The Argument from Design in the Prologue to the *Prose Edda*

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The Prologue to the *Prose Edda*, composed in the early thirteenth century by Snorri Sturluson, contains one of the most interesting philosophical passages in Old Norse literature and, if correctly dated, is the earliest text that includes what appears to be original philosophical ideas attributable to an individual Icelandic author.

The Prologue provides a philosophical and historical background for the sections of mythological narrative in the *Prose Edda*. It accomplishes this in two steps. First, it provides a theological and philosophical explanation for the supposed fact that the majority of mankind, after Noah's flood, forgot the name of God and his existence and the manner in which they consequently tried to make sense of the world by the use of their own reason. Starting with observed correspondences between the earth and animals and birds, they arrived at what has typically been characterized by the scholarly community as a form of natural theology that yielded a belief in an anonymous divine ruler of the world or of the cosmos. Second, the Prologue presents a historical narrative that recounts the migration of the Æsir, in the guise of Trojan chieftains, from Asia Minor to Saxony, Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. Although the Æsir are said to be

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Abstract: The Prologue to the *Prose Edda* contains several arguments for the existence and attributes of superior beings. One is normally classified as a microcosm-macrocosm speculation, whereas it is in fact an analogical argument for the conclusion that the earth is a living and powerful being. Another, which is usually interpreted as a variant of traditional design arguments for the existence of God, proves to be an astronomical argument for the conclusion that there exists a mighty and powerful governor of the heavenly bodies. Finally, hypothetical arguments extend the attributes and domain of the governor of the heavens to the whole world.

Keywords: *Prose Edda*, design argument, natural religion, microcosm-macrocosm, medieval philosophy.

godlike, they are not presented as gods in the Prologue itself: only as human beings possessing superior knowledge and skills. The Prologue thus positions the rise of the Old Norse religion within the frameworks of biblical narrative, natural religion, and universal history.

The first part of the Prologue contains an argument that has sometimes been interpreted as an instance of the argument from design for the existence of God — a type of argument that reasons from the order of nature to a transcendent being as an explanation of that order. More precisely, this kind of argument is based on the idea that specific features of the visible world, such as the apparent order of nature, indicate the existence of a transcendent being, identified with God, who provides an explanation of that order by having designed it. A typical example of a medieval 'design argument' is Thomas Aquinas' (1225–74) 'fifth way' in the *Summa theologiae* (I[a] *Pars*, *Quaest*. 2, *Art*. 3): nature presents an order in which beings not endowed with reason act as if in accordance with a set purpose; therefore, they cannot themselves be the origin of the order in the world, making it necessary to presuppose a superior, transcendent being as the source of the order in question (cf. Aquinas 1941, 14; Kenny 1969, 96). Such an argument from design argues for — or presupposes — a monotheistic conception of the transcendent being.

Although, as noted, a number of studies assume that the argument in the *Prose Edda* is of this type, the precise nature of the argument, or rather arguments, in the Prologue has not, in fact, been analysed in detail from a logical and philosophical point of view. The problem with many interpretations is, first, that they are not based on such an analysis but assume that the argument in the Prologue constitutes a traditional design argument. Moreover, the Prologue arguably contains not one, but two (or even three), linked arguments that can be interpreted as arguments for the existence of deities, a rare — although perhaps not unique — feature in the history of medieval Western thought.[1] This feature of the Prologue has not always been recognized as such by scholars of Old Norse studies. It is also largely overlooked by historians of medieval philosophy, who focus mostly on the Latin and Arabic traditions.

Among those scholars of Old Norse studies who have written on the Prologue one can distinguish, broadly speaking, three main positions on what the arguments are about. First, there are scholars who see the passage in question as positing a belief in two deities. Thus Sigurður Nordal (1920, 109) considered

[1] See for instance Augustine (354–430) on Varro in *De ciuitate Dei*, books VI–VII, cf. Augustine 2003; O'Meara 1984.

the personification of the earth and the belief in the controller of the stars as originally scientific conclusions that turned into religious belief; Siegfried Beyschlag (1954–55, 166–68) took the text to argue for an earth goddess and a god of the heavens; and Edith Marold (1998, 151–52) adopted a similar interpretation. Second, certain German scholars, starting with Walter Baetke (1950), approached the text mainly in terms of natural theology, insisting on its monotheistic conception as expressed in the argument for the ruler of the heavens (Baetke 1950, Weber 1986, Von See 1988, Strerath-Bolz 1991). Third, what have now become standard interpretations of the arguments in the English-speaking world (Dronke 1977, Faulkes 1983) reduce one of the arguments to a macrocosm–microcosm speculation, while assimilating the other to a traditional design argument for the existence of God. In addition, scholarly discussion on the connection between the Prologue and *Gylfaginning* has led to various theories on the relationship between the natural religion of the Prologue, the Old Norse religion as represented in *Gylfaginning*, and medieval Christianity.

As none of the abovementioned studies, diverse as they are, have analysed the arguments in the Prologue in terms of their logical structure, it seems important to raise the question of what kinds of arguments are in fact to be found in the Prologue. Does the Prologue actually argue for two gods rather than one and, if so, in what way and to what extent? And in what way and to what extent does the text of the Prologue rehearse traditional design arguments and how does it depart from them? *How*, precisely, are the arguments in the text articulated, *are* they arguments from design in the traditional sense, and, if so, arguments *for what*?

