

2.0 Can we prove there is a god?

We'll consider two kinds of arguments and two kinds of reasons aiming to show God exists

- Arguments from reason alone (Anselm, Descartes, Pascal)
- Argument to the best explanation (Design, Fine Tuning)
- Subjective evidence
- Leap of faith

We will also look at an argument that you should believe in god—but the argument will not try to show that a god exists. (Pascal's Wager)

Why believe that something exists?

Reasons to believe that something G exists can include:

- It is necessary for G to exist.
- G plays a necessary role in a very successful theory.
- I have observed G .

Sometimes, in mathematics, people propose that any mathematical object exists if it is not contradictory. This is not a criterion that I have seen proposed for non-mathematical objects.

We are going to need some logic

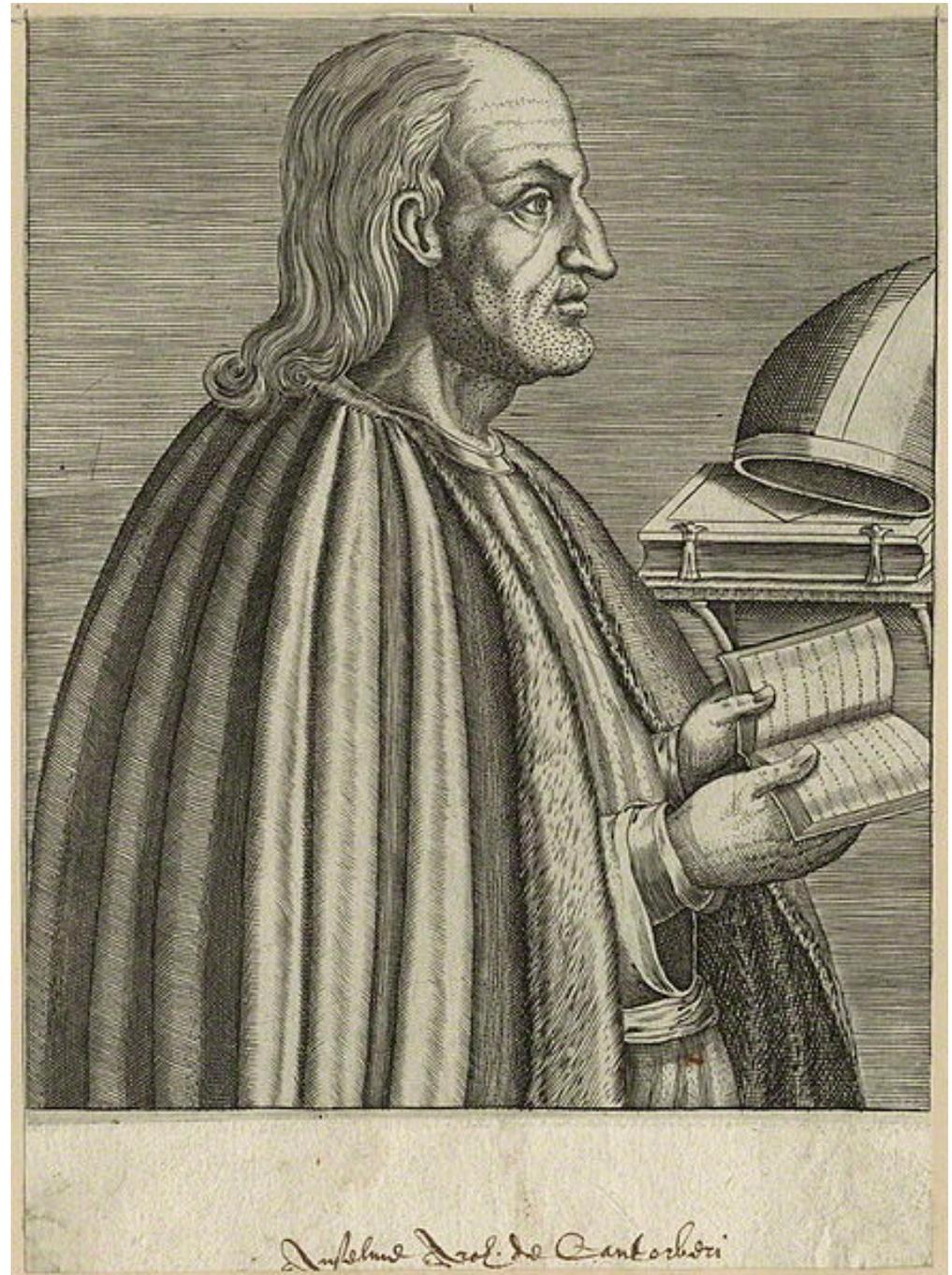
- **Argument:** a collection of sentences, one of which we call the “conclusion,” and the others of which we call “premises.”
- **Valid Argument:** an argument for which, necessarily, if the premises are true, then the conclusion is true.
- **Sound argument:** a valid argument with true premises.
- **Proof:** [a very informal description:] where we show an argument is valid by filling in the steps in reasoning.

