

# LECTURE 11: THE CLASSIC ARGUMENTS FOR GOD

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## The classic arguments for the existence of God

Through the centuries apologists and theologians have developed several ways to demonstrate the existence of God, using logic and observations. These methods have been called the classic arguments. They can be divided into two major types: *a priori* (logically independent of sense perception), and *a posteriori* (logically dependent on sense perception). The *a priori* arguments are considered to be deductive in nature, and their conclusions are said to be certain. The *a posteriori* arguments, being based on sense experience and on limited observation, are inductive in nature, and can yield only probable conclusions.

These arguments are discussed in all standard theologies and standard apologetics texts. A well thought out historical summary is provided in the *Great Books Syntopicon*, ch. 29, esp. pp. 551-557, with detailed index following. A helpful summary in chart form is in H. Wayne House, *Charts of Christian Theology and Doctrine*, pp. 34-38.

Here is a brief list of these arguments, in the approximate order in which they have been discussed in Christian apologetics:

### Ontological argument

Propounded by Anselm; supported by Descartes and Spinoza; opposed by Aquinas and Kant.

Assumes that God must be conceived as “a being than which nothing greater can be conceived.” And since necessary existence is greater than possible existence, this idea must include the idea of absolute existence. Hence, the non-existence of God would involve the thinker in a logical contradiction, which is impossible. Hence, God must exist.

Aquinas and others answer that while the non-existence of God may involve us in a logical contradiction of thought, such a difficulty does not preclude his non-existence in reality.

### Innate knowledge argument

Propounded by Augustine, Calvin, Locke, Hodge, more recently by Alvin Plantinga.

States that all people have a natural knowledge or understanding of God’s existence and claims on them. This knowledge may come from reflection on our own existence or that of the

universe (when it does, it overlaps the cosmological argument). Evidence for this view is seen in the nearly universal belief in some sort of God or gods. Atheists are the exception.

“He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.” (Eccl 3:11)

Opponents argue that apparently not all men have this innate knowledge, and that the various views of God are contradictory. Beliefs in God may be the result of cultural environment.

## Cosmological argument

Propounded by Augustine, Aquinas, Newton, Berkeley, Descartes, some modern creationists, recently by Craig; opposed by many philosophers (e.g., Hume, Kant).

The existence of the universe must have a cause; this cause must be separate from the universe and greater than the universe, that is, God.

Aquinas expanded this argument with five major sub-points, called the “five ways” to prove the existence of God: argument from motion (echoing Aristotle), argument from efficient cause (as Berkeley and Locke), argument from potentiality (similar to Platonists), argument from the gradation of things (similar to Descartes), and argument from the governance of the world (similar to the teleological argument, as in Newton).

William Lane Craig (*Apologetics: An Introduction*) points out that the reigning theory of the beginning of the universe (the “big bang”) requires us to believe that the universe is finite in time, with a beginning and an end; hence, it is not eternal, and something or someone other than itself must have started it. There is a detailed description of this argument as developed by Islamic scholars in the Middle Ages by Craig (*The Kalām Cosmological Argument*, also his *Time and Eternity: An Exploration of God’s Relationship to Time*).

Critics of this argument maintain that whatever caused the universe, it need not be a personal God. Perhaps the universe is eternal (materialism, oscillating universe theory); perhaps other natural events can account for the “big bang.” In any case, the development of our present universe after the “big bang” can be accounted for by natural forces and laws, with adequate time for chance events. And wouldn’t God himself need a cause?

The common idea that the universe developed “by chance” is refuted by R. C. Sproul, *Not a Chance: The Myth of Chance in Modern Science and Cosmology* (1994).

