

DOES GOD EXIST?
MCC PHILOSOPHY CLUB
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Introduction: Today, we'll briefly state and examine six arguments for God's existence, giving objections to each of them as we go. Keep in mind that even if you are a staunch believer, and even if these arguments are not convincing because you find the objections strong, that does not mean that God does not exist; it means that no one has been able to prove God's existence yet. And if you are an atheist, if you think the arguments are weak and the objections are solid, that does not mean that God does not exist.

I. Arguments for God's existence:

A. Anselm's Ontological Argument:

- (1) God is defined as the greatest conceivable being.
- (2) The conception of God exists in your mind, and God *may* actually exist.
- (3) If God only exists in the mind, and may have actually existed but does not currently exist, then God might have been greater than God is.
- (4) But God is the greatest conceivable being (from premise 1), so premise 3 cannot be true.

C: Therefore, God exists in reality as well as the mind.

Objections:

1. Is existence the same kind of property as tallness (e.g., to say of me that I exist)? Also, if I imagine a dollar, and I have an actual dollar in my hand, is the actual dollar a better dollar *because it actually exists*?
2. Even if we grant to Anselm that whatever qualifies for greatest thinkable being must exist, is it not still an open question whether there is anything which does qualify for this title in the first place?

B. St. Thomas Aquinas' Five Arguments for God's existence (we have the 2nd of the 5 arguments in the Bonus Stuff section because it's very similar to the first argument):

1. By Motion (abbreviated version):

- (1) Whatever is in motion is moved by something else, since nothing undergoes motion except insofar as it is potentially moveable.
- (2) If this "something else" is itself moved, it must in turn be moved by something else, and so on.
- (3) But the sequence of movers cannot continue backwards to infinity. [SUB-ARG: If the movers were infinite, there would not be any first mover, and hence nothing would move anything else, since subsequent moving things do not move unless moved by an original mover; Aquinas' example: a stick does not move unless moved by a hand.]
- (4) So it is necessary to arrive at a first mover that is moved by nothing else.

C: This first (unmoved) mover is understood as being God.

Objections:

1. The conclusion that God exists may not follow from the premises (also known as the Non Sequitur fallacy). Consider these two arguments by analogy:
ARG1: Every physicist almost certainly believes in Newton's Laws of Motion (at least for medium-sized physical objects), that there must be movers of things to get these things to move, that there must be a first mover, etc., but not all physicists are led to the certain conclusion that God exists. Note that physicists do *not* have to say that the Big Bang *is* the beginning of the universe. They can claim not to know. But to say that we *can* know that it *is* God who is the first mover, has not been proven.

ARG2: Isn't this argument significantly similar to a detective's arguing, "We've shown through our general evidence that Smith could not have killed himself, so we *know* that someone or something *had* to have killed Smith. Therefore, it's Bill Jones!"?

2. Even if this argument establishes that there must be a first mover, it fails to prove that the version of God that Aquinas is trying to prove exists. That is, it does not show that the first mover is all-powerful, all-knowing, and/or all-good. The first mover just has to be able to move itself and put other things into motion. An alternative hypothesis is the Big Bang.
3. Aquinas argues that the first mover has to be actually moving when it puts the first "something else" into motion, but he also thinks God is eternal (that is, *not* in time) and immutable (that is, never changes). If God is eternal, how can God be *always* or even *ever* in motion? (What do we make of the Genesis "on the seventh day, God rested" passage – isn't this impossible if Aquinas is correct that God actually moved to create the universe but never changes?) Moreover, how can God be eternal and never changing, if God must be actually moving all the time (in order to never change), which implies that God is in time?

2. By Necessity:

- (1) There are many things that contingently exist (= things that exist at some time but not at others).
- (2) It is impossible that everything only contingently exists. [Sub-Argument: Because if something has the possibility of not being, then at some time or other it lacks being; if all things have the possibility of not being, at some time there was nothing at all. But then there would still be nothing, which is not true.]
- (3) So there must be something that exists that is necessary.
- (4) But everything that is necessary has to have a cause of its necessity or no cause; but the cause of the necessary items cannot continue backwards to infinity.
- (5) So it is necessary to suppose (or posit) a being exists that has its own necessity (which does not receive its necessity from anything else) and that causes necessity in other things.

C: Therefore, this necessary being is what we call "God".

