

Arguments for God's Existence: Anselm and Aquinas

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1 Anselm's Ontological Arguments

Anselm (1033–1109), Archbishop of Canterbury, presents one of the most famous arguments for God's existence. Starting from a definition of God as “that, the greater than which cannot be conceived,” Anselm reasons a priori, or apart from experience, that God exists. Since to exist is better than not to exist, God has to exist to conform to the definition.

1. God is that, the greater than which cannot be conceived.
2. To exist is greater (or better) than not to exist.
3. So, God exists.

Imagine a God₀ that had every attribute that a God₁ has (omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence, etc.) except existence. By premise two, having existence is better than not having it. So only God₁, not God₀, could be God according to Anselm's definition.

Several philosophers, including Descartes (1596–1650), followed Anselm in putting forth a variation of the argument. A contemporary of Anselm's named Gaunilo was an early opponent, who thought the argument would allow us to prove the existence of a perfect island, a perfect valley, etc. David Hume criticized the argument on different grounds: only experience counts as evidence concerning a question of fact or existence. Concepts in themselves articulate possibilities only. Experience tells us whether a concept is exemplified in the world. In other words, experience tells us what exists.

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) advanced another critique, insisting that “existence is not a predicate.” Existence is not an attribute like any other. The proposition, “All triangles have three sides,” can be true even if there are no triangles, and we can know it is true. But only experience can tell us that there are indeed triangles in the universe. Similarly, we know that a unicorn would have a single horn whether or not there are in fact any unicorns. But no concept can tell us whether unicorns exist.

Not all philosophers, however, find these criticisms conclusive against all versions of the ontological argument. Anselm puts forth a second argument, also ontological and a priori, that concerns necessary existence rather than existence. This second argument implies

that the conceivability of a perfect being is the crux of the issue. A modern version of the argument makes this explicit:

It is possible that there is a God. (The concept of God is consistent.)
It is necessarily true that, if God exists, God exists necessarily.
Therefore, God exists necessarily.

1.1 Anselm, from *Proslogion*

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Chapter 1: Exciting the mind to the contemplation of God

...Let me gaze upon your light, even from far away or from out of the depths. Teach me to seek you, and show yourself to the one who seeks, for I cannot seek you unless you teach me, nor can I find you unless you show yourself. Let me, desiring, seek you; let me, seeking, desire you. Let me, loving, find you; let me, finding, love you.

I recognize, Lord, and give thanks that you created in me your image so that I can remember, think about, and love you. But your image is so sanded by the abrasions of my faults and so obscured by the smoke of my sins that it cannot do what it was made for, unless you renew and reshape it. I do not try to penetrate your height, for my intellect is in no way comparable to that. But I do try to understand to some degree your truth, which my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand in order to believe; I believe in order to understand. For I also believe this: “If I were not to believe, I would not understand.”

Chapter 2: God really exists

Therefore, O Lord, you who give understanding to faith, let me understand, to the degree you know to be best, that you are—as we believe—and that you are as we believe. And we believe you to be something the greater than which cannot be conceived. Or, is there therefore no such nature, as “the fool has said in his heart that there is no God” (Psalm 13:1, 52:1). But surely that same fool, when he hears what I just said, ‘something the greater than which cannot be conceived,’ understands what he hears; and, because he understands, it is in his understanding, even if he were not to understand that it exists. For being in the understanding is one thing, and understanding a thing to exist is another. For when a painter imagines what is to be, he has a certain thing in the understanding, but he does not understand it to exist, because he has not painted it. Once he has really painted it, he both has it in the understanding and understands its to exist, because he has made it.

Even the Fool therefore is forced to agree that something, the greater than which cannot be conceived, exists in the understanding, since he understands this when he hears it, and whatever is understood is in the understanding. And surely that, the greater than which

cannot be conceived, cannot exist in the understanding alone. For if it exists solely in the understanding, it can be thought to exist in reality, which is greater. If, then, that, the greater than which cannot be conceived, exists in the understanding alone, this same being, than which a greater cannot be conceived, is that than which a greater *can* be thought. But surely this is impossible. Therefore, there can be absolutely no doubt that something, the greater than which cannot be conceived, exists both in the understanding and in reality.

