

Does God Exist?

What is “God”? There are many religions, and many different ideas within each. Each has different views on what “God” is, and some are polytheistic. For this essay, I will consider the Christian God- the God of the Bible- believed to be omniscient, omnipotent and omni-benevolent.

I will consider the Ontological, Teleological and Cosmological Arguments for God’s existence. I will consider in which contexts God exists. I expect to conclude that no argument sufficiently proves God’s existence

(I refer to God as “he” since this is the usual interpretation of the biblical God).

St. Thomas Aquinas gave five proofs for God’s existence. The first two are Cosmological: there can be no uncaused cause, so the universe could not have created itself, so there must be a first cause/prime mover, (Appiah, 2003, p. 322), which he calls “God”. This, in my view, doesn’t prove anything. He is saying the universe cannot have come from nothing, but its creator can. If God is an exception to the “no uncaused cause” rule, why can’t the universe be? (Russell, 1927).

Why is there one first cause? Multiple first causes are just as probable as one (Sober, 2009, p. 40). Even if Aquinas is correct, God doesn’t necessarily exist. It is equally possible many gods could exist. Furthermore, St. Thomas uses “God” as a label for the first cause. The first cause isn’t necessarily the Christian God (Dawkins, 2007, p. 101); all-knowing, all-powerful and all-good (all-k.p.g.), or anything God is usually considered to be.

God is usually considered to exist outside of space and time. If this is so, then God could only create things which are also outside of space and time, since he would have no understanding of space and time. A being which has no place in time cannot create, or interact with, beings which do, in my view. God would inhabit his own realm – with no space and time. We live in a realm with space and time. It seems to me a first cause would have to be temporal. It’s possible that a temporal being created the universe, but the Cosmological Argument doesn’t prove this; it merely proposes some unknown first cause and labels it “God”. What I am trying to say is that even if there was a first cause, it wasn’t necessarily the Christian God (loc. cit.).

Furthermore, Aquinas didn’t prove that there was a first cause at all. Isn’t it possible that the end of time links back with the beginning, in an infinite cycle? (bbc.co.uk). Perhaps the world’s destruction is also its beginning. I’m not saying this is so, but it’s possible, just as the existence of God is possible. The Cosmological Argument doesn’t prove that there must be a beginning to the cause-and-effect chain.

To summarise, the Cosmological Argument doesn’t seem to offer sufficient proof of God’s existence.

The third proof of St. Thomas Aquinas has similar problems. The argument is as follows: a being which is not contingent must exist, since contingent things did not always exist, so if everything was contingent, nothing would ever exist. There must exist a necessary being, which is called “God” (Sober, 2009, p. 47). Just like before (loc. cit), there is no reason to label this being “God” or to assume it has any of the properties usually ascribed to God.

The fourth proof is the Argument from Degree: objects have properties to some degree, so there is a being with the maximum degree of all properties (Sober, 2009, p. 51). There seems to be no reason for this assumption. Dawkins relates this to smelliness: people have varying degrees of smelliness, so there's a being with the maximum possible smelliness (2007, p. 102). This is unconvincing and doesn't prove anything.

The final proof from Aquinas is as follows: an object without a mind must have been created by an object with one (Sober, 2009, p. 53). This is suggesting that God created the world. There is no proof that this must be so and once again no reason to believe God is the answer. This argument is used today in the form of The Argument from Design. The idea is that the world looks as though it was designed, and is so complex that it must have been designed. The harmony of "nature" is used as an example of why (Appiah, 2003, p. 325). I argue, however, that there is very little harmony in nature. Natural disasters, animals hunting and killing other animals, and human activity (crimes, deforestation, pollution, and man-made disasters; remember humans are part of nature too!) do not in my view showcase a harmonious "nature".

Simply because something looks designed does not mean it was designed (Dawkins, 2007, p. 103). Darwinian natural selection shows us that things evolve over time into what they are today. Things did not start out already made. The environment wasn't made to suit us; we evolved to suit it (Russell, 1927). The analogy often made is the Watchmaker argument: an eye is like a watch, both are very complex and intricate, and so since a watch has a maker, so too must an eye. There is a problem of analogy here- just because something is true of a chosen analogy doesn't mean it is also true of the corresponding subject. A watch is a man-made phenomenon; an eye is a product of evolution.

Furthermore, is the eye really that good? Consider three things: Firstly, some people are blind, some are visually impaired, and some are colour-blind. Secondly, some animals, for example hawks, have much better eyesight than humans. Finally, we can only see an incredibly small part of the electromagnetic spectrum. This isn't a perfect eye which is so complex and intricate it requires a God to create it.

To summarise, the five proofs of St. Thomas Aquinas, in my view, do not adequately prove God's existence.