Objections:

1. The Non-Sequitur/1st objection and the 2nd objection to the Motion argument applies here as well.
2. Aquinas denies an infinity of "possibles," or contingently-existing things, as follows: "If something has the possibility of not being, then it lacks being at some point." How is this true? If I tell you that it's possible that you fail my class, even if you take it over and over, is it *necessary* that you *will fail* it at some point? It hardly seems so. If it's possible for *anything* to happen, does that thing *have* to happen eventually? Again, this does not seem plausible.

3. By Gradation or Degree:

- (1) Some things are more or less good, noble, and true, but "more" and "less" are used in reference to how close they are to what is the greatest of its kind (Aquinas' example: Something is hotter if it is closer to what is hottest).
- (2) So there is something that is truest, best, and noblest.
- (3) Things that are truest are greatest in being.¹
- (4) So the "something" that is truest, best, and noblest is greatest in being.

¹ From Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Book II.

- (5) The greatest in any kind is the cause of everything of that kind (Aquinas' example: fire has the greatest heat, so it causes everything hot to be hot).
- (6) So there is something that is the cause of being and goodness and every other perfection in things.
C: So, since God is the name for the cause of all perfections, God exists.

Objections:

1. Premise 2 states: "So there is something that is truest, best, and noblest," but is the truest, best, and noblest necessarily **all** perfect, **all** knowing, etc.? For example, I may be the ugliest person in the room, but does that make me the ugliest possible being in the universe that will ever or could ever exist? Or, if we locate the most powerful thing in the universe, is that thing therefore **all** powerful? If not, this is not the God that Aquinas is interested in proving exists.
2. How does this argument show that there must be *one* thing in the universe that has all of these characteristics simultaneously? Doesn't all evidence point to our thinking that some *one* thing in the universe seems to be the most powerful, another thing seems to be the most beautiful (and it's not the same thing), another thing seems to be the most intelligent, etc.?
3. The causal principle stated in premise 5 seems fallacious: "The greatest in any kind is the cause of everything of that kind." If person X is the tallest person in the world, how can person X be meaningfully said to be the cause of every other tall person? Obviously not. Would the most powerful thing in the universe necessarily be the cause of every other powerful thing? Again, not that we can tell. Sure, it's *possible*, but that it is *possible* that God exists is not the same thing as proving that God *must* exist, right?

4. By Design (also known as the Intelligent Design or Teleological Argument):

- (1) Some things that lack knowledge (e.g., "natural bodies," such as oceans, animals, plants) work for the sake of a goal or end. [Sub-Argument: Natural bodies always or often act in the same way to pursue what is best; this shows that they reach their goal not by chance but by directedness.]
- (2) But things that lack knowledge do not tend towards a goal unless they are guided by something with knowledge and intelligence (e.g., an archer directs an arrow).
- (3) So there is some intelligent being by whom all natural things are directed to their goal or end.
C: This intelligent being is the being we call God.

Objections:

1. This argument *may* be a good explanatory hypothesis for the designer's being intelligent, but it does not show that God is perfect, all-powerful, all-knowing, and/or all-good. So this is not the God that Aquinas is trying to prove exists.
2. An alternative hypothesis for the designer of the universe is evolution, which could be the designer (that is, natural selection—the view that whatever physical or genetic property enables an organism to survive better will occur more frequently, and whatever does not promote the survival of a species will occur less frequently).
3. Is the world really that well designed? Then why is there evil, suffering, and why is the Earth supposed to get scorched by the sun at the end of its "lifetime," when the sun expands? Why is this evidence of perfect design?
4. The argument says that things that lack knowledge (Cottingham, the editor of Dr. Y's PHI 101 course, says "non-conscious objects" and Aquinas says, "natural bodies") serve a goal and have an aim. First, Aquinas says that they "always" or "often" act for the sake of a goal. Isn't "often" a keyword there? What about the natural bodies that he admits sometimes do not? Second, what is the goal or aim of stones? Not some stones, being used for whatever purpose, and not the usefulness

of some stones to some humans (in, say, a house), but of every stone? What about garbage (a non-conscious object)? Who is intelligently designing either stones or garbage? What about the goals of twigs, or used gum?