One more logical concept

- **Reductio ad absurdum:** a kind of argument with the following form
 - We believe that sentence **P** must be true.
 - We assume that **P** is false. (This is called the “assumption for reductio.”)
 - We show that if **P** is false, we can prove other obviously false things. We do this by proving a contradiction.
 - We reason that the source of the contradiction was our assumption that **P** is false. Thus, **P** is not false.
 - We conclude that **P** must be true.

2.1 Anselm's "Ontological Argument"

- Anselm, also known as Saint Anselm of Canterbury
- 1033-1109



A proof form of Anselm's "Ontological Argument"

1. **God is that than which nothing greater than can be conceived.** [This is a *definition*.]
2. **It is greater to exist than not to exist.**
3. ["The fool says"] **God does not exist.** [This acts as our assumption for reductio.]
4. ["The fool admits that"] **one can conceive of god existing.**
5. But (by 2 and 4), **one can conceive of something greater than god.** [Namely, God existing.]
6. But, 5 and 1 contradict. We reason that the source of the error is line 3; so, line 3 is false: **it is not the case that god does not exist.**
7. We conclude that **god does exist.**

“A philosopher’s god”

- If the argument works, what have we proved?
- Sometimes we use the phrase, “a philosopher’s god” to describe the thing that would be shown to exist in proofs like this.
- This term is meant to draw attention to the fact that there is no clear connection between something like “That than which nothing greater than can be conceived” and, for example, specific claims about the Christian God, such as that it loves us.

2.2 Descartes's Argument from Meditation 3

One brief (implicit) argument

1. All beings of the universe are sustained to some degree.
2. Each thing requires something at least as real as that thing to sustain its existence.*
3. Only God is at least as real as all the beings of the universe.
4. If all beings of the universe are sustained to some degree and if only God is at least as real as all the beings of the universe, then God exists.
5. God exists.

* Note this is the opposite of our modern conception of the conservation of mass: we assume all matter by its nature continues to exist.

Where did this idea come from?



Where
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come
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A Reconstruction of another (implicit) argument in M3

1. a. The ultimate cause of a thing must be at least as real as that thing.
 b. The ultimate cause of an idea of a thing must be at least as real as the thing that it is an idea of.
2. God is the most real thing. [That is: God = the most real thing]
3. I have an idea of God as the most real thing.
4. The cause of my idea of God must be at least as real as God. (By 1.b.)
5. The cause of my idea of God must be at least as real as the most real thing. (Substitution of 2 into 4)
6. The thing at least as real as the most real thing is the most real thing. [That is: The thing at least as real as the most real thing = the most real thing.]
7. The cause of my idea of God is the most real thing. (Substitution of 6 into 5)
8. The cause of my idea of God is God. (Substitution of 2 into 7).
9. A cause must exist.
10. God must exist. (By 8 and 9)

Descartes also uses the principle...

X is more real than Y if and only if X has more positive properties than Y.

He needs this because he wants it to follow that god, the most real thing, would do no evil or commit no deceptions; and so he claims (like many philosophers before him) that evils and lies are lacks of positive properties.