Chapter 3: Because He cannot be conceived not to exist

Certainly, this being so truly exists that it cannot even be thought not to exist. For something can be thought to exist that cannot be conceived not to exist, and this is greater than whatever can be thought not to exist. Hence, if that, the greater than which cannot be conceived, can be thought not to exist, then that, the greater than which cannot be conceived, is not the same as that, the greater than which cannot be conceived, which is absurd. Therefore, something, the greater than which cannot be conceived, exists so truly that it cannot even be thought not to exist.

And You are this being, O Lord, our God. You exist so truly, Lord my God, that You cannot even be thought not to exist. And this is as it should be. For, if a mind could think of something better than You, the creature would rise above its creator and judge its creator, and that is completely absurd. In fact, everything else, except You alone, can be thought not to exist. You alone, then, of all things most truly exist, and therefore of all things possess existence to the highest degree; for anything else does not exist as truly, and possesses existence to a lesser degree. Why, then, is it the case that “the fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God,’” when it is obvious to any rational mind that you exist to the highest degree of all? Why, except that he is stupid and a fool?

2 The Cosmological Arguments of St. Thomas Aquinas

Many philosophers—St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), for example—have been skeptical of a priori arguments for the existence of God such as Anselm’s ontological argument. They have agreed with Hume and Kant that existence is not merely a matter of logic, and that God’s existence cannot be demonstrated on the basis of thought alone. But they have found in the world and our experience of it reasons to believe that God exists. The arguments they advance on the basis of experience are a posteriori.

A posteriori arguments fall into two groups: cosmological arguments, which turn on the idea that the origin of the universe must have some ultimate explanation, and teleological arguments, or arguments from design, which find in nature’s intricate design a reason to believe in God. Aquinas advances arguments of both kinds.

Aristotle drafted the first cosmological argument, contending that there must have been a “prime mover” for the universe. His argument, however, is highly complex, and depends on showing that the “first sphere of heaven” revolves eternally in a circular path. Various

early church fathers—notably Athenian philosopher Marcianus Aristides (2nd century)—tried to simplify the argument. And simple versions occur in the works of the great Indian philosopher Udayana (1000 CE), who unified two long-running realist schools, Vaisesika (particularism) and Nyaya (logic):

1. Argument from effects
Things like the earth must have a cause.
Because they are effects.
Like a pot.

But it was in the medieval period that Muslim, Jewish, and Christian philosophers devoted serious attention to the cosmological argument as the most important and reliable way of establishing God’s existence. Aquinas advances five a posteriori arguments for God’s existence, three of which are versions of the cosmological argument.

Here is one version. Every change has a cause other than itself. There cannot be an infinite regress of causes, however, for, if there were, the causal conditions of subsequent changes could never have been fulfilled. So, there must have been a first cause—what Aristotle calls the prime mover. And that, Aquinas asserts, is God.

Call the current state of the world *a*. It must have had a cause. That cause must have been earlier than *a*, and something other than *a* itself. Call it *b*. But then *b* must have had some other cause, *c*, and so on. The chain of causes (*a, b, c, . . .*) cannot be infinite; so, there must have been a first cause, God.

Many objections have been raised to this argument. Two are especially obvious. First, why can’t the chain of causes be infinite? Aquinas provides little supporting argument: “If you eliminate a cause you also eliminate its effects. Therefore there can be neither a last nor an intermediate cause unless there is a first.” But the question is why each cause cannot have some further cause (or even, as Averroes suggests, why the chain of causes cannot loop back on itself). Aquinas offers no answer. Second, why call the first cause God?

Another a posteriori argument in Aquinas relies on necessity and contingency. This argument relies on the premise that “If all things could not be, therefore, at one time there was nothing.” This is ambiguous; “all things could not be” could mean either that each thing is such that it might not exist—a reasonable claim, if all things are contingent—or that it is possible for nothing to exist, that is, for everything to fail to exist all at once. That does not follow from anything Aquinas has said. So, the argument may rest on a simple fallacy.

Aquinas may, however, have had in mind the following argument. Suppose each thing is contingent, and, so, might at some point fail to exist. If there were an infinite series of events stretching back into the past, all possibilities would have been realized at some point in the past; and among those is the situation in which the contingent things cease to exist all at once. That, however, would have made it impossible for anything to exist now.

So, the existence of some things now shows that such a thing never happened, and, thus, that the series of causes cannot be infinite.

