
UNIT 2 TRADITIONAL ARGUMENTS FOR GOD’S EXISTENCE

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this Unit is to give the student some of the traditional arguments about the Existence of God. While it gives some arguments, there is no attempt made to formulate a universal proof for the existence of God. What we are trying to do is to examine some of the traditional arguments about God’s existence. The basis for these arguments is reason, but then we realize and have to accept that the topic we are studying, namely, the Existence of God, is such that we cannot come to any universal conclusion, given the topic of our study. Hence we shall examine the place that proofs hold in such a context and the significance of some of these arguments. Thus by the end of this Unit you should be able:

- to have a basic understanding of some proofs for the existence of God;
- to differentiate the ontological, cosmological, teleological and moral arguments;
- to relate it to the positions of Augustine, Bonaventure and Duns Scotus
- to understand the character of an argument for the existence of God

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Most believers do not need proofs for the existence of God, even so we feel the need to speak of arguments in favour of the existence of God. On the other hand most non-believers or atheists would not feel the need of proving their non-belief or non-acceptance of God, because they see this as most natural. The

responsibility then seems to be on the believers to give some arguments to prove the existence of God. While we agree that there can never be a universal proof for the existence of God, even so we can definitely speak of arguments in favour of the existence of God. This chapter will speak of "TRADITIONAL ARGUMENTS FOR GOD'S EXISTENCE." The aim of this chapter is to examine certain arguments that have traditionally been used to prove or demonstrate the existence of God. We shall examine different types of arguments and we shall also look at some individual philosophers who had significant arguments to prove the existence of God.

We need to look into the actual demonstration of God's existence, that is, the ways to show that the proposition "God exists" is true. We need to ask the question, "Is this proposition evident or not?" Evident is that which shows itself to us directly, so that it does not need any demonstration. For a proposition to be evident, at least as far as we are concerned, both the subject and the predicate must be known to us. If they are not, the proposition is not evident. Does this then mean that it is not true? No. It may not be evident but it may be true, although the truth of this proposition may have to be demonstrated. If the proposition 'God exists' were evident, then there would not be any atheists. But there are atheists, because this is not an evident proposition, although it is true and certain but it needs to be demonstrated. This is necessary because the terms of the proposition are not known to us directly. Since we do not see God directly, we have to prove that he exists. But is a universal proof for the existence of God possible?

2.2 AUGUSTINE ON THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

In the teachings of Augustine there is a vast difference between God and the world. God is eternal, is transcendent, all good, all wise, absolute in every way. He is the cause of everything, the creator of the universe out of nothing. He also taught that God in the beginning, predetermined everything so that he knew from the first what would happen to all his creatures through-out eternity. The God of Augustine is the idealization of everything that man considers good and worthy. He is absolute power, perfect goodness, the source and creator of everything. He knows everything and has so controlled the universe that everything is determined by him forever.

Augustine's central proof of God's existence is from thought, the proof from within. It begins from the apprehension of the mind of necessary and changeless truths which is present to all. This truth is superior to the mind which cannot change it or amend it. The mind varies in its apprehension of truth, but truth remains ever the same. Eternal truths must be founded on being and reflect the Ground of all truth. They reflect the necessity and immutability of God who is the Ground of eternal and necessary truth.

Augustine also seeks to prove the existence of God from the external and corporeal world but these are more like hints, or reminders. He was keen to show that all creation proclaims God who is recognized in the dynamic attitude of the soul towards God. The soul seeks happiness, and some seek it outside themselves. Augustine tries to show that creation cannot give the soul the perfect happiness it seeks, but points upwards to the living God who must be sought within. He seeks to demonstrate the existence of God from his effects. He views the rational

knowledge of God in close connection with the search of the soul for the Truth which is a kind of self revelation of God to the soul.

