

CHAPTER 2.

REASONS TO BELIEVE – THEORETICAL ARGUMENTS

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Thinking about God brings together our powers of speculation, our deepest values, and our greatest hopes and fears. It is therefore fertile philosophical territory. Some of the arguments for belief in God are theoretical in that they appeal to our reason. Other arguments are practical in that they invoke God to make sense of some of our practices, such as morality. In this chapter, we will review the most influential theoretical arguments for God's existence: the teleological, the cosmological, and the ontological arguments. The former two try to show God's existence using tools familiar from ordinary empirical reasoning; God is a hypothesis to be proven in much the same way as we prove more mundane hypotheses, marshalling the evidence as best we can. Just as a one might see a puddle and infer that it has been raining recently, one might observe certain other features of the world and infer God as the best (or only) explanation of them. The latter argument is more closely akin to mathematics and conceptual analysis; just as one might reflect on the concept of a triangle and ascertain that its internal angles must add up to 180°, one might reflect on the concept of God and ascertain that he must exist. Lastly, we will introduce the suggestion that it is legitimate to believe in God without providing arguments at all: that belief in God is more properly a cornerstone for our thinking, than a mere conclusion of some argument. Each of these arguments have been articulated in myriad ways, so we will focus our attention on some of the most influential versions.

THE TELEOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

“Telos” being Greek for “purpose” or “goal,” the **teleological** argument takes as its starting point the appearance of purpose or design in the world. If there is design, there must be a designer. This thought is an ancient and cross-cultural one, appearing in classical Hindu thought (Brown 2008) and in the Psalms: “The heavens declare the glory of the Lord; and the firmament sheweth his handiwork” (Psalm 19:1). An influential formulation comes from William Paley (1743-1805). In *Natural Theology*, Paley offers numerous instances of apparent design, focusing primarily on biological organisms. Paley argues that organisms are analogous to human-created artifacts in that they involve a complex arrangement of parts that serve some useful function, where even slight alterations in the complex arrangement would mean that the useful function was no longer served. An eye, like a watch, evidently serves a useful function. The function is only achieved by a very complex arrangement

of parts, which in turn serve various sub-functions, all ordered towards the higher function. Had this arrangement been different in any minute detail, the eye would not successfully serve its higher function. To explain this feature of the eye, we should, on an **analogy** with the watch, refer to a designing mind's activity, rather than the blind play of causal forces. As we are to the watch, so God is to the eye. To Paley, God is a powerful and simple hypothesis that must be invoked to explain the design resplendent in nature (Paley 1802).

Formulations of the teleological argument like Paley's have been subjected to searching criticisms, not least by David Hume (1711-1776). In his fabulously written *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Hume questions how close the analogy of design really is. For example, we produce artifacts by acting on pre-existing materials, but God is supposed to create from nothing. Most artifacts have a purpose that is evident to us, but God's purpose in having created this or that creature, or the world at all, is unclear. We have seen artifacts being manufactured on many occasions, but never an organism, or the world. Even granting unequivocally that there is design in the world, we would not be justified in inferring God to explain it. Hume notes that artifacts are usually the result of collaboration by many people. Nor is there any connection between the qualities of an artifact and the qualities of its designer; one need not be a giant to build a skyscraper or be beautiful to make a beautiful painting. So, the design in the world need not be the design of one being, or an especially exalted being. Rather, the evidence of design is equally consistent with the hypothesis of polytheism (Hume 1779). Perhaps as devastating for Paley's formulation, Charles Darwin's (1809-1882) theory of evolution by natural selection is widely taken to show that the complex arrangement of parts and the functions of the parts of organisms can be accounted for without reference to a designing mind. The appearance of design is merely appearance; the analogy between artifacts and organisms is a misleading one. God is an obsolete hypothesis so far as the explanation of these phenomena are concerned. A distinct minority, the proponents of "Intelligent Design" contest this claim by offering examples of biological phenomena that supposedly cannot be explained by Darwinian evolution (Behe 1996). Barbara Forrest argues that "Intelligent Design" theories lack a serious methodology, given that they invoke miraculous intervention in an unprincipled way to explain various phenomena (Forrest 2011).

