

# Arguments for and Against The Existence of God

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## 1 Overview

In this article, I will discuss some of the arguments for and against the existence of God, in particular the monotheistic God believed in the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Islam, and Christianity) as well as Bábism, the Bahá'í Faith, and Sikhism. Arguments for the existence of God try to argue that either God exists (based on other things people agree with) or that belief in God is reasonable. Arguments against the existence of God try to argue that the existence of God leads to some contradiction or other absurdity.

## 2 Argument For God: Leibnizian Cosmological Argument

Cosmological arguments take the form of arguing that we can infer God exists based on existence, causality, the universe, etc. Leibniz's (yes, the Calculus guy) Cosmological Argument rests on his idea of the "Principle of Sufficient Reason," which is his way of saying nothing happens without a reason [1]. He formulates this to help answer the question "why is there something rather than nothing." Leibniz develops the idea of contingency, which is the idea that things are either contingent on other things (they exist because something else exists and it is possible that they do not exist) or necessary (meaning they must exist by their own nature). Leibniz' cosmological argument can be formulated as follows:

- P1: Everything that exists has an explanation of its existence, either in the necessity of its own nature or in an external cause.
- P2: If the universe has an explanation for its existence, the explanation is God.
- P3: The universe exists.
- C1: Therefore, the universe has an explanation for its existence (From P1, P3)
- P4: The explanation of the universe is not in the necessity of its own nature.

- C2: Therefore, the explanation of the existence of the universe is God (From P1, C1, P4).

Premise 1 is just a statement of Leibnitz' PSR and is relatively uncontroversial. Surprisingly, Premise 2 is not that controversial at all. P3 is obviously not controversial either. As a result, the most controversial premise is this P4. Defenders of Leibnitz' argument say that nothing about our universe seems necessary, as this is like arguing every single particle had to exist the way it does. They point to the fact that we can imagine a universe where nothing material exists at all, suggesting that the material universe is not necessary [2]. For a defense of this argument, see [3, 4] for a more scholarly treatment, and [5] for a more popular level treatment.

Objections to this argument rest on whether the PSR is really applicable for everything, and whether the universe could be a necessary thing (instead of God) [6]. For instance, some say there could be "brute facts" or things that exist for no reason [7] or that have no explanation for their existence [8].

### 3 Argument Against God: Argument from Non-belief

The idea behind this argument is to point out that if God exists and wants people to know him, why is his existence not all that "obvious?" In other words, why does God seem so hidden if he exists? Bertrand Russell famously replied that if he met God on judgement day he would say, "Not enough evidence, God! Not enough evidence!" Schellenberg formulates the argument famously as [9]:

- P1: If there is a God, he is perfectly loving.
- P2: If a perfectly loving God exists, nonresistant nonbelief does not occur.
- P3: Nonresistant nonbelief occurs.
- C1: Therefore, no perfectly loving God exists (from P2 and P3).
- C2: Therefore, God does not exist (from P1 and C1).

As Schellenberg points out, P1 is relatively uncontroversial, and there are few criticisms of P3, so much of the debate is around P2. Schellenberg defends P2 by arguing that if God's goal is to have as many people enter a relationship with him as possible, he should make his existence more obvious.

The key here is "nonresistant nonbelief" (Schellenberg originally used "reasonable nonbelief," but it is usually worded as "nonresistant nonbelief" because the word "reasonable" is difficult to define [10]). There are certainly people who do not believe in God because they do not want God to exist. This is not what Schellenberg is pointing to. Instead Schellenberg is pointing attention to people who either want God to exist (or would not be so against it that their judgement is compromised) yet still disbelieve due to a lack of evidence. Schellenberg's point is God could make his existence more obvious to convince these

people (perhaps by some miracle) to believe in him yet does not. He concludes it is likely that a loving God does not exist in light of this.

Objections to this argument involve challenging P2 and P3. Those who argue against P2 often follow the Irenaean theodicy made famous by John Hick, who says, “Humanity is created at an epistemic distance from God in order to come freely to know and and love their maker [11].” The term “Epistemic Distance” refers to the idea that God gives does not intrude by making his existence seem obvious for those who do not want to believe or who do not want a relationship with God. Those who object to P3 tend to argue that those who appear to be nonresistent actually have some (hidden) resistance, perhaps in pride or a faulty epistemology [12, 13]. Finally, some argue God only seems implausible given a modern, post-enlightenment worldview. These objectors argue the reason God appears hidden is a product of our culture and the (arguably) atheistic tenancies of enlightenment rationalism [14, 15].

