
**Outline the four classic proofs for God's existence.
How (if at all) can these be useful in contemporary
evangelism?**

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Outline

1. Introduction
2. The Cosmological Argument
3. The Teleological Argument
4. The Moral Argument
5. The Ontological Argument
6. The Arguments in Contemporary Evangelism
7. Conclusion
8. Bibliography

1. Introduction

The question of how to argue logically and rationally for the existence of God has occupied the minds of philosophers and theologians, amongst others, for centuries. Advocates of Natural Theology, such as Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), contend that it is possible to know the existence and nature of God by natural revelation. With this in mind, a number of rational arguments or “proofs” have been formulated in support of God's existence. The best known of these are the cosmological, teleological, moral and ontological arguments respectively. We may summarise them as arguments from creation, design, moral law and being.

As we attempt to demonstrate, each argument has been challenged in several areas and while the arguments may not compel universal agreement among all who consider them, they may play a subsidiary, but limited role in contemporary evangelism.

2. The Cosmological Argument

This argument (which derives its name from the Greek word *cosmos*: 'world, universe') comes from the idea that since the universe exists, it must have been caused by something beyond itself. For this reason, the argument is sometimes called the argument from first cause and relies on a philosophical principle: *every effect has a cause*.

The origins of the cosmological argument were found in the writings of the Greek philosophers Plato (c. 428-348 BC) and Aristotle (c. 384-322 BC), but was classically formulated by Thomas Aquinas in his work *Summa Theologica*. In this work, Aquinas lists the *Quinque Viae*, or 'Five Ways', which are arguments for God's existence. In one of these Aquinas argues that an infinite chain of finite causes is impossible. Therefore there must be a first cause of everything, that which is an uncaused cause. This is God himself.

One major objection to this argument is that if everything needs a cause, then so would God, or else he would be self-caused, which is impossible. Against this, it is argued that only things that have a beginning actually need a cause, so as the first cause (God) does not, the argument is valid.

Geisler draws out two aspects of the cosmological argument as applied to the universe: firstly, that the universe requires God as an *originating* cause and secondly God as a *sustaining* cause.¹ The latter relates to Aquinas' argument above, but the former (known as the *Kalam* cosmological argument, from an Arabic word meaning 'eternal') asserts that the universe has a beginning and as everything with a beginning has a cause, the universe must have one itself.

3. The Teleological Argument

This argument might also be called the *argument from design*. The argument derives from the Greek word *telos*, meaning 'end' or 'purpose' and is based on the idea that there is a hierarchy of designs, from simple to complex and that there must be a master designer behind all of them. Thomas Aquinas used a form of the argument in his *Quinque Viae* or 'Five Ways' by observing that there is an observable order in the universe amongst objects that cannot be attributed to the objects themselves but to an intelligent being.

A more recent form of the teleological argument originated with the writings of William Paley (1743-1805), who used the analogy of finding a watch in a field. The person finding it would conclude that it had a watchmaker because of its design and not that it was a mere random occurrence. By extension, by considering the complex design and order of the universe, one might conclude that there is a purposeful and powerful designer behind it all.

1. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, p160.

This principle has been challenged by evolutionists, for example, who claim that the order of things may be due not to a designer, but due to chance or natural selection.

A more modern version of this argument relies on the belief that in order to support life, the universe has to be “fine-tuned” in order to provide the necessary conditions for life to exist. For example assuming that the universe was created via the “big-bang”, the conditions required are too complex to have merely happened by chance, hence an argument for an intelligent designer.

4. The Moral Argument

This argument originated with the writings of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and relies on the human sense of morality. One way of stating it is: There is a universal moral law, which requires a universal law giver who is absolutely good, since the standard of all good must be completely good.

Kant argued that all humans ought to strive for the greatest good (*summum bonum*), yet true happiness for all cannot be brought about by humans in this life. Hence, by necessity, there must be an after life and a supreme being (God) must exist. The philosophical principle which Kant outlined here (*ought implies can*) was rejected by amongst others, Martin Luther; who argued that imperfect human beings cannot by themselves obey the commandments of God. Some also argue against the idea that moral impulses come from God, rather they might be part of an evolutionary process.

