilon\omega\nu/\beta\epsilon\lambda\tau\acute{\iota}\omega\nu/\kappa\rho\epsilon\acute{\iota}\tau\tau\omega\nu$) with the sign “ $<$ ”. I gather that our authors expect implicitly that the relation be

- (i) asymmetrical: $(a < b \rightarrow \sim (b < a))$
- (ii) transitive: $a < b \ \& \ b < c \rightarrow a < c$

That our relation has a maximal element “ m ” ($\forall x \sim (m < x)$) is guaranteed by the sufficient but not necessary condition that the set on which the relation is defined is finite.³⁵ This hypothesis is explicit by Cleanthes, as we shall see, but I think that Aristotle also shares this conviction. That the maximal element is singular is endorsed by the (iii) requirement of trichotomy ($a < b \vee b < a \vee a = b$), the assumption of which

³¹ On this problem, see W. C. K. GUTHRIE, “The Development of Aristotle's Theology,” *Classical Quarterly* 27; 28 (1933–1934): 162–172; 90–98; reprint in German in *Metaphysik und Theologie des Aristoteles*, ed. Fritz Peter HAGER, 75–113. Wege der Forschung, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1969; Philip MERLAN, “Aristotle's Unmoved Movers,” *Traditio* 4 (1946): 1–30; Anton-Hermann CHROUST, “Aristotle's Religious Convictions,” *Divus Thomas* 69 (1966): 91–97; OEHLER, Klaus, *Der Unbewegte Beweger des Aristoteles*. Phil. Aloh., no. 52. Frankfurt-am-Main: V. Klostermann, 1964; DEVEREUX, Daniel T. “The Relationship between Theophrastus' *Metaphysics* and Aristotle's *Metaphysics Lambda*.” In *Theophrastean Studies*, ed. W. W. FORTENBAUGH and R. W. SHARPLES, 167–188. Rutgers University Studies in Classical Humanities, no. 3. New Brunswick–London: Transaction Publishers, 1988; KRÄMER, Hans-Joachim. “Az arisztotelészi metafizika történeti helye.” [The Historical Place of Aristotelian Metaphysics]. *Filozófiai Szemle* 35 (Budapest, 1991): 892–935.

³² This is at least the interpretation of Arius Didymus (fr. 9): according to Aristotle, the greatest ($\mu\acute{\epsilon}\gamma\iota\sigma\tau\omicron\nu$) among the nine gods of the spheres is a blissful rational being ($\zeta\acute{\omega}\nu\ \lambda\omicron\gamma\iota\kappa\acute{\omicron}\nu\ \kappa\alpha\iota\ \mu\alpha\kappa\acute{\alpha}\rho\iota\omicron\nu$).

³³ Cicero, *ND* I 13. 32.

³⁴ Fr. 1.

³⁵ That the condition is not necessary is shown by the example of the non-positive real numbers with the relation “grater”, or of a river system with the relation “closer to the source”. In the latter case all sources are maximal elements.

we can reasonably attribute to our authors, although this is again not a necessary condition.³⁶

The result of the demonstration, however, is not that there is a single supreme being, but a single supreme excellency, i.e., an equivalency class of beings with the same grade of excellency. A way out could be the assumption that there are no two beings that are equally excellent/good. A different type of solution is to understand with *de Xenophane* “supreme” as “most powerful” and suppose that as such he is omnipotent, and cannot be restricted by an equal power. In this version of the argument, as we shall soon see when we turn to the Stoics, one step is missing.

III. THE STOICS³⁷

The Stoics expressed the content of the concept/preconception of God in similar terms to those of Aristotle: god is “a living being unsurpassed in excellence,”³⁸ and the attribute of eternity was presumably implied.³⁹

As for the argument, Cleanthes seems to have adopted it as he found it in Aristotle’s *de philosophia*.⁴⁰ What he added is what was implicit in Aristotle: that the Best Being is not a Man. Here he makes use of the assumption that the Supreme Being is perfect. We have noted this conviction in Aristotle⁴¹ and traced it back to Xenophanes,⁴² but as I have just hinted, this assumption does not formally follow from the rest of the argument, since the Best Being can still be imperfect: that is to say, one might be able to conceive the possibility of a still better being. The existence of the Perfect Being could be then ensured only by an ontological type of argument.