However, teleological arguments continue to thrive in other forms. One line of thinking is the fine-tuning argument. Our universe seems to be governed by a batch of laws of nature—e.g. gravity, the strong nuclear force. It seems possible that these laws of nature could have been different in an unfathomable number of ways—e.g. we can conceive gravity as a billion times stronger than it is, or a billion times weaker. It seems that most of the ways that the laws of nature could have been would not allow for embodied moral agents (or, more broadly, life) by not allowing for the emergence of complex matter. Now, arguably God is a being who wishes there to be embodied moral agents. So, if there is a God, this predicts a universe with laws of nature that allow for the emergence of embodied moral agents, laws that are finely-tuned for such a purpose. By contrast, if there is no God there is no particular reason to predict that the laws of nature will be like this. Our universe seems to be one with laws that allow for embodied moral agents. Therefore, our universe is more consistent with the theistic hypothesis, so probably God exists. Finally, putting aside the fine-tuning of the physical laws we enjoy, Richard Swinburne contends that the fact that our universe is governed by laws at all, rather than being chaotic, is something that demands a design-based explanation (Swinburne 2004).

Whether such arguments really identify phenomena that stand in need of a special explanation, and whether the explanations they offer are vulnerable to being supplanted by non-theistic alternatives, is a matter of ongoing debate.

Questions to Consider

1. What is the value of arguments by analogy, such as Paley's? Do they give new information, or just highlight information you already had, or can they even be misleading?
2. Suppose you were convinced that our universe is in fact fine-tuned. What, if anything, would you be entitled to infer about the nature of the fine-tuner(s)?
3. Many have thought that Darwinian evolution thoroughly undermines the view that biological phenomena are designed by God. Is there a consistent way of holding both views? Supposing there is, would the hypothesis of a designer-God still be a necessary part of the explanation of the biological phenomena, or a somewhat ornamental addition?

THE COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

"Cosmos" being Greek for "world," the **cosmological** argument suggests God as the only adequate hypothesis in explaining why there is something rather than nothing. Cosmological arguments go back at least as far as Plato (428-348 BCE), with influential formulations being offered by Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) and Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716). One influential formulation comes from Samuel Clarke (1675-1729).

In *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God*, Clarke argues for the conclusion that God is the reason for the universe's existence by showing the bankruptcy of the alternatives. Something must have existed from eternity, Clarke reasons, since to suppose otherwise would be to suppose that something arose from nothing, which is absurd. Further, this eternal something must be independent of the universe. Think of a sapling tree. Like every individual thing in the universe its existence is **contingent**—it could fail to exist—as demonstrated by the fact that it once did not exist and by the fact that it is susceptible to change and destruction. Therefore, its reason for existing must be sought outside it; if we seek the reason why the sapling exists we must refer to its parent tree, the soil, the sun, the air. But if everything in the universe is contingent, then so is the universe itself, and its reason for existing must be sought outside it. Even if the universe had no beginning in time, and we could trace the sapling's reason for existing backward indefinitely, we would still need to explain why there was this endless succession of contingent beings rather than nothing. Think of "reason for existing" as being like the parcel in the children's game "pass the parcel."¹ Even supposing an infinite number of players, or a circle of players passing the parcel for an eternity, if every player must receive the parcel

1. Pass the parcel (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pass_the_parcel) is a parlour game in which a parcel containing a prize is passed around and around in a circle.

from another (like a contingent being receives its reason for existing from another), then we would still face the question where the players got the parcel in the first place. Lastly, the being outside the universe must have a necessary existence; that is, it must contain the reason for its existence within itself, such that it could not fail to exist. By the difficulties attending all the alternatives, we are driven to accept that not all beings are contingent; our search for reasons for existing must reach its terminus in a necessary being, God. Clarke admits that the notion of necessary existence is difficult to conceive, since all the beings we encounter are contingent, but holds that it is the only adequate hypothesis in explaining why there is something (Clarke 1705).