5. David Hume (Scottish philosopher) objected: (i) Isn't this a really weak analogy, saying that nature is like a man-made machine, so there must be some intelligence behind it? (ii) Can we infer causes backwards, after the fact, when we have no experience with creating universes or witnessing others creating universes, *and* where we only are experiencing a unique effect (namely, the way the world is right now, and there's only one universe, from what we can experience)? (iii) Have we really experienced the whole universe to verify that the *entire* universe is really well-designed and directed? (iv) Has anyone actually experienced the beginning of the universe to witness its cause?

C. Descartes' Trademark argument:

- (1) I have an idea of God (perfect, infinite, eternal, all-powerful, all-knowing...).
- (2) There must be at least as much reality in a cause as in the effect of that cause. E.g., a warm stone can cause warmth; a pen cannot bring about a live human birth. And something more perfect can't come from something less perfect.
- (3) Objective reality (as defined by Descartes) is what a representation is a representation of; e.g., the objective reality of a painting of Napoleon is Napoleon.
- (4) The causal principle (in Premise 2) applies to the objective reality (in Premise 3) of my ideas.
- (5) There are two levels of reality: (i) Modes (the lowest level of reality, are vague; examples: colors, sounds, tastes, heat/cold), (ii) finite substances (e.g. human beings, physical things such as chairs), and a possible third level of reality: (iii) infinite substance (e.g. God).
- (6) I (as a thinking finite substance) have an idea of the color blue, of my brother, and God. I can be the cause of the idea of the color blue, since it's a mode, one level lower than finite substance; I can be the cause of the idea of my brother because we're both at the finite substance level. However, I cannot be the cause of the idea of God, since I'm not perfect or infinite (or eternal).

C: Thus, God must really exist as a perfect being in order for me to be able to think about God in the first place.²

Objections:

1. Don't we know what infinity is from math (e.g., infinite mathematical sets, such as natural numbers or Real numbers)? Also, Descartes believes that we have a soul, and it goes on to an afterlife (heaven or hell), so, according to him, we are not finite, but infinite, because our soul is infinite.
2. Can't something more perfect come from something less perfect? E.g., a nice person coming from alcoholic abusive parents?
3. Don't we know what perfection is in different contexts, such as a perfect score in Olympian gymnastics, perfect scores on tests, etc.? Can we then extrapolate that to everything that everyone does, to the extent of imagining a being with perfect knowledge, all powerfulness, and all goodness?
4. Can't I imagine the perfect day without it actually existing? Can't we do the same with God?

Discussion Questions:

1. Do you have any questions about what we just presented?
2. Do you have any other objections?
3. Overall, which argument do you think is the strongest? Do any of these arguments convince you of God's existence?

² This argument is called the Trademark argument because Descartes concludes: God is like a trademark, where knowledge of God is innate, just as knowledge of my own existence is innate (where "innate" means we're born with these ideas of perfection and our own existence).

BONUS STUFF:

1. Additional Objections against Anselm's argument:

- a. Anselm may not be proving that the version of God he believes in (that is, “something”=a being) exists. Plotinus (and possibly Plato and Buddha) holds that the highest “being” is not a being at all, since being a *being* would limit it. On the contrary, the highest entity (or Source of All things or whatever we name it!) is beyond being and not being—beyond all qualities or properties—truly unlimited and limitless. If you say I’m six feet tall, then I’m **not** 5’ 9”, one foot tall, etc. But if you say that I’m beyond height then height makes no sense to ask about in reference to me, right? So Anselm’s greatest being could still be a great *being*, but not the greatest possible entity, if Plotinus is correct.
- b. (Weak OBJ): Gaunilo (a monk in Anselm’s monastery who believed in God), objected, “Hey, if the perfect island is that than which no greater can be conceived, then does not the perfect island exist in reality and not just in my mind, since it’s better for the perfect island to exist in reality and not just in the mind?” REP1: Anselm replies that the logic of his argument **only** applies to God, **The** most perfect being and not everything else in the universe.
- c. (Weak OBJ): What about the perfect Evil being? Wouldn’t that being have to exist as well, according to Anselm’s argument? Even if the principle were not supposed to be true of anything other than God, wouldn’t the perfect Evil being have to exist – all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-evil? Can there be a tie for first here—an all-good being and an all-evil being? Anselm would probably reply that we cannot suppose that evil is perfection, and this might work. What do you think?

