Arguments for the Existence of God

A N I N T R O D U C T I O N

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DOES GOD EXIST?

Before we can answer this question we must know what the term “God” means so that we can know what we are looking for and how to look for it. Through the religious work and thought of many generations of people of diverse faiths, the term God has come to be recognized in the common parlance of Western civilization as referring to an infinite, eternal, uncreated, immaterial Being that transcends the material universe he created. Suppose we adopt that conception of God as a starting point for our discussion. How then shall we go about finding out if he exists? Clearly it would be very difficult to “grasp” God directly as he is in himself with our sensory organs inasmuch as this God is immaterial, transcending our material world. Perhaps, however, we could come to know about God indirectly through his works. If God is in fact the Creator of our world and the entire universe, perhaps we can come to a knowledge of his existence and what he is like by examining his works, that is, the world. Perhaps we can use talk about the world to produce talk about God. Generating knowledge about God based on knowledge about the world is the goal of an intellectual endeavor called natural theology.

Proponents of natural theology believe that a scrutiny of this world can yield evidence that leads to the conclusion that God does in fact exist. The arguments for the existence of God generated in this fashion are referred to as a posteriori arguments because they proceed from, or after, or posterior to, the data of the experienced world, and claim on the basis of that data to demonstrate the existence of God. A posteriori arguments for the existence of God were constructed as early as the time of the Greek philosopher Parmenides in the fifth century B.C. and continued to be fashioned and defended by philosophers through the centuries even into contemporary times. Two
basic forms of \textit{a posteriori} arguments emerged: the cosmological and the teleological.

The cosmological argument starts from some feature of the world such as motion, causation, or contingency and argues to the source or ground of that feature God seen as the Unmoved Mover, the First Cause, or the Non-Contingent Being. Advocates of the cosmological argument have included the ancient philosophers Plato (428/7–348/7 B.C.) and Aristotle (384–322 B.C.), the medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas (1224/5–1274 A.D.), and the twentieth-century philosopher Richard Taylor (1919–).

The teleological argument starts with apparently designed objects in nature and argues to the source of that design in God viewed as the Divine Designer. Advocates of the teleological argument have included William Paley (1743–1805), John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), F. R. Tennant (1866–1957), and Richard Swinburne (1934–).

In the eleventh century A.D. a genuinely new approach to proving the existence of God emerged in the thought of St. Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury. He articulated for the first time an \textit{a priori} argument for the existence of God that came to be called the ontological argument. Instead of following the track of the \textit{a posteriori} arguments (starting with a feature of the experienced world and arguing on that basis for the existence of God), Anselm proceeded \textit{a priori}, seeking to derive God’s existence from grounds that are independent of, prior to, the data of the experienced world. Anselm did not begin with any feature of the experienced world, such as motion, causation, contingency, and design. Instead, he proceeded from the very concept of God as the Perfect Being (the description of God we have adopted here) and argued that holding that concept in one’s intellect (\textit{in intellectu}) required one to admit that God existed as a real entity (\textit{in re}). Subsequently, a number of philosophers developed various forms of Anselm’s argument. René Descartes (1596–1650), the so-called “Father of Modern Philosophy,” set forth a version of this argument. G. W. Leibniz (1646–1716) found the argument attractive, as does Alvin Plantinga (1932–), a contemporary philosopher of religion.

To be sure, these arguments for the existence of God have not been without their critics. Among these, the forceful criticisms of the cosmological and teleological arguments offered by David Hume (1711–1776) are worth mentioning, as is the critique of Anselm’s ontological argument given by the monk Gaunilo, a contemporary of Anselm. Especially noteworthy is the critique offered by Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) of all possible proofs
for the existence of God. Kant argued that the teleological argument is weak and needs the cosmological argument, that the cosmological argument is weak and needs the ontological argument, and that the ontological argument is fatally flawed. According to Kantian criticism, the teleological argument at best can only demonstrate that, for example, the human eye had a designer who was perhaps divine but not necessarily the supreme being we call God. To move beyond this designer to God, the teleological argument needs the cosmological argument, which attempts to show that there is a supreme being that is responsible for the causal network in which things like human eyes, human ears, ozone layers, and so forth, are generated. The cosmological argument, however, is also weak inasmuch as the most it can do is bring a person to the alternative that there is either a supreme being responsible for the existence of the world with its manifold network of causes, or there is an infinite regress of finite causes without a supreme being. The cosmological argument leads a person to the idea of a supreme being without demonstrating that there is a referent in reality corresponding to that idea. Accordingly, the cosmological argument needs the ontological argument, which attempts to provide just such a demonstration. The ontological argument, however, is fatally flawed inasmuch as it falsely assumes that “existence” can function as a logical predicate. Consider, for example, the concept “horse.” The logical predicates of horse are the attributes or characteristics of a horse that can be derived from the concept of a horse. Such logical predicates of “horse” are “mane,” “tail,” “head,” and “hooves.” But “existence” is not one of those logical predicates. No scrutiny of the concept “horse” will demonstrate that there is in fact a horse existing as a referent in reality for that concept. (After all, while we were scrutinizing the concept “horse,” all horses that were existing in the world might have perished at that moment because of a highly contagious, novel virus.) Indeed, no scrutiny of any concept will ever demonstrate the existence of a referent in reality corresponding to that concept. The ontological argument mistakenly assumes that “existence” can function as a logical predicate.

For many philosophers and theologians, Kant’s analysis showed conclusively that no argument yet propounded was able to prove the existence of God. That is to say, reason did not require belief in God. Yet there are some post-Kantian thinkers who believe that some of the traditional arguments, if enriched and enhanced, do offer a case for theism that is not easily dismissed. Kant himself did not end his discussion of the arguments for the existence of God on the note of disbelief. Indeed, he fashioned an argument
for the existence of God based on taking the moral life seriously. For Kant, while reason did not require belief in God, reason did allow him to believe in God if he took seriously his moral quest.

If one is to believe in God, must one have a cogent and convincing argument for God’s existence? Would it be convincing to argue from one’s personal religious experience to the existence of God who is purportedly encountered in that experience? Would it be convincing to argue from “miracles” to the existence of a “miracle-worker” called God? Is it permissible to believe in God without a compelling argument for his existence? These are some of the questions that you may wish to consider as you study the arguments for the existence of God presented in this section.

**Suggested Further Reading**


