

FACTFILE:



AS 8 PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION RELIGIOUS STUDIES ARGUMENTS FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD



Arguments for the existence of God

LEARNING OUTCOMES:

Students should be able to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of, and critically evaluate:

- The ontological argument, including:
 - The relationship between reason and faith;
 - The origins and nature of the ontological argument;
 - The contribution of Anselm and Descartes;
 - Reformulations of the argument;
 - Critique of the argument;
 - The value of the argument for religious faith.
- The cosmological argument, including:
 - The historical background and the relevance of causality to the debate;
 - The three forms of the argument in Aquinas and his rejection of infinite regress;
 - Reformulations of the argument;
 - Critique of the argument including the atheist view and the view of the universe as 'brute fact';
 - The value of the argument for religious faith.

THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

The relationship between reason and faith

Faith and reason are two sources from which beliefs held by an individual or group can be based.

Faith is defined as a strong belief in something that is based on a spiritual conviction rather than proof or evidence to support the belief e.g. people believe in God without requiring hard evidence to support his existence. **Fideism** is the view that knowledge or truth can depend on faith alone and that beliefs may be held without any evidence even if they defy reason or logic e.g. that Jesus really walked on water.

Reason refers the power of the mind to think and form logical judgements. In other words, reason refers to the ability humans have to make sense of things and verify facts with information. For example, a **rationalist** will only accept that something is real or true if it is based on reason and facts from empirical evidence e.g. the view held by the rationalist philosopher Hume that miracles cannot be real.

Many religious believers argue that faith and reason work together and should never be in conflict. For example, in *Summa Theologica* and *Summa contra Gentiles*, **Thomas Aquinas** (1225 – 1274) argued that there should be harmony between faith and reason. Aquinas viewed reason as accounting for what we can know by experience and logic alone. Aquinas believed that from reason, we can know that there is a God and that there is only one God.

However, faith accounts for what people can know through God's special revelation to humanity. Through faith, Christians can believe that God came into the world through Jesus and that God consists of a Holy Trinity. These spiritual truths about God cannot be known by reason alone, therefore, faith and reason are both ways of arriving at religious truth.

Key Terms:

Ontology – the study of existence.

A priori – statements or arguments based on reason or logic, not evidence. Such arguments are made prior to or without physical experience.

The opposite of an a priori argument is **a posteriori** – statements or arguments are based on sense experience or empirical evidence (information received by means of the senses).

Contingent existence – something that depends on other things for their existence.

Necessary existence – something that can't not exist.

The origins and nature of the Ontological Argument and the contribution of Anselm

The Ontological Argument for the existence of God is an **a priori argument** for the existence of God. The best-known ontological argument was proposed by Benedictine monk **St. Anselm** of Canterbury (1033 – 1109) in the 11th century C.E. Anselm believed that he could prove God's existence from how God is defined.

Anselm defined God as ***a being than which nothing greater can be conceived***.

He also assumed that **something is greater if it exists than if it doesn't**.

Anselm used the **Painter Analogy** to explain his argument. Before a painter begins his / her next work they will already have an image of it in their mind. However, it doesn't actually exist until it has been painted and then it can be said to exist in reality and not just in the mind. The painting that exists in reality **is greater than** the one that exists in the mind. Since God is a being **than which nothing greater can be conceived**, God must exist in reality and in the mind.

Therefore, according to Anselm: if God is the greatest thing we can imagine, **it is illogical to think that God does not exist**. In other words, if God is the greatest thing that exists, he can't only exist in the human mind but must also exist in reality.

Anselm's argument can be summarised as follows:

1. God is the greatest possible being;
2. It is greater to exist in the mind and in reality, rather than in the mind alone;
3. Therefore, the greatest possible being, God, must exist in the mind and in reality.

Gaunilo's Criticism of Anselm

This first version of Anselm's argument was criticised by another 11th century monk named **Gaunilo** who argued that, if what Anselm said was true, then we could define anything into existence so long as it has the property of being the greatest. He said the same could be said to prove the existence of an imaginary island which he used to undermine Anselm.

Gaunilo asks people to think of the perfect 'lost' island:

It is said somewhere in the ocean is an island ... this island has inestimable wealth ... it is more excellent than other countries ... for this reason it must exist.

