# Arguing About God (Classifying and Evaluating Arguments)

Philosophers, theologians, and logicians have been arguing about God for a *long, long* time. Plus, most people have some opinion about whether God exists, so it’s a question of inherent interest. With that in mind, we’ll take a look at some of the most popular arguments for and against God with an eye toward figuring out the difference between *good* arguments and *bad* arguments. For this class, we’ll assume that “God” means the traditional Jewish-Christian-Islamic God (all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving). Many of these arguments have actually played an important role in the development of logic, and the way in which we now understand arguments (because reasoning about God is so tricky/controversial, it is has often led to both to the development of news ways of reasoning, and to the identification of new ways of getting reasoning wrong.)

The goal of this lesson is NOT to defend any particular conclusion about God. Instead, the goal will be to learn to distinguish between two (very different things):

1. Whether or not you happen to agree with the conclusion of a particular argument.
2. Whether or not the argument is fallacious.

This is among the most important “practical” skills that you can take away from a logic class. However, for most of us, it requires a surprising dedication and practice to do this, as it seems our brains “want” to ignore problems with arguments whose conclusions we like, even as they are quick to pick up on errors (real or imagined) when we consider arguments with conclusions opposed to ours.

## Informal Logic: A Very Quick Review

Philosophers define **logic** as the study of **arguments.** Here, “argument” does NOT mean “yelling match between two people.” Instead, it simply means a group of statements in which one or more of the statements (called the **premises**) are offered as reasons/evidence to believe another of the statements (which we call the **conclusion**). When thinking about arguments, some important things to keep in mind:

1. Not everything is an argument, even if it is something people might disagree with! In particular, you aren’t arguing if you simply report what you believe (“I believe in God”) or explain something (“The reason I don’t believe in God is that my parents were atheists”). Arguments happens only when there is a claimed **inferential link** between premises and conclusions.
2. Arguments, and the logical analysis, can happen (and often do happen) entirely within the confines of our own heads. More specifically, we “argue” whenever we try to figure out what we should believe, based on the evidence we’ve accumulated. So, you don’t need to be “argumentative” to get something out of logic: you just need to be interested in making sure your beliefs are as accurate as they can be, given your evidence.
3. There are two importantly different types of arguments: **deductive** and **inductive.** In a deductive argument, the arguer claims that it is LITERALLY IMPOSSIBLE (inconceivable!) that the premises could be true and conclusion could be false. We’ll see a few arguments for/against God like this. In inductive arguments, the claim is simply that the truth of the premises makes the falsity of the conclusion improbable. (It’s important to remember that this distinction concerns the strength of the inferential link, and NOT “how certain you feel about the conclusion.” Deductive arguments can have false conclusions! Inductive arguments can have true conclusions!).
4. In evaluating any argument, you need to do at least three things. First, clearly separate out premises and conclusion (e.g., by putting the argument in **standard form**). Second, on the assumption that the premises are true, ask yourself “Does the conclusion follow?” If so, the argument is inductively **strong** or deductively **valid?** Finally, ask yourself whether the premises are actually TRUE. (Note: at no point do you simply ask “Do I agree with the conclusion?” After all, the goal here is to determine whether or not we actually have good reason to believe the conclusion. We shouldn’t simply start by assuming an answer to this!).
5. There are exactly two types of “good” arguments: an inductively strong argument with true premises (a **cogent** argument) and a deductively valid argument with two premises (a **sound** argument). By contrast, there are many way of arguing/reasoning badly: an inductive argument might be weak, a deductive argument might invalid, or the premises might be false. Over the past 2,000 years, philosophers have identified some of the most common ways of reasoning badly as **fallacies.** Fallacies can roughly be understood as arguments that have something wrong with them besides *merely* having false premises. The basic idea is as follows: you haven’t committed a fallacy if you base your argument on the best information that you have, but this information turns out to be wrong. A fallacy is the sort of argument where you really should have known better.
   1. Common deductive arguments include mathematical “proofs”, categorical arguments (words like “All”, “No”, “Some”), or arguments based *merely* on the meanings of words.
   2. Common inductive arguments include predictions about the future, inferences about causes/effects, reasoning based on “authority” (this happens EVERY SINGLE TIME you believe something because you read it, or were told it, etc.), generalizations, arguments by analogy, etc.
6. Fallacies can occur in a variety of ways:
   1. A deductive argument might have a bad “form,” and thus be invalid. We call these **formal fallacies.**
   2. The argument might deductively valid or inductively strong, but rely on premises that are obviously unacceptable, given the context. Logicians sometimes call these **fallacies of presumption.**
   3. An inductive argument might have TRUE premises, but these premises fail to provide adequate support for the conclusion. This might be because the premises are completely irrelevant to the conclusion (**fallacies of relevance**) or because they simply don’t provide *enough* support for the conclusion (**fallacies of weak induction).**
7. One thing to remember: inductively cogent arguments are sensitive to new evidence, while deductively sound arguments are not. This matters, since it means that the beliefs we establish on the basis of induction (which is most of our beliefs!) will need to be continually reassessed as we learn more about the world.