2.3 ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

The first type of argument that is used to show the existence of God is the ontological argument, and it is so called because it attempts to show that the very concept of the idea of God implies his existence in reality. That is to say, if a person is able to clearly conceive the idea of God then he or she ought to be able to understand and accept that God must exist. It was Anselm who first gave a serious formulation of this argument. His argument was as follows.

God is the greatest possible being. He is “That than which nothing greater can be thought”.

God exists at least in the mind or understanding.

A being who exists only in the mind is not so great as a being who exists in reality as well as in the mind.

If God existed only in the mind, he would not be the greatest possible being.

So “that than which nothing greater can be thought” must exist in the mind as well as in reality.

Hence, God must exist in reality. (as well as in the mind.)

This argument met with many objections because of its claim that the existence of something can be inferred merely from its definition.

Gaunilo a contemporary of Anselm produced a parallel argument, substituting the concept of God with that of the “most perfect island”. Following this argument, logically the ‘most perfect island’ must exist in reality. But it was not the case, thus proving the argument wrong. But Anselm replied that this argument applied only to God, because the concept of God is unique in the sense that God is the only necessary being. All other beings, as the ‘island’ are finite objects and hence not necessary. Hence we can always conceive a more perfect island, but God is already the greatest possible being, and nothing greater can be thought of. We cannot think of a merely perfect God, while we can always think of a more perfect island.

Immanuel Kant also objected to this argument, because he said, that one cannot legitimately think of ‘existence’ as a property which an entity may or may not have, or have to varying degrees. When we say of something that it exists, we are talking of it as already actualized. Existence is not a ‘property’ of a thing as for instance its being red or blue or yellow. So it cannot be a property that adds something to the greatness of God. From Anselm’s argument it appears as if existence in reality adds something to the greatness of God.

2.4 COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

Another argument that strives to prove the existence of God is the so called Cosmological argument. This argument strives to proceed from the fact of the existence of the world to a transcendent creator. These arguments originate in

the thinking of Aristotle and have been presented by Thomas Aquinas who used Aristotle's ideas as the intellectual medium to put down his own religious philosophy. These are commonly referred to as the Five Ways of Thomas. His arguments could be presented as follows.

First Way (from motion)

- Everything that moves is moved by something.
- That mover is in turn moved by something else again.
- But this chain of movers cannot be infinite or movement would not have started in the first place.
- Therefore, there must be an unmoved mover. (whom we call God.)

Second Way (from the nature of the efficient cause)

- Everything has a cause.
- Every cause itself has a cause.
- But you cannot have an infinite number of causes.
- Therefore, there must be an uncaused cause, which causes everything to happen without itself being caused by anything else.
- Such an uncaused cause is what people understand by 'God.'

Third Way (from possibility and necessity)

- Individual things come into existence and later cease to exist.
- Therefore at one time none of them was in existence.
- But something comes into existence only as a result of something else that already exists.
- Not all things can be ONLY possible. There must be one that is of itself Necessary
- Therefore, there must be a being whose existence is necessary, 'God'.

Another form of the Cosmological Argument is the **Kalam Argument**. It was spelt out by the Muslim philosophers Al-Kindi and Al-Ghazali in the ninth and tenth century.

KALAM COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

The Kalam Argument for the existence of God originated and became highly developed in Islamic theology during the late Middle Ages. It gets its name from the word "kalam", which refers to Arabic philosophy or theology. It is an Arabic term that literally means 'argue' or 'discuss', though it has also been translated as 'theology' or 'dialectical theology'. Traditionally the argument was used to demonstrate the impossibility of an actual infinite existing in the real world, as well as an argument from temporal regress, thus showing that the universe cannot be eternal. In recent years these philosophical arguments have been confirmed by scientific discoveries, viz., the Big Bang theory. The most thorough and articulate proponent of the argument today is Dr. William Lane Craig.

Statement of the (modern) deductive Kalam Cosmological Argument:

Everything that begins to exist has a cause of its existence. (Causal principle.)
The universe (space, time, and matter) began to exist. (Evidenced by two philosophical arguments, the Big Bang, and the second law of thermodynamics.)
Therefore, the universe has a cause of its existence.

