

Kant's Arguments for God's Existence

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Introduction

Kant puts forth three arguments for God's existence---or, what might be more accurate, three very different versions of a single such argument. Each is original and

none has any obvious flaws. This is not to say that they prove what they are meant to prove, only that, if they fail to do so, it is not immediately clear why.

Background: Three Arguments for God's Existence

When philosophers try to prove God's existence, it is almost always by way of one of the following three arguments: the ontological argument, the cosmological argument, and the teleological argument.

Kant rejects each of these arguments, and his own arguments are to be understood in terms of this fact. Right now, I will state and evaluate these arguments, and then I will state and evaluate Kant's arguments.

The ontological argument: God is by definition perfect; failure to exist is an imperfection; therefore, God must exist.

Analysis: This argument is a total failure, since all it shows is the truism is that *if* God existed, *then*, having as he would every conceivable perfection, he would exist—since, in other words, all it shows is that if God existed, then God would exist.

By way of anticipation, Kant makes a similar point, albeit so clumsily and circuitously that his meaning can barely be made out.

The cosmological argument: We can explain any given event in terms of prior events, but we cannot explain the totality of events in this way. Therefore, this event-

totality can only be explained in terms of something that lies outside of itself, and any such thing, being outside of space and time and therefore thoroughly supernatural, is *ipso facto* God.

Analysis: I don't know that this argument, stated in this way, is indeed fallacious. But I do have one serious misgiving about it, namely, that anything that is outside of space and time cannot possibly *create* anything, since causes are necessarily in the same timeline as their effects and therefore cannot be outside of the temporal manifold. By way of anticipation, Kant makes a similar point.

Be it noted that there are cruder versions of the cosmological argument that are either outright failures or have glaring gaps in them, a case in point being Aristotle's 'unmoved mover' argument. According to Aristotle, there must be an unmoved mover at the beginning of time that sets everything else in motion. This unmoved mover, says Aristotle, must necessarily be God, given that it has the miraculous and therefore supernatural property of not needing a cause.

The main problem with this argument is that, supposing there to be an unmoved mover at the beginning of it all, it is not clear that it would have any of the characteristics we would associate with God—not clear that it would be conscious or purposive, let alone benevolent and all-knowing.

Maybe there is a reason why it would have these characteristics; but if so, Aristotle doesn't say what it is, and neither does any other proponent of this argument.

Also, if God is an unmoved mover, then unmoved movers are possible; and if they are not possible, then God cannot be one.

The obvious counter-response is to say that they are possible only *as* miracles but not otherwise. But that response begs the question.

The teleological argument: According to this argument, the structure of the world embodies intelligence and is therefore the work of an intelligent craftsman, this being God, since any craftsman capable of creating the universe would seem for that very reason to qualify as God.

There is also the fact that not only does the structure of the world *suggest* intelligence; the world actually *contains* intelligence—as in, we are intelligent, and so to varying degrees are other creatures. And it is very hard to see how intelligence could come from unthinking matter.

Leibniz put forth this argument, and it occurs as a subsidiary argument in one of Kant's argument's for God's existence. Whether it is a version of the teleological argument is a question we can set aside for now.

Analysis: This argument is *prima facie* reasonable, but Kant himself identifies a subtle problem with it. See below.

[Kant's criticisms of these three arguments](#)

Kant's analysis of the ontological argument is that it involves some kind of sophism stemming from a failure to see that, even though, linguistically, "exists" and other such terms are comparable to "runs" and "is red" and other garden-variety predicates, nonetheless "exists" has very different logical properties from other predicates. Kant is right that there is a muddle at work here, but he does not do a good job of putting his finger on the problem.

In any case, the blunder is that "red" and "runs" and other garden-variety predicates attribute properties to objects, whereas "exists" attributes a property to a concept. When you say that a pink elephant exists, you are not first picking out some existent pink elephant and then uselessly attributing existence to it; rather, you are saying of the concept of a pink elephant that it is instantiated (or, equivalently, of the class of pink elephants that it is non-empty).¹

Kant's analysis of the ontological argument is not very important, either in itself or to the architectonic of his thought; but his analyses of the other two arguments are important.

