

Arguments that prove the existence of god



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In this essay it shall be discussed whether there are any arguments which work to prove the existence of God. The teleological and cosmological arguments shall be first discussed, criticised by showing their reliance on the ontological argument, which shall then be shown to be an inadequate argument. It will then be concluded that there appear to be no arguments which work to prove the existence of God.

The Teleological Argument

The teleological argument, or the argument from design, puts forward the claim that God's existence is proven by the evidence that the universe is so well ordered, and its contents complex, to the point that they must have been designed. If this is the case, then there must be a designer of the universe, and this designer can only be God.

The strongest version of this argument is put forward by Paley. He claims that should he find a stone on the ground, he might suppose that it had always been there. However, should he then come across a watch, he could not hold this same supposition. This, he claims, is because the watch's parts are such that " they are framed and put together for a purpose" (Paley, 1867: 11). The watch must have been designed and must therefore have a designer. Paley makes this same claim of the universe. He argues that:

" Every manifestation of design, which existed in the watch, exists in the works of nature; with the difference, on the side of nature, of being greater and more..." (Paley, 1867: 21).

Therefore, as the universe is of such a complex nature, in which all things are made of parts which allow them to fulfil their purpose in the same way

the watch is made of mechanisms which permit its owner to tell the time, the universe must have been designed and must therefore have a designer. This designer, the argument concludes, is God.

However, there are problems with this argument. Firstly, it can be claimed that the world isn't as perfectly designed as it would have been should God (being omniscient, omnipotent etc.) have created it. For example, there are many degenerative diseases which affect animals as they grow older, and therefore show the parts of their anatomy to be unable to complete their purpose of life.

Secondly, there are other, scientific, arguments which give explanation for things in nature being fit for their purpose such that do not suppose the existence of God. The most prominent of these arguments is evolution, proposed initially by Darwin (Darwin, 1859). Evolution argues that living beings in nature come to fit their purpose by adaptation, and therefore, though appearing to be designed, are not.

The Cosmological Argument

The cosmological argument, or the argument from first cause, claims that everything in the universe must have a cause. Were all the chains of cause and effect to be traced backwards in time, they would lead to the creation of the universe. However, the creation of the universe must also have a cause, since the universe cannot be the cause of itself (as nothing but an ontological being can be). The cause of anything must be either a physical law or a personal being. The first cause must be a personal being, as no physical laws predated the universe, which is God. Therefore, simply in

virtue of the fact that the universe itself exists, God must exist.

(Reichenbach, 2012).

As a first criticism against the cosmological argument, the argument relies on the existence of a being which can be the cause of itself. This, therefore, necessitates a reliance on the ontological argument which will later be shown to fail.

There are two more direct criticisms of the argument. Firstly, modern science has set forth hypotheses which aim to establish what could have been the cause of the universe other than God. Of these, the most prominent is the Big Bang. According to this theory, the universe literally arose out of nothing, and there is therefore no need to rely on God's existence to explain the existence of the universe.

A criticism against this may be that the Big Bang itself, since it was an event, must need a cause. However, to claim this is to misunderstand the theory of the Big Bang. The Big Bang did not occur within the space-time continuum; the continuum was created from the Big Bang. It therefore does not need to rely on the regular cause and effect model of the universe.

A second criticism against the cosmological argument directly is that it relies on the claim that the universe itself must have a cause. However, should it be able to be shown that the universe has existed for an infinite amount of time, it will need no cause, and therefore there is no reliance on God's existence.

The argument that the universe cannot be infinite is that, if it were so, it would be impossible to reach the present moment from the beginning. Since

we have arrived at the present moment, the universe cannot be infinite. However, Mackie argues that this representation of infinity is misleading. A true representation of infinity would not include a starting point. Whilst this may seem to make the arriving at the present moment more impossible, this isn't the case. Mackie argues that to truly understand infinity is to know that from any past cause, no matter how far back the cause, there will be a finite number of links in the chain of causality to the present moment. Therefore, even in an infinite chain of causality, it is possible to reach the present moment (Mackie, 1983).

The Ontological Argument

The ontological argument differs from the other arguments for God's existence because it argues that God must exist simply because of the concept of God, and not because of the existence of the universe, or some fact about it. As has been seen, the teleological argument and the cosmological argument both necessitate the existence of an ontological being. An ontological being is one which cannot but exist. The ontological argument claims that, simply in virtue of the concept of God, God must exist. That is, if we can conceive of the concept of God, without any contradiction, by the fact that it is possible, it must be true.