Reconstructed in this way, the argument faces two problems. First, that each thing might not exist does not establish that everything might fail to exist all at once, for the existence of things might not be independent issues. Maybe *a* might fail to exist, because it could be replaced by *b*, and likewise *b* might fail to exist, being replaced by *a*. Aquinas needs the assumption that one thing's nonexistence never requires the existence of something else. Second, the idea that an infinite past would have realized every possible circumstance seems to rest on an intuitive but sloppy conception of infinity. Consider the infinite series of numbers 2, 4, 6, 8, It is infinite, but it does not contain every number. Similarly, a sequence of events could be infinite without containing every possible event.

2.1 Thomas Aquinas, from *Summa Theologica*

Source: The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas. Literally translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1920.

Question 2. The existence of God

Is the proposition "God exists" self-evident?

Is it demonstrable?

Does God exist?

Article 1. Whether the existence of God is self-evident?

Objection 1. It seems that the existence of God is self-evident. Now those things are said to be self-evident to us the knowledge of which is naturally implanted in us, as we can see in regard to first principles. But as Damascene says (*De Fide Orth.* i, 1,3), "the knowledge of God is naturally implanted in all." Therefore the existence of God is self-evident.

Objection 2. Further, those things are said to be self-evident which are known as soon as the terms are known, which the Philosopher (1 *Poster.* iii) says is true of the first principles of demonstration. Thus, when the nature of a whole and of a part is known, it is at once recognized that every whole is greater than its part. But as soon as the signification of the word "God" is understood, it is at once seen that God exists. For by this word is signified that thing than which nothing greater can be conceived. But that which exists actually and mentally is greater than that which exists only mentally. Therefore, since as soon as the word "God" is understood it exists mentally, it also follows that it exists actually. Therefore the proposition "God exists" is self-evident.

Objection 3. Further, the existence of truth is self-evident. For whoever denies the existence of truth grants that truth does not exist: and, if truth does not exist, then the proposition "Truth does not exist" is true: and if there is anything true, there must be truth. But God is truth itself: "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6) Therefore "God exists" is self-evident.

On the contrary, No one can mentally admit the opposite of what is self-evident; as the Philosopher (*Metaph.* iv, lect. vi) states concerning the first principles of demonstration. But the opposite of the proposition “God is” can be mentally admitted: “The fool said in his heart, There is no God” (Psalm 52:1). Therefore, that God exists is not self-evident.

I answer that, A thing can be self-evident in either of two ways: on the one hand, self-evident in itself, though not to us; on the other, self-evident in itself, and to us. A proposition is self-evident because the predicate is included in the essence of the subject, as “Man is an animal,” for animal is contained in the essence of man. If, therefore the essence of the predicate and subject be known to all, the proposition will be self-evident to all; as is clear with regard to the first principles of demonstration, the terms of which are common things that no one is ignorant of, such as being and non-being, whole and part, and such like. If, however, there are some to whom the essence of the predicate and subject is unknown, the proposition will be self-evident in itself, but not to those who do not know the meaning of the predicate and subject of the proposition. Therefore, it happens, as Boethius says (*Hebdom.*, the title of which is: “Whether all that is, is good”), “that there are some mental concepts self-evident only to the learned, as that incorporeal substances are not in space.” Therefore I say that this proposition, “God exists,” of itself is self-evident, for the predicate is the same as the subject, because God is His own existence as will be hereafter shown (3, 4). Now because we do not know the essence of God, the proposition is not self-evident to us; but needs to be demonstrated by things that are more known to us, though less known in their nature—namely, by effects.

Reply to Objection 1. To know that God exists in a general and confused way is implanted in us by nature, inasmuch as God is man’s beatitude. For man naturally desires happiness, and what is naturally desired by man must be naturally known to him. This, however, is not to know absolutely that God exists; just as to know that someone is approaching is not the same as to know that Peter is approaching, even though it is Peter who is approaching; for many there are who imagine that man’s perfect good which is happiness, consists in riches, and others in pleasures, and others in something else.

Reply to Objection 2. Perhaps 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. Yet, granted that everyone understands that by this word “God” is signified something than which nothing greater can be thought, nevertheless, it does not therefore follow that he understands that what the word signifies exists actually, but only that it exists mentally. Nor can it be argued that it actually exists, unless it be admitted that there actually exists something than which nothing greater can be thought; and this precisely is not admitted by those who hold that God does not exist.