Another major objection to this argument lies with regard to the existence of evil and injustice as set against an absolutely good God. To answer this objection, C.S. Lewis argued in *Mere Christianity* that the whole idea of injustice can only make sense when there is a perfect standard of justice against which it might be evaluated.

My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. ²

In Romans 2:14-15 (NIV), we read that the Gentiles, who had no revelation of the law, yet “the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.”

In his work *The Brothers Karamazov*, the author Dostoevsky writes: “If there is no God then everything is permissible. The unthinkable becomes thinkable; the forbidden becomes legal.” The fact that that moral laws exist can also be used to argue for God's existence.

5. The Ontological Argument

In contrast to the previous three arguments which attempt to prove the existence of God by relying on sense experience (known as *a posteriori* arguments), the ontological argument (from the Greek, *ontos*: 'being'), uses a method independent of sense experience and relies on reason (known as an *a priori* argument). Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) is regarded as the first Christian philosopher to formulate it.

Anselm began his argument with a definition: “God is something of which nothing greater can be thought.” ³ It is greater to exist in reality than in the mind, and therefore God must exist, otherwise he would not be the greatest being possible. This form of the argument relies on the premise that “existence is a necessary part of perfection.”

² C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p45.

³ Anselm, *Proslogion*, Chapter 2

This argument was questioned in Anselm's time by a monk named Gaunilo who challenged the premise that what exists in the mind, must also exist in reality. In response to this, Anselm formulated a different form of the argument using the idea of God as a necessary being:

- 1, God is by definition, a necessary being
- 2, Existence is logically necessary to the concept of a necessary being
- 3, Therefore since God is a necessary being, he must exist

One major objection to this argument was voiced by Immanuel Kant, amongst others. Kant challenged the idea that existence is a perfection, arguing that “the unconditioned necessity of a judgement does not form the absolute necessity of a thing.”⁴

The ontological argument, with its *a priori* reasoning, has proved to be controversial, with amongst others, Thomas Aquinas rejecting it on two grounds:

1. That “..not everyone who hears this word ‘God’ understands it to signify something than which nothing greater can be thought, seeing that some have believed God to be a body.” and:
2. “..it does not therefore follow that he understands what the word signifies exists actually, but only that it exists mentally.”

However, Geisler offers a summary of the scope of the ontological argument thus:

The ontological argument...can prove things about his [God's] nature. For example, God must necessarily exist, if he exists at all. He cannot cease to exist or exist contingently.⁵

4 Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*.

5 Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, p278.

6. The Arguments in Contemporary Evangelism

As we have seen, the four classical arguments or “proofs” for God's existence are not considered conclusive or compelling and should not be seen as definitive statements underpinning theistic belief. Rather, as Swinburne suggests they might be seen as stepping stones or building blocks towards proof of God's existence. ⁶

Grudem argues that the value of the arguments are to “...overcome some of the intellectual objections of unbelievers.” But they “...cannot bring unbelievers to saving faith, for that comes about through belief in the testimony of scripture,.” ⁷

Essentially then, using logical arguments in this manner does not negate the requirement for faith – faith in God as revealed through the Bible and ultimately in the person of Jesus Christ. For some, logical arguments for God's existence may need to be supplemented by those from practical experience, for example the witness of those who can testify of miracles and personal experience of faith. In this instance, the four proofs can serve to bolster faith that has already been established.

Bray points out the limitations of the classical proofs:

Christian theology does not deny the positive assertions that the proofs make, but it is careful to place them within the framework of a series of beliefs which does not depend on them as evidence for its claims. ⁸

6 Swinburne, *The Existence of God*.

7 Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p144.

8 Bray, *The Doctrine of God*, p76.

7. Conclusion

The four classical proofs of God's existence attempt to argue from both experience (The Cosmological, Teleological and Moral arguments) and reason alone (The Ontological argument), with all of them, but especially the latter being open to critical analysis.

For many, they function as enhancements to faith; arguments to bolster already held convictions, rather than something *sine qua non*. For natural theologians, who support the idea of general revelation through the natural order, the arguments have much relevance in arguing for God's existence. The supreme revelation of God however is found in Christ and thus the arguments, whatever their value, do not negate the requirements of faith in God as revealed in the person of his Son.

8. Bibliography

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