The Argument for the Attributes and Nature of the Earth

Before addressing these questions the textual basis for the analysis needs to be clarified by briefly reviewing the manuscript tradition of the Prologue. Three separate redactions of the Prologue, preserved in the four main manuscripts of the work, can be distinguished.[2] These may be called the *U-redaction*, the

[2] The Prose Edda as a whole is extant in three fourteenth-century manuscripts: U = *Codex Upsaliensis* (Uppsala, Uppsala universitetsbibliotek, MS DG 11), usually dated to *c.* 1325, R = *Codex Regius* (Reykjavík, Árni Magnússon Institute, GKS 2367 4to), *c.* 1350, and W = *Codex Wormianus* (Copenhagen, The Arnamagnæan Collection, AM 242 fol.), *c.* 1375; in addition, T = *Codex Trajectinus* (Utrecht, Universitätsbibliothek Utrecht, MS1374), dated to 1595, is thought to represent a lost medieval, possibly thirteenth-century, manuscript closely related to R (cf. Faulkes 2005, xxviii–xxxi). In 1609, a new and different version of the Prose Edda was prepared by the Lutheran pastor Magnús Ólafsson (1573–1636) of Laufás (northern Iceland)

W-redaction, and the *RT-redaction*. The difference is, roughly, that, compared to RT, the Prologue is abridged in U and expanded with interpolations in three places in W. In addition, the beginning of the Prologue, where the design argument is found, is completely missing from R, since the first leaf of the manuscript has been lost, and is partially missing from T. Editions of the text of R have traditionally been supplemented with T and W (Finnur Jónsson 1931). However, seventeenth-century paper copies deriving from R before the leaf was lost have made it possible to reconstruct with considerable accuracy the contents of the lacuna in R (Faulkes 1979). Also, as the first interpolation in W comes after the arguments in question, RT and W can be seen to present a comparatively consistent version of that part of the Prologue. For these reasons, the text of R as edited and partially reconstructed by Faulkes (2005, 3–6) provides a relatively safe textual basis for a study of the arguments in the Prologue.

The Prologue begins by recounting the story of the creation of the world and of man:

> Almáttigr guð skapaði himin ok jǫrð ok alla þá hluti er þeim fylgja, ok síðast menn tvá er ættir eru frá komnar, Adam ok Evu, ok fjǫlgaðisk þeira kynslóð ok dreifðisk um heim allan. (Faulkes 2005, 3)
>
> (Almighty God created heaven and earth and all things in them, and lastly two humans from whom generations are descended, Adam and Eve, and their stock multiplied and spread over all the world.) (Faulkes 1987, 1)

Then comes the story of Noah's flood: but after the flood history repeats itself, and mankind persists in its sinful ways of living and, moreover, forgets the name of God. This means that mankind does not know God, its Creator, does not know that he exists, and therefore has no knowledge of his works, that is, of his creation, or even that the world has been created. These two matters, ignorance of God and of his works, form the background for what follows.

Even if mankind has turned away from God and has forgotten his name and works, God grants man two kinds of goodness. On the one hand, 'jarðligar giptir, fé ok sælu, er þeir skyldu við vera í heiminum' (earthly blessings, wealth and prosperity for them to enjoy in the world), and on the other, 'spekina svá at þeir

and this formed the basis for the first printed edition, the *Edda Islandorum*, which was published in Copenhagen in 1665 and includes a Danish and Latin translation (Faulkes 1977–79). For recent suggestions on the nature of U see Sävborg (2012 and 2013). On Snorri's authorship of the Edda see Ólafur Halldórsson (1990); and for a recent study of Snorri see Wanner (2008). On the roles of prologues in Old Icelandic texts in general see Sverrir Tómasson (1988).

skilðu alla jarðliga hluti ok allar greinir þær er sjá mátti loptsins ok jarðarinnar' (wisdom so that they could understand all earthly things and the details of everything they could see in the sky and on earth; Faulkes 2005, 3; 1987, 1). As underlined by Dronke (1977, 156) this wisdom is God-given; it does not stem from a corrupt nature or from demonic deception. Later, towards the end of the first section of the Prologue, it is emphasized that men understood all things 'jarðligri skilningu' (with earthly understanding), for they had not received spiritual wisdom. Also, they saw that everything was made or forged ('smíðað') out of some matter (cf. Faulkes 2005, 4; 1987, 2).

A more precise description of mankind's earthly understanding is to be found in the middle of the first section of the Prologue, and it is divided into two main parts. In fact, the text speaks of the distinctions observable in the sky and on earth ('greinir þær er sjá mátti loptsins ok jarðarinnar'), which actually echoes the beginning of the Prologue. Accordingly, the first part of what follows deals with the *earth* and the second part with the *sky*.

In the first part, the philosophical concepts of *eðli* (nature, substance, essence) and *háttr* (mode, accident, quality) are applied to observed natural phenomena. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact corresponding Latin terminology, although these concepts resemble the basic categories of Aristotle; in any case, the distinction between the 'what' and the 'how' implied in 'eðli' and 'háttr' is very clear in the Icelandic vernacular. The application of the philosophical concepts results in an analysis of a series of parallels or correspondences and an inference concerning the nature of the earth as well as its attributes. The discussion of these parallels is what is frequently referred to as the 'microcosm-macrocosm speculation'. However, these parallels are not instances of the typical 'microcosm-macrocosm' theme, which is that of *man* as the *world* in miniature. The idea of man as a microcosm implies that man, like the world, is composed of the four elements, and the idea is further expressed in the theory of the four humours. At this point in the Prologue we have a different idea, which is that of the *earth* as a living being exhibiting characteristics of *animals*. This idea is not simply stated in the Prologue but is manifest in the form of the argument.

Wonder, according to Aristotle, is the origin of philosophy, and in the Prologue the argument is introduced by a statement that expresses the sense of wonder at how the earth, the animals, and the birds are similar in their essence or nature but differ in their accidents or qualities.

> [1] Þat hugsuðu þeir ok undruðusk hverju þat mundi gegna at jǫrðin ok dýrin ok fuglarnir hǫfðu saman eðli í sumum hlutum ok var þó ólíkt at hætti. [a] Þat var eitt eðli at jǫrðin var grafin í hám fjalltindum ok spratt þar vatn upp ok þurfti

> þar eigi lengra at grafa til vaz en í djúpum dǫlum. Svá eru ok dýr ok fuglar, at jafnlangt er til blóðs í hǫfði ok fótum. [b]ǫnnur náttúra er sú jarðar at á hverju ári vex á jǫrðunni gras ok blóm ok á sama ári fellr þat allt ok fǫlnar. Svá eru ok dýr ok fuglar, at þeim vex hár ok fjaðrar ok fellr af á hverju ári. [c] Þat er hin þriðja náttúra jarðar þá er hon er opnuð ok grafin þá grœr gras á þeiri moldu er efst er á jǫrðunni. Bjǫrg ok steina þýddu þeir á móti tǫnnum ok beinum kvikvenda. [d] Af þessu skilðu þeir svá at jǫrðin væri kyk ok hefði líf með nokkurum hætti. (Faulkes 2005, 3, my enumeration)