## 4 Argument For God: Craig’s Kalam Cosmological Argument (KCA)

Analytic philosopher and Evangelical Christian William Lane Craig is best known for his formulation of a cosmological argument which he calls the “Kalam Cosmological Argument.” He uses the name “Kalam” out of respect for the medieval Islamic scholastics who inspired it, most famously Al-Ghazali around the 11th century [3]. Craig formulates his argument as modes ponens:

- P1: Everything that begins to exist has a cause for its existence.
- P2: The universe began to exist.
- C: Therefore, the universe has a cause for its existence.

In support of Premise 1, Craig argues from the general principle that things do not happen uncaused or for no reason (like the PSR). In support of Premise 2, Craig has two lines of defense: The first is a philosophical defense that an infinite regress of past events or causes leads to various absurdities. This point was argued 2500 years ago by Aristotle [16] and 700 years ago by Thomas Aquinas [17], however Craig also uses modern mathematics developed by Georg Cantor [18, 19] and David Hilbert to further argue this point (see Hilbert’s Hotel [20]). Craig’s other line of defense rests on cosmology, including the Big Bang (Greg Koukl puts it rather crudely, “the big bang needs a big bang-er”) and other results from theoretical physics that are quite sophisticated and beyond the scope of this text. On the surface, this does not seem to get anywhere close to “God,” and Craig adds a few more premises:

- P3: The cause of the universe must be beginningless, changeless, timeless, spaceless, immaterial, and enormously powerful.
- P4: Creation involves a personal agent.

- C2: Therefore, an uncaused, personal Creator of the universe exists, who sans the universe is beginningless, changeless, immaterial, timeless, spaceless, and enormously powerful.

Craig argues for P3 based on time itself “starting” at the Big Bang. P4 is based on our experience with thoughts causing (logical causation, not necessarily temporal) actions. Craig argues that his conclusions are best explained by a monotheistic, Judeo-Christian God (note that this argument could also support the existence of the Muslim or Jewish God; Craig himself does not expect this argument to lead to Christianity on its own). According to atheist Michael Martin, this argument (as presented by Craig and others) are, “among the most sophisticated and well argued in contemporary theological philosophy [21].” For more information on Craig’s Kalam Cosmological argument, see [3, 22] and for a more popular (and less academic) distillation, [5].

There are several objections offered to this argument. Some question whether an actual infinite would lead to the various absurdities talked about in Hilbert’s Hotel [23], and whether a series of future events has similar problems to a past series [24, 25, 26]. Others argue that ideas in theoretical cosmology such as the multiverse hypothesis or an expanding-contracting universe can account for the beginning of the universe without a need for a beginning [6]. The debate around whether the universe has a finite past continues, often employing results in modern cosmology such as the Borde-Guth-Vilenkin (BGV) theorem [27].

## 5 Argument Against God: Argument from Religious Confusion

This is an argument that calls attention to the problem of religious pluralism, or why there are so many religions that often make contradictory claims about who God is (and whether he exists at all). It can be formulated as follows:

- P1: Any all-knowing, perfectly wise, and perfectly good being will be maximally clear in revealing precisely what salvation requires in terms of belief and practice.
- P2: God is all knowing (omniscient), perfectly wise, and perfectly good.
- C1: Therefore, God will be maximally clear in revealing precisely what salvation requires in terms of belief and practice (From P1, P2).
- P3: What is required for salvation is not maximally clear given the amount of religious confusion in the world.
- C2: Therefore, God does not exist (or God is not all knowing, perfectly wise, and perfectly good) (From C1).

The controversy in this argument is mostly around P1, though some also argue against P3. Defenders of this argument try and connect God’s desire for a

relationship with humanity with the fact that different religions or religious traditions differ so widely. The difficulty with this argument is explaining why God must be “maximally clear” – perhaps God wants people to play a role in helping others come to know him, as many Evangelicals and Catholics would say, so he has reasons not to spell out his plan in every language in the sky or something obvious like this. As a result, this argument is more compelling when it is formulated in an evidential way – meaning it rests on the idea that there are things God could do to make his existence or plan more clear at little to no cost.