Another argument for the existence of God is the Ontological Argument, proposed by Anselm. It states that God is a being than which none greater can be conceived, and since existing is better than not existing, God must exist, otherwise something greater could be conceived- an existing God (Sober, 2009, p. 86; Appiah, 2003, p. 314). Firstly, the Christian God, i.e. the God of the Bible, should not be considered great, at least in terms of morality (he commits infanticide [Exodus 11: 5], endorses slavery [Exodus 21: 2], and punishes rape victims [Deuteronomy 22: 23-4], there are more examples but I shan't labour the point). This is relevant because it is this God most Christians believe in.

Secondly, existence isn't greater than non-existence. Natural disasters, wars, and crimes are much better when they don't exist, in my view.

Thirdly, Guanilo refuted this argument by considering a perfect island (Sober, 2009, p. 89). Imagining an island than which none greater could be conceived doesn't mean such an island exists.

Murray and Rea point out that saying God is the greatest possible being already implies existence- Anselm is begging the question (2008, p. 129-30).

Finally, Gasking argued (Dawkins, 2007, p. 107-8) that it would be even more impressive for God to create the world without existing. So this is the greatest conceivable being-God. Thus, God doesn't exist. This argument doesn't actually prove God doesn't exist, but it was structured as a valid argument just like Anselm's. My point here is that simply creating a valid argument and using logical tricks does not prove God exists or doesn't exist, and these arguments are not likely to persuade anyone.

To summarise, the Ontological argument doesn't, in my view, prove God's existence.

Rene Descartes attempted to prove God's existence. In his Third Meditation, he says he knows he isn't perfect, so there must exist a being which is perfect to measure against (Descartes, Cottingham (ed.), 1996, pg. 31). This is the Argument from Degree I already discussed.

He also says (ibid, pg. 33): "There must be at least as much in the cause as in the effect". This means God must be a thinking thing and be at least as great as Descartes himself. He is trying to prove that God is the great being he is considered to be. However, he has not actually proven God's existence in the first place.

He rejects the possibility of multiple first causes by saying that unity of his attributes is one of God's most important qualities. This is a problem, in my view, since he is discussing the qualities of something he has not proven exists.

In one of the objections to Descartes (ibid, p. 95-6) it is said that using qualities or properties to try to prove God's existence is not allowed. God must already exist to have any property (circular argument).

Descartes considers God again in his Fifth Meditation: "the certainty and truth of all knowledge depends...on my awareness of...God" (ibid, p. 49). God gave him his knowledge; but he also says that he knows God exists because he perceives it clearly (ibid, p. 45). This is circular reasoning, since God, the thing he is trying to prove exists, is the cause of the method of proof.

To summarise, in my view, Descartes failed to prove that God exists.

In their Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion, Murray and Rea say that just because God exists in the understanding doesn't mean he exists in reality (2008, p. 125). This leads me to consider the context of God's existence. We know God exists in thought, in books, films, etc.; but so do superheroes and unicorns- and they don't exist in the actual world. It's my view that God exists in this and only this capacity: as a concept. Arguing the God's existence gets us nowhere, since the concept comes from the Bible (a book which also mentions unicorns [Isaiah 34: 7] and a beast with 7 heads (Revelation 13: 1-3)). God exists in a story book; we shouldn't ask if he exists in reality, in my view. Furthermore, there is no actual conclusive physical evidence for God's existence. As Bertrand Russell said he would say to God to explain his lack of belief: "Not enough evidence, God, not enough evidence" (Dawkins, 2007, p. 131).

Finally, I intend to show that the all-k.p.g. God couldn't possibly exist.

If God is omni-benevolent, he can do no wrong; however, if God is omnipotent, he can do anything, including wrong. These two properties are incompatible (Murray and Rea, 2008, p. 134).

If God is omnipotent, he can do anything. If he is omniscient, he knows everything. As Karen Owens asked (Dawkins, 2007, p. 101):

*Can omniscient God, who
Knows the future, find
The omnipotence to
Change his future mind?*

These two properties are also incompatible.

If God knows everything, he knows evil exists - he also created it, since he is supposed to have created everything- and therefore co-operates in evil (Leibniz, Huggard (ed.), 2005, p. 217). However, an omni-benevolent God cannot, by definition, allow for the existence of evil. These two properties are incompatible. In the words of Epicurus (Hume, Kemp Smith (ed.), 1947, p. 198):

Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent.

Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent.

Finally, omnipotence is impossible. Can God create a rock so heavy he can't lift it? Whether yes or no, God is not omnipotent (philosophyofreligion.info).

To summarise, the three properties (all-k.p.g.) God is supposed to have lead to paradoxes.

In conclusion, a variety of arguments attempted to prove God exists. St Thomas gave five proofs (including the Cosmological and Teleological Arguments), Anselm proposed the Ontological Argument, and Descartes reconsidered these. I hope to have shown that none of these prove God exists. I also attempted to show that it is not possible to be all-k.p.g. I considered in which contexts God exists, and decided God exists as a concept and fictional character, but nothing more, and not in the actual world.

So, in my view, there is insufficient proof that God exists.

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