> ([1] They pondered and were amazed at what it could mean that the earth and animals and birds had common characteristics in some things, though there was a difference of quality. [a] One of the earth's characteristics was that when it was dug into on high mountain tops, water sprang up there and there was no need to dig further for water there than in deep valleys. It is the same with animals and birds; that it is just as far to blood in the head as in the feet. [b] It is a second property of the earth that every year there grows on the earth vegetation and flowers and the same year it all falls and fades. It is the same with animals and birds, that their hair and feathers grow and fall off every year. [c] It is the third property of the earth, that when it is opened and dug, then vegetation grows on the soil which is uppermost on the earth. Rocks and stones they thought of as equivalent to teeth and bones of living creatures.[3] [d] From this they reasoned that the earth was alive and had life after a certain fashion.) (Faulkes 1987, 1–2, my enumeration)[4]

Let us try to break this first passage down into its logical components. The first component establishes the affinity between animals and birds, on the one hand, and the earth, on the other, by asking *why* this is the case ('hverju þat mundi gegna'). Three parallels are adduced that can be interpreted as the grounds or premises that support the claim for this affinity. The first parallel is drawn between water in the earth and blood in animals and birds. The evidence is that wherever one digs down to water, be it in mountains or in valleys, it is equally far down, in the same way that blood is equally distributed within the head and the feet of animals or birds. The second parallel is drawn between the growth of grass and flowers on the earth and the growth of hair or feathers on animals or birds. This time the evidence is that the vegetation grows and withers every year in the same way that the hair or feathers of animals or birds grow and are shed

[3] 'Living creatures' translates 'kvikvendi', which should *not* be taken to include humans, as is evident from the context; also, for instance, the Old Norse translation of the *Elucidarius*, at I, 65 (Firchow 1989, 43), distinguishes between 'maðr' (*homo*) and 'kykvendi' (*animalia*).

[4] U has a misreading, 'grœn' (green) for 'grafin' (dug), and a slightly abridged text (cf. Heimir Pálsson 2012, 7).

every year. The third parallel is drawn between the surface of the earth and the hide of animals, as well as between rocks and stones in the earth and teeth and bones in living creatures. The connection or comparison is not clearly spelled out; the parallel is implicit and depends on the context, established by the previous observations.

From this comparison between the earth and animals and birds, the *inference* is drawn ('Af þessu skilðu þeir svá') that the earth itself must also be *a living being*, and thus the question of why the various similarities are observed is answered. The underlying assumption leading to this conclusion is that since birds and animals that possess the observed features are alive, the earth, which exhibits the same features, must be alive as well. The reasoning moves from a similarity in mode to a similarity in essence, from 'háttr' to 'eðli'.

Having established that the earth is a living being, the argument continues by stating that the earth has certain qualities or *attributes*:

> [2] ok þat vissu þeir at hon var [a] furðuliga gǫmul at aldartali ok [b] máttug í eðli. [c] Hon fœddi ǫll kvikvendi ok hon eignaðisk allt þat er dó. [d] Fyrir þá sǫk gáfu þeir henni nafn ok tǫlðu ættir sínar til hennar. (Faulkes 2005, 3, my enumeration)

> [2] (and they realized that it was [a] enormously old in count of years and [b] mighty in nature. [c] It fed all creatures and took possession of everything that died. [d] For this reason they gave it a name and traced their ancestry to it.) (Faulkes 1987, 2, my enumeration)[5]

The earth has the two attributes of being very *old* and very *powerful* in its nature. Then, another observation is introduced: all 'kvikvendi' (animals) are nurtured by the earth and everything (a more extensive category) will return to it. Finally, because the earth has all these attributes, the ancients give it a name and trace their origin to it, i.e. they look upon themselves as the sons and daughters of the earth.

What we have in these passages, therefore, is not a traditional macrocosm-microcosm comparison between man and the world, based on the theory of the four elements (earth, water, fire, and air), but a certain kind of argument — an *analogical* argument, based on the comparison between the earth and animals — that aims at demonstrating that the earth is a living being and that it possesses certain attributes. Even if the analogy itself is known from other sources, here it is turned into an argument for the conclusion that the earth is alive.[6] In fact,

[5] U drops the first two attributes and rewrites the text as an explanatory clause; in Faulkes' translation: 'since it fed (gave birth to?) all creatures and took possession of everything that died. To it they traced their ancestry' (Heimir Pálsson 2012, 7).

[6] The closest parallel that Faulkes (1983, 288) cites is Nicolaus Cusanus (1401–64), *De*

this way of arguing from observable phenomena to the existence and attributes of a superior being can be seen to echo, in general, the traditional approach of medieval theologians and philosophers, who first argue for the *existence* of God and then try to ascertain his *attributes*, sometimes based on or derived from the qualities observed in the course of the argument. Examples of this approach can be seen, for instance, in the *Proslogion* of Anselm (1033–1109), where Anselm's aim is to demonstrate first that God exists and second that he is as he is believed to be (Koyré 1978).

The Argument for the Ruler of the Sky

In the argument concerning the sky, inferences are drawn from the movements of the heavenly bodies. The second part begins by stating what men have heard from their forefathers:

> [1] Þat sama spurðu þeir af gǫmlum frændum sínum at [a] síðan er talið váru mǫrg hundruð vetra þá var in sama jǫrð, sól ok himintungl. [b] En gangr himintunglanna var ójafn, áttu sum lengra gang en sum skemra. [c] Af þvílíkum hlutum grunaði þá at nokkurr mundi vera stjórnari himintunglanna [2] sá er [a] stilla mundi gang þeira at vilja sínum, [b] ok mundi sá vera ríkr mjǫk ok máttugr. (Faulkes 2005, 3–4, my enumeration)

> ([1] Similarly they learned from their elderly relatives that [a] after many hundreds of years had been reckoned there was the same earth, sun and heavenly bodies. [b] But the courses of the heavenly bodies were various, some had a longer course and some a shorter. [c] From such things they thought it likely that there must be some controller of the heavenly bodies, [2] who [a] must be regulating their courses in accordance with his will [b] and he must be very powerful and mighty.) (Faulkes 1987, 1–2, my enumeration)[7]

Here, the words 'Þat sama' (similarly) at the beginning of the text indicate a transition to an argument comparable with the one presented just previously. Thus, the *same* earth, sun, and heavenly bodies existed for generations but (the observation is) the courses of the heavenly bodies were 'various', or *uneven* ('ójafn'). As a way

docta ignorantia, II, 13: 'The earth is like a sort of animal — as Plato says — having stones instead of bones, streams instead of veins, trees instead of hair'. In Plato's *Timaeus*, however, the whole world is an animal, possessing intellect, soul, and body.