Clarke's cosmological argument was also criticized by Hume in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Hume questions why the universe itself may not be the necessary being. Clarke's reason for rejecting this idea was that everything in the universe is contingent. But, Hume notes, Clarke is committing the fallacy of composition. A flock may be composed of sheep destined for slaughter, but this does not prove that the flock itself is destined for slaughter. Likewise, perhaps the universe's existence is necessary despite the contingency of every individual thing in it, a thought which is lent some credibility by the physical principle that matter can neither be created nor destroyed. Raising further havoc, Hume questions whether there can even be such a thing as a necessary being. It seems to be a feature of claims which are necessary—like “ $2+2=4$ ” or “a nephrologist is a physician of the kidneys”—that their contraries cannot be conceived without contradiction, as with “ $2+2=5$.” But we seem able to conceive any being's nonexistence without contradiction; just as I can coherently conceive of the sapling's nonexistence, I can coherently conceive of God's nonexistence (as shown by the fact that we feel the need to debate God's existence).

Another issue is that Clarke's cosmological argument, like many other formulations, invokes the “principle of sufficient reason,” or the idea that every state of affairs has a reason why it is so and not otherwise. This seems to be a principle that we make thorough use of from early childhood in endlessly asking “why?” and expecting that there must be answers. Because of this principle, we insist that the universe must have a reason for its existence, rather than allowing that the universe is an unaccountable “brute fact.” But why should we accept the principle of sufficient reason? It does not seem to be a necessary truth or something we can infer from experience (Pruss 2006).

A quite different version of the cosmological argument is presented by William Lane Craig, drawing upon the Islamic philosophers of the 9th-12th centuries such as al-Ghazali (1058-1111), called the *kalām* cosmological argument. Craig argues that whatever begins to exist has a cause, that the universe began to exist, and that God must be invoked as its cause. Why believe that the universe began to exist? For one thing, it seems that the universe cannot have an infinite temporal duration since the successive addition of finites cannot add up to something infinite. Just as one cannot “count to infinity,” the compounding of the moments that pass in time could not ever add up to an infinite temporal duration. For another, if we make the supposition that the universe has an infinite temporal duration various absurdities arise. Sundays are a subset (one-seventh) of all the days that have ever occurred. A very bored deity would count out six non-Sundays for every Sunday. But if the universe has an infinite temporal duration, then an infinite number of Sundays have occurred. And an infinite number of non-Sundays have occurred. Therefore, the subset is equal in magnitude to the set—an absurdity. So, the universe began to exist. Notice that Craig's argument avoids referring to necessary

beings, or the principle of sufficient reason; Craig's argument requires only that if something begins to exist, then it has a cause. Supporters of the kalām cosmological argument may also cite scientific evidence to support the idea that the universe began to exist, for instance the Big Bang theory or the idea that if the universe had an infinite temporal duration, then **entropy** would guarantee that complex matter would not exist presently (Craig 1979).

One key question about Craig's kalām cosmological argument is whether the cause of the universe must be something like our conception of God, a kind of personal agent. Craig, following al-Ghazali, suggests that the cause of the universe must be timeless, outside of time entirely. Physical causes bring about their effects, as it were, immediately. For example, an effect like the process of water freezing will begin to happen as soon as its cause, a sub-zero temperature, is present. So, if the cause of the universe is timeless and is a physical cause, we would expect the universe to have always existed. But as we have seen, that cannot be. So, the cause of the universe must be non-physical. Aside from physical causes, we sometimes explain effects as resulting from actions—we have the idea that personal agents bring about effects spontaneously as and when they will to do so, in a way that is different than and not entirely determined by physical causes. On this model, plausibly the cause of the universe is the action of a personal, but non-physical, agent. Others have objected, though, that it is difficult to make sense of the idea of a personal agent who acts but is also outside of time, and again that we are having to rely too heavily on our limited repertoire of concepts: for all we know, there might be causes that are neither like the physical nor like personal agency.