Epistemological interlude

- That a benevolent omnipotent God exists becomes Descartes's most important **foundational** belief.
- His foundationalism then derives from this important consequences, such as:
 - God gave us our senses,
 - Because God is benevolent our senses must be reliable (if used properly).
- Surprisingly, this gives Descartes a new problem: why do we make errors?

2.3 Descartes's Argument from Meditation 5

A Reconstruction of Descartes's M5 Argument

1. I have clear and distinct understanding of the necessary properties of some things.
2. If I have clear and distinct understanding of the necessary properties of a thing, then that understanding is knowledge [that understanding is true].
3. I have clear and distinct understanding that the necessary properties of God include the having of all perfections [and being most perfect].
4. It is more perfect to exist than not to exist.
5. God has all perfections. (By 2 and 3.)
6. God exists. (By 4 and 5.)

2.4 Pascal's Wager

A Reconstruction of Pascal's Wager

1. I can believe that god exists or believe that god does not exist.
2. Either god exists or god does not exist.
3. If god exists, god will reward belief in god with eternal happiness.
4. If god exists, god will punish disbelief in god with eternal pain.
5. There are now four possible outcomes:
 1. I believe god exists and god does exist.
 2. I believe god exists and god does not exist.
 3. I don't believe god exists and god does exist.
 4. I don't believe god exists and god does not exist.
6. There are four possible corresponding benefits/costs:
 1. For 1: I get eternal happiness.
 2. For 2: I bear the cost of being wrong.
 3. For 3: I get eternal pain.
 4. For 4: I get the benefit of being right.
7. The potential benefit of being a theist (the sum expected benefit of outcomes 1 and 2) very far outweigh the potential benefit of being an atheist (the sum expected benefit of outcomes 3 and 4)
8. I should believe what will most benefit me.
9. I should believe that god exists.

Note

Pascals wager is unusual:

- It gives us a reason to believe that God exists.
- It does not give us reasons that the claim that “God exists” is true

Question: are you able to choose what you believe?

2.5 The Design Argument





A famous case: The Design Argument

In crossing a heath, suppose I pitched my foot against a stone, and were asked how the stone came to be there; I might possibly answer, that, for anything I knew to the contrary, it had lain there forever: nor would it perhaps be very easy to show the absurdity of this answer. But suppose I had found a watch upon the ground, and it should be inquired how the watch happened to be in that place; I should hardly think of the answer I had before given, that for anything I knew, the watch might have always been there. ... There must have existed, at some time, and at some place or other, an artificer or artificers, who formed [the watch] for the purpose which we find it actually to answer; who comprehended its construction, and designed its use. ... Every indication of contrivance, every manifestation of design, which existed in the watch, exists in the works of nature; with the difference, on the side of nature, of being greater or more, and that in a degree which exceeds all computation.

A Reconstruction of the Design Argument as a proof

1. Anything with complex independently interrelated parts was designed.
2. If something is designed, then there is an intelligent designer.
3. All living organisms are complex with independently interrelated parts.
4. There are living organisms.
5. Therefore, there is an intelligent designer.

2.6 The Fine Tuning Argument

A Reconstruction of the Fine-Tuning Argument as a proof

1. There are very, very many possible physical constants for a universe.
2. The physical constants of our universe are appropriate for allowing life in the universe.
3. If the physical constants of our universe were significantly different, then there would be no life in our universe.

TABLE I An abbreviated list of the CODATA recommended values of the fundamental constants of physics and chemistry based on the 2014 adjustment.