[7] U has a very condensed text; in Faulkes' translation: 'They saw that the courses of the heavenly bodies were various, some travelled further than some. They suspected that someone must control them, and he must be powerful' (Heimir Pálsson 2012, 7).

of explaining this difference, people 'thought it likely' or *suspected* ('grunaði') that there must be someone who governs the heavenly bodies ('stjórnari himintunglanna') and regulates their orbits at will. The thought is evidently that only the existence of such a governor would suffice as an explanation of the observed heavenly phenomena.

So far, the *existence* of the governor of the planets has been established. But the argument does not end there. Additional observations and inferences follow, aimed at determining the *attributes* of the governor of the heavenly bodies, in much the same manner as those of the earth were determined in the previous argument. First, the attributes of will, might, and power are deduced directly from the previous statements, as in the case of the earth. These attributes are then supplemented by two conditional inferences that develop the argument further:

> [3] ok þess væntu þeir, [a] *ef* hann réði fyrir hǫfuðskepnunum, at hann mundi fyrr verit hafa en himintunglin; ok þat sá þeir, [b] *ef* hann réði gang himintunglanna, at hann mundi ráða skini sólar ok dǫgg loptsins ok ávexti jarðarinnar er því fylgir, ok slíkt sama vindinum loptsins ok þar með stormi sævarins. [c] Þá vissu þeir eigi hvar ríki hans var. [d] Af því trúðu þeir at hann réð ǫllum hlutum á jǫrðu ok í lopti, himins ok himintunglum, sævarins ok veðranna. (Faulkes 2005, 4, my enumeration and emphasis)
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> ([3] and they assumed, [a] *if* he ruled over the elements, that he must have existed before the heavenly bodies; and they realized that [b] *if* he ruled the course of the heavenly bodies, he must rule the shining of the sun and the dew of the sky and the produce of the earth which is dependent on it, and similarly the wind of the sky and with it the storm of the sea. [c] But they did not know where his kingdom was. [d] And so they believed that he ruled all things on earth and in the sky, of heaven and the heavenly bodies, of the sea and the weathers.) (Faulkes 1987, 2, my enumeration and emphasis)[8]

It should be emphasized that these inferences are different from the previous ones in not being observational but conjectural. They are based on hypothetical reasoning (if *a*, then *b*) and transition rules (if *a* implies *b*, and *b* implies *c*, then *a* implies *c*), which were part of Aristotelian and Boethian logic in the Middle Ages.[9]

[8] U has an abridged text that eliminates the hypothetical form of arguments; in Faulkes' translation: 'and they thought he must have existed before the heavenly bodies. They thought he must rule the shining of the sun and the dew of the earth and the winds and storm. But they did not know who he was. But this they believed, that he rules all things' (Heimir Pálsson 2012, 7).

[9] For instance, *De hypotheticis syllogismis* by Boethius was known in the twelfth century as part of the *logica vetus* (Marenbon 2011, 181–217).

Thus, the controller of the planets has the attributes of (a) *will*, *might*, and *power* (similar to the earth).[10] The next two inferences flesh out, so to speak, the precise nature of his power and might: (b) he is *prior to* the heavenly bodies (which establishes a distinction between the regulator and the world) and (c) he regulates the sublunar world too, since the one who governs the heavenly bodies must also control what the heavenly bodies control, i.e. the sun, the rain, the vegetation, the weather, and the winds in the air and on the sea. However, a supplementary premise ('which is dependent on it') has to be introduced to relate the previous observations concerning the earth to the power of the sky, that is to say, to represent the produce of the earth as *dependent* upon the sun and the rain, which are governed by the ruler of the sky.

As a conclusion to these points, a distinction is made between belief and knowledge: it is stated that people did not *know* where this governor's kingdom was but they *believed* that he controlled all things in heaven and on earth. This 'leap of faith', together with the three previous points, is the element in the Prologue that perhaps most closely reflects aspects of medieval Christian thought about the nature of the Divinity.

Thus, the power of the regulator of the planets is extended to the whole world. As a sequel, it is added that, in order to keep these things firmly in mind people gave names to all things, presumably in the sky and on earth. These names underwent changes later, as nations and languages developed. It is stressed that the world view of these people was different from the Christian one, insofar as it was limited to the world of nature, without access to divine revelation or scripture, the spiritual dimension:

> En til þess at heldr mætti frá segja eða í minni festa þá gáfu þeir nafn með sjálfum sér ǫllum hlutum ok hefir þessi átrúnaðr á marga lund breyzk svá sem þjóðirnar skiptusk ok tungurnar greindusk.[11] En alla hluti skilðu þeir jarðligri skilningu þvíat þeim var eigi gefin andlig spekðin. Svá skilðu þeir at allir hlutir væri smíðaðir af nokkuru efni. (Faulkes 2005, 4)
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> (But so as to be better able to give an account of this and fix it in memory, they then gave a name among themselves to everything, and this religion has changed in many ways as nations became distinct and languages branched. But they understood everything with earthly understanding, for they were not granted spiritual

[10] On the related term 'kraptr' (force) and a lexematic approach see Van Nahl (2013a, 125–41, and 2013b).

[11] The first interpolation in W occurs in this place; it contains an elaboration on the tower of Babel and the origin of idolatry (cf. Finnur Jónsson 1924, 2–3; Wellendorf 2013).

> wisdom. Thus they reasoned that everything was created [i.e. fashioned] out of some material.) (Faulkes 1987, 2)

Thus, the ancients referred to in the Prologue did not have the idea that the world was created *ex nihilo*.[12] The text does not state that the world was created but that everything was *smíðað* (made, forged, fashioned) out of some matter, with reference to the activity of carpenters and blacksmiths that fashion things out of their material, their *efni*, i.e. matter, possibly evoking the ideas of matter (*hyle*, or *silva*) found in Calcidius' translation and commentary on Plato's *Timaeus* (Wasznik 1962) and in twelfth-century Platonism, although also mentioned by Isidore (560–636) and other philosophers (cf. Gasparotto 2004, Barney 2006).