Questions to Consider

4. It seems that the opponent of the cosmological argument can try to defuse it by denying that the universe has a reason for its existence, or a cause, or by denying the principle of sufficient reason. Are these unreasonable moves? Is there any claim or principle that it would be unreasonable to deny, if the alternative was the conclusion that God exists?
5. In theory, could science one day prove that the universe did not begin to exist? What impact would such a finding have on Clarke's cosmological argument? On Craig's kalām cosmological argument?
6. Is it reasonable to rely on our limited repertoire of concepts, as exemplified in the discussion about whether the cause of the universe is a personal agent? Should we be worried by the thought that reality may be stranger than we can conceive?

THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

“Ontos” being Greek for “being” or “existence,” the **ontological** argument is unusual in that it has no empirical premises at all; God is not called upon as an explanation for anything. Rather, God's existence is proven by reflection on the concept of God. This is an extremely unfamiliar way of proceeding, since ordinarily we think that by **analyzing** the concept of something, we may discover

the **predicates** that will be true of it *if* it exists, but not *that* it exists. For instance, if I have a child then the predicate “has a grandfather named Patrick” will be true of it. The ontological argument proposes, in the case of God, to abolish this “if” and proceed directly from the concept of God to his existence. The argument’s first proponent was Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109). It’s a familiar idea that God is great, the greatest in fact, so great one cannot think of anything greater. Anselm draws on this familiar idea in his *Proslogion*. There, Anselm characterizes God as “a being than which nothing greater can be conceived” (Anselm 1078). In more modern language, Anselm is saying that God is the greatest conceivable being, that it is part of the concept of God that it is impossible to conceive of any being greater than God. It seems that existence is greater than nonexistence. So, if we conceive of God as nonexistent, then we can conceive of something greater than God: e.g., a shoe, a flea. But God is the greatest conceivable being, so our assumption of God’s nonexistence must have been false, and God must exist. Another way of putting this is that Anselm anticipates Hume’s objection that no being’s existence is necessary (since any being’s nonexistence can be conceived without contradiction). Anselm insists that in this case the idea of God, properly understood, does give rise to contradiction if we suppose his non-existence. “The being which must exist does not exist” seems like a contradiction.

From the outset, the ontological argument has had difficulties heaped upon it. For one thing, although it may seem intuitively right that existence is greater than nonexistence, what does “greater” mean? Better than? Preferable to? More real than? A satisfying characterization is hard to find. Another early objection comes from Gaunilo of Marmoutier (994-1083), who makes the parodic suggestion of an island that is the greatest island that can be conceived. If such an island is to be greater than, say, Corsica, it must exist. Must we then say that such an island exists? Surely not. The difficulty raised by Gaunilo is that it seems that the predicate of existence can be bolted on to any concept illicitly. Anselm responds, however, that his argument applies uniquely to the greatest *being* that can be conceived (not a given, limited kind of being like an island), since although the imagined island would indeed be greater if it existed, it is not part of the concept of anything except the greatest being that can be conceived that it be greater than everything else, and so for it alone can we infer its existence from its concept. A similar response is that contingency is part of the concept of an island (or dog, or horse, or any other specific, limited kind of being which we are acquainted with), so that a necessarily existing island would simply be a contradiction. Only with the non-specific concept of “a being” in general would contingency not just be included in the concept.

The most historically influential criticism of the ontological argument, however, comes from Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant argues that existence is not a predicate (Kant 1781). Think about the concept of a banana. We can attribute certain predicates to it, such as “yellowness” and “sweetness.” As time goes by, we might add further predicates to the concept, e.g., “nutritional potassium source.” Now think about what happens to the concept of a banana when you suppose that bananas exist. It seems that the concept is not changed at all. To say something exists is not to say anything about the concept of it, only that the concept is instantiated in reality. But if existence cannot be part of a concept, then it cannot be part of the concept of God, and cannot be found therein by any sort of analysis.