2. Additional Objections against Aquinas' Motion argument:

- a. If energy can neither be created nor destroyed, how would God be able to create more energy? If, for instance, God’s energy is transferred to planets, trees, and the universe in the creation of the universe, then God would have changed, right? But Aquinas holds that God is immutable (unchangeable).
- b. (Weak OBJ): Has Aquinas soundly shown that there *must* be an “original mover” – why can there not be a sequence that goes backward to infinity? How do we know that time is linear and not circular/cyclical? [This is weak because one cannot merely claim that time is cyclical or circular and win the argument – one must prove either that time is linear or circular – it is a good question, but doesn’t prove Aquinas wrong, on the one hand. But on the other hand, he or his defenders must prove that time is linear and not merely assume it.]
- c. (Weak OBJ): Why can’t there be *more than one* first mover, if Aquinas is correct that there must be a first unmoved mover? [This is weak because the objector is allowing for God to exist, but just asking about whether there could be more than one god.]
- d. (Weak OBJ): Why is the first mover (God, according to Aquinas) the exemption to the “nothing can move itself” rule? One cannot answer, “Because God is special” without begging the question – the argument is supposed to prove that God exists, not assume God exists in order to attribute other characteristics to God. Possible Aquinas reply: Because there must be a first mover, and there cannot be a first mover if it cannot be unmoved by something else.

3. Aquinas' 2nd argument by Cause:

- (1) It is impossible for any natural thing to be the efficient cause of itself (i.e., a thing cannot be the complete and sufficient source of its own existence).
- (2) [Sub-Argument to prove Premise 1: In order to cause itself, a thing would have to precede itself (e.g., in order for me to be the source of my own existence, I would have to exist before I existed, which is impossible).]
- (3) It is impossible for a series of efficient causes to go on backwards to infinity.

- (4) [Sub-Argument to prove Premise 3: There is a first cause in every series, a final effect, and intermediate causes.]
- (5) So if there was not a first cause in the series of efficient causes, there will be no intermediate efficient causes or final effects.
- (6) And if the series of efficient causes stretches backward to infinity, there will be no final effect and no intermediate efficient causes, which is definitely not the case.
- (7) Therefore, there must be a first efficient cause and this everyone calls “God”.

Objections:

1. See the first two objections against the Motion argument above; they apply, but change the words “motion”/“mover” to “cause.”
2. Even if this argument establishes that there must be a first cause, it fails to prove that the version of God that Aquinas is trying to prove exists. The first uncaused cause just has to be able to cause itself and cause other things. An alternative hypothesis is the Big Bang.
3. (Weak OBJ): Has Aquinas soundly shown that there *must* be an “original cause” – why can there not be a sequence that goes backward to infinity? How do we know that time is linear and not circular/cyclical? [This is weak because one cannot merely claim that time is cyclical or circular and win the argument – one must prove either that time is linear or circular – it is a good question, but doesn’t prove Aquinas wrong, on the one hand. But on the other hand, he or his defenders must prove that time is linear and not merely assume it.]
4. (Weak OBJ): Why can’t there be *more than one* first cause, if Aquinas is correct that there must be a first uncaused cause? [This is weak because the objector is allowing for God to exist, but just asking about whether there could be more than one god.]

4. Additional Objections against Aquinas’ argument from Necessity:

- a. (Weak OBJ): Has Aquinas soundly shown that there *must* be a “first uncaused necessary cause” – why can there not be a sequence that goes backward to infinity? How do we know that time is linear and not circular/cyclical? [This is weak because one cannot merely claim that time is cyclical or circular and win the argument – one must prove either that time is linear or circular – it is a good question, but doesn’t prove Aquinas wrong, on the one hand. But on the other hand, he or his defenders must prove that time is linear and not merely assume it.]
- b. (Weak OBJ): Why can’t there be *more than one* first necessary cause, if Aquinas is correct that there must be a first uncaused necessary cause? [This is weak because the objector is allowing for God to exist, but just asking about whether there could be more than one god.]

5. Other Approaches to the issue of whether God exists:

- a. **Faith:** One can think of faith as a non-rational (not *irrational!*) belief: That is, you have a sense or feel that God exists, or want to think that God exists or feel that God exists, but you have no objective proof for anyone else to believe in God. There are philosophers (e.g., Pascal and Kierkegaard) who think and argue that no one can prove God’s existence, so it’s a matter of faith.
- b. **Religious Experience (or mysticism):** One can have a personal experience, vision, or knowledge that God exists. As with faith, that experience does not provide any objective proof for anyone else.