Quantity	Symbol	Numerical value	Unit	Relative std. uncert. u_r
speed of light in vacuum	c, c_0	299 792 458	m s^{-1}	exact
magnetic constant	μ_0	$4\pi \times 10^{-7}$	N A^{-2}	
		$= 12.566\,370\,614\dots \times 10^{-7}$	N A^{-2}	exact
electric constant $1/\mu_0 c^2$	ϵ_0	$8.854\,187\,817\dots \times 10^{-12}$	F m^{-1}	exact
Newtonian constant of gravitation	G	$6.674\,08(31) \times 10^{-11}$	$\text{m}^3 \text{kg}^{-1} \text{s}^{-2}$	4.7×10^{-5}
Planck constant	h	$6.626\,070\,040(81) \times 10^{-34}$	J s	1.2×10^{-8}
$h/2\pi$	\hbar	$1.054\,571\,800(13) \times 10^{-34}$	J s	1.2×10^{-8}
elementary charge	e	$1.602\,176\,6208(98) \times 10^{-19}$	C	6.1×10^{-9}
magnetic flux quantum $h/2e$	Φ_0	$2.067\,833\,831(13) \times 10^{-15}$	Wb	6.1×10^{-9}
conductance quantum $2e^2/h$	G_0	$7.748\,091\,7310(18) \times 10^{-5}$	S	2.3×10^{-10}
electron mass	m_e	$9.109\,383\,56(11) \times 10^{-31}$	kg	1.2×10^{-8}
proton mass	m_p	$1.672\,621\,898(21) \times 10^{-27}$	kg	1.2×10^{-8}
proton-electron mass ratio	m_p/m_e	1836.152 673 89(17)		9.5×10^{-11}
fine-structure constant $e^2/4\pi\epsilon_0\hbar c$	α	$7.297\,352\,5664(17) \times 10^{-3}$		2.3×10^{-10}
inverse fine-structure constant	α^{-1}	137.035 999 139(31)		2.3×10^{-10}
Rydberg constant $\alpha^2 m_e c/2h$	R_∞	10 973 731.568 508(65)	m^{-1}	5.9×10^{-12}
Avogadro constant	N_A, L	$6.022\,140\,857(74) \times 10^{23}$	mol^{-1}	1.2×10^{-8}
Faraday constant $N_A e$	F	96 485.332 89(59)	C mol^{-1}	6.2×10^{-9}
molar gas constant	R	8.314 4598(48)	$\text{J mol}^{-1} \text{K}^{-1}$	5.7×10^{-7}
Boltzmann constant R/N_A	k	$1.380\,648\,52(79) \times 10^{-23}$	J K^{-1}	5.7×10^{-7}
Stefan-Boltzmann constant $(\pi^2/60)k^4/\hbar^3 c^2$	σ	$5.670\,367(13) \times 10^{-8}$	$\text{W m}^{-2} \text{K}^{-4}$	2.3×10^{-6}
Non-SI units accepted for use with the SI				
electron volt (e/C) J	eV	$1.602\,176\,6208(98) \times 10^{-19}$	J	6.1×10^{-9}
(unified) atomic mass unit $\frac{1}{12}m(^{12}\text{C})$	u	$1.660\,539\,040(20) \times 10^{-27}$	kg	1.2×10^{-8}

A Reconstruction of the Fine-Tuning Argument as a proof

1. There are very, very many possible values for the physical constants for a universe.
2. The values of the physical constants of our universe are appropriate for allowing life in the universe.
3. If the physical constants of our universe were significantly different, then there would be no life in our universe.
4. The probability of our universe having the physical constants appropriate for life (the physical constants it does have) are incredibly small. (By 1, 2, and 3.)
5. It is more likely that the physical constants of the universe became what they are because they were designed, than that they simply happened. (Equivalently: the probability that the universe is designed with its physical constants is higher than the probability that this universe just happened to have these physical constants.) (This is a consequence of 4 and some other implicit claims about probability and design.)
6. Most likely, the universe was designed. (By 5.)
7. If the universe was designed, then there was a designer.
8. Most likely, there was a designer. (By 6, 7)

2.7 Responses and Other Arguments

Many philosophers now agree that the arguments from reason alone are not valid or are otherwise unsound

- Anselm's ontological argument includes an existence claim inside a definition. Such a move can be shown to sometimes cause contradictions. For example, consider the definition: 'x is the largest existing natural number.'
- Descartes's argument has a similar problem: must there be a greatest number that caused my idea, if I claim that I can conceive of "the greatest existing number"?
- Pascal's Wager assumes only the distribution of probabilities for a benevolent god, and so it assumes what it wants to prove. Consider the argument if one supposes there is a god that will punish you for belief.