Kant’s argument was widely taken to be calamitous to the ontological argument. However, in the

1960s, the argument was rejuvenated, in a form that (perhaps) avoids Kant's criticism, by Norman Malcolm (1911-1990). Malcolm suggests that although existence may not be a predicate, necessary existence is a predicate. As contingent beings, we are the sort of things which can come into and go out of existence. But if God exists, then he is a necessary being rather than a contingent being. So, if he exists he cannot go out of existence. This is a predicate God enjoys, even if existence per se is not a predicate (Malcolm 1960). Intuitively, "indestructibility" and "immortality" are predicates that alter the concept of a thing. Another modern version of an Anselmian ontological argument is offered by Lynne Rudder Baker (1944-2017). Baker's version avoids the claim that existence is a predicate (as well as several other traditional difficulties). Instead, Baker notes that individuals who do not exist have mediated causal powers, that is, they cause effects but only because individuals who do exist have thoughts and beliefs about them: Santa Claus has the mediated causal power to get children to leave cookies out for him, children who themselves have unmediated causal powers. In short, to have unmediated causal powers is intuitively greater than having mediated causal powers, so given that God is the greatest being that can be conceived of, God must have unmediated causal powers, and so he must exist (Baker 2013).

A final difficulty that we may mention for these three theistic proofs is whether they prove the existence of the God of Abraham, or the God of classical theism (supposing that the two are the same) — which it is the concern of most theistic philosophers to do. The teleological argument may show a designer, which corresponds tolerably well to the creatorhood of God, but seems to fall short of showing God's other attributes, like omnibenevolence. Similarly, the world-cause or necessary being purportedly shown by the cosmological and ontological arguments may seem far distant from a personal God who is interested in our affairs. One theistic response is that these arguments may work in combination, or be supplemented by the evidence of revelations, religious experiences, and miracles (See Chapter 3 (<https://press.rebus.community/intro-to-phil-of-religion/chapter/non-standard-arguments-for-gods-existence/>) for a few such arguments), or we may be able to find ways in which one divine attribute implies the others. Bear in mind also that there are many less well-known theistic arguments beyond these three traditional ones (McIntosh 2019). (For some specific examples, see Chapter 3 (<https://press.rebus.community/intro-to-phil-of-religion/chapter/non-standard-arguments-for-gods-existence/>).)

Questions to Consider

7. Do we really have a conception of "a being than which nothing greater can be conceived"? Is that something we are able to frame in our minds, or have we just begun to misuse words?
8. If existence is not a predicate, why do we treat it as one in ordinary sentences, like "the pecan tree exists"? Further, how do we delineate the domain of fiction? Isn't our concept of "Homer Simpson" a concept of a character who does not exist? If not, what is it a concept of?
9. Even once you grasp it, does the ontological argument seem intuitive to you? Does it seem

less intuitive than the cosmological argument? Should you put much weight on your intuitions about these arguments?

REFORMED EPISTEMOLOGY

It strikes some people as very odd to base belief in God on theoretical arguments like those we have discussed. It seems that someone who did so would be obliged to regularly check the philosophical journals to ensure that their favorite argument had not been undermined, and as you may have noticed the fortunes of each argument wax and wane over time. Surely, belief in God should not depend on such vicissitudes. But without relying on such arguments, would belief not become theoretically unjustified, irrational, and dogmatic?

One suggestion, drawing on the Reformed theology of John Calvin (1509-1564), comes from Alvin Plantinga (1983). We can think of our beliefs as being arranged in a structure. Some beliefs are high-up in the structure. We can only justify these beliefs by making complicated arguments from other beliefs (e.g. “inflation reduces unemployment”). But other beliefs are at the foundation of the structure; they are not based on other beliefs, and so are themselves “basic.” Basic beliefs need not be arbitrary. Rather, basic beliefs are justified (“properly basic”) if they arise from the exercise of reliable faculties such as our senses or our reason. For instance, I don’t infer the belief that I am cold from any more well-known beliefs. I justifiably believe it since it is evident to my senses. And, although a mathematician could prove “ $2+2=4$ ” from axioms that are in some sense more fundamental, that isn’t how ordinary people arrive at this belief. Rather, people justifiably believe that “ $2+2=4$ ” since it is self-evident to their reason.