Sub-argument: As the cause of the universe (space, time, and matter), the cause must be outside of space, time and matter, and therefore be spaceless, timeless, and immaterial. Moreover, the cause must be a personal agent, otherwise a timeless cause could not give rise to a temporal effect like the universe. (Argument expanded.)

This is an accurate picture of God.
Therefore, God exists.

The first premise of the argument is the claim that everything that begins to exist has a cause of its existence. In order to infer from this that the universe has a cause of its existence the proponent of the kalam cosmological argument must prove that the past is finite, that the universe began to exist at a certain point in time. The crucial premise of the kalam cosmological argument, then, is the second: “The universe has a beginning of its existence”. How do we know that the universe has a beginning of its existence? Might not the universe stretch back in time into infinity, always having existed? The proponent of the kalam cosmological argument must show that this cannot be the case if his argument is to be successful.

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer
b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1) What are the strengths and the weaknesses of the Ontological Argument

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2) What are the different types of Cosmological Arguments?

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2.5 BONAVENTURE ON THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

While Bonaventure supported the relation of philosophy and theology, he did formulate arguments for the existence of God. He philosophizes in the light of what he already believes in. His arguments are rational and he makes no reference to dogma in them. Yet he pursues his arguments in the light of the faith which he possesses. His ideal is of Christian wisdom, in which the light of the Word is shed not only on theological but also on philosophical truths, and without which those truths would not be attained. He was mainly interested in the relation of the soul to God and so his proofs for the existence of God were about stages in the soul's ascent to God. This God is not just an abstract principle of intelligibility but is rather the God of the Christian consciousness. Bonaventure does not deny that God's existence can be proved from creatures but rather he affirms it. He says that God can be known through creatures as Cause through effect. This mode of cognition according to him is natural because for us sensible things are the means by which we arrive at knowledge of the objects transcending sense.

In *De Mystério Trinitatis* (5,29) Bonaventure gives a series of brief arguments for the existence of God. He says if there is a being from another, there must exist a being which is not from any other, because nothing can bring itself out of a state of non-being into a state of being, and finally there must be a first Being which is self-existent. Again, if there is possible being, being which can exist and being which can not exist, there must be a being which is Necessary, that is a being which has no possibility of non-existence, since this is necessary in order to explain the reduction of possible being into a state of existence. If there is a being, a potency, there must be a being in act, since no potency is reducible to act except through the agency of what is itself in act. Ultimately there must be a being which is pure act, without any potentiality, God.

Every human being has a natural desire for happiness which consists in the possession of the supreme Good which is God. Therefore every human being desires God. But there can be no desire without some knowledge of the object. Therefore the knowledge that God or the supreme Good exists is naturally implanted in the soul. The human will is naturally orientated towards the supreme Good, which is God, and this orientation of the will is inexplicable unless the supreme Good, God, really exists.

2.6 JOHN DUNS SCOTUS

According to Duns Scotus God is not properly speaking an object of metaphysical science even though Metaphysics is the Science of Being and God is the first being. Scientific truths are known apriori while the metaphysician knows truths about God only aposteriori. The philosopher comes to know God only in and through his effects. He holds that man has no intuitive knowledge of God in this life since the intuition of God is precisely that form of knowledge which places a man outside the state of life. Our knowledge starts from things of sense and our natural conceptual knowledge of god is arrived at through reflection on the objects of experience and is imperfect.