Reply to Objection 3. The existence of truth in general is self-evident but the existence of a Primal Truth is not self-evident to us.

Article 2. Whether it can be demonstrated that God exists?

Objection 1. It seems that the existence of God cannot be demonstrated. For it is an article of faith that God exists. But what is of faith cannot be demonstrated, because a demonstration produces scientific knowledge; whereas faith is of the unseen (Hebrews 11:1). Therefore it cannot be demonstrated that God exists.

Objection 2. Further, the essence is the middle term of demonstration. But we cannot know in what God's essence consists, but solely in what it does not consist; as Damascene says (*De Fide Orth.* i, 4). Therefore we cannot demonstrate that God exists.

Objection 3. Further, if the existence of God were demonstrated, this could only be from His effects. But His effects are not proportionate to Him, since He is infinite and His effects are finite; and between the finite and infinite there is no proportion. Therefore, since a cause cannot be demonstrated by an effect not proportionate to it, it seems that the existence of God cannot be demonstrated.

On the contrary, The Apostle says: "The invisible things of Him are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made" (Romans 1:20). But this would not be unless the existence of God could be demonstrated through the things that are made; for the first thing we must know of anything is whether it exists.

I answer that, Demonstration can be made in two ways: One is through the cause, and is called "a priori," and this is to argue from what is prior absolutely. The other is through the effect, and is called a demonstration "a posteriori"; this is to argue from what is prior relatively only to us. When an effect is better known to us than its cause, from the effect we proceed to the knowledge of the cause. And from every effect the existence of its proper cause can be demonstrated, so long as its effects are better known to us; because since every effect depends upon its cause, if the effect exists, the cause must pre-exist. Hence the existence of God, in so far as it is not self-evident to us, can be demonstrated from those of His effects which are known to us.

Reply to Objection 1. The existence of God and other like truths about God, which can be known by natural reason, are not articles of faith, but are preambles to the articles; for faith presupposes natural knowledge, even as grace presupposes nature, and perfection supposes something that can be perfected. Nevertheless, there is nothing to prevent a man, who cannot grasp a proof, accepting, as a matter of faith, something which in itself is capable of being scientifically known and demonstrated.

Reply to Objection 2. When the existence of a cause is demonstrated from an effect, this effect takes the place of the definition of the cause in proof of the cause's existence. This is especially the case in regard to God, because, in order to prove the existence of anything, it is necessary to accept as a middle term the meaning of the word, and not its essence, for the question of its essence follows on the question of its existence. Now the names given to God are derived from His effects; consequently, in demonstrating the existence of God from His effects, we may take for the middle term the meaning of the word "God".

Reply to Objection 3. From effects not proportionate to the cause no perfect knowledge of that cause can be obtained. Yet from every effect the existence of the cause can be

clearly demonstrated, and so we can demonstrate the existence of God from His effects; though from them we cannot perfectly know God as He is in His essence.

Article 3. Whether God exists?

Objection 1. It seems that God does not exist; because if one of two contraries be infinite, the other would be altogether destroyed. But the word “God” means that He is infinite goodness. If, therefore, God existed, there would be no evil discoverable; but there is evil in the world. Therefore God does not exist.

Objection 2. Further, it is superfluous to suppose that what can be accounted for by a few principles has been produced by many. But it seems that everything we see in the world can be accounted for by other principles, supposing God did not exist. For all natural things can be reduced to one principle which is nature; and all voluntary things can be reduced to one principle which is human reason, or will. Therefore there is no need to suppose God’s existence.

On the contrary, It is said in the person of God: “I am Who am.” (Exodus 3:14)

I answer that, The existence of God can be proved in five ways.