Could it be that belief in God is properly basic, rather than something high-up in our belief-structure, as the arguments that we have canvassed assume? The apparent objection to allowing this is that God’s existence is neither evident to the senses, nor self-evident to reason. If a belief does not meet either of these criteria, then how can it be properly basic? Plantinga’s response is that there are many beliefs which seem to be properly basic for us yet which do not meet these criteria. For instance, consider your belief that other people are not automatons, that they have an inner mental life like your own. This belief is usually basic for us; we believe it spontaneously when we see a human form, rather than believing it because of some complicated argument. Is this belief evident to the senses? No, we cannot “see” other people’s minds, only their observable, outward behavior. Is it self-evident to reason? No, unlike a mathematical truth, it is the sort of thing which we can conceive to be false without contradiction (since we can conceive of other people being mindless robots). So, it seems this belief is basic for us, despite neither being self-evident nor evident to the senses, and is properly basic if whatever the faculty is that delivers this belief is reliable. Perhaps belief in God is just the same way, something we spontaneously believe in certain circumstances, as when viewing a dramatic sunset or following the prevention of impending peril. Such a belief will be properly basic if it results from the exercise of a reliable faculty. Following Calvin, Plantinga postulates such a faculty under the term *sensus divinitatis* (“sense of divinity”). Plantinga notes that taking belief in God as basic need not be dogmatic, since basic beliefs can be overturned if they are shown to be false or shown to have resulted

from unreliable faculties—but he conjectures the failure of the arguments against God’s existence, which are addressed in Chapter 4 (<https://press.rebus.community/intro-to-phil-of-religion/chapter/reasons-not-to-believe/>).

Questions to Consider

10. If belief in God can be properly basic, why couldn’t all sorts of strange beliefs be properly basic?
11. If there is a faculty that generates basic beliefs about religious claims, how do we explain the occurrence of unbelief or of indifference to religious claims? On the other hand, if there is not such a faculty, how do we explain the widespread belief in something so exotic and far-removed as God? Would anyone have thought-up the idea of God, if it were not the sort of idea that spontaneously occurs to us under certain common conditions?

CONCLUSION

We have looked at some arguments that purport to provide evidence for God’s existence either by invoking God as an explanation for various aspects of the world (the teleological and cosmological arguments) or by analysis of the concept of God (the ontological argument). Each argument has formidable proponents and detractors, and both the arguments and the responses to them raise difficult philosophical problems about the nature of thought (concepts, beliefs, arguments) and the nature of nature itself (time, causality, purpose). One thing we can learn from this state of affairs is that anyone with an interest in proving God’s existence, or in resisting those proofs, needs to take an interest in philosophy, and likewise that those with an interest in philosophy can see philosophical problems in new and different lights by examining the arguments for God’s existence.

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FURTHER READING

Books Surveying Arguments for and against the Existence of God

Accessible sources assessing the three arguments considered here, and more:

- Everitt, Nicholas. 2004. *The Non-Existence of God*. Routledge: London.
- Swinburne, Richard. 2004. *The Existence of God*. Second Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Zagzebski, Linda. 2007. *The Philosophy of Religion: An Historical Introduction*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Online Resources

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy and The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy contain many excellent articles on the main arguments for and against God's existence. There are many websites and blogs focusing on the philosophy of religion. Good ones include:

- Strange Notions: The Digital Areopagus—Reason, Faith, Dialogue (<https://strangenotions.com/>)
- Edward Feser's blog (<http://edwardfeser.blogspot.com/>)
- Alexander Pruss's blog (<http://alexanderpruss.blogspot.com/>)
- Arguments for the Existence of God on The Secular Web (<https://infidels.org/library/>)

modern/theism/arguments.html)

- Atheism: Proving the Negative (<http://www.provingthenegative.com/>)
- Ex-apologist: A philosophy of religion blog (<https://exapologist.blogspot.com/>)
Consider watching a video lecture series, such as Professor Matt McCormick's video lectures (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCgHJAhcNwMInU0KuPFEAP1g/>)

Readings Specific to Each Argument

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