

## Notes On Arguments For Theism

Tentative conclusion from Chapter Two : it is possible to work out a coherent concept of deity that avoids paradox and contradiction and which preserves most of the features of the God of western theism. Up to this point in Hudson's text, in examining the concept of God, he has found no conclusive reason to assert that the existence of God is impossible or that it is illogical or incoherent to believe in God.

Though many who believe in God do not try to find a rational grounding for this belief, it is part of the business of philosophy to seek rational grounding for beliefs wherever, and to the extent that, such grounds can be developed. Assuming, for the time being that the existence of a theistic god is at least logically and metaphysically possible, we may investigate whether there may be rational grounds for asserting that such a being actually exists.

There are many non-theists who suspect or assert that theism is either irrational or not sufficiently well-grounded to qualify as a belief that a reasonable person ought to adopt. If the skeptical (atheistic or agnostic) non-theist can be presented with rational grounds for theism, theists should try to develop and present them. This involves developing arguments for the existence of the god of theism as well as rebutting arguments against the existence of God. Many theistic philosophers have taken on this task. (Note: to take on this task means that one puts a high value on the reasonableness of religious beliefs and, so, for this reason, one rejects extreme fideism, but this may not be the only reason for rejecting extreme fideism.)

Argument - set of statements, one of which (the conclusion) is so related to the others (the premises) that the others provide evidence or reasons for accepting that statement.

Deductive argument - argument involving a claim that its conclusion cannot be false, if its premises are true.

Valid deductive argument - argument with a conclusion that cannot be false, if its premises are true.

Sound deductive argument - valid argument having all true premises.

Proof - Sound deductive argument whose premises are known to be true. Proofs provide conclusive evidence for knowledge-claims.

Inductive argument - argument involving a claim that its premises offer some support (but not conclusive evidence) for its conclusion.

Sound (or, strong) inductive argument - inductive argument which shows that its conclusion is probably (though not conclusively) true.

A priori argument - argument claimed to depend only on the meanings of terms; not dependent on empirical evidence. Premises are necessarily true simply because they define concepts. A sound a priori argument would be the ideal proof.

Empirical (a posteriori) argument - argument containing (some) premises whose truth depends on contingent facts in the observable world, not just on the meanings of its terms.

### **Ontological Arguments for the Existence of God**

An a priori argument. Several versions have been propounded.

Descartes's version : whereas it is self-contradictory to assert the existence of some things (e.g., round squares) and, so, their existence is impossible, at least one thing is such that it is self-contradictory to deny its existence: God. To deny God's existence is to deny the existence of a supremely perfect being. By definition, such a being could lack no perfection. To deny that God exists is to claim that a being which cannot lack any perfection does lack some perfection, i.e., the perfection of existence. But this is a contradiction. So, is impossible that God does not actually exist. This argument is an attempt at a sound a priori proof of The existence of the god of theism.

According to this conception of God, God could no more lack existence than he could lack knowledge or power. God's very essence (what it is to be God) includes existence in the same way that the essence of a triangle (what it is to be a triangle) includes the characteristic of having three interior angles whose sum equals two right angles.

Anselm's version : By definition, God is *that than which nothing greater can be conceived* (the GCB). Some things, e.g., unicorns, exist only in thought and not in reality. The GCB exists *at least* in thought, even in the thought of the atheist who denies that God exists in reality. But if the GCB existed only in thought and not in reality as well, then something greater than it could be conceived, i.e., something which existed in reality as well as in thought. Given the definition of

the GCB, this is impossible. (Nothing greater can be conceived than that-which-nothing-greater can-be-conceived.) Therefore, the GCB exists in reality. This is another attempt at a sound a priori proof.

Aquinas's criticism of the argument: The argument may be sound, but it is not a proof because its most important premise cannot be known by human beings in this life. This premise states a claim about God's very essence or nature. In this life, at least, human beings cannot know the essence of God, i.e. know what God must be like. We can only know the essences or natures of creatures (through sense experience).

Gaunilo's criticism of Anselm's version: If the argument were sound, then the existence of all sorts of things could be "proved". The existence of an island than which no greater can be conceived would be "proved" on exactly the same grounds as Anselm's argument purports to prove the existence of God.

Anselm tried to reply to Gaunilo by pointing out that the argument could only work for proving God's existence, since, an island, no matter how excellent, can always be conceived to be better in some way. This is impossible in the case of God. Moreover, no matter how excellent the island, it can be conceived to have had a beginning. God, by contrast, cannot be conceived to have had a beginning, since the greatest conceivable being would exist eternally.