Surprisingly enough, we also find the elements of such a proof in the Stoa. It was Diogenes of Babylon who has been – probably unduly – charged with inventing the ontological argument,⁴³ but the components of the argumentative scheme had already been advanced by Zeno. His argument runs as follows:

³⁶ See the example of a river-system with the relation “closer to the mouth”.

³⁷ Unfortunately I was unable to consult M. DRAGONA-MONACHOU, *The Stoic Arguments for the Existence and the Providence of the Gods* (Athens, 1976).

³⁸ Cicero, *ND* II 17.45: “Sed cum talem esse deum certa notione animi praesentiamus, *primum ut sit animans, deinde ut in omni natura nihil eo sit praestantius*, ad hanc praesensionem notionemque nostram nihil video quod potius accomodem quam ut primum hunc ipsum mundum, quo nihil excellentius fieri potest, animantem esse et deum iudicem”; cf. Malcolm SCHOFIELD, “Preconception, Argument and God,” in *Doubt and Dogmatism: Studies in Hellenistic Epistemology*, ed. M. SCHOFIELD, M. BURNYEAT and J. BARNES (Oxford, 1980), 301.

³⁹ See Sextus Empiricus *M* IX 118 and esp. 143 (cf. 141; 145; 147; 151; 157; 160; 161; 166; 170; 172 and BRUNSCHWIG, “Diogenes,” 183–184).

⁴⁰ Sextus Empiricus *M* IX 88–91 (Cleanthes, fr. 529 Arnim.). His preferred terms are *κρείττων/-κράτιστον*, *ἀρίστη/ἄριστον*, and the verbal forms *«πρόχει τε καὶ κρατιστεύει»*. The argument is briefly summarised by BOYANCÉ, 52 n. 2, who remarks that parallel *ideas* can be pointed out in Chrysippus (Cicero, *ND* II 6.16–7.18, in the context of a cosmological proof though).

⁴¹ See p. 209 above.

⁴² See p. 208 above.

⁴³ For his version of Zeno’s argument and the possible traces of idea of an ontological type of proof in it see BRUNSCHWIG, “Diogenes,” 170–189.

The rational is superior to the non-rational. But nothing is superior to the world. Therefore the world is rational. And similarly with “intelligent” and “participating in animation”. For the intelligent is superior to the non-intelligent and the animate to the non-animate. But nothing is superior to the world. Therefore the world is intelligent and animate.⁴⁴

If we add “existent” to the list of replaceable predicates in this argument,⁴⁵ we obtain an ontological argument, keeping it in mind that the *cosmos* and God are identical for the Stoics and that the *cosmos* is conceived here as the supreme being.⁴⁶

Although the substitution of the predicate with “existent” would be a rather bold step, the fact that it was not alien to Zeno is shown by another fragment of him:

One might reasonably honour the gods. <One might not reasonably honour those who do not exist.> Therefore gods exist.⁴⁷

Here *vice versa*, in order to gain an ontological argument, one has to replace “can reasonably be honoured” with “perfect” (or Anselm’s “better cannot be thought of” – a phrase in fact used by Chrysippus in the context of the cosmic god).⁴⁸ As Sextus reports, this argument has provided a catalyst for a subtle discussion already in this embryonic form.⁴⁹

Returning to the gradation argument, it is expounded in its full-grown form but less formally by the Stoic speaker of Cicero’s *De natura deorum*, Balbus.⁵⁰ Here the demonstration as presented by Cleanthes is completed with the Zenonian argument that the Supreme Being is necessarily intelligent,⁵¹ and the ontological hypothesis, i.e. that the Perfect Being exists, is made explicit.⁵² The line of the argument is at the same time the way to know God.⁵³ Balbus also appends two additions to the train of thought attributed to Cicero: first, a proof that man is not the perfect being, since he

⁴⁴ Sextus Empiricus *M IX* 104 (Zeno, fr. 111. Arnim). Translation from A. A. LONG and D. N. SEDLEY, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 54F. vol. 1, 325. The argument has been repeated generally by Stoics, among them Chrysippus and Posidonius: DL VII 142–143. Parallel ideas appear frequently in Cicero’s *ND II* (e.g., 14. 38; 17. 46–48).