The Structure of the Arguments

Having examined the text of the Prologue, we have seen that where the analogy between the earth and the birds and animals is discussed, *an inference is drawn* about the nature of the earth and, in the same way, when the movements of the stars are discussed, *an inference is drawn* about their governor. The comparison between the earth and animals is *not* a typical microcosm-macrocosm speculation, although it presents some weak similarities, for the microcosm-macrocosm theme normally applies to the relation of man as *microcosmos* to the world as *macrocosmos*.[13] Nor is it a design argument, even if it resembles one in arguing for the nature and attributes of a superior being from observed features of the world. It is an argument of a different type, an *analogical* argument, for the reason that a certain conclusion is drawn from the comparison between the animals and the earth. Its form is in fact typical of analogical arguments in that an extended similarity is inferred from known similarities. Just as the features of the earth are analogous to features of animals and birds, so the earth is alive ('kyk'), as are the animals and the birds.

[12] However, in U, although slightly abridged, the idea of creation has been added: they 'believed that everything was created or made ["skapat eða smíðat"] from some material' (Heimir Pálsson 2012, 7).

[13] There are at least three variants of the theme in Old Icelandic sources: man as microcosm made from the four elements in Hauksbók (Finnur Jónsson 1892–96, 180), the more complex microcosmic nature of Adam's body in *Elucidarius* I, 59 (Firchow 1989, 39–40), and the inverted theme of the world as microcosm made out of the macrocosm of a giant's body in *Grímnismál* (Jónas Kristjánsson 2014, 376; cf. Guðrún Nordal 2001, 277–83).

The analogical argument is presented in connection with another argument of a different type, the *astronomical* argument, drawn from the 'uneven' movements of the stars, to the effect that there is a governor of the heavens and, by extension — a third step of hypothetical inference — of the whole world. The astronomical argument is evidently of the sort that is called 'inference to the best explanation' — a type of argument to which traditional design arguments likewise belong. In scholarly discussion, it is typically assumed that the Prologue contains a design argument, that is to say, the argument for the controller of the planets, which is then associated or identified with a traditional design argument for the existence of God as either orderer or creator. However, the argument in the Prologue is not an inference from the apparent order of the world to its designer, nor, for that matter, to its creator. In fact, the ancients seem to have had no idea that the world was created at all; we are told that they *forgot* their creator and only argued for a powerful governor of the heavens. Nor did the ancients seem to take as their starting point the view that the world is an *orderly* creation: it is precisely because they observed some *disorder* in it that the ancients were prompted to conclude that the stars have a governor.[14] They do not claim that the objects within the world do their jobs as if they had sense while being senseless, as in Thomas Aquinas' 'fifth way', even if analysis of the astronomical argument might reveal an assumption that the heavenly bodies do not move as they do of their own accord but according to the will of their governor. Nor does the Prologue explicitly contain any suggestion of a coordination of means and ends, as in later analogical design arguments. It only describes the ancients as drawing inferences from the nature of the earth and the course of the stars and supplements these inferences with further ones drawn from the relation of the stars to phenomena on earth, leading to belief in a living earth and a heavenly ruler.

The question remains as to whether an inference is made for the existence of a goddess of the earth and a god of the sky; that is, according to the limited and earthly epistemological perspective of the ancients, who did not receive the gift of spiritual wisdom. The two arguments depend upon natural reason, that is, the exercise of natural reasoning without any recourse to revelation. Both are non-deductive arguments that start from the observation of natural phenomena

[14] The relevant starting point is the observed *irregularity* in the motions of the heavenly bodies. If those motions were regular, they might be explained as resulting simply from their nature. Irregularity precludes this explanation. As the movements seem not to be self-governed — or not entirely so — and there is no natural agent that seems to be capable of controlling those movements, then the 'best explanation' is that there must be a non-natural or transcendent governor. What is explained is the irregular motions of the heavenly bodies, not their existence.

and conclude with a being that is transcendent with respect to the observed phenomena and that possesses certain attributes. We have to distinguish the arguments and their conclusions from matters of interpretation. The conclusion of the *arguments* is only that the earth is alive and powerful and that there is a mighty ruler of the heavens. However, it seems that the ancients *interpret* the living earth as a goddess, or at least as divine, since they give her a name, and the ruler of the heavens as a powerful god, even if he is nameless. One could object that the ruler of the heavens is invisible and transcendent whereas the earth is not, but in both cases a conclusion is drawn that goes beyond the observable phenomena. By means of the hypothetical arguments in the third step there is an underlying movement towards something akin to a monotheistic world view or, possibly, to a henotheistic one. Yet, when the perceptions and inferences of the ancients have been interpreted as a strong anticipation of Christian monotheism, the tendency has been to overlook or dismiss the preceding analogical argument, as well as the fact that the astronomical argument does *not* lead to the view that the world is *created* by God (or by any agent or agents). A design argument implies the existence of a designer but not necessarily of a creator, as a cosmological argument would. Even if we grant that the governor of the heavenly bodies fashioned the world, like the Craftsman of Plato's *Timaeus*, on the assumption that he existed before the elements, we must take into account that the ancients conceived of everything in an earthly manner and believed that all things were fabricated out of some matter. So the natural religion does not include the belief that God created the world out of nothing, at least not according to the reasoning of the ancients in the Prologue, even if a reader might want to interpret the text in that way in view of the initial biblical context.

Hypothetical Reasoning and the Elements

As previously mentioned, the third step in the argument is in the form of hypothetical reasoning. The Prologue states that 'they assumed, if he ruled over the elements, that he must have existed before the heavenly bodies'. Taken at face value the inference is not formally valid, as can be seen when rewritten in a modal form.[15] The same is true of the next instance of hypothetical reasoning, which says that 'they realized that if he ruled the course of the heavenly bodies, he must rule the shining of the sun and the dew of the sky and the produce of the earth

[15] For instance, given that p = the elements, q = the heavenly bodies, the modal conditional 'If x rules over p, necessarily x exists before q' is a *non sequitur* as it stands.

which is dependent on it'. The proposition that the ruler of the heavenly bodies rules the shining of the sun, does not, in itself, imply that he rules the rain too, nor, for that matter, the wind, as stated in the sequel ('and similarly the wind of the sky and with it the storm of the sea'). These inferences look to be invalid as they stand, and additional premises would need to be supplied. (It is of course possible that these premises were taken to have been established and therefore could be left unstated.)