## Teleological argument

Propounded by Aquinas, Newton, Butler, Paley, modern creationists; opposed by many philosophers (e.g., Russell); brought up to date by Michael J. Behe, *Darwin’s Black Box: The Biomedical Challenge to Evolution* (1996) and *The Edge of Evolution* (2007), and by Fazale Rana, *The Cell’s Design: How Chemistry Reveals the Creator’s Artistry* (2008); excellent summary of use

of this argument by Thomas C. Oden, “Without Excuse: Classic Christian Exegesis of General Revelation,” *JETS* 41/1 (Mar., 1998), 55-68; also John C. Hutchison, “The Design Argument in Scientific Discourse: Historical-Theological Perspective from the Seventeenth Century,” *JETS* 41/1 (Mar., 1998), 85-105. Recently astronomer and physicist Hugh Ross has contributed much to this argument: *The Fingerprint of God: Recent Scientific Discoveries Reveal the Unmistakeable Identity of the Creator* (1991), and *The Creator and the Cosmos: How the Greatest Scientific Discoveries of the Century Reveal God* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 2001), *A Matter of Days: Resolving a Creation Controversy* (2004), *Origins of Life Biblical and Evolutionary Models Face Off* (co-authored with Fazale Rana, 2004); these arguments continue to expand with new discoveries of the fine-tuning of the universe (cf. the frequently updated list of items at [www.reasons.org](http://www.reasons.org), under “Evidence for Design”). [For additional resources, see the discussion on Intelligent Design in the previous chapter.]

There is apparent design in nature (*telos* in Greek means end, purpose, goal). Random chance cannot account for the intricate, complex, beautiful workings of nature. These are seen in inanimate laws and objects, and in living things. A purposeful God, a grand Designer must stand behind what we see. The modern Intelligent Design movement has published many updated forms of this argument.

Opponents answer that there is much chaos in nature; there is no apparent design or purpose. By and large the universe is cold, uninviting, and cruel. Life as we know it can be explained through random chance and evolution, which is a scientific certainty.

For a recent attempt to explain the complexity of the universe by natural causes, see Charles W Petit, “The Cosmic Code: Does the Universe Run on a Simple Computer Program?” *U. S. News* (Aug. 19, 2002); this article popularizes the book by Stephen Wolfram, *A New Kind of Science* (2002). Atheistic physicist Murray Gell Mann has founded the Santa Fe Institute, to study ways to explain design from naturalistic causes (see his *The Quark and the Jaguar* [1994]). A fairly technical defense of the necessity of intelligent design of the information found in complex systems is William A. Dembski, *No Free Lunch: Why Specified Complexity Cannot Be Purchased without Intelligence* (2002); the cover features a molecular depiction of the flagellum of one-celled bacteria—the example made famous by Michael Behe’s *Darwin’s Black Box*.

For the objection of the problem of evil in the universe, see John E. Hare, “The Problem of Evil,” ch. 5.1 of *Evidence for Faith*, ed. by John Warwick Montgomery, pp. 231-52; also the entire issue of the *WRS Journal (Theodicy: God’s Justice in an Evil World)* 3:1 (Winter, 1996)

## Moral argument

Propounded by Kant, Pascal, recently by C. S. Lewis.

All people know that certain thoughts or actions are “right” or “wrong.” But these categories would have no meaning without the existence of some moral standard outside of ourselves. This is God, the supreme moral law giver. Without God’s existence, there could be no moral categories.

Pascal's variation: "Pascal's Wager": better to assume Christianity true, with resulting goodness, holiness, happiness, hope of eternal life, than to assume it false, with resulting discord, meaninglessness, and death.

Critics say that the world does not show a moral bias; moral laws made by society for its own purposes; concepts of morality not the same in various cultures. Christianity has produced much evil, they say.

## **Other arguments**

Several other arguments have been used to defend the Christian faith that are not included in the classical arguments. Here are a few of them:

### **Biblical characteristics**

The Bible, though written by many human authors over an extended time, reveals amazing self-consistency and unity. Fulfilled prophecies and accurate historical and scientific statements are remarkable.

### **Historical arguments**

Many foundational and important events in the Bible have evidence of their truth in the historical record, such as the resurrection of Jesus, the conversion of Paul, and the historicity of much of the narrative history of the Old Testament.

### **Practical arguments**

The Christian faith changes lives, leads people to altruism and lives of love, and accomplishes great tasks for good in society. Accusations of harm resulting from Christianity can be answered easily.