Since it is perfect, it must exist, or it would be inferior to the grottiest island on the map. The argument can be summarised as follows:

1. We can imagine an island which is the greatest possible island;
2. It is greater to exist in reality than in the mind;
3. Therefore, the greatest possible island must exist in reality.

Clearly, the existence of the island is in doubt until there is empirical evidence to support that it does in fact exist. Gaunilo says 'If someone wishes to persuade me that this island really exists beyond all doubt, I should either think that he was joking, or I should find it hard to decide which of us I ought to judge the bigger fool.'

Anselm's Second Proof – his response to Gaunilo

Anselm provided a reply to Gaunilo and outlines a second version of his ontological argument. He pointed out that an island is a finite, limited thing e.g. rising sea levels could make the island disappear. He argued that islands have a **contingent existence** and we can consider a world without the perfect island and there will always be other "perfect" islands.

However, Anselm argued that it is unreasonable to think that God doesn't exist. He argued that it is impossible for things to be as they are if God did not exist, and therefore that it is actually not possible for there to be no God. Therefore, Anselm argued that Gaunilo's criticism fails because he doesn't understand that God is a **necessary being**.

The contribution of Descartes

French philosopher **René Descartes** (1596 – 1650) reformulated the ontological argument for the existence of God. He aimed to provide an **a priori** proof demonstrating the existence of God from the idea that he is a supremely perfect being. His argument is very similar to Anselm's as it rests on the definition of God. It can be outlined as follows:

1. God is the supremely perfect being;
2. A supremely perfect being contains all supreme perfections (omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence, etc.);
3. Existence is also a supreme perfection;
4. Therefore God, a supremely perfect being exists.

In other words, existing must be an essential property or **predicate** of the perfect being. Descartes argued:

From the fact that I cannot conceive of God without existence, it follows that existence is inseparable from him, and hence that he really exists.

As the above quote indicates, Descartes agreed with Anselm that God is a **necessary being**. He used the **Triangle Analogy** to get his point across, his training as a mathematician influencing his argument. He argued that it was as impossible to imagine God not existing as it was to imagine a triangle without its internal angles adding up to the sum of two right angles. Because God is perfect his non-existence is impossible, in other words God necessarily exists.

In Descartes' own words:

Existence can no more be separated from the essence of God than the fact that its three angles equal two right angles can be separated from the essence of a triangle, or that the idea of a mountain can be separated from the idea of a valley. Hence it is just as much a contradiction to think of God (that is, a supremely perfect being) lacking existence (that is, lacking a perfection), as it is to think of a mountain without a valley.

Descartes agreed that our thoughts cannot define something into existence. He wrote "I may imagine a winged horse even though no horse has wings" however, God is different because God is a necessary being: "I cannot think of God except as existing."

Kant's Criticisms

In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, German Philosopher **Immanuel Kant** (1724 – 1804) was critical of the idea favoured by Anselm and Descartes that God is a necessary being. Kant argues that just because some people assume that some characteristics of God are true e.g. that he is a necessary being, it does not follow that God actually exists in reality. Likewise, someone can assume that a unicorn is a horned horse but that doesn't mean a unicorn exists in reality. In other words, Kant argues that we can't define something into existence.

Kant went further and was critical of Anselm's idea that existence is a quality associated with God. He argued that existence is not an essential quality or predicate of anything. Kant argued that existence cannot be a property of God because existence is not a property of anything. Genuine qualities or predicates describe the subject and enhance their features but since 'exists' does not describe the subject or enhance the features, it is not a genuine predicate.

In other words, we add nothing to a description of something by saying that it exists. For example, there is no difference between an imaginary football and an actual football. While one exists and the other doesn't, the features of a football don't change. Therefore, existence is not a predicate and can't be used to say that God is real.

If Kant is right, the ontological arguments lose credibility because the foundations on which Anselm and Descartes have based their arguments are not true:

1. It cannot be accepted that God is a necessary being;
2. We cannot treat existence as one of the properties that God must possess.

Reformulations of the argument

Two American philosophers have supported the ontological argument in more recent years.

Norman Malcolm (1911 – 1990) outlined his support for Anselm's second argument, that because God is the greatest possible being he must be a **necessary being**, and therefore must exist. His argument can be framed as follows:

1. God is that than which nothing greater can be thought;
2. Necessary existence is a perfection;
3. If God possesses all perfections, he must possess necessary existence;
4. A necessary being cannot not exist;
5. God must exist.