## Identifying Fallacies in Ordinary Language

In logic textbooks (and lecture notes), fallacies tend to stick out like a sore thumb: they are such *obviously* bad arguments that it seems impossible that anyone could possible to reason in such a way. And to some extent, this is true: in real-life speech and writing, people are generally smart enough to avoid making such simplistic mistakes. However, we nevertheless commit slightly more complex versions of these fallacies nearly every day. Why? A few reasons are as follows:

* **Sometimes, we convince ourselves it is OK to make bad arguments, since it serves our goals.** In many cases, people *know* they are making bad arguments, and that it isn’t really a good idea for anyone to believe their conclusion, at least based on the evidence they’ve provided. However, they might have ulterior motives (selling you something, getting you to vote for a certain candidate, etc.) that mean they benefit from this. This is obviously morally problematic, since the whole purpose is trick people into acting against their own long-term self-interest. In any case, it’s always good to be on your guard for fallacious reasoning when talking to someone who has an obvious interest in you believing a certain conclusion.
* **Sometimes, we let our emotions get the best of us.** Arguments often involve our emotions in some way: we have positive feelings about some people and causes, and negative feelings about other people and causes. These emotions can in many cases be a good thing, since they motivate to do things on behalf of others. However, they can also lead us to make mistakes when reasoning. In particular, it’s important not to mistake the *feeling* “I really like this person! Their conclusion must be true” for the reasoned *judgement* “The argument that the person just gave was actually a good one.” Similarly, don’t mistake feelings of anger/disgust for actually having a reasoned critique of an argument whose conclusion you disagree with.
* **Sometimes, we just find it difficult to accept conclusions that don’t fit with our worldviews.** All of us have our own “worldview,” or set of beliefs/values that define how we see the world and our place in it. Certain sorts of beliefs (such as those regarding religion or politics) occupy a much more central place in this worldview than others (beliefs regarding whether it will rain tomorrow). When we encounter arguments that *challenge* beliefs that are central to our worldview, there can be an almost overwhelming urge to dismiss the argument as quickly as possible, and to stop thinking about it. This can easily lead to fallacious reasoning.

It is almost impossible to avoid these sorts of things completely. However, the study of fallacies should, ideally, make us better at recognizing when our reasoning has gone off the tracks, and to start taking steps to correcting it.

## Some Arguments that Don’t Work (Recognizing Common Fallacies)

OK, so we are done with our review of logic and fallacies. Now, let’s think about how all of this might work when applied to a real-life topic of interest to many people: the existence (or non-existence) of God. To begin with, let’s consider some arguments that are commonly recognized (by both theists and atheists) as being unsuccessful, even though it’s pretty understandable why so many people accept them (most of them rely on well-studied psychological mechanisms):

