# Can God’s Existence be Proven?

Over the past 3,000 years, many religious philosophers and theologians (**theists**) have attempted to give arguments capable of convincing rational, well-informed atheists and agnostics that God exists. While these individual arguments differ in terms of details, nearly all of them fit into one of (relatively few) types of arguments. We’ll be looking at some “classical” versions of each argument: while these are not the most nuanced and complex versions available (people have written books about each of these arguments), they should give you a real sense of how the arguments work, and the ways in which they have been criticized.

## How Arguments Work

In the context of philosophy, an **argument** is collection of two of more statements, one or more of which (the **premises**) are claimed to provide good reason to believe another (the **conclusion**). One can of course argue with other people. However, one can also argue with oneself, when weighs reasons for/against some conclusion. In order to be successful, an argument needs to meet two DIFFERENT criteria.

1. There is good reason to think that premises are TRUE, even for a person who might (initially) doubt the conclusion.
2. The truth of the premises must make the truth of the conclusion either CERTAIN (in a **deductive** argument)or at least PROBABLE (in an **inductive** argument).

Arguments can go wrong by having false (or questionable) premises, or by having premises that fail to adequately support the truth of the conclusion. For example of how this works, consider the following arguments, which (most) philosophers would agree are unconvincing:

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| Argument | What’s wrong? |
| (P1) Since the Bible says that God exists, and (P2) everything the Bible says is true, (C) God must exist. | It isn’t reasonable to believe P2 unless one already had independent evidence for thinking that God exists. Fails criteria 1. |
| (P1) Most people believe in God. So, (C) God probably exists. | P1 may be true, but doesn’t provide enough support for the conclusion. There are lots of things that have *seemed* true to lots of people (“The earth is flat!”) but which turned out to be false. Fails criteria 2. |
| (P1) Life would be meaningless without God. Therefore, (C) God must exist. | P1 seems likely to be false, since plenty of atheists/agnostics lead meaningful lives. Moreover, even if it *were* true, it’s not relevant to the truth of the conclusion. *Wanting* something to be true, or *fearing* that it might not be don’t actually provide evidence. |

It’s important to remember that the success of argument will depend, at least in part, on who one’s audience is. This is because different people will find different premises to be plausible. When making your own arguments, try to find premises that your audience will be likely to accept. An argument *among* Christians, for instance, might reasonably use the truth of the Bible as a premise. However, this would obviously be an unacceptable premise if they were arguing with Muslims, Buddhists, etc. Similarly, when a person is trying to decide whether or not God is real, they can’t take for granted the truth of any particular religious text.



## What is “God”? SOme Definitions

In considering arguments for (or against) the existence of God, it will be helpful to keep in mind some definition. In the context of the arguments we’ll be studying, **“God”** is usually taken to mean something like the God of the “Abrahamic” religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Some branches of Hinduism and Buddhism have a similar (though not identical) concept. This God is, among other things, **omnipotent** (“all-powerful”), **omnibenevolent** (“all-good” or “all-loving”), and **omniscient** (“all-knowing”). This God is also a **personal** God, who has relationships with humans, who are obliged to **worship** this being. **Theists** are defined as those who believe that a God of this sort exists, while **atheists** think that this God doesn’t. **Agnostics** are unsure, and many of them argue that is *impossible* to have good evidence one way or the other. Finally, there are people such as **deists** (who believe in some sort of all-powerful being, but not one interested in human affairs) and **polytheists** (who believe in *multiple* gods). In the remainder of the lesson, we’ll consider some of the most famous and influential argument in favor of theism.

## Why is There Something Rather Than Nothing? (THe Cosmological Arugment)

“If the universe began to exist, and if the universe is caused, then the cause of the universe must be a personal being who freely chooses to create the world.” (William Lane Craig)

The **argument from first cause** (or **cosmological argument**) holds that we can establish God’s existence by reflecting on the question “Why is there something rather than nothing?” One simple version is as follows:

1. The universe exists contingently (i.e., it might have not existed).
2. Every contingent being has a cause other than itself. (Example, since a car is a contingent being, someone must have built it.)
3. Infinitely long causal chains are impossible.
4. If infinitely long causal chains are impossible, then there must exist a first cause that does NOT exist contingently (i.e., it is a being that existed “of necessity”).
5. CONCLUSION: There exists a first cause (which we can call “God”).

Objection 1: Premise 2 is false. The universe might exist contingently, but there’s nothing in contemporary physics that suggests that the universe has a cause. It might seem “strange” to ordinary people think that the universe is uncaused, but lots of well-confirmed claims (such as quantum mechanics or the theory of relativity) in contemporary physics seem strange. The mere fact that people find the idea of an uncaused universe to be uncomfortable doesn’t provide any evidence.

Objection 2: Premise 3 is false. There’s nothing in contemporary physics that prohibits infinitely long causal chains. Once again, the mere fact that something seems strange or uncomfortable to ordinary people doesn’t mean that it is false.