Immanuel Kant's criticisms of all versions of the ontological argument:

FIRST: The argument mistakenly assumes that 'exists' is a real predicate; a term that attributes some real property or characteristic to a subject.

If a term is a real predicate, then adding it to, or subtracting it from, a subject makes a real difference to the subject. This is clearly the case with terms like 'green', 'healthy' or 'roars'.

But to deny "My hundred dollars exists" or to assert "My hundred dollars exists" makes no difference to the amount of money in question. Here is another way of expressing Kant's point. It is a mistake to suppose that, since "Tigers exist" seems to have the same grammatical form as "Tigers roar", that existing is a real property just as roaring is a real property. This mistake can be seen by comparing

"There are tigers that do not roar"

with

"There are tigers that do not exist".

To say that unicorns do not exist is not to deny some characteristic of unicorns. It is simply to say that there are no unicorns. Likewise, to say that tigers do exist is not to attribute some characteristic to tigers. It is simply to say that there are tigers. (Or, “At least one thing is a tiger”) So, it *makes no sense* to speak of existence as an inseparable characteristic within God’s essence or to say that God’s existence is included within his essence, etc.

SECOND: No existence proposition is logically necessary. The argument aims to establish God’s existence as a necessary fact. So, the argument attempts to establish what cannot be established, a *necessarily* true existence statement. It is an illegitimate use of categories to speak of a “necessary being. Necessity can only be meaningfully attributed to (or denied of) *propositions*. To speak of God as a necessary being could only make sense if it is just another way of claiming that “God exists” is a *necessarily true proposition*. But no existence proposition is such that its opposite is impossible. Whatever X may be, if “X exists” is a possible truth, so must “X does not exist” also be a possible truth. All existence propositions are logically contingent.

Moreover, all necessary propositions, such as may be found in mathematics, for example, are non-existential. The ontological argument rests on the mistake of supposing there may be an exception to this rule.

Is this second objection as powerful as Kant thought? Perhaps Kant was wrong about mathematical propositions being non-existential. It seems that the non-existence of some things can be derived from their definition. Four-sided triangles, for example. But then we have an example of a necessarily true existential proposition: “It is not the case that there are four-sided triangles”. Why, then, can’t there be necessarily true propositions of the form “X exists”?

Even if this point has some force against Kant, it does not help to show that “God exists” is necessarily true. Arguments for the necessary existence or necessary non-existence of abstract entities like numbers or shapes may or may not be comparable to arguments for the necessary existence or non-existence of concrete entities, including God.

The Modal Version: If something exists necessarily, then it exists in every possible world, including the actual world. God, by definition, is a maximally perfect being. A maximally perfect being would exist necessarily. The existence of such a being is possible; it exists in at least one possible world. A maximally perfect being

would exist in every possible world if it exists in at least one possible world. Therefore, a maximally perfect being exists in every possible world, including the actual world. But can we explain the idea of maximal perfection? For those who are interested, see agnostic philosopher Graham Oppy's discussion at [http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/graham\\_oppo/modal.html](http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/graham_oppo/modal.html)

An Ontological Disproof of the Existence of God ?

Gaunilo's argument for the existence of a perfect island is an attempt to refute Anselm's argument by means of constructing a parody of Anselm's argument. One reduces an argument to absurdity by showing that, if it were sound then some other obviously ridiculous argument would also be sound. Therefore, the target argument is absurd and cannot be sound.

In recent years, there have been other attempts to parody the ontological argument. One, by David and Marjorie Haight, (in their article "An Ontological Argument for the Devil" See page 116 of Hudson, footnote 9) attempts to show that, if the ontological argument were sound, then one could also prove the existence of a *maximally imperfect* being, i.e., the Devil. Anselm's argument is ambiguous. It only speaks of the greatest conceivable being. One can ask "Greatest in what way?" The greatest conceivable being might mean the thing that is *greatest in evil*. It would beg the question to assume that greatness can only have to do with goodness.

That than which nothing more evil can be conceived must exist, since the worst conceivable thing would be an existent Devil rather than a Devil that existed only in thought. Perhaps the argument could be defeated by proving that goodness is greater than evil. But it is not clear how such an argument would go. Is the Haight's argument a disproof of the existence of God or a proof that either God or the Devil must exist? They intend it as a parody of Anselm's argument and therefore a rejection of Anselm's proof of the existence of God. Whether it does what they intend or something else, or nothing at all is still under discussion. Likewise, no version of the ontological argument so far seems to succeed in proving the existence of God. Some philosophers continue to believe that a successful version can be constructed.