Part of the problem is the indeterminate meaning of the term 'hǫfuðskepnur' (translated as 'elements'). Another is the context and sequence in which the term occurs. It is usually taken to refer to the doctrine of the four elements (earth, water, fire, and air) that the material world was thought to be composed of. Medieval philosophers distinguished the primordial elements in this scientific sense from a more general use of the term referring to visible aspects of the material world, the visible elements (ground, sea, stars, winds). William of Conches (*c.* 1090–1154), for example, used the word *elementata* for the visible elements in order to distinguish them from *elementa* in the scientific sense (cf. Elford 1988, 308; Clunies Ross 1987, 134).

Now the term 'hǫfuðskepnur' occurs in the Prologue only in the context of the argument involving the governor of the heavenly bodies, more precisely in the hypothetical reasoning for his being prior to them. The inductive argument gives no evidence for the idea that the governor of the sky governs the four primal elements. To go, without any intermediate steps, from the control of the heavenly bodies to control of the four elements and from there to temporal or ontological priority with respect to the heavenly bodies seems a bit stretched. There are several ways in which one could try to come to terms with this problem.

First, the word 'hǫfuðskepnur' might be interpreted in a metonymic way, as a general term used instead of a more specific one for the sake of stylistic variation. According to the context principle, a word has meaning in the context of a proposition (and, consequently, a proposition has meaning in the context of other propositions). Thus 'hǫfuðskepnur' would normally refer to the elements, but would in this context be used in such a way that the reference is to the stars only. If this is so, the sense of the argument would be clearer since it would deal only with the movements of the stars and their control.[16]

Second, the Prologue never explicitly mentions the four elements as such, but it does make reference to the heavens, the winds, the sea, and the earth,

[16] According to Du Cange (1844, 27), *elementa* is used for the sun, moon, and the planets in the writings of some church fathers.

which suggests that here the sense of the term 'hǫfuðskepnur' is these visible phenomena. This use of the term is attested by other sources.[17] Thus, in the Old Norse translation *Elucidarius* 'hǫfuðskepna' can refer to the heavens as well as to air, water, and earth.[18] At I, 26, 'hǫfuðskepna' is used for *principalis creatura*, of which it might be a literal translation. On the other hand, in the discussion of man as microcosm (I, 59) 'hǫfuðskepnur' refers to the four traditional elements as one would expect from a macrocosm-microcosm theme: man derives his corporal being from the four elements: he has flesh from earth, blood from water, breath from air, and warmth from fire.

In the Icelandic Book of Homilies (Stockholm, Kungliga biblioteket, MS perg. 15 4to, *c*. 1200), 'hǫfuðskepna' has an even more variable meaning, referring to the heavens, the sea, and the earth, as well as to the sun and the stars. In one place, 'hǫfuðskepnur' clearly refers to a definite star, and not to the elements in the abstract sense, when it is said that 'a star' (*stella*, given in Latin in the Old Icelandic text) announced Christ, when he was still an infant and unable to speak, to the pagan peoples, and that the 'mode of reason demanded that speaking teachers make us acquainted with a speaking Lord, but while he was speechless because of his young bodily age, he was announced by mute elements' (*hǫfuðskepnur*).[19] In this context the term 'hǫfuðskepnur' may be seen as referring to the stars in a similar way as in the Prologue.

In short, it seems that the term 'hǫfuðskepnur' can be used in a concrete sense as referring to different aspects of the visible or sensible world, the 'principal creatures'. For example, the sea is referred to as 'hǫfuðskepna' by Bergr Sokkason (early fourteenth century) in his *Nikulás saga* (Unger 1877, 66). *Barlaams saga* (Rindal 1981, 48) speaks of the air as being above us ('lopt yuir oss'), and in *Jóns saga helga* changes in weather are seen as the work of 'hǫfuðskepnur' (Foote 2003, 276). Thus, in Old Norse-Icelandic texts we commonly encounter

[17] In this study I have benefited from searches in the online edition of *A Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* <http://www.onp.hum.ku.dk/>.

[18] At I, 20, *Elucidarius* states that God 'created the temporal day, that is, sun and moon and stars in the highest element (*hǫfuðskepna*), that is in heaven', where 'heaven' replaces the Latin *ignis* and thus changes the meaning from the primordial to the visible elements: 'scop hann tiþlegan dag þat es sol oc tungl oc stiornor á eNne ofsto hofoþskepno. þat es á himne', cf. 'fecit diem temporalitatis, scilicet solem et lunam et stellas, in supremo elemento, quod est ignis' (Firchow 1989, 21).

[19] 'oc þaN eN lítla ſvein oc eige eN melaNda fyr aldrſ ſakar boþaþe ſtella héiþnom þioþom. þat beidde hóttr ſkynſemennar. at mælanda drotteN kyNde os męlande keNerar. en meþan haN var mál laus at likamſ aldre þa boþoþo haN dumbar hofoþſkepnor' (Van Weenen 1993, 28^{r}:12–14).

an understanding of the elements as visible and perceptible phenomena — sky, wind, water, land — and not necessarily, it seems, as physical or metaphysical entities. Accordingly, the natural religion of the Prologue is based on observation of visible natural phenomena; in the case of the astronomical argument it is based on a difference in the movement of the stars that is unaccounted for unless one posits a ruler of the heavens, that is, a ruler of the sun, the moon, and the planets.[20]

Third, as a somewhat different approach, the hypothetical arguments could be read in the reverse order. As they stand, the arguments seem to move from the general to the particular, that is from the elements to the planets, and from there to the sublunar world, which would seem quite logical if it were not for the problem of the context and meaning of the word 'hǫfuðskepnur'. Perhaps we should read the argument as enthymemic or as an expression of unstated assumptions about the elements. Or perhaps we may distinguish the narrative order from the logical one and begin with the second hypothetical argument in which it emerges that the governor of the heavenly bodies rules the sunshine, the rain, the wind, the sea, and the produce of the earth. It would seem that this is in fact an enumeration of instances of the visible elements. The first hypothetical argument states that the one who governs the elements must be prior to the heavenly bodies, and the second argument may perhaps be seen as expressing the logical presuppositions of the former.