The classical version of this argument is put forward by Anselm. He claims that the definition of God is "a being than which nothing greater can be conceived" (Anselm, 1077: chapter 2). By this definition, Anselm claims that God now cannot be conceived not to exist (Anselm, 1077: chapter 3). This is because if we conceive of God (with all his qualities, including omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence), and then believe God not to exist, we are not

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in fact conceiving of God, as a being greater than this one of which we conceived could be conceived: one which existed. Whichever being is greater of the two, and Anselm claims the one which exists would be greater, must therefore be God (Anselm, 1077: chapter 3).

A similar argument is found in Descartes' Meditations. He claims that God is a "supremely perfect being" (Descartes, 1641: 45); a being who holds all the perfections. However, included within this, Descartes claims that there is also the perfection of existence (Descartes, 1641: 46). If we conceived God to be without the perfection of existence, we would not actually be conceiving of God. Therefore, to conceive of the perfect being necessitates its existence, and God must exist.

A criticism is put against this by Kant. Kant argues that if we deny something's existence, we do not contradict a concept, as the ontological argument would claim we do, because he argues that existence does not "add" anything to a concept. That is, he holds that stating that something exists cannot make a concept greater. In order that a concept may be made greater by a predicate (in relation to the concept as a subject), the predicate must be something which, were it to be removed from the subject, would create a contradiction. In the example of God, we cannot claim the concept cannot be omniscient, as this would create a contradiction with the predicate "God is omniscient". This, Kant claims, is a "determining predicate" (Kant, 1781: A598/B626).

Existence, however, is not a determining predicate. Kant claims, even, that it is not a predicate at all. Instead, to say something exists is "merely the

positing of the thing" (Kant, 1781: A598/B626); that is, to say that something exists does not add to the concept, but simply states that there is an actual occurrence of the concept. So when we state " God exists", we do not state anything extra of the concept as we would in saying " God is omnipotent"; instead, as Kant argues, " we attach no new predicate to the concept of God, but only posit the subject in itself with all its predicates" (Kant, 1781: A599/B627). Therefore, there is no reason to suppose that a being greater than which none can be conceived must necessarily exist. This is because there it is not necessary that there must be an actual occurrence of the greatest being in order that it is the greatest being. Therefore, the classic ontological argument fails.

There have been more recent applications of the ontological argument. Plantinga aimed to show that, by the possibility of certain concepts, God must exist. These two concepts are maximal excellence and maximal greatness. Maximal excellence, he argues, " entails omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection" (Plantinga, 1974: 108). That is, all the concepts one attributes to God. Secondly, a being has maximal greatness if it has " maximal excellence in every world" (Plantinga, 1974: 108); that is, every possible world. These two concepts, Plantinga claims, are not self-contradictory, and therefore possible. Plantinga then argues that if the concept of maximal excellence is possible, there is a being, in some possible world, which has maximal excellence; this need not necessarily be the actual world. However, if the concept of maximal greatness is also possible, this means that in every possible world there is a being which has maximal

excellence, including the actual world. The being who has maximal excellence is God, and therefore God must exist. (Plantinga, 1974: 108).

A criticism to be made of Plantinga is that the concept of maximal greatness, though it is not self-contradictory, may not necessarily be possible. Indeed, consider the case that it is possible that maximal excellence may not exist. Therefore, there is a possible world in which maximal excellence does not exist. However, if maximal greatness was to be possible, there must be a being with maximal excellence in the world in which there is no being with maximal excellence. This, of course, cannot be the case. Plantinga himself admits this. He writes:

“ We must ask whether this argument ... proves the existence of God. And the answer must be, I think, that it does not. An argument for God’s existence may be sound ... without in any useful sense proving God’s existence.” Plantinga, 1974: 112).

The argument only proves God’s existence if the premise that maximal greatness is possible is accepted. However, this premise will only be accepted by people who already believe in God’s existence. Therefore, the argument fails in proving his existence externally of prejudiced beliefs.

In conclusion, the cosmological, teleological, and ontological arguments for God’s existence have been put forward. The criticisms put against them, in that the two former arguments rely on the ontological argument, and the ontological arguments fail to prove God’s existence, seem to indicate that there are no arguments which work to prove the existence of God.

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