### **The Cosmological Argument**

All versions of this argument include a premise noting the actual existence of certain things: moving things, events causing other events, contingent beings.

All versions also include a premise that expresses what Philosophers have called the Principle of Sufficient Reason: *for anything that exists or occurs, there must be a sufficient reason that it exists, something adequate to cause it, something that is the basis of an adequate explanation of its existence.*

All versions assert that explanations referring only to things that are moved, things that are caused, things that are themselves contingent, cannot be adequate explanations.

The only possibly adequate explanations will be ones that refer to something which is not moved by anything or caused by anything and which exists non-contingently. This may be called God. All versions include a premise stating that an infinite regression of contingent beings is not a sufficient explanation of the existence of contingent beings.

\* Several Problems with the cosmological argument.\*

Is the principle of Sufficient Reason absolutely certain? Can there be no exceptions to it? Is free human action an exception to this principle? It does not seem to be self-evident in the way that other principles like the Law of contradiction are. Part of the problem is that the principle may be interpreted in a number of ways. What is the meaning of "sufficient"?

If C is a sufficient condition for the occurrence of E, does that mean that, given C, E must occur? If so, are there sufficient conditions for human actions? Would this principle then rule out free human actions? Only if we interpret the principle in this case to mean that certain antecedent conditions plus a free act of the will are sufficient for human actions would the principle not rule out free actions. This principle, however, does have enough intrinsic plausibility that these doubts about it are not enough, by themselves, to justify rejecting the cosmological argument.

Why wouldn't an infinite regression of contingent beings provide a sufficient reason or explanation for the existence of other contingent beings without resorting to inferring the existence of something else, like God?

Aquinas denied that there could be an infinite regression of causes prior to the present existence of things, thinking that this would imply that there was no first cause and, thus, no intermediate causes and, thus, no things in the present.

This was a mistake on his part. When one denies a first cause, all that is being said is that no cause, no matter how far back one goes, is the first. Perhaps each one is itself caused by something earlier. Why must there be one that comes before all the others? Remember that Aquinas is attempting to construct a proof, even though it is not offered as an a priori proof.

A different argument for the necessity of there being a cause of the world's existence has been presented (by Aquinas, Leibniz and others). This argument says that, even if the world has always existed, for an infinite time in the past, the series of things going back into the past is a contingently existing series. What explains the existence of the whole series? If we choose some other contingently existing thing as the explanation for the existence of the series, then it, too, would need an explanation. Therefore, only something that exists necessarily can be a sufficient explanation for the existence of the world. Aquinas and others state that this something may be called God.

One objection (by Paul Edwards) to this argument is this: it is a simple fallacy to insist that there must be one explanation for a whole group of things (for example, several Eskimos standing in the lobby of the Empire State Building). It may be that each member of the group has its own separate, perfectly adequate explanation (reason for being there at that time).

One may reply to Edwards that his examples are not comparable to the world we would like to explain. Current scientific cosmology does not portray an infinite series, but one that leads back to a primal event, the Big Bang. Even if we could explain each thing in the history of the universe back to the Big Bang, perhaps we can still reasonably demand an explanation of why any of this exists. If the big bang was a contingent event, if the infinitely dense singularity into which all (potential) space-time-matter was concentrated prior to the Big Bang existed contingently, then one may ask, what was the sufficient reason of its existence. One might thus still claim that only a necessarily existing being could be this sufficient reason.

But is God the only possible explanation? What if *matter* in some form that we are not acquainted with or in some form not yet conceived by current science has always existed even within the singularity before the Big Bang? This would revive the possibility of an infinite series. It has been speculated by some scientists that, before the big bang that resulted in our present universe, there was another universe, as developed as our own. It gradually collapsed into the super-dense point of matter that then exploded to become our present universe. This earlier

universe may have resulted from an even earlier big bang, and so on. Why would not this eternal recurrence of birth and death of universes be a sufficient reason for the existence of things? Nothing in this idea would have to refer to a God who creates things.

Even if one concedes that an eternal series of universes would require a sufficient reason for its existence, we could still raise the question of why the being that is the basis for the explanation of its existence would have to be the God of western theism. What about Brahman as conceived in Hinduism? What about the eternal Tao as conceived by Taoists? What about the pantheism of Spinoza or Plotinus?