Scotus is not so attracted to the argument from motion, but inclines towards the argument from the fact of contingency to the existence of a first cause and a

necessary being. Contingent beings can neither cause themselves nor be caused by nothing. Scouts distinguishes between the series of essentially ordered beings and the series of accidentally ordered beings. He does not deny the possibility of an unending regress of successive contingent causes, but rather he denies the possibility of an unending vertical series of simultaneous total causes. Even if we grant the possibility of an infinite series of successive causes the whole chain requires an explanation which must be outside the chain itself since each member of the chain is caused and so contingent. It is necessary to postulate a transcendent cause. The totality of ordered effects is itself caused by some cause which does not belong to that totality. Scotus shows that the first cause in the essential order of dependence must exist actually and cannot be merely possible, that it is necessary being, that is, that it cannot not exist and that it is one. There cannot be more than one necessary being.

In his commentary on the Sentences, Scotus argues as follows. We have to proceed from creatures to God by considering the causal relation of either efficient or final causality. Contingent being, is caused by nothing, or by itself, or by another. As it is not possible for it to be caused by nothing or by itself, it must be caused by another. If that other is the first cause, then we have found what we are looking for. If not, then we need to proceed further. But in the vertical order we cannot proceed forever searching for this dependence. Nor can we suppose that contingent being cause one another because then we shall proceed in a circle without arriving at any ultimate explanation of contingency. We cannot escape by saying that the world is eternal, since the eternal series of contingent beings itself requires a cause. Similarly in the order of final causality there must be a final cause which is not directed to any more ultimate final cause. The first efficient cause acts with a view to the final end. But nothing other than the first being itself can be its final end. So the first efficient cause cannot be of the same nature as the effect, but must transcend all its effects. And as first cause it must be the most eminent being.

2.7 TELEOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

This argument is related to the sense of the word ‘telos’ which signifies the meaning, end or purpose. Here we are speaking of the telos, of the world. In a way this argument also argues that the sense of purposeful design that we see in nature suggests that the world has a designer, namely God. That is why this argument is also referred to as the Way of Design or the Fourth Way of Aquinas.

Thomas Aquinas links the idea of causation to that of purpose. He says that causation gives things their perfection. And then he links this to the idea of purpose. He holds that goal directed behavior is in all beings, even if they lack awareness. Such beings that lack awareness are directed to their goal by someone who has the awareness and understanding that they themselves lack. Everything in nature is directed to its goal.

While this is one of the traditional arguments, it was best explained by William Paley (1743 – 1805). He gave the example saying that if one was to find a watch lying on the ground, one would assume that it had a maker and had been designed by a watch maker. This would be natural because one can see immediately that it is made up of different parts which work together. They work in harmony to tell us the time. The world too he says is like a machine, with different parts

designed so that they have a part to play in the whole. The intricate design of the world in which, like the watch, different parts worked together in such a way that suggested a complex design and planning. The design is such that when looked at as a whole one cannot but think of the designer of the world, who is God.

Religious common sense tends to look at the intricacy of nature as pointing to a God who is the designer and provides a purpose to creation. There is no evidence to sustain an analogy between human creativity and the idea of a divine creator. It is difficult to sustain the teleological approach as a logical argument. At the best we can only say that the world appears to have some order and purpose. For the believer, it supports his or her belief. But to the atheist, it is logically inconclusive.

2.8 MORAL ARGUMENT

This line of argument examines those aspects of human experience which relate to religion. It asks whether there is anything in the way in which people respond to the idea of God which can be used to prove that God exists. One possibility is the experience of morality, namely that we have a sense of what we ought to do and also a sense of guilt when one realizes that one has done what is believed to be wrong. The second possibility is the religious experience itself. Moral rules arise as God's commands, from an objective look at human nature and the structures of the world or as the product of human society and human choice.

We look at the second possibility. Aristotle related morality to his idea of a final cause. He held that we ought to do that which leads to our maximum self fulfillment. Once we discover our true nature we will want to act accordingly. By this approach we could say that morality is rational and objective. If one experiences moral obligation, it implies that one is free to act and that one will experience happiness as a result of virtue. For this to be possible there has to be some overall ordering principle which will reward virtue with happiness, and this might be called God. This was the argument of Kant. He seemed to be saying that you cannot prove the existence of God, but one's sense of morality implies that the world is ordered in a moral way, and that this in turn implies belief in God.