Some Theological and Philosophical Implications

As shown above, the inductive arguments in the Prologue proceed in a similar way, from the observation of natural phenomena towards inferring the attributes of the living earth and the existence and attributes of the ruler of the sky. The degree to which the reader is to identify the latter with the Christian God as Creator, mentioned at the start of the Prologue, is, as previously indicated, problematic. The identification of the governor of the stars with the Creator is in fact not present in the Prologue; it exists only in the mind of the (medieval Christian) reader, who assumes it without its being stated. It is implicit contextually because

[20] In that case, the hypothetical inferences make more sense. The argument could then be formally construed in modal form as 'If *x* rules over *q*, necessarily *x* exists before *q*', which, although not valid, might seem to make more sense than the original reformulation. On the other hand 'necessarily, if *x* creates *q*, *x* exists before *q*' would seem to be valid. Perhaps, one could see in the flawed argument a misleading influence from *Elucidarius* I, 15 where it is stated that God is prior to his creation (Firchow 1989, 18).

the Prologue begins with the biblical creation narrative, mentioning God Almighty, and it is his name, of course, that the ancients have forgotten, even if the reader has not forgotten it. But it is not to be assumed, surely, that pre-Christian efforts to make sense of the world were, or could have been, informed by what the narrator thinks that he knows.

As we have seen, the nature and attributes of the earth are argued for in a way similar to the existence and attributes of the ruler of the sky, even if the logical form of the arguments is different. One might therefore ask why the outcome of the discussion is not explicitly a bi-theistic conception of the earth as a goddess and of the sky as a god? What happens to the earth? The text states that the ruler of the sky dominates the earth by controlling the growth of the earth; his power is extended so as to include everything on earth and in the heavens, with the consequent impression to the medieval Christian that the ruler of the sky is to be equated with or compared to the God Almighty of the beginning of the Prologue. Yet the analogical argument is never explicitly refuted, rejected, or modified in a comparison with the astronomical one. It is, therefore, only by ignoring the significance of the first step, the analogical argument, that the second step, the astronomical argument, can be extended by means of the hypothetical arguments so as to cover the whole of nature. The first is, so to speak, 'naturalized' and the second 'theologized'.[21]

It has been pointed out that in Nordic mythology there is a 'figure corresponding to *terra mater* in Jǫrð, wife of Óðinn and mother of Þórr' (Faulkes 1983, 290), which could indicate that when the ancestors of the migrating Æsir give a name to the earth they might be conceived of as constituting or confirming the belief in a goddess. On the other hand, the argument for the ruler of the sky in the Prologue mirrors the way *Gylfaginning* has Alfǫðr fulfil the function of the highest god (Lassen 2011, 266–307). King Gylfi, thinly disguised as the traveller Gangleri, asks the three persons, named Hárr, Jafnhárr, and Þriði (High, Just-as-High, and Third, an obvious reference to the Trinity), a few revealing questions about their god and his works (Faulkes 2005, 8–9; 1987, 8–9). It turns out that the highest and most ancient of their gods is called Alfǫðr, an eternal ruler of his kingdom, who made heaven and earth and man and gave man an eternal soul; the souls of righteous men will live with him in his kingdom while the wicked will be sent to the other place. When Gylfi asks what he was doing

[21] Else Mundal (1992, 180–92) has emphasized Snorri's lack of interest in female figures, and according to Britt-Mari Näsström (1992, 195) 'Snorri's system of arranging the goddesses is a deliberate classification, due to a patriarchal system'.

before he made heaven and earth the reply is that he was among the frost-giants.[22] Thus *Gylfaginning* assimilates Nordic mythology in a much greater degree to the Christian world view than does the Prologue, which divides its attention between natural reasoning and history. If the Prologue's comment on the ancients having thought that everything was fashioned out of some material is extended to embrace the creation of the world, on the basis of the statement in *Gylfaginning* that Alfǫðr constructed ('smíðaði') the world (cf. Baetke 1950, 53), that is a matter of interpretation that depends on *Gylfaginning* and is not what the Prologue says. It is important to acknowledge the emphasis on the God-given, yet earthly, understanding of the ancients in the first section of the Prologue.

This paper has focused on logical and philosophical aspects of the Prologue to the *Prose Edda*. It has not given much attention to the intensively discussed question of the relation of the Prologue to *Gylfaginning* and other parts of the work. In general, the different approaches to that problem are different ways of explaining how Snorri reconstructs a systematic pagan religion on natural and euhemeristic grounds as a dim reflection of Christianity.[23] Also, some scholars see the Prologue as a later, theological, addition (cf. Von See 1988) and still others see all the parts of the *Prose Edda* as separate works, entering into the collection with other parts depending on the needs or interests of the compiler or of a teacher of poetics (Heimir Pálsson 2012). The *a priori* view is, of course, that the Prologue is indeed a prologue to the work in much the same way as the prologue to *Heimskringla* is to the kings' sagas in that work. If the function of the Prologue to the *Prose Edda* is to provide the setting and the background for paganism as arising out of philosophical reasoning and (implicit) euhemerism, there is not necessarily any contradiction involved if the ideas of the Prologue are in conflict with the mythical tales themselves.

The philosophical concepts of *eðli*, *háttr*, and *efni*, along with inductive and conditional arguments to the existence or essence of one or more superior beings

[22] The idea that Alfǫðr was among the frost giants may be an ironic twist of the *Joca monachorum*, where it is said that before he created the world God sat on the wings of the wind (cf. Kålund 1917, 36).