⁴⁵ Many modern logicians would hesitate to make this step and would be embarrassed to call “existent” a predicate (a good summary of the debate can be read in Christopher STEAD, *Philosophy in Christian Antiquity*, (Cambridge: University Press, 1995), 121–126). The ancients had fewer scruples, and my main task is to unravel *their* way of arguing.

⁴⁶ Similarly in Plato, *Timaeus* 32c–33b, and in [Ocellus], *de universi natura* I 7; 11; [Aristotle] *de mundo* 397a5–17; Philo of Alexandria, *De aeternitate mundi* I.1 etc. The idea of the perfection of the world and the argument for its eternity based on this fact may well have been also present in Aristotle’s *de philosophia*: EFFE, 9–13.

⁴⁷ Sextus Empiricus *M IX* 133 (Zeno, fr. 152. Arnim.), translation from LONG-SEDLEY 54D. vol. 1, 324. The insertion is based on the parody of the argument that follows in Sextus.

⁴⁸ Cicero, *ND II* 7. 18, in a passage related to the gradation argument, as noted above n. 40 on p. 211.

⁴⁹ *M IX* 134–136.

⁵⁰ Cicero *ND II* 12.33–13.36, analysed by BOYANCÉ, 60–62; for the possible sources of anonymous arguments in *ND II* see *ibid.* 69–71.

⁵¹ 13.36; cf. 14. 48.

⁵² 13.35; cf. 14.38.

⁵³ Generally for the Stoics, the way of the formation of our concept/preconception about god and the proofs of his existence were deeply interrelated: BOYANCÉ 49; SCHOFIELD 289–307.

is not self-aimed;⁵⁴ second, that the universe is indeed perfect (and thus intelligent), since it contains everything.⁵⁵ This serves as a substitute for the ontological argument.

With “Balbus” the argument also reaches its supreme form in Antiquity and does not change further – only its epistemological aspect is elaborated in Middle Platonism, as we shall see.

IV. NEO-PYTHAGOREANISM AND MIDDLE PLATONISM

IV 1. *Onatas*

Before turning to Middle Platonists, however, we should add a brief note on Onatas, or pseudo-Onatas, who – in the spirit of the philosophical renaissance of his age⁵⁶ – recapitulates the Aristotelian-Xenophanean tradition, but without supplying the argument he only summarises the definition of God and the theses of Xenophanes: god is supreme, and rules but is not ruled, and is perfect.⁵⁷ He puts forward the creed of henotheism and seems to openly oppose the argument in *de Xenophane* that the supremacy of the Sovereign God involves his singularity. On the contrary, says Onatas, supremacy is manifested in the existence of lower gods. His argument may also be directed against the pseudo-Aristotelian *de mundo* as well, since many of the images about God the Ruler are common to both texts (although they may well come from Aristotle’s *de philosophia*). Thus the author behind Onatas starts from writings that he knows to be by Aristotle and corrects Aristotle by reconstructing his supposedly Pythagorean source which, as “Onatas” thinks, Aristotle distorted. This is the standard process of the pseudo-Pythagorean literature with the texts of Plato and Aristotle. We may possibly detect Onatas’ basis of reconstruction: he relies on Xenophanes, who was also believed to have been associated with Pythagoras.⁵⁸

We do not have to assume that Onatas is arguing against Jewish or Christian authors, as a strict monotheism is proposed by the pseudo-Aristotelian *de mundo*, *de*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 14. 37.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 14. 38–39.