Alvin Plantinga (born 1932) was critical of Malcolm's argument and offered his own ontological argument. Plantinga's argument has more in common with Anselm's first argument and Plantinga defined God as 'a being with 'maximal excellence' and a being with maximal excellence **must exist**. For Plantinga, God's excellence consists of qualities such as omniscience, omnipotence, benevolence and moral perfection.

Plantinga also rejected Gaunilo's criticism of Anselm's first argument. He argued that there's no such thing as a perfect island – the perfect island could always be improved e.g. have twice as many palm trees, etc. For Plantinga, God alone is perfect and therefore must exist.

Critique of the Argument

We have already considered the criticisms of the ontological argument put forward by Gaunilo and Kant.

David Hume (1711 – 1776) agreed with Kant: "We cannot define something into existence ... even if it has all the perfections we can imagine."

British philosopher **Bertrand Russell** (1872 – 1970) was another outspoken critic of this argument. Similar to Kant's views, Russell argued that *existence quite definitely is not a predicate* as it doesn't describe a property of a subject, it simply informs us that there is something in the world corresponding to a particular description e.g. an omnipotent, omniscient and benevolent God.

Value for religious faith

Swiss theologian **Karl Barth** (1886 – 1968) believed that this argument was of more value to the religious believer because it expresses and explores a definition of God and what type of being God is. Once a person who believes understands God as a perfect being, they can see God's existence is of a higher order than the rest of the universe. For the believer, the ontological argument helps understand God as being unlike anything else and does not exist due to any external cause – God is a necessary being and doesn't have a beginning or an end.

Anselm's own words in opening of the Proslogion read:

I do not seek to understand so that I may believe,
But I believe in order to understand.

He also said I have written the following (for) one who ... seeks to understand what he believes. So, for Anselm, the key to the ontological argument is not to prove God exists, but to help him and other believers explore and understand their own faith.

Watch the following clip for a good overview of the topic:

Anselm & the Argument for God: Crash Course Philosophy #9

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FmTsS5xFA6k>

TASK

Answer the following questions:

1. Outline Anselm's ontological argument for the existence of God.
2. How was Gaunilo critical of Anselm's argument and how did Anselm respond to Gaunilo's criticism?
3. What contribution did Descartes make to the ontological argument?
4. Summarise Kant's two key criticisms of the ontological argument.
5. Having considered all of the points of view, do you think that this is a convincing argument for the existence of God?

THE COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

The historical background and the relevance of causality to the debate

The cosmological argument is an argument for the existence of God based on the idea that the world cannot come from nothing. The existence of the universe demands a **cause**, reason or explanation. Things cannot have got going by themselves and only God could have brought about the existence of the universe. Therefore, this argument for the existence of God is a **posteriori** because it is based on sense experience or empirical evidence e.g. the existence of the universe.

This idea of a **first cause** or **uncaused cause** as the creator of the universe was initially advanced by **Aristotle** so the argument has its roots in Greek philosophy.

Aristotle believed in the concept of causality – the principle that everything has a cause.

In *Metaphysics*, Aristotle referred to the first cause as the **unmoved mover** – the being that moves other things (e.g. gets the universe going) but is not itself moved by any prior action. He wrote: “It is clear then ... that there is a substance which is eternal and unmovable and separate from sensible things.”

Aristotle was influenced by **Plato** who believed that every created thing must have come about due to some prior cause. In *Timaeus*, Plato argued that “everything that is created must of necessity be created by some cause, for nothing can be created without a cause ... was the world always in existence and without beginning? Or created and having a beginning? Created, I reply.”

The Three Forms of the argument in Aquinas and his rejection of infinite regress

In mediaeval times, Thomas Aquinas elaborated on this notion of an **unmoved mover** in three of his **Five Ways**. The Five Ways are Aquinas’ five logical arguments supporting the existence of God and are outlined in *Summa Theologica*. In the first 3 of Aquinas’ 5 Ways, a form of the cosmological argument is used:

1. First Mover / Unmoved Mover Argument;
2. Uncaused Causer / First Cause Argument;
3. Contingency Argument / Necessary Being Argument.

First Way – First Mover / Unmoved Mover Argument (Argument from Motion)

The First Way is best referred to as the **Unmoved Mover** argument but has also been called the **First Mover** argument. Whatever is moved has to have been moved by another thing which itself was moved.