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| Premises | Conclusion | Argument Type | Comments |
| Many people (maybe even you) have had “religious experiences.” God’s existence is one explanation for these experiences. | God exists. | Inductive-Weak. | The existence of a supernatural being is not the *best* explanation for these experiences, which we know differ wildly according to a person’s culture and upbringing. This looks like an inappropriate appeal to **Anecdotal Evidence**. The best explanation would appeal to psychology, neurology, sociology, etc. |
| The Bible/Koran/Torah says that God exists. (Or, Karl Marx says that God does not exist.) | God (does not) exists. | Inductive-Weak. | Why should someone who doesn’t *already* believe in God believe that the Bible, Koran, or Torah are true? This is an **Appeal to Inappropriate Authority.** In arguments, you should always appeal to authorities whose expertise would be accepted by someone who might be tempted to *disagree* with your conclusion. |
| Either God exists or there is no meaning to my life. But there is meaning to my life. | God exists. | Deductive-Valid. (Unsound) | This is valid, but unsound. The premise “Either God exists or there is no meaning to life” is probably false, since plenty of atheists/agnostics live meaningful lives. This is known as a **False Dichotomy,** since it leaves out relevant possibilities.  This might also commit the fallacy of **Begging the Question,** which occurs when one of your premises (whether or not *you* think it is true) is likely to be unacceptable to anyone who does not already agree with the conclusion. |
| I am afraid of hell. I want to go to heaven. (Or, I want to enjoy life, and not have to worry about the afterlife.) | God (does not) exists. | Inductive-Weak. | *Wanting* something to be true, or *fearing* what will happen if you don’t believe something are not evidentially relevant, even though they are psychologically relevant. Believing something because you are afraid of the consequences of not believing is related to the **Appeal to Force,** which happens when someone threatens you to make you agree with them. |
| I will be loved, accepted, and admired by society/my family/some other group if I believe that God (does not) exist. | God (does not) exists. | Inductive-Weak. | This is a version of the **Appeal to the People** fallacy. Wanting to be accepted by a group certainly provides psychological reasons to believe something, but doesn’t provide any actual *evidence.* |
| You can’t deductively prove to me that God does not (or does) exist. | God (does not) exists. | Inductive-Weak. | Just because someone can’t deductively prove that something is false does NOT mean that it is reasonable for you to believe that thing. For example, I can’t deductively prove to you that jumping off a 30-story building will kill you, but it wouldn’t be reasonable for you to do this. This is called an **Appeal to Ignorance.** |
| My life is great! Great things have happened to me! (My life sucks! Horrible things have happened to me!) | God (does not) exist. | Inductive-Weak. | This is a **Hasty Generalization.** You shouldn’t over-estimate the importance of your own (limited) experience. Instead, look at *everyone’s* experience. For example, how does the world look to a child dying of malaria? To a happily married newly-wed? |

As noted above, most of these arguments commit **fallacies**, which are arguments that have something wrong with them *besides* merely having false premises. Fallacies are very easy to fall into if you are not careful. As humans, we are very prone to believe the sorts of things that the people around us believe, that make us feel good, and that allow us to avoid wasting too much energy worrying about things that don’t *directly* affect us. The bad thing about believing fallacies? They allow bad ideas to stick around for way longer than they should (for example: the theory that the earth was the center of the universe, slavery, the belief that women are inferior, etc.).

## Some Better Arguments

In the previous section, we discussed arguments that are (almost) universally recognized as bad arguments by logicians. We’ll now move to some better arguments. Many of these arguments have long histories, and some very smart people have been on both sides of the debate. (Since both sides can’t be right, though, we know that at least some of the arguments have false conclusions!)