If one believes that there is an objective moral order, it may be used either to suggest that the world is created by a moral being, God, or to show that morality is well established on objective rational grounds and no God is needed. On the other hand, if morality is a human product, no God is required to account for moral experience. Hence the moral argument cannot prove the existence of God. Atmost it can illustrate the way in which the idea of God is used in situations where there is a moral choice to be made. This is the Fifth Way of St. Thomas.

2.9 ARGUMENT FROM RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

There is in every person the capability of self-transcendence in every experience. That is to say, a very ordinary this-worldly experience seems to point beyond itself and reveals something about the meaning of life as a whole. It reveals to us the religious and the transcendent dimension. Some people do use this as an argument for the existence of God.

Problem of Affirming God’s Existence

For those who have had a religious experience it is impossible to prove the non existence of God. One cannot argue against their experience. But then the issue is that there are various ways of interpreting what has been experienced. What one person calls God may have a perfectly rational explanation to someone else. While we could be mistaken about an experience, it is also possible that we might have a correct experience and have truly experienced God. This is true also of our religious experience. But this requires a previous knowledge of what God is so that we can say whether the experience is correct or not.

The problem is that such knowledge is not possible of God. Because if there was such knowledge then there would be no discussion on the existence of God, because if God exists then his existence would be evident to all and there would be no such debate. Hence if religious experience is a source of knowledge of God, it remains convincing only to those who accept or share this experience. But to the philosopher, the proposition ‘God exists’ can be either correct, incorrect or meaningless. Religious experience can thus become the basis for the argument for the existence of God only when all people accept one definition of the word ‘God’.

If religious experience according to different cultures can be found to have a common core, then there is hope of coming to a common understanding of the term ‘God’. But if we do not arrive at a common core then most will be unconvinced by the argument from religious experience. This argument may be enlightening and persuasive, but it is not logically compelling. That is why this argument is not much liked by philosophers. However for people with a religious mind, it is the most persuasive of all arguments.

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer

 b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1) Christian Western Philosophers like Augustine, Bonaventure and John Scotus have valid arguments for the Existence of God. Spell out these arguments.

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2.10 LET US SUM UP

The Ontological Argument follows the apriori approach. While the cosmological, teleological, moral and religious experience approaches are aposteriori. While considering the arguments about the existence of God it is good to remember that God is not something which might or might not happen to exist. We have to understand the concept of necessary existence. God does not merely happen to exist. Neither can he come into existence or pass out of existence since such a being would not be God. For God, his existence is necessary. If he does not

exist then his existence is impossible. But if God’s existence is possible then it is necessary. It is his essence to exist, he is being itself, and not ‘a’ being.

Hence when we try to give arguments about the existence of God, we do not try to show the existence of God as the existence of one entity alongside others, but we are speaking about a fundamental way of regarding the whole universe. It is about the structure of being itself and not merely about the possible existence of ‘a’ being.

All in all, the ontological argument has made us aware of the logical problems in speaking about God as “that than which no greater can be thought”. It has also made us aware of the distinction between a conceptual perfection and an existential perfection. The claim that the existence of something can be inferred from its definition does not seem possible for most people. Anselm made an illegal leap from a conceptual existence, to existence in reality.

The cosmological arguments and the argument from design suggest that there are features of this world which enable the mind to go beyond experience. We try to understand the cause of everything and we also try to understand why the world is as it is.

The moral argument suggests that together with freedom and immortality, we have an intuition of God. This is more evident every time we have or experience a moral obligation.

The argument from religious experience cannot be conclusive because experience is always open to various interpretations. Yet religious experience keeps us focused on the fact that at the heart of religion there is in man a struggle to express our belief in God. Religious experience is a context in which we try to understand the existence of God.

