

Marianne Talbot student essay comp: Michaelmas term 2024

2nd prize: Roland Rosmond (Sweden)

Exploring the Existence of God: Philosophical Arguments and Counterpoints

Introduction

The philosophical exploration of God's existence spans multiple centuries and involves various approaches, including deductive reasoning, empirical observations, and metaphysical arguments. Thinkers like Mawson, Anselm, William James, and William Lane Craig have approached the question of God from different angles, using reason and evidence to either affirm or challenge belief in the divine.

Mawson emphasizes the role of reason in addressing existential and metaphysical questions, positing that logical coherence, while limited, is the primary tool for understanding concepts of God. However, he acknowledges that reason alone may not provide conclusive answers. The limitations of rational inquiry leave room for alternative approaches such as faith, religious experience, and theological reflections, which focus on subjective experiences and existential meaning. This essay examines how reason and other approaches interplay in various arguments for and against the existence of God, such as the ontological argument, the design argument, the cosmological argument, the argument from religious experience, and the problem of evil.

Reason and Rationality

Mawson argues that reason is a powerful but limited tool for addressing questions of God's existence. He advocates for the importance of logical coherence in metaphysical discussions but acknowledges that some truths may extend beyond human rationality. For example, the concept of God as an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent being often involves metaphysical assumptions that cannot be empirically verified. Mawson's approach suggests that while reason helps us navigate these questions, it may not be sufficient to provide definitive answers about God's nature or existence.

Philosophers like Kant and Aquinas have similarly grappled with the limits of reason when addressing metaphysical issues. Kant's critique of the ontological argument, for instance, questions whether existence can be treated as a predicate, suggesting that logical reasoning alone cannot establish God's existence. Similarly, Aquinas believed that empirical evidence and reason could only take us so far in understanding God, emphasizing that faith plays a central role in addressing questions that reason cannot answer.

The Ontological Argument

The ontological argument, introduced by Anselm, is a deductive reasoning approach that attempts to prove God's existence through logic alone. Anselm's formulation posits that God is a being than which nothing greater can be conceived, and that such a being must exist in both the understanding and reality, as existence in reality is greater than mere conceptual existence. If we accept the premises of the ontological argument, the conclusion - that God exists - logically follows.

However, critics like Kant have raised significant objections to this argument. Kant famously argued that existence is not a predicate and that the argument's structure does not provide convincing evidence for the existence of God. The ontological argument also faces the "Overload Objection", which suggests that the argument could be extended to prove the existence of any hypothetical entity defined as the greatest conceivable being. While the ontological argument has its supporters, its abstract and deductive nature makes it difficult to persuade those who do not already believe in God.

The Design Argument

The design argument, particularly in its formulation by Paley, posits that the complexity and order in the world imply the existence of a designer. Paley's famous watchmaker analogy suggests that just as a watch's intricate design implies the existence of a watchmaker, the complexity of the natural world suggests the existence of an intelligent designer - God.

Modern proponents of Intelligent Design, such as Michael Behe, have expanded on this argument with the concept of "irreducible complexity". Behe argues that certain biological systems, like the bacterial flagellum, are too complex to have evolved gradually through natural selection, as their function relies on multiple interdependent parts that could not have developed independently.

Despite its appeal, the design argument faces significant criticism. Many evolutionary biologists, such as Kenneth Miller, have demonstrated that complex systems can evolve gradually, undermining Behe's claims. Additionally, critics argue that the design argument relies on a 'God of the gaps' approach, where gaps in scientific knowledge are filled with divine explanations. Although the design argument may contribute to a cumulative case for theism, it struggles under scientific scrutiny and does not provide definitive proof of God's existence.

The Cosmological Argument

The cosmological argument, particularly in the form of the Kalam Cosmological Argument presented by William Lane Craig, is one of the most compelling arguments for the existence of God. The argument is based on two premises: (1) Whatever begins to exist has a cause, and (2) The universe began to exist. From these premises, Craig concludes that the universe must have a cause, which he identifies as a transcendent, personal God.

The Kalam Cosmological Argument is supported by both philosophical and scientific reasoning. Philosophically, Craig argues that the universe cannot be infinite and must have had a beginning. Scientifically, the Big Bang theory and the second law of thermodynamics provide evidence that the universe had a finite beginning, supporting the argument's premises.

However, critics challenge the necessity of a cause for the universe, particularly in light of quantum mechanics, where uncaused events can occur at a subatomic level. Additionally, even if the universe has a cause, critics argue that this does not necessarily imply the existence of the God of classical theism. Despite these criticisms, the cosmological argument remains a strong philosophical and scientific foundation for theism and contributes meaningfully to a cumulative case for the existence of God.

The Argument from Religious Experience

Religious experiences are often cited as powerful personal evidence for the existence of God. William James defines religious experiences as profound encounters that individuals interpret as direct contact with the divine. These experiences often include visions, feelings of unity, and overwhelming sensations of divine love or spiritual insight.

Swinburne's "Principle of Credulity" supports the argument from religious experience, suggesting that if it seems to someone that something is the case, it is reasonable for them to believe it unless there are strong reasons to doubt it. For individuals who have had religious experiences, these encounters can serve as compelling evidence for the existence of God.

However, religious experiences are subjective and difficult to verify. Critics argue that such experiences may be psychological or natural phenomena rather than encounters with the divine. Additionally, irreligious experiences - moments of insight where individuals feel distanced from or dismiss religious interpretations - offer counterarguments, supporting a naturalistic or atheistic worldview. While religious experiences may provide powerful personal evidence for those who have them, they lack universal persuasive power and are less effective in broader philosophical debates.

The Problem of Evil

The problem of evil is perhaps the most significant argument against the existence of a theistic God. The existence of evil and suffering in the world seems incompatible with the idea of an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good God. The deductive form of the argument is structured as follows: (1) God is omnipotent and perfectly good, (2) evil exists in the world, (3) an omnipotent and perfectly good God would not allow evil to exist unless for a necessary reason, and (4) since evil exists without sufficient justification, it suggests that God does not exist.

The problem of evil presents a significant challenge for theism. Theists often respond by arguing that certain evils are necessary for greater goods, such as free will or soul-making. However, these responses often feel insufficient to justify extreme suffering. The existence of unnecessary suffering, such as natural disasters or horrific events, raises profound questions about the coherence of belief in a benevolent, all-powerful God.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the arguments for and against the existence of God offer valuable perspectives but none provide definitive proof. The ontological and design arguments, while intellectually stimulating, face significant challenges from critics. The cosmological argument and the argument from religious experience offer more tangible support for theism but are not without their criticisms. Meanwhile, the problem of evil presents a strong challenge to the coherence of belief in an omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent God. Ultimately, the question of God's existence remains an open and deeply philosophical one, shaped by both rational inquiry and existential wonder.

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