Also, even if something must exist necessarily to provide a sufficient reason for the existence of the natural universe, why couldn't this be just the natural universe itself? If we have no reason to rule out the possibility that the universe or series of universes exists eternally, then it seems plausible that *the universe itself* is a necessary being. Notice that this alternative could be different even from any form of pantheism. Perhaps the physical universe is all that there ever has been and it has necessarily existed from eternity, though in different forms and phases.

Finally, isn't it inconsistent to demand that there be a sufficient reason for everything and then *\*not\** ask what is the sufficient reason for God's existence? One way a theist can deal with this question is to interpret the Principle of sufficient reason to mean that everything must have either an extrinsic reason for its existence or an intrinsic reason for its existence. A necessary being would have a sufficient reason for its existence that is intrinsic to itself, since it is something that could not fail to exist. It depends only on itself for its existence and is independent of the existence of anything else. It is *causa sui*. Thus, only contingently existing things require extrinsic reasons for their existence.

However, if the notion of something which is a necessary being, and *causa sui*, makes sense, why may not the world of material things be itself *causa sui* and necessarily existent?

## **Notes On the Teleological Argument**

"Telos" - goal, purpose.

Many natural objects and processes seem to have purposes, aim at goals.  
How is this to be explained?

## Deductive Form of the argument (Aquinas)

The conclusion of Aquinas' argument is that there is a divine governor of the world. The crucial premise of this form of the argument is

"Whatever lacks knowledge cannot move toward an end unless it be directed by some being endowed with knowledge"

The other premise is that some bodies (all things in Nature other than human beings) lack knowledge but act for an end.

As to its purely formal structure, the argument is valid. Are all its premises known to be true? Is *the crucial premise* (above) any easier to establish than the soundness of the whole argument?

To simply take the crucial premise for granted or to treat it as known *a priori* is to beg the question. If we agree that the crucial premise is not known *a priori*, then it can only be known on the basis of empirical evidence. In other words, we need a strong inductive argument to support it as well as the other premise.

So, any deductive form of the teleological argument will presuppose a separate, strong inductive argument and cannot be any stronger than this inductive argument. Hence, the only important issue is the *direct* relationship between the empirical evidence and the conclusion that God exists. This is why most philosophers who have tried to construct teleological arguments for the existence of God have looked for plausible empirical evidence with which to construct an inductive argument that confers a high degree of probability on the conclusion that God exists.

## **Inductive forms of the Argument**

Typically, these are arguments from analogy. An argument from analogy has the following general form.

- \* A and B are strongly analogous things.
- \* Similar things have similar causes.
- \* So, the cause of A is probably similar to the cause of B

The specific form of a teleological argument from analogy is as follows:

1. The natural universe resembles objects known to be products of intelligent, creative design, e.g. watches or houses, but it is far more intricate and complex than products of human intelligence. Many parts of the natural universe, e.g., the human eye, exhibit this sort of complex order.

2. Similar effects have similar causes.

3. So, the most probable explanation of complex order in nature is creative designing activity of a supernatural agent, similar to, but far surpassing, human intelligence.

Advocates of this version of the teleological argument often attempt to strengthen it by arguing that ANY alternative explanations of complex order in Nature are deeply implausible or even absurd. For example, they maintain that it is ludicrous to suppose that highly complex order could ever exist by chance or coincidence. Even a single complex object like an automobile could not reasonably be supposed to have been produced by an explosion in a factory.

So, they claim, it is extremely unreasonable to suppose an unintelligent cause for the complex order that pervades the whole universe.

### David Hume's Criticisms of the Inductive Form or the Argument

1) Generally, the analogies on which the argument depends are too weak to provide the conclusion with a significant degree of probability. Is it actually known or even plausible that the universe as a whole resembles a watch or a house or any other human artifact?

2) We are in a poor position to make analogies between the whole universe and anything. We have a little knowledge of only a tiny part of the history of whole universe. How can we generalize from this little knowledge to the structure of the whole universe?

3) Good arguments from analogy depend on past observations of regular correlations of cause and effect. No observational data on the origin of the universe are available. The universe is, as far as we know, unique. It is not a phenomenon that occurs more than once, as far as we are in a position to judge.

We are not in a position to compare the universe to objects or events that are *recurrent*, like the boiling of water or the rising of the sun.

4) Even if the argument supported an inference to a designer, it does not show that this designer is God. This is because inferred causes cannot justifiably be claimed to be *greater than* what can produce the observed effects.

Based on what we know about human designers, and their products, we cannot justly infer that the designer of the universe is omniscient or omnipotent or that "it" is not a team of designers, each of which relies on other members of the team in completing tasks, or that the orderly condition of this universe is not the result of an effort that was preceded by a series of botched trial-and-error attempts by an infant designer that were discarded.

