

God Exists

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I felt worried when I lost belief in God. My religious beliefs had given me security, a sense of purpose, hope for the future, and a feeling of significance as a person. I realized, though, that I could not simply hold on to a belief in God because *I wanted to*. In fact, my desire to believe fueled my doubts. I wondered: had my desire for God blinded me from honestly facing reality? As I looked out beyond my local culture (family, church, friends), I saw that different cultures had different beliefs. I also saw that a group's most sacred beliefs tended to bring its members great security, just as belief in God had brought me security. How could I go on believing in *my* God among the many? I could not.

My doubts about God led me to become a truth-seeker. A noble root of atheism, I discovered, is the courage to face reality *as it is*, rather than as you may want it to be. In a moment, I made a commitment to follow reason and evidence wherever they might lead me. Thus, I began to investigate things for myself—to test everything. I exchanged blind faith for the light of reason. Later, however, I found that reason led me to faith.

This chapter considers how reason can lead to God. Although rational arguments carve away certain limited, arbitrary conceptions of God, I will present classic reasons that point to a culturally transcendent, Supreme Foundation of all things. I have two objectives: (i) to mark out some of the reasons (about existence, life, and reason itself) one can have for thinking that God exists, and (ii) to display a method of inquiry that readers may use to explore these issues further.

A Truth-Seeker's Tool: the Best Explanation

In order to investigate a subject as deep as the existence of God, it will help to start with a basic tool of reasoning. Much of what we reasonably believe in science and everyday life is based upon *explaining* things. For example, suppose you become aware of water covering streets, signs, cars, and houses. This experience gives you a basis to infer that it *probably* rained last night. That is because rain, in this context, *best explains* what you see. This method of reasoning is called “inference to the best explanation” (IBE).

It is useful to divide IBE into three basic action steps:

Step 1. Start with what you know or observe.

Step 2. Search for possible explanations of what you know or observe.

Step 3. Select the best—most adequate and reasonable—explanation.

Before we continue, a few disclaimers are in order. First, IBE is not the *only* method to know things; philosophers investigate others. Second, the best explanation can be false, even if it is the *most probable* explanation. Third, there can be reasonable disagreement about which explanation is actually the best.

With IBE in hand, let us return to the investigation at hand: does God exist? IBE gives us a procedure for investigating this question. We can gather up various things we take ourselves to know already, and then we can ask whether any of them are best explained by God's existence or non-existence.

Explaining Existence

In this section, I will give a reason to think that the existence of God best explains why there is anything at all. I will begin by presenting the main premises of a two-part argument (based upon the history of *cosmological* arguments about reality as a whole). We will consider support for the premises and then turn to some common objections.

Here is the *Argument from Existence*:

Part I: Foundation

1. You exist.
2. Therefore, something exists.
3. The best explanation of the existence of something is in terms of a self-existent foundation.

Part II: Identification

4. The best explanation of the nature of a self-existent foundation is in terms of a *supreme* foundation—something maximal in every positive respect.
5. Therefore, the best explanation of the existence of something is in terms of something whose nature is best explained in terms of a supreme foundation (God).

Let us look more closely at each of the premises. I trust you will accept the first premise: that you exist. If you do not, then there is no “you” for me to convince.

Assuming you exist, you may now wonder: why does anything exist? Why not instead *nothing*? Things would be far simpler if there had never been anything at all. As strange as it is, however, there is