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Premises | Conclusion | Argument Type | Comments |
| I have an idea of the most perfect being, which I’ll call “God”. It is more perfect to really exist than to merely be an idea. | God exists. | Deductive-Invalid. | This is the **Ontological Argument.** Here’s a **counterexample** that shows this particular version of the argument to be invalid: “I have an idea of the most perfect island, which I’ll call `Atlantis’. It is more perfect to exist than to merely be an idea. So, Atlantis exists.” There are more recent (and very technical) versions of this argument that avoid this easy rebuttal. |
| The universe is a great fit for intelligent life. The best explanation for this is that God created a “fine-tuned” universe with intelligent life in mind. | God exists. | Inductive-Strong. (Arg. to the Best Explanation) | This is the **Teleological Argument** (or **Argument from Design).** Premise 2 may be false for the following reason: if life *weren’t* a good fit for life, we wouldn’t be around to observe it. Because of this, it looks like atheism provides an *equally good* explanation. Premise 1 may also be false, since we can seemingly describe universes that would be a *better* fit for life. |
| All physical events are events with causes. Some physical events (e.g., the “Big Bang”) are not events with physical causes. So, some events with causes are not events with physical causes. | A non-physical “First Cause” exists. | Deductive-Valid. (Categorical Syllogism) | This is the **Cosmological Argument.** This does NOT claim to show that the Judeo-Christian-Islamic God exists, only that there is some non-physical cause of the universe. Some physicists have suggested that not all physical events have causes, or that all physical events DO have physical causes (even the Big Bang). |
| There is objective moral truth. If God does not exist, there is no objective moral truth. | God exists. | Deductive-Valid. (Modus Tollens) | This is the **Moral Argument for God.** Some atheists have claimed that there is no objective moral truth; others have claimed that objective moral truth does not require God. |
| Objective moral truth exists. If there is objective moral truth, then it is logically impossible for murder to be morally OK. If God exists, then God could make murder morally OK. So, God does not exist. | God does not exist. | Deductive-Valid. | This is the **Moral Argument Against God.** Some theists have claimed that murder could be morally OK if God wanted it to be. Others have claimed that morality is *independent* of God (so, even God couldn’t make murder morally OK). |
| Innocent children and animals die horrible deaths from disease, natural disasters, and human action. We have no evidence that these things are for the “greater good”. The best explanation for this is that God does not exist. | God does not exist. | Inductive-Strong. (Arg. to the Best Explanation) | This is the **Problem of Evil.** Some theists have argued that God’s existence is an *equally good* explanation for the existence of evil. For example, perhaps suffering is necessary for free will or the existence of love. This requires more than showing that God *might* have some “unknown reason” for allowing evil, though—it needs to be shown that evil would be *just as likely* as on atheism |

As you can see, most of these arguments above (unlike the ones considered in the first section) are either deductively valid or inductively strong. This means that, if you disagree with the conclusion of one of these arguments, you need to do the following:

* If the argument is deductively valid, you MUST provide evidence that at least one of the premises is false.
* If the argument is inductively strong, you can either (1) provide evidence that at least one of the premises is false, or (2) show that there is additional, relevant evidence that makes it likely the conclusion is false.

**So, Should We All Be Agnostics?** When confronted with arguments for conflicting conclusions, its tempting to think “Well, who knows?” or “I guess everyone’s opinion is equally valid.” In some cases, this sort of “agnosticism” perfectly fine. In many other cases, however, this is NOT a good response, and it is one that has often been used to bad ends (for example, cigarette companies used this basic human response to try and create “doubt” about the cigarette-cancer link for years). Instead, one has to consider ALL of the relevant evidence, and try to decide which conclusion seems MORE LIKELY in the light of it. Remember, one good argument is better than ten (or a 100!) bad arguments. The take-away: reasoning well is sometimes *tough,* but it really is something that’s worth doing (whether you are a theist, atheist, or agnostic).

## Review Questions

1. Take 5-10 minutes and write down the *best* arguments you can think of for or against God. Now:
   1. Classify these arguments as inductive or deductive, and explain your reasoning.
   2. Carefully consider the premises of these arguments. Which of these premises might someone who disagreed with the conclusion object to? What sort of argument might they give?
   3. At the end of the day, how confident are you that these arguments could convince an intelligent, well-informed person on “the other side”?
2. Choose a topic that you are something of an expert on. (This could be anything! Sports, science, history, video games, etc.). Now, try to do the following:
   1. Come up with at least TWO sample arguments about this topic that commit the sorts of fallacies identified above (or which we have talked about earlier in the class).
   2. Give an example of at least TWO sample arguments about this topic that do NOT commit fallacies. If possible, try to think of a specific debate where there seem to be good reasons on both sides, and present an argument for/against the same conclusion.