If we trace all the moves or changes back throughout time, we must arrive at a first mover which is what Aquinas understood to be God. Aquinas rejected the concept of **infinite regress**, the idea that things can just keep going back endlessly throughout time so there must be a **First Mover** who is also an **Unmoved Mover**.

Some philosophers use the example of a train and carriages as an analogy to illustrate Aquinas’ rejection of the idea of infinite regress. Imagine a train with an unlimited number of carriages, each one being pulled by the other. Could this happen without an engine?

This argument can be referred to as a **dependency argument** – there is an initiator of the universe (God) whose existence is depended upon, otherwise we wouldn’t exist.

Aquinas wrote “It is certain, and evident from our senses that ... whatever is moved is moved by another ... but this cannot go on to infinity, because then there would be no first mover ... Therefore, it is necessary to arrive at a first mover, moved by no other, and this everyone understands to be God.”

The Unmoved Mover argument can be summarised as follows:

- Everything that moves is moved by something else;
- There cannot be an infinite chain of movers;
- Therefore, there must be an unmoved mover, producing movement in everything, without itself being moved;
- This unmoved mover is what people understand by 'God'.

Second Way – Uncaused Causer / First Cause Argument (Argument from Causation)

This argument is almost identical to the previous one. According to Aquinas, we must accept the **notion of causality** and we must view the world as having been brought about or made by some prior event or cause. Therefore, this argument states that everything that happens is a chain of cause and effect. Many philosophers use the **domino analogy** to illustrate this argument. Think of a line of dominos standing on one side. For the line to fall, someone / something must push the first domino over. This outside force is known as the **First Cause**.

Like the previous 'proof', this is also based on the rejection of infinite regress as causes cannot go back *ad infinitum*. Aquinas stated: 'Such a series of causes must, however, stop somewhere ... one is therefore forced to suppose some first cause, to which everyone gives the name God.'

Aquinas argued that 'we are bound to conclude that everything that is real is from God' and 'God is the all-embracing cause of beings'.

In summary, the First Cause argument can be outlined as follows:

- Everything that happens has a cause;
- Infinite regress is impossible – you cannot have an infinite number of causes;
- Therefore, there must be a First Cause;
- This first cause must be an uncaused cause – it has not been caused by anything else;
- This uncaused cause is God.

Third Way – Contingency Argument (Argument from Contingency)

There is some agreement between Aquinas and Anselm in relation to this third 'proof' for the existence of God. Both agreed that God cannot have a **contingent existence**, that God does not depend on other things for his existence. In his Third Way, Aquinas argued that God's existence is a **necessary existence**, that God simply can't not exist.

God, for Aquinas, is the necessary being needed to bring contingent beings into existence. How could the universe and any of the things in it come into existence without being brought into existence by something that is **not** part of the finite world? We need a more powerful being to do this: an omnipotent and transcendent God.

Aquinas said: 'Therefore we cannot but admit the existence of some being having of itself its own necessity, and not receiving it from another, but rather causing in others their necessity. This all men speak of as God.'

This argument can be summarised as follows:

- Ordinary things start to exist and later stop existing (they are contingent);
- At one time, none of them was in existence;
- But something only comes into existence by being caused by something that already exists;
- Therefore, there must be a being whose existence is necessary – that being is what people understand by 'God'.

Reformulations of the argument

German philosopher Gottfried **Leibniz** (1646 – 1716) developed the principle of **sufficient reason**. This principle asserts that everything must have a reason or a cause. He argued that God is the only reason humans can use to explain their existence. He considered the world around him and concluded that ‘neither in any one single thing, nor in the whole ... can there be found the sufficient reason of existence.’ He continues ‘we cannot escape the ultimate reason of things, or God.’ We must accept the existence of God: ‘something which is of absolute necessity, for which no reason can be given’.

Leibniz’s argument can be summarised as follows:

- Every contingent fact has an explanation;
- This explanation must involve a necessary being;
- This necessary being is God.

Richard Swinburne (born 1934) is a contemporary supporter of the Cosmological Argument.

“The human quest for explanation inevitably and rightly seeks for the ultimate explanation of everything ... A may be explained by B, and B by C, but in the end, there will be some-one object on whom all other objects depend ... every object which exists is caused to exist and kept in existence by God ... there could be no simpler explanation.”

He adds “If we can explain the many bits of the universe by one simple being which keeps them in existence, we should do so – even if we cannot explain the existence of that simple being.” This principle is known as **Ockham’s Razor** – if a simple explanation can be found, there is nothing to be gained from pursuing other explanations.