Moreover, inferring intelligence in a cosmic designer would also justify inferring other characteristics that are (as far as we know) invariably conjoined with intelligence in humans, e.g., having a body, desires, fears, faulty memory, moral weakness.

5) From our own experience, we know of other causes of order *besides* intelligent designing activity: *Vegetation in plants and Generation in animals*. Neither of these natural principles involves planning. This criticism points out that advocates of the teleological argument may be guilty of a false dilemma when they maintain that the only alternative explanation of order in nature besides a designing intelligence is sheer chance or coincidence. Why may there not be at least one more alternative explanation besides these two?

Hume's point that we observe plants and animals causing order in their offspring without putting intelligent planning into the process of reproducing their own kind may be extended to a more general idea: that Nature is itself capable of producing many complex orderly forms on its own, without using any planning or designing activity.

In this way, without knowing it, Hume anticipated the explanations of complex orderly structures and advantageous capacities in organisms that are provided by modern Biology. These orderly, useful parts and capacities of these organisms develop and are present in organisms by natural selection for environmental fitness. Creatures without them didn't survive. They were at a competitive disadvantage. Modern biology also goes beyond the explanation of these features to explain the very existence of the species themselves. Modern Biology thus

refutes a crucial assumption of the teleological argument: that *species are fixed and never change*. It even provides the framework for an explanation of the origin of all living things from non-living substances.

Hume satirizes the analogies between the universe and artifacts like houses and watches, pointing out that these analogies are no more plausible than comparing the universe to a plant or an animal. A cause of order in the universe analogous to the principles of plant or animal life is just as plausible as one which is analogous to human intelligence and this alternative explanation would also have the advantage that it does not have to be anything distinct from the universe itself.

Hume says one cannot rule out the possibility of a natural principle of order inherent in the nature of matter itself. This may be something inseparable from the nature of matter, just as inseparable as are the forces of gravity and magnetism from the nature of matter. This hypothesis is no more extravagant than the hypothesis of theism.

Finally, we observe a great deal of disorder as well as order in nature. Many natural mechanisms (e.g., rapid mutations in viruses, cancer or the exhaustion of the sun's nuclear fuel) work to the disadvantage of living creatures, even to the "disadvantage" of whole cosmological systems (e.g., black holes swallowing up whole solar systems or even galaxies). What convincing evidence is there that these destructive mechanisms always restore balance in nature? Hume's claim is that the evidence for theism provided by the teleological argument is so weak that it gives no significant support for any belief that would make any difference to how we live our lives.

#### Recent Attempts to Defend the Teleological Argument Against Hume's Criticisms

- 1) Many of Hume's proposed counter-explanations are not seriously made.
- 2) The fact that the argument is based on fallible evidence is important, but the same is true of many scientific arguments. This just means that certainty is not a reasonable goal in science or in natural theology.
- 3) If Hume's criticism referring to the uniqueness of the universe is important, one should note that science regularly offers explanations of unique unobserved phenomena, e.g., the break-up of an original single landmass on Earth, condensation of gas clouds into stars and solar systems, the evolution of complex

life-forms. These scientific explanations are more detailed and less sweeping than theism but that does not negate the fact that they are about unique, unobserved events. The conclusions of natural theology may have a lower degree of probability than that of scientific explanations, but it is significantly greater than zero. If there are other plausible arguments for theism, then their combined probability may be very considerable.

4) Hume's alternative "explanation" that the universe may have an internal principle of order or even exist necessarily is an argument from ignorance and it is dangerously close to being a pseudo-explanation on a par with the "explanation" of the fact that opium makes people sleepy because it has "dormitive" power.

Even if it is granted that these replies have some force, they still do not answer Hume's point that a designer need not be God. The lesson may be that, as an explanatory hypothesis, theism is not clearly superior to naturalism. This conclusion will be re-examined later.

For those who are interested in recent attempts to construct teleological arguments that are hopefully stronger than the ones criticised by Hume, see those that have been presented by defenders of "Intelligent Design". These arguments are claimed to be scientific, empirical, arguments for the existence of some sort of intelligent power, even if it is not the god of theism. Various well-funded organizations have sprung up in recent years to advocate for this idea and to use it as a means to change the nature and content of science education in public schools.

See the website for the Discovery Institute. <http://www.discovery.org/>

For a website dedicated to opposing the Intelligent Design movement, see: <http://www.ncseweb.org/default.asp> (The National Council for Science Education).