

Foundations for Christian Faith
The Existence of God – A Survey of Classical and Other Arguments
Bruce Phillips, September, 2023

Introduction

- Defining Apologetics
 - Telling us why what we believe is rational

Three Core Arguments

- A little bit of argument logic
 - IF P then Q; P; Therefore, Q - YES
 - IF P then Q; Not Q; Therefore Not P YES
 - IF P then Q; Q; Therefore P – NO! Fallacy
- The Cosmological Argument
 - 1. Whatever BEGINS to exist has a cause
 - 2. The universe BEGAN to exist
 - 3. Therefore, the universe has a cause
 - The Big Bang and Cosmological Background Radiation
 - The 2nd Law of Thermodynamics (entropy measuring disorder)
 - Impossibility of an infinite past
- The Design Argument (Teleological Argument)
 - 1. The fine-tuning of the universe is due to law, chance or design
 - 2. It is not due to law or chance
 - 3. Therefore, it is due to design
 - Establishing fine tuning by authority (Physicist Paul Davies)
 - Laws describe the universe, they do not make it
 - Chance now depends on the multiverse – no evidence
- The Moral Argument (Axiological Argument)
 - 1. If God does not exist, objective moral values don't exist (If P then Q)
 - 2. Objective moral values do exist (Not Q)
 - 3. Therefore, God exists (Not P)
 - Morals are either objective (independent of human reason) or subjective (potentially totally reliant on human reason)
 - Subjective morals would result in societal chaos
 - There is wide agreement on potential objective moral intuitions: fairness is good, murder is bad, etc/

- Keller’s question – If people are currently doing things that, regardless of their beliefs, you think they should stop, then at least one objective moral value exists. And that’s all we need.
- In today’s world think: “Don’t be a racist!”
- See “Can We Be Good Without God” – Paul Chamberlain

The Modern Era: Intelligent Design

- **Fine tuning** was already discussed above with the Design Argument
- **Irreducible complexity:** some, and perhaps most, biological organisms do not appear to be able to be constructed one step at a time. Darwin himself said this would undermine his theory.
- **Cambrian Fossils:** Rather than Darwin’s assumption of a long fossil record of comprehensible development we instead see a major share of animal body types appearing 50mya in what amounts to a geological blink of an eye, with no predecessors.
- **DNA:** Genetic information is of a type (Complex Specified Information) that reflects a standard outside of itself. This type of information is uniquely characteristic of intelligence. Hence DNA must have an intelligent source.

Classical Arguments – Aristotle and a very different form of argument

- Metaphysics: the study of reality. Much broader than science which confines itself to material entities. A major division of philosophy. Roots in ancient Greece and work done in the Middle Ages.
- Some Aristotelian metaphysical distinctions and definitions
 - **Substances:** things that exist in themselves and are subject to having properties (or characteristics, or attributes)
 - **Actuality:** The characteristics or attributes that a substance actually has
 - **Potentiality:** The characteristics or attributes that a substance could potentially have in the normal course of affairs
 - Change is simply **potentiality** becoming **actual**
 - Potentialities cannot actualize themselves, but are brought into being by something already actual which has the power to effect the change
 - like heat can cause the potential of an ice cube to “actually” melt
 - Potentially cannot exist on its own but always exists with actuality.

- So while pure potentially cannot exist on its own, pure actuality can
- The Greeks often identified pure actuality with God.
- Chains of causation
 - When one change is related to subsequent changes. There are two ways:
 - **Essential Causation:** The components of the chain exist simultaneously **ALL** of the elements in the chain of causation **MUST** remain in effect for the final effect to continue. It has been likened to the sound of a musical instrument continuing only so long as the performer continues to play.
 - **Accidental Causation:** Typically occurs across time and there is no ongoing relationship between the effect of the first change and the cause of the subsequent change. The effect can continue to exist on its own but if it is involved in some future change event, that is “by accident.” Hence it is difficult if not impossible to identify any “first” cause in the chain.
 - A common example of **essential causation** is a hand pushing a stick pushing a rock. The hand cannot just contribute one push on the stick and then “pack up and go home.” If the hand stops, everything stops.
 - Each stage in a series of **essential causation** has the power it has as “derivative” of the cause before it. And as a result, if each stage in the chain needs something prior to actualize it, the chain will never end and we will be left with an infinite regress.
 - So **essential causal chains** can only end with something that does not need or require something else to provide it with the causal power it needs to start the chain. In other words it has no potentiality. And that thing is defined as **pure actuality**.
- So what is a being of **pure actuality**?
 - With no potential to change, it is **Changeless**
 - Changeless implies **Eternal and Immaterial** because changeless things are not subject to time and space, two essential aspects of change.
 - A being of Pure Actuality cannot lack anything which is why it has no potential and so is **Perfect**.
 - Since pure actuality would have all power, it is **Omnipotent**
 - Since it cannot not know something, it is **Omniscient**

- And finally
 - There could not be two such beings of Pure Actuality, because if there were we would have to be able to differentiate them. But nothing does, because a being of Pure Actuality lacks nothing.
 - And hence we have reasoned our way to **Monotheism**.
- This is a VERY ROBUST view of God. And all this from contemplating change, developing the ideas of actuality and potentiality to help us understand change, thinking through the relationships between these two, and following their implications to reason our way to what we can learn from chains of causation.