He also adds that the cosmological argument is consistent with scientific evidence. For example, the cosmological argument hinges on the idea of cause and effect or **causal activity**. According to Swinburne, there is scientific evidence that the universe was caused to exist a finite time ago by the Big Bang and many religious believers argue that God was the cause of the Big Bang.

American philosopher **William Lane Craig** (born 1949) is another modern supporter of the cosmological argument. He believed that the universe could not have got going by itself:

“Since everything that begins to exist has a cause of its existence, and since the universe began to exist, we conclude, therefore, the universe has a cause of its existence ... the cause of the universe must be a personal being who freely chooses to create the world.” Craig is responsible for the development of what is referred to as the **Kalam cosmological argument** (1979) which has its origins in Islam.

Craig’s argument can be outlined as follows:

1. Whatever exists has a cause;
2. The universe exists;
3. Therefore, the universe has a cause;
4. If the universe has a cause, then an uncaused, personal Creator of the universe must exist.

He adds “there exists a cause which brought the universe into being ex nihilo ... our whole universe was caused to exist by something beyond it and greater than it.”

Critique of the argument and the atheist view

One of the key objections to the cosmological argument is that there is no empirical evidence for an uncaused caused / first mover. Many philosophers reject the idea that the universe had to have a cause and that a divine being was this cause. For example, Bertrand Russell argued that ‘the universe is just there and that’s all there is to say.’ He argued that just because other things have causes, it doesn’t mean that the universe must have one too. Just because every human has a mother, it does not follow that the universe has to have a mother!

Despite the attempts by some philosophers to link God to the Big Bang, this cannot be verified. There is simply no evidence to confirm it and scientists such as Stephen Hawking reject this idea and argue that “it is not necessary to invoke God to ... set the universe going.”

Another objection to the cosmological argument is that it is inconsistent. The First Cause argument assumes that everything requires a cause but proceeds to argue that God doesn't need a cause which is a contradiction. If everything needs a cause, why does God not? This criticism was developed by empiricist David Hume who believed that all knowledge must come from experience. If there is no empirical evidence for something, then we shouldn't jump to conclusions or speculate. We should never reach conclusions about things that are beyond our experience. Hume therefore rejected the idea of necessary existence.

Friedrich Nietzsche's (1844 – 1900) views can be used to present a further criticism of the cosmological argument. He believed that religion was guilty of the 'god of the gaps' fallacy. He said, 'into every gap they put their delusion ... which they called God.' The cosmological argument is guilty of this as it uses God to fill gaps in terms of understanding of what caused the universe to exist. The argument that 'something caused the universe to exist therefore, it must have been God' is flawed. **Wittgenstein** (1889 – 1951) argued that there is no point speculating about God's role because we don't know if he exists or not: 'Whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must remain silent.'

Value for religious faith

Many religious believers argue that the cosmological argument does have value for the religious believer. The arguments reinforce the message from the book of Genesis that God is the cause of all things.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

Therefore, God is the force initiating the creation of the universe. In the Letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament, the same message is given by the author:

The world was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was made out of things which do not appear.

The cosmological argument is also consistent with the Christian beliefs outlined in the Nicene Creed from 381AD. God the Father is the Creator, the First Cause.

The value of this argument for religious believers is that it can allow them to accept the existence of God and combine this with the findings of science. For example, the Big Bang Theory was originally hypothesised in 1927 by a Jesuit Priest **Georges Lemaitre** (1894 – 1966). Pope Francis has argued that “The big bang, which is today posited as the origin of the world, does not contradict the divine act of creation; rather, it requires it.”

Finally, the first cause argument for the existence of God is an argument with lasting value which offers the simplest explanation for the existence of God and gives religious believers a sense of purpose – all existence forms part of God's creation and humans have a unique role to fulfil God's plan for his creation.

Watch the following clip for a good overview of the topic:

Aquinas & the Cosmological Arguments: Crash Course Philosophy #10

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TgisehuGOyY>

TASK

Answer the following questions:

1. Explain Aquinas' three forms of the cosmological argument for the existence of God.
2. Outline some of the reformulations of the cosmological argument.
3. Summarise the main criticisms of the cosmological argument.
4. Having considered all of the points of view, do you think that this is a convincing argument for the existence of God?