His basic criticism of both arguments is that they fail to distinguish between *cause* and *ground*. Both of these arguments, according to Kant, are to the effect that God is a *cause* of the universe. But, says Kant, if that is true, then God is just one cause among many---and therefore isn't very God-like.

¹ Kant's criticisms of the ontological argument are stated in the first three "reflections" contained in *The Only Possible Proof of God's Existence* and also in pages 563-568 of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (Guyer Translation).

The idea here is that, if God is simply a super-cause, then he differs only in degree, not in nature, from other causes and for that reason isn't really God.

Kant's position is that God, if existent, must be the *rational basis* of the universe, not its creator—not, in other words, just another cause, albeit a particularly important one.

Relatedly, Kant holds that these two arguments attempt to establish God's existence in much the way that a scientific hypothesis attempts to establish the existence of some unseen force or particle. I see footprints; I start thinking like a scientist and decide to model this data by positing the existence of another person on the island. Similarly, so the teleological argument goes, we see order and intelligence, and the natural explanation is that there is an intelligent designer behind it all.

According to Kant, this is not a bad argument *per se*, but it is a bad argument *for God*; it is a *good* argument for a very important—but less than God-like—being of some kind or other.

Give or take a few niceties, Kant holds much the same to be true of the cosmological argument. He holds that, if it weren't through, it would only establish the existence of a super-cause—one cause among others, albeit an unusually important one—and would therefore fail to establish God's existence, since God, so Kant holds, must be more than just another cause.²

² This argument is given in the fourth "reflection" contained in *The Only Possible Proof of God's Existence* and also in pages 570-582 of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (Guyer Translation).

Ground vs. Cause: Kant's reason for rejecting constructive proofs of God's existence

Kant says that any attempt to produce "speculative" or "theoretical" proofs of God's existence must necessarily fail. By this he means that God's existence is not to be proved scientifically but rather conceptually. Science identifies causes. Science tells us that we came from apes and that glass comes from heated sand and the like. God, says Kant, is what underlies the very possibility of such explanations and is therefore not himself to be explained in this way.

Here is one way to think of it. You and a friend are watching a play about three people, Smith, Jones, and Brown. You find the play confusing. "Why did Smith just punch Brown", you ask your friend. Your friend explains that Brown just insulted Smith. "Why did Jones take Brown's side", you then ask your friend. "Because Jones is mad at Smith for stealing his car." All of these explanations are play-internal. They concern character-to-character causal relations.

Now suppose you ask: "why does the play itself exist?" The mechanisms in terms of which you explain the behavior of the characters can't explain why the play itself exists. If you were to say "because there is a fourth character, Green, who created the others and set them in motion", your answer would be misconceived. The author of the play is not just another character. In fact, he is not another character at all. And

although he is responsible for the existence of the play, the way in which he is responsible for it is very different from the way in which Brown's insult leads to Smith's punch. The author is what makes all of the character-on-character causal relations possible, and it therefore was not through such relations that the author was responsible for the play's existence.

In my view, Kant is quite right about this. The cosmological and teleological arguments, even if cogent, simply establish the existence of a relatively God-like being that isn't God—a being that differs from other causes only in degree and is therefore just another character in the play of existence.

Kant's first argument for God's existence: God's existence as the foundation of causal explanation

This brings us to Kant's own arguments for God's existence.

The first is in Section 1, Reflection 4 of his monograph *The Only Possible Proof of God's Existence*. Here is a summary:

Things that exist contingently presuppose the existence of something that exists necessarily.

I exist contingently, and so do you. But the basis of our existence is not itself contingent. It is not a contingent fact that we could exist, even though it is a contingent fact that this possibility was actualized.

Whatever it is that makes our existence possible, that being must have (or be) a mind, since non-mental existence does not by itself make mental existence possible.

Moreover, there can only be one being that exists necessarily. This is because necessary beings are ones that are necessary for contingent beings; and if each of two or more beings were responsible the existence of contingent beings, then all but one of those necessary beings would be redundant, meaning that they were not in fact necessary.