The first and more manifest way is the argument from motion. It is certain, and evident to our senses, that in the world some things are in motion. Now whatever is in motion is put in motion by another, for nothing can be in motion except it is in potentiality to that towards which it is in motion; whereas a thing moves inasmuch as it is in act. For motion is nothing else than the reduction of something from potentiality to actuality. But nothing can be reduced from potentiality to actuality, except by something in a state of actuality. Thus that which is actually hot, as fire, makes wood, which is potentially hot, to be actually hot, and thereby moves and changes it. Now it is not possible that the same thing should be at once in actuality and potentiality in the same respect, but only in different respects. For what is actually hot cannot simultaneously be potentially hot; but it is simultaneously potentially cold. It is therefore impossible that in the same respect and in the same way a thing should be both mover and moved, i.e. that it should move itself. Therefore, whatever is in motion must be put in motion by another. If that by which it is put in motion be itself put in motion, then this also must needs be put in motion by another, and that by another again. But this cannot go on to infinity, because then there would be no first mover, and, consequently, no other mover; seeing that subsequent movers move only inasmuch as they are put in motion by the first mover; as the staff moves only because it is put in motion by the hand. Therefore it is necessary to arrive at a first mover, put in motion by no other; and this everyone understands to be God.

The second way is from the nature of the efficient cause. In the world of sense we find there is an order of efficient causes. There is no case known (neither is it, indeed, possible) in which a thing is found to be the efficient cause of itself; for so it would be prior to itself, which is impossible. Now in efficient causes it is not possible to go on to infinity, because in all efficient causes following in order, the first is the cause of the intermediate cause, and the

intermediate is the cause of the ultimate cause, whether the intermediate cause be several, or only one. Now to take away the cause is to take away the effect. Therefore, if there be no first cause among efficient causes, there will be no ultimate, nor any intermediate cause. But if in efficient causes it is possible to go on to infinity, there will be no first efficient cause, neither will there be an ultimate effect, nor any intermediate efficient causes; all of which is plainly false. Therefore it is necessary to admit a first efficient cause, to which everyone gives the name of God.

The third way is taken from possibility and necessity, and runs thus. We find in nature things that are possible to be and not to be, since they are found to be generated, and to corrupt, and consequently, they are possible to be and not to be. But it is impossible for these always to exist, for that which is possible not to be at some time is not. Therefore, if everything is possible not to be, then at one time there could have been nothing in existence. Now if this were true, even now there would be nothing in existence, because that which does not exist only begins to exist by something already existing. Therefore, if at one time nothing was in existence, it would have been impossible for anything to have begun to exist; and thus even now nothing would be in existence—which is absurd. Therefore, not all beings are merely possible, but there must exist something the existence of which is necessary. But every necessary thing either has its necessity caused by another, or not. Now it is impossible to go on to infinity in necessary things which have their necessity caused by another, as has been already proved in regard to efficient causes. Therefore we cannot but postulate the existence of some being having of itself its own necessity, and not receiving it from another, but rather causing in others their necessity. This all men speak of as God.

The fourth way is taken from the gradation to be found in things. Among beings there are some more and some less good, true, noble and the like. But “more” and “less” are predicated of different things, according as they resemble in their different ways something which is the maximum, as a thing is said to be hotter according as it more nearly resembles that which is hottest; so that there is something which is truest, something best, something noblest and, consequently, something which is uttermost being; for those things that are greatest in truth are greatest in being, as it is written in *Metaph.* ii. Now the maximum in any genus is the cause of all in that genus; as fire, which is the maximum heat, is the cause of all hot things. Therefore there must also be something which is to all beings the cause of their being, goodness, and every other perfection; and this we call God.

The fifth way is taken from the governance of the world. We see that things which lack intelligence, such as natural bodies, act for an end, and this is evident from their acting always, or nearly always, in the same way, so as to obtain the best result. Hence it is plain that not fortuitously, but designedly, do they achieve their end. Now whatever lacks intelligence cannot move towards an end, unless it be directed by some being endowed with knowledge and intelligence; as the arrow is shot to its mark by the archer. Therefore some intelligent being exists by whom all natural things are directed to their end; and this being we call God.

Reply to Objection 1. As Augustine says (*Enchiridion* xi): “Since God is the highest good, He would not allow any evil to exist in His works, unless His omnipotence and goodness were such as to bring good even out of evil.” This is part of the infinite goodness of God, that He should allow evil to exist, and out of it produce good.

Reply to Objection 2. Since nature works for a determinate end under the direction of a higher agent, whatever is done by nature must needs be traced back to God, as to its first cause. So also whatever is done voluntarily must also be traced back to some higher cause other than human reason or will, since these can change or fail; for all things that are changeable and capable of defect must be traced back to an immovable and self-necessary first principle, as was shown in the body of the Article.