Objections to this argument are quite varied. Some call attention to the fact that the word “Religion” is not well defined [28, 29], and that the term religion refers more to a set of social practices than something directly created by God. Others say that the history of (Western) thought, and (Western) epistemology in particular, is so closely tied to Christianity that attempts to see other religions through its lens is mistaken. For instance, some Eastern philosophical systems allow for *dialetheia*, or statements which, along with their negation, are both true. These are seen in some schools of Jainist, Daoist, and Indian thought, while being less common (or absent) in most Western traditions <sup>1</sup> [31]. Others point to the amount of commonality between the tenants of many of the “world religions” and moral systems, arguing defenders of this argument overstate the amount of disagreement between religions and moral traditions.

## 6 Argument for God: Teleological Arguments

Teleology is a fancy word that just means “design” or “purpose,” and teleological arguments rest on what appears to be design or complexity in the universe. William Paley famously structured his “watchmaker analogy” which can be formulated into an argument as follows [5]:

- P1: The material universe resembles the intelligent productions of human beings in that it exhibits design.
- P2: The design in any human artifact was caused by an intelligent being.
- P3: Like effects generally have like causes.
- P4: Therefore, it is highly probable that the material universe was designed by an intelligent being.

Of course, this argument rests on probabilities and induction (reasoning from past experience), so it is more analogous than strictly logical. Furthermore, many believe Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution severely weakened the traditional design argument (for direct creation), saying he provided a naturalistic

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<sup>1</sup>The absence of *dialethism* from most forms of Western thought is likely due to the influence of Aristotle [30].

explanation for the appearance of design [32]. However, the teleological argument lives on in three ways, all of which are quite new (within the last 100 years).

The first is an argument from the fine tuning of the universe, suggesting that the initial conditions or constants in physics were even slightly different, the universe would not be hospitable to life. As Fred Hoyle (no friend of theism) once remarked, it appears as if “a super-intellect has monkeyed with physics [33].” The second is a statistical argument from information (information in a technical sense, see [34]) which rests on the discovery of DNA acting like computer code, argued by Stephen Meyer and others [35, 36]. The third argument is an argument from simulation theory [37] arguing that if reality could be simulated, God is simply the “programmer” who wrote our universe into being. As David Chalmers remarked, this provides an argument for a God even a naturalist can believe in [38]. Each of these arguments can be written as follows:

- P1: X (complex life, human consciousness, the fine tuning of the universe, etc) is due to either necessity, chance or design.
- P2: X is not due to chance or necessity
- C: Therefore, X is due to design

P1 is uncontroversial, first made by Monod [39] and expanded upon by Craig [3], so most of the debate that currently rages around P2. Objections and defenses to P2 rest on complex statistical arguments which include discussions on entropy and the probabilistic resources of the universe or possible multiverse.

## 7 Argument Against God: Argument from Gratuitous Evil

This is a formulation of the famous “problem of evil” that rests on the idea of “gratuitous evil.” The main thrust of this argument is to point out if God is so good, why there is so much bad and suffering. Gratuitous evil is evil which serves no greater purpose: the “gratuitous” part of is important because the theist will usually agree God permits some evil to serve a greater purpose, so it isn’t the existence of any evil that is a challenge to theism, rather it is evil that calls into question God’s goodness. The argument can be formulated as follows:

- P1: If gratuitous evil exists, then God does not exist.
- P2: Gratuitous evil exists.
- C: Therefore, God does not exist.

In support of P1, defenders claim that if God is all good (also following Leibniz), he wants to create the best of all possible worlds. Furthermore, if God is all powerful, they argue he can create world free of evil that does not serve a greater purpose. Most theists see God as omnibenevolent (all good) and omnipotent

(all powerful), so for most theists, P1 is relatively uncontroversial and most of the debate is around P2. P2 rests on whether the evil we observe is truly gratuitous or serves some greater purpose. To support P2, defenders often bring up atrocities that cause immense suffering like the holocaust, slavery, and cancer as examples of evils they see as gratuitous. They claim that if a benevolent God existed, he would step in to stop these things from happening. As a result, defenders of P2 often argue that any theodicy fails given the apparent evil of these scenarios. Many also make a distinction between natural evil (like natural disasters) and moral evil (people using free will to do bad stuff). Famous works on the problem of evil include William Rowe [40] and Paul Draper [41].

Objections exist to both P1 and P2, many of which form the basis of various theodicies.

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