[23] For instance, we have the idea of the 'Alfǫðr-theology' of *Gylfaginning* as a mediation between the natural religion of the Prologue and the polytheism in *Gylfaginning* (Baetke 1950); the concept of 'association through contrast' (Holtsmark 1964); the hypothesis of parallels to or anticipation of Christianity (Dronke 1977, Clunies Ross 1987) and of 'theologization' in the Prologue vs original myth in *Gylfaginning* (Von See 1988); the concept of 'analogy' (Beck 1994); and last but not least the idea that scholars may, like Gylfi, have been fooled by taking Snorri's humour all too seriously (Vésteinn Ólason 2001).

and their attributes, can be seen to derive from a treatment of subjects that necessitate a conceptual approach or distinctions that provide understanding or explanation of the subject matter. The text reflects and exposes examples of philosophical thought framed in the vernacular. An almost complete absence of direct references to or correspondence with Latin writings is combined with an obviously learned and conceptual approach. The possible influence of twelfth-century Platonism has often been evoked, a philosophical current inspired by the reading and interpretation of Calcidius's translation of and commentary on Plato's *Timaeus*.[24] The main grounds for this hypothesis are the attitude to pagan mythology found in the *Prose Edda*, the involvement of the elements, and the microcosm-macrocosm theme. One could point to an additional ground: the concept of matter. But perhaps one should only speak of echoes of Platonic themes rather than direct influence. Vernacular texts, such as the *Elucidarius*, may account for many (though not all) of these themes, such as the micro-macrocosm correspondences, the doctrine of the elements, the priority of God to his creation, and the idea that the planets obey the will of God.

Another source, and perhaps more proximate, might be theological explanations of the nature of the Trinity (same nature, different manifestations) or the Eucharist (e.g. blood and wine as being of the same nature but exhibiting different qualities) that it would be natural to discuss, not only in Latin but in the vernacular as well. For instance, in his treatise *De corpore et sanguine Domini*, Lanfranc of Bec (*c.* 1005–89) distinguishes between *substantia* and *qualitas* in a way that mirrors the distinction between 'eðli' and 'háttr' (D'Achery 1880, 416). The possibility of influence from Old English should also be taken into consideration. For instance, Ælfric (*c.* 955–*c.* 1010) explains the nature of the Trinity in a similar manner, as three modes (cf. 'hættir') and one god, i.e. in substance: 'þry on hadum 7 an god'; cf. 'hi ðry an god untodæledlic: þry on hadum, 7 an god' (they three one indivisible god: three in modes and one god; Clemoes 1997, 238, 256). In such cases we would have an instance of theological influence without any trace of direct Latin learning, a situation that would be characteristic of oral and vernacular transmission.

It is, of course, possible that the outlook of the Prologue might be influenced by the concept of 'analogy' (*similitudo*) as expounded in the *Canones* of the Lateran Council of 1215, which were transmitted to Norway and Iceland

[24] See, for instance, Dronke 1977, 169–70; Faulkes 1983, 300; Clunies Ross 1987, 14, 133, 175; Strerath-Bolz 1991, 103–16; Guðrún Nordal 2001, 273–77. Óláfr Þórðarson (*c.* 1210–59) mentions Plato in his *Third Grammatical Treatise* (Finnur Jónsson 1927, 21).

(Beck 1994, cf. Van Nahl 2013a). The traditional topological approach, as manifested for instance in the allegorical interpretations in the vernacular *Veraldar saga*, written before 1190, might however have provided a sufficient basis for such an outlook (Jakob Benediktsson 1944, 79–86, cf. Wellendorf 2011). Nevertheless, the distinction between *eðli* and *háttr* can in fact be seen as revealing a conceptual structure that is sufficient to account for the relationship between the old and the new religions: while fundamentally the same thing they differ in their manifestations.[25] If this is so, there is no need to go further than the Prologue itself in search of explanations. In addition, the conditional reasoning, especially prominent in the argument for the existence of the ruler of the sky, might reflect the author's vernacular legal training, tempting though it might be to explain this kind of reasoning as the author's having been acquainted with the basic principles of hypothetical or conditional arguments as found in Aristotelian or Boethian logic. However, there need not be any contradiction between dialectical and legal training.[26]

Conclusion

It is indeed remarkable that in the Prologue to the *Prose Edda* there actually *is* a notion of something akin to a natural inductive and hypothetical reasoning, from observations of the features of the world to the existence of superior beings of some kind, and that these concepts and reasons are expressed in the vernacular. The *Prose Edda* is accepted as being the work of a skilled poet and mythographer and so it is not surprising that the Prologue invites different hermeneutical approaches. This paper has argued that the 'analogical' argument, which is too readily assimilated to a 'microcosm-macrocosm speculation', must be given its value as an argument in connection with the 'astronomical' argument, too easily identified as a traditional 'design argument'. These two arguments correspond to a philosophical manner of arguing for the existence and attributes of God, one to the effect that the earth is living and powerful and the other to the effect that the sky has a mighty ruler. They are not reducible to the macrocosm-microcosm theme, to traditional arguments from design, or to natural theology in the monotheistic tradition. Rather, the text presents three interrelated kinds of arguments: an inductive argument to the effect that the earth is alive and powerful, an inductive

[25] For the notion of 'conceptual structure' cf. Hadot 2014, 25–26.

[26] For editions of the laws of *Grágás*, see Finsen 1879 or Gunnar Karlsson 1992; for an English translation, see Dennis, Foote, and Perkins 1980–2000.

argument to the effect that the sky has a powerful controller, and hypothetical arguments to the effect that the controller of the heavenly bodies is distinct from the domain he governs and that he governs everything in the sky and on earth. It is only by suppressing the first argument and ignoring certain aspects of the second and the third that the Prologue can be seen to contain an argument from design of a traditional sort. Moreover, the distinction between *eðli* and *háttr* is sufficient to account for the overall conceptual structure at work in the Prologue.

Thus the process in the first part of the Prologue to the *Prose Edda* seems to be the following: first, by observation, the earth is discovered to be a living being and the ruler of the planets to be an overlord of the sky and consequently, by conjecture, of the whole world, thus approaching the monotheistic conception of Christianity. The flawed hypothetical arguments may even be taken as indications of authorial intent, that is of a will to approximate the natural and the revealed religions. The point of view of the omniscient narrator in the Prologue, who starts out with the biblical creation narrative, must be distinguished from that of the ancients, who draw inferences, with the help of their natural reason, from the way things work in nature and come to conclusions that approximate some aspects of the true religion. Philosophy only brings them so far, which, in fact, is in accordance with traditional theological positions. These people, the Prologue tells us, 'understood everything with earthly understanding, for they were not granted spiritual wisdom'.

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