Finally, these arguments may not be conclusive but they are significant because they indicate the thought process of a religiously inclined person. It indicates in a special way what they understand by the word ‘God’ and how they use that word. For a believer these arguments reinforce their faith. For the agnostic or the atheist they are unlikely to convince. But all in all at least they show us the real differences in various perspectives that the belief in God implies. As it is said, “For him who believes, no proof is needed. For him who does not believe, no proof will ever be sufficient.”

2.11 KEY WORDS

Act	: the perfection of a being, or the existence of a being.
Argument	: offering reasons and causes in support of a conclusion.
Atheist	: a person who denies the existence of God.
Being	: whatever exists or may exist; something existing in its own way.
Causation	: the principle by virtue of which anything is produced

**Problem of Affirming God’s
Existence**

Concept	: abstract, universal idea; the intellectual representation of an object.
Contingent	: uncertain, non-necessary, non-essential; a being which exists, but which may not exist.
Cosmological Argument	: reasons offered in proof of God’s existence, taken from the order that exists in the world.
Existence	: that which makes a thing to be.
Experience	: sense awareness, an immediate and direct perception of reality.
God	: the supreme being, creator of all things, the first cause, the most perfect of all beings.
Immutability	: the inability to change or be changed.
Moral Argument	: based on man’s consciousness of universal and absolute binding character of the moral law.
Necessary	: that which needs to be there by all means if a certain end is to be achieved.
Ontological	: related to the study of being.
Potency	: a tendency to actuality; a dormant capacity or faculty.
Proposition	: a judgement symbolised in words and so arranged as to convey a complete thought.
Reality	: anything that exists, independent of man. (could be actual or existent.)
Soul	: a spirit or entity that is supposed to be only in all living things. (Greek psyche, or Latin anima.)
Teleological	: related to the end, purpose or final cause.
Telos	: end.

2.12 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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2.13 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answers to Check Your Progress I

- 1) It attempts to show that the very concept of the idea of God implies his existence in reality. That is to say, if a person is able to clearly conceive the idea of God then he or she ought to be able to understand and accept that

God must exist. It was Anselm who first gave a serious formulation of this argument.

This argument is considered weak since it can be applied only to God, because the concept of God is unique in the sense that God is the only necessary being. All other beings, as the 'island' are finite objects and hence not necessary. Hence we can always conceive a more perfect island, but God is already the greatest possible being, and nothing greater can be thought of. We cannot think of a merely perfect God, while we can always think of a more perfect island.

- 2) The Cosmological argument consists of the Five ways of Thomas. This argument strives to proceed from the fact of the existence of the world to a transcendent creator. These arguments originate in the thinking of Aristotle and have been presented by Thomas Aquinas who used Aristotle's ideas as the intellectual medium to put down his own religious philosophy. These are commonly referred to as the Five Ways of Thomas. The first three ways are part of the Cosmological Argument.

First Way. (from motion.) Second Way. (from the nature of the efficient cause.) Third Way. (from possibility and necessity.)

Another form of the Cosmological Argument is the **Kalam Argument**. It was spelt out by the Muslim philosophers Al-Kindi and Al-Ghazali in the ninth and tenth century.

The Kalam Argument was used to demonstrate the impossibility of an actual infinite existing in the real world, as well as an argument from temporal regress, thus showing that the universe cannot be eternal. In recent years these philosophical arguments have been confirmed by scientific discoveries, viz., the Big Bang theory

Answers to Check Your Progress II

- 1) In the teachings of Augustine there is a vast difference between God and the world. God is eternal, is transcendent, all good, all wise, absolute in every way. He is the cause of everything, the creator of the universe out of nothing. He also taught that God in the beginning, predetermined everything so that he knew from the first what would happen to all his creatures through out eternity. The God of Augustine is the idealization of everything that man considers good and worthy. He is absolute power, perfect goodness, the source and creator of everything. He knows everything and has so controlled the universe that everything is determined by him forever.

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