Finally, being simple, this necessary being cannot be destroyed, since to be destroyed is to be decomposed into parts.

Any being having all of these characteristics is obviously God, since God is an indestructible being that is responsible for existence and, specifically, for spiritual existence. Q.E.D.

Kant's second argument for God's existence: Natural orderliness as being grounded in the coherence of God's mind

Kant's second argument for God's existence is in Section 2 of the same work.

Here is a summary:

It is not the *orderliness* of nature that proves God's existence but is rather the *unity* of nature that does so. A clock is orderly, but it is a blind kind of order and depends on causes and effects happening to line up in a certain way: if a certain gear isn't oiled or a certain screw falls out, the mechanism collapses. The orderliness that we find in nature is a mere sign of an underlying *coherence* that, although expressed in mechanical interactions, is distinct from them.

The sort of orderliness we find in a clock is mere *evidence* of coherence; it is merely the causal fallout of the activities of a coherent mind and is not itself coherence. But the orderliness that we find in nature is itself coherence. Proof of this, says Kant, is that, in nature, disruptive events simply lead to new forms of order, whereas, in mere mimics of nature, such as clocks, such disruptions simply ramify.

Orderliness is a purely mechanical property, being a property of non-sentient beings. But coherence is a psychological property, being a property of minds. And since the universe is not merely orderly but also coherent, it is itself a mind, or the embodiment thereof, and, given a few extra premises similar to those involved in the previously given argument, it follows that this mind must itself be God.

Kant's third argument for God's existence: morality as grounded in the coherence of God's mind³

This argument is to the effect that the existence of morality presupposes the existence of God. Here is a summary:

It is a datum that we have moral obligations. Moral obligations obviously couldn't possibly be *created* in the way that boats or hammers could be created. At the same time, moral obligations must be *grounded* in something other than themselves, given that they are obviously not brute, random facts.

According to Kant, there are two 'categorical imperatives', i.e. two moral directives that must be followed no matter what.

First, people should treat others as subjects, not objects; in other words, people should not use other people. (I am violating this principle if I enslave someone and complying with it if I engage in fair business dealings with them.)

Second, one's conduct should be guided by principles that one could coherently want everybody's conduct to be guided by. (I am violating this principle if I tell a lie, since lies wouldn't work in a world of liars; and for the same reason *mutatis mutandis*, I am complying with this principle if I tell the truth.)

³ This argument is given in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (Guyer Translation), pages 582-589.

Kant believes these principles to be equivalent. Kant seems to hold that, when people violate the second categorical imperative, they introduce an incoherence into the universe similar to the incoherence they introduce into individual people's when they violate the first categorical imperative. The idea being that morality is grounded in the universe's being coherent---as opposed to merely 'orderly'---and in its therefore being (or embodying) the mind of a deity.

Kant is in fact wrong to regard those two principles as equivalent, given that one can perform moral acts that are driven by principles that one could not coherently want all human conduct to be driven by. (For example, when Beethoven composed innovative music, he was behaving ethically, but the principle guiding his conduct—namely, upset existing norms—obviously isn't one that one could coherently want all conduct to be guided by.) But what is relevant in this context is that Kant regarded morality as being rooted in the coherence of a deity's mind, immoral conduct being conduct that undermines this coherence.

[Kant's arguments for God as transcendental arguments](#)

Kant invented an entirely new kind of argument—the so-called “transcendental argument.” A transcendental argument is one to the effect that, unless such and such existed, it could not even be asked whether such and such existed. If somebody asks me

to prove that there exist minds that think coherently, I can respond by saying that, unless such minds existed, that very question couldn't even be understood or therefore asked.

Transcendental arguments prove the existence not of causes but rather of *grounds*. A *cause* is what makes something exist. A *ground* is what makes it *possible* for something to exist. Kant's argument's for God's existence are to the effect that God's existence makes it *possible* for there to be morality and natural law, and those arguments are therefore transcendental in nature. For the reasons already given, Kant's position is that any argument for the existence of a *bona fide* God, as opposed to a God-like super-cause that is not in fact God, must be transcendental.