Many philosophers now agree that the arguments from reason alone are not valid or are otherwise unsound

- The design argument is an *inference to the best explanation*, and we now have an alternative (and, arguably, a simpler, testable, and more productive) explanation in evolutionary theory.
- The fine tuning argument uses statistical reasoning that works only for large populations, to reason about a single instance. We don't know if there are many dead universes, for example.
- Descartes's second argument relies again upon the claim that his knowledge of god is like his knowledge of mathematics, necessarily true when clear and distinct. But people make mistakes even in mathematics; even great mathematicians have supposed that things existed which were later shown to be impossible or to otherwise lead to contradictions.

Other reasons for theism

- Claims to experience (a kind of subjective evidence) that is direct evidence. On this view, a religious experience is just like a perceptual experience, and provides evidence that the thing perceived exists. [However, this evidence is not third-person-verifiable on demand, which we require of scientific evidence.]
- Leap of Faith (a decision to believe)

Soren Kierkegaard

- 1813-1855
- Lived almost his whole life in Copenhagen



From Genesis 22. King James Version

1 And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am. 2 And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Mori'ah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of. 3 And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and clave the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him. 4 Then on the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off. 5 And Abraham said unto his young men, Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you. 6 And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife; and they went both of them together. 7 And Isaac spake unto Abraham his father, and said, My father: and he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering? 8 And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together. 9 And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood. 10 And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. 11 And the angel of the LORD called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I. 12 And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from me. 13 And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns: and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son.

An Existentialist Response

Abraham is the representative of faith, and that faith is normally expressed in him whose life is not merely the most paradoxical that can be thought but so paradoxical that it cannot be thought at all. He acts by virtue of the absurd, for it is precisely absurd that he as the particular is higher than the universal. This paradox cannot be mediated; for as soon as he begins to do this he has to admit that he was in temptation (*Anfechtung*), and if such was the case, he never gets to the point of sacrificing Isaac, or, if he has sacrificed Isaac, he must turn back repentantly to the universal. By virtue of the absurd he gets Isaac again. Abraham is therefore at no instant a tragic hero but something quite different, either a murderer or a believer.

-- *Fear and Trembling*, chapter 3, Translated by Walter Lowrie.
Published by Princeton University Press, 1941.

An Existentialist Response

- Kierkegaard argues that faith requires a leap – faith is absurd and irrational.
- But, Kierkegaard argues, without religion one cannot have a completely secure happiness
- Like Isaac, one must make an irrational commitment, even if it is unethical! He calls this the “teleological suspension of the ethical.”
- [“Teleology” is the philosophical term for the study of purpose. “Teleological” is thus often used to mean: concerned with purpose.]

2.8 Atheist arguments

Some philosophers argued there is evidence against the existence of a god

- Lack of (reproducible) evidence
- The problem of evil
- A bad form of explanation
- Incoherent definition

A version of the problem of evil

1. There is a God that is omniscient, omnibenevolent and omnipotent.
2. If God is omnibenevolent, then God wants that there be no evil.
3. God wants that there be no evil. (By 1 and 2)
4. If God is omnipotent and omniscient, then God can and will make happen whatever God wants.
5. God can and will make happen whatever God wants. (By 1 and 4)
6. God can and will make it that there be no evil. (By 3 and 5)
7. There is no evil (By 6)
8. There is evil. (Observation)

2.9 A last note

Why does this matter?

You may or may not feel that the question of whether there is a god is important, but:

- Descartes uses his “proof” of the existence of God as the foundation for his entire epistemology.
- Some philosophers think that history, or the universe, or even just human beings, can only have a purpose if they were created for a purpose. (Some philosophers deny this; but the point is that theism plays a role in some theories of ethics and purpose.)

The Atheist's Tragedy

- The importance of theism to past generations is illustrated by the English stage play *The Atheist's Tragedy*, by Cyril Tournier and published in 1611.
- The protagonist is an atheist, and he murders his rivals and commits all manner of crimes in the play.
- The morality of the protagonist is expressed by his statement that:
 - Let all men lose, so I increase my gain.*
 - I have no feeling of another's pain.*
 - Act 1, scene 1
- The audience of that time expected this: they equated atheism and immorality, because they assumed morality *required* theism, and theism alone could cause a person to be moral.