⁵⁶ About the philosophical milieu of the period between the first century BC and the second century AD see, e.g., Olof GIGON, “Die Erneuerung der Philosophie in der Zeit Ciceros,” in *Recherches sur la tradition platonicienne: Sept exposés. Entretiens sur l’Antiquité classique*, no. 3 (Vandoeuvres-Genève: Fondation Hardt, 1955; reprint, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliches Buchgesellschaft, 1971), 25–61. For the debate on the dating of these pseudo-Pythagorean writings, see Walter BURKERT, “Hellenistische Pseudopythagorica,” *Philologus* 105 (1961): 16–43; 226–246; and *id.*, “Zur geistesgeschichtlichen Einordnung einiger Pseudopythagorica,” in *Pseudoepigrapha. Entretiens sur l’antiquité classique*, no. 18 (Vandoeuvres-Genève: Fondation Hardt, 1972), vol. 1, *Pseudopythagorica-Lettres de Platon-Littérature pseudépigraphique juive: Huit exposés suivis de discussions par Ronald Syme, Walter Burkert et al.* ed. by Kurt VON FRITZ, 23–56.

⁵⁷ The expressions he uses referring to superiority/supremacy are as follows: μέγιστος καὶ καθυπέρτερος, κράτιστοι, ὑπεροχῆς, the verbal forms ἀρχεῖν, κράτειν.

⁵⁸ Fr. B 7 (Diogenes Laertius VIII 36). According to Diogenes IX 18, he in fact argued with him.

Xenophane and Antisthenes.⁵⁹ Since the latter is quoted by Cicero's doxographic source on the history of theology, his view must have been known in Onatas' time.

IV 2. *Alcinous, Maximus and the via eminentiae*

For Middle-Platonism the gradation argument is hardly relevant, because it is not easily compatible with the growing emphasis on divine transcendence. Thus, among the ways to the knowledge of God, the *via negativa* takes by far the first place, followed by the *via analogiae*, while only the last place can be reserved for the *via eminentiae* based on the hierarchy of beings and corresponding to the gradation argument.⁶⁰ Both the handbook-writer Alcinous and the popular philosopher Maximus emphasise the extraordinary status of the last step on this *gradus*: here quantitative change turns into qualitative, corresponding to the Platonic theory of Forms, since the Form/Idea is not on the same ontological level as the things participating in it. If we were to continue to apply the mathematical model, than the hierarchy of beauty/excellency by Platonic authors would correspond to an ordered set consisting of the natural numbers and the first infinite cardinality, ω , which would be the maximal element representing God. ω is grater than any final cardinality, but cannot be reached by addition from them. This model, however, openly contradicts the Stoic Cleanthes, who *expressis verbis* excludes infinite progress in grading superiority. No wonder, since, as we have seen, he needs this assumption to make the argument work – in which, however, the Platonists seem to have no interest.

CONCLUSION

I am not aware of any direct trace of the gradation argument in Philo,⁶¹ and it certainly did not impress early Christian authors. The early apologists and Church Fathers – with, possibly, the single exception of St. Augustine – were wary of advancing arguments for the existence of God, and if they did come up with arguments for apologetic reasons, they usually applied the cosmological proof, inspired by Romans 1,20.⁶² On the one hand, as we have seen, the gradation argument loses its relevance with Middle Platonism and the milieu which puts the emphasis on the transcendence of God. On the other hand it may be too technical for a Christian theologian, who has a different audience and purposes in mind. Alongside Augustine, it is Boethius who displays the most interest in philosophy among early Christian writers. He indeed pro-

⁵⁹ See p. 212 above.

⁶⁰ Alcinous/Albinus, *Didascalicus* X 6; cf. Maximus of Tyre, *Or* 11, 5.

⁶¹ See the summary of Philo's arguments by Samuel SANDMEL, "Philo Judaeus: An Introduction to the Man, his Writings and his Significance," in *ANRW* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1984), vol. II.21, *Hellenistisches Judentum in römischer Zeit: Philon und Josphus*, 23.

⁶² Christopher STEAD, *Philosophy in Christian Antiquity*, (Cambridge: U.P., 1995), 115–119.

vides us with a version of the gradation argument, with ethical overtones.⁶³ In the West, Anselm of Canterbury is probably the next author who is interested in philosophical techniques to this extent. His story, however, transcends the framework of this paper, the competence of the author, and probably also the philosophical horizons of Robespierre. Finally the question of whether it was the convincing power of the gradation or the ontological argument that persuaded the Convent to vote unanimously for the existence of the Supreme Being is beyond the scope of the history of Ancient philosophy.

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⁶³*Consolatio* III 10.