**Other Problems:** Even if the argument did succeed, it wouldn’t show that anything like the Abrahamic God exists.

## The World Was Made With Me in Mind (The Teleological Argument)

“There cannot be design without a designer; contrivance without a contriver; order without choice; arrangement, without any thing capable of arranging; subserviency and relation to a purpose; means suitable to an end, and executing their office in accomplishing that end, without the end ever having been contemplated, or the means accommodated to it. Arrangement, disposition of parts, subserviency of means to an end, relation of instruments to use, imply the preference of intelligence and mind.” (William Paley)

The **argument from design** (or **teleological argument**) contends that God’s existence can be ascertained by reflecting on the question “Why is the world so well-suited for human life?”

1. In order for intelligent life to exist, many things had to go exactly “right” –the distribution of matter, the “fine-tuning” of certain physical constants, etc.
2. (From 1) So, if the universe arose by pure chance, it is incredibly unlikely that we would observe intelligent life.
3. If the universe was created by an intelligent designer, it’s very likely that we would observe intelligent life.
4. CONCLUSION: Given that we observe intelligent life, it’s very likely that an intelligent designer exists.

Objection 1: Who created the creator? Presumably, any creator capable of making the universe had to be pretty complex and “fine-tuned.” So, if the argument from design works allows us to conclude that intelligent life on earth had a creator, it seems like similar reasoning would allow us to conclude that this creator was created by ANOTHER creator. And so on, forever. This suggests that something is wrong with the *form* of the argument, and not just the particular premises that are used.

Objection 2: The **weak** **anthropic principle** states that it will ALWAYS be highly probable (in fact, certain) that we will observe intelligent life; after all, we are ourselves intelligent life, and we would simply not be around to observe a universe hostile to such life. So, the move from premise 1 to premise 2 fails.

**Other Problems: Many people (famously including Charles Darwin) have noted that the world does NOT seem to be all that good a fit for life: human and animal lives are *filled* with examples of pointless suffering and pain, and nature doesn’t seem to care one way or the other. This provides some reason for thinking that, if there *were* a creator, it could hardly be the all-powerful, all-loving God described above.**

## The Very Idea of God Guarantees Existence (The ONtological Argument)

It is certain that I… find the idea of God in me, that is to say, the idea of a supremely perfect being… And I know no less clearly and distinctly that an actual and eternal existence belongs to his nature… existence can no more be separated from the essence of God… than the idea of a mountain can be separated from the idea of a valley; so that there is no less contradiction in conceiving a God, that is to say, a supremely perfect being, who lacks some particular perfection, than in conceiving a mountain without a valley. (Rene Descartes)

*Ontology* means “the study of existence”; the **ontological argument** claims that God’s existence is guaranteed by the mere fact that we have an idea of God. Here is a simple version of the argument, from Anselm of Canterbury:

1. We have an idea of God, which is the idea of the most perfect possible being.
2. It is more perfect to exist as real thing than to exist merely as an idea.
3. CONCLUSION: God exists (in reality, and not merely as an idea).

The success of the argument hinges on premise 2, which seems plausible at first glance. However, note that if the above argument works, then so does the following argument:

1. We have an idea of Atlantis, which is the idea of the most perfect possible island.
2. It is more perfect to exist as real thing than to exist merely as an idea.
3. CONCLUSION: Atlantis exists (in reality, and not merely as an idea).

Many philosophers have thought this sort of **counterexample** shows that something is wrong with premise 2. One possible idea: the concept of *perfection* does not guarantee existence, since no concept guarantees this. An analogy with art might help. Suppose that an alien arrived on earth and was shown a painting of a dog and a painting of a dragon. There would be no way for the alien to tell *simply by looking at the paintings* that the dog was real and the dragon was not. In just the same way, we aren’t in a position to tell *simply from thinking about God* whether or not God exists.

## REview QuestionS

1. Using your OWN words and examples, explain the cosmological, teleological, or ontological argument in a way that would be accessible to a (bright, interested, somewhat argumentative) 14-year-old. Then, carefully explain at least one OBJECTION to this argument. You should aim to make use of ideas from the readings and handouts where appropriate.
2. Give an example of an argument for God other than those described above. Now, answer the following: What are the arguments premises? Its conclusion? Is it inductive or deductive? All things considered, is it a “good” or “bad” argument?
3. If you are currently an atheist (or agnostic), describe the sort of evidence (if any) that might convince that God exists. If you are a theist (or agnostic) describe the sort of evidence that might convince you that God did NOT exist.

## For Further rEading

* “Anselm: Ontological Argument for the God’s Existence | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy.” 2016. <http://www.iep.utm.edu/ont-arg/>.
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* Evans, C. Stephen. 2014. “Moral Arguments for the Existence of God.” In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2014. <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2014/entries/moral-arguments-god/>.
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* Reichenbach, Bruce. 2013. “Cosmological Argument.” In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2013. <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2013/entries/cosmological-argument/>.