The Principle of Sufficient Reason

- What is it?
 - A powerful and controversial philosophical principle stipulating that everything must have a reason or cause
 - To deny this means taking a very extreme position on the possibility of rational investigation or even basic perception.
- So how is this defended?
 - If A is caused by B, and B was caused by C does this chain ever stop? This should begin to sound familiar! (See Aristotle!)
 - Now if reasons or causes come in two types, we can identify them as contingent or necessary.
 - **Contingent** causes don't have to be the way they are so need something prior to make them into what they are.
 - But **necessary** causes can exist on their own, not needing any prior cause to make them what they are.
 - So we need to follow the line of causes back until we find a necessary cause
 - And because the world is largely deficient in necessary causes, one default is to call that cause God.
- Looking back at our work so far today you will note that
 - The Kalam argument looked for the beginning of the universe
 - The Scholastic argument looked for the Ground of Being or Pure Actuality
 - And the Principle of Sufficient Reason looks for a Necessary start to any chain of support for some current effect.

- So I would venture that God comes out pretty well no matter how you look at it!

The Ontological Argument (Ontology: the study of being or existence)

- What is it? An argument arising in the Middle Ages based on the assertion that God is the “greatest of all conceivable beings.” It goes like this:
 - God is the greatest of all conceivable beings
 - If something greater than that were conceivable, then that would be God
 - But think about the concept of **non-existence** and ask . . .
 - Which is greater, a God whose non-existence is **conceivable**, or a God whose non-existence is **inconceivable**?
 - Clearly a God whose non-existence is inconceivable is greater
 - Hence God must exist.

Thoughts on different argument types

- Scientific
 - Empirical (through senses or data)
 - Inherently probabilistic, so conclusions are not necessary
 - Always at risk of new contradicting data
- Mathematical
 - Concern rational things found in the mind)
 - Results of careful argumentation are necessarily true
- Metaphysical
 - Concern empirical observations not open to challenge
 - Apply conceptual premises and reason to a necessary conclusion

Final Thoughts

- If you were to revisit this class a hundred years from now, which arguments do you think will still be being taught?

Recommended Sources for Research and Reading

The Three Main Arguments

- Craig, William Lane, ***On Guard – Defending Your Faith with Reason and Precision*** (David C. Cook, 2010)
 - A somewhat detailed description of the three main arguments: Cosmological, Teleological, and Moral, plus a section on the Principle of Sufficient Reason. Perhaps uniquely, the book includes “Argument Maps” as to how a discussion of the material might be carried out with a non-believer or skeptic.

Intelligent Design

- Behe, Michael J., ***Darwin’s Black Box*** (Touchstone 1996)
 - Very readable introduction to seminal critiques of the inherent atheism in Darwinism. This was the beginning of the “**irreducible complexity**” challenge. It also includes thoughts on Design, Science and Religion
- Meyer, Stephen C., ***Signature in the Cell – DNA and the Evidence for Intelligent Design*** (HarperOne, 2009)
 - THE comprehensive work on the argument from DNA. Some of the science has certainly moved on, but this book is foundational to the topic.
- Meyer, Stephen C., ***Darwin’s Doubt – The Explosive Origin of Animal Life and the Case for Intelligent Design*** (HarperOne, 2013)
 - The argument (or lack of it) from the fossil record with particular attention to the Cambrian Explosion and the relationship to the field of developmental biology (from initial fertilization to adult creature.)

Metaphysical Arguments

- Feser, Edward, ***The Last Superstition: A Refutation of the New Atheists*** (St. Augustine’s Press, 2008)
 - Although originally written, as the subtitle states, to refute the New Atheists and their adherence to the superstition of materialism, Feser gives an accessible account of Aristotelian and Thomistic metaphysics including but not limited to the argument from the observation that “Things change.” These arguments

lead not only to the existence of God, but to the Immortal Soul, and Natural Law. All of these are routinely dismissed in our modern world and need defending.

- Feser, Edward, ***Five Proofs of the Existence of God*** (Ignatius 2017)
 - This covers five important philosophers and their approach to our topic: Aristotle, Plotinus, St. Augustine, Aquinas and Leibnitz. It is a thorough and thoughtful book made more accessible by Feser's structuring each chapter into two stages of informal statement: the first arriving at a solution (Unmoved Mover, etc.) and the second discussing the characteristics of such a solution. This is followed by a third stage which sets the argument in formal logical form often with fifty or more steps! Feser concludes with sections on The Nature of God and His Relationship to the World, and Common Objections to Natural Theology – of which such searches for evidence for God make an important part. Highly recommended, but get out your highlighter and get ready to study!
- Feser, Edward: Any of a number of books by him on Scholastic Metaphysics, Aquinas, or the relationship with modern science (***Aristotle's Revenge***).

The Principle of Sufficient Reason,

- See Craig, William Lane above and the next referral below.

A Valuable General Reference

- Geisler, Norman, Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics (Baker Books, 2000 – 5th printing – originally 1999)
 - This is an invaluable work (despite its 850 pages and \$70 price tag!) It addresses essentially everything in our talk with the exception of Intelligent Design. I suspect the initial date of publication was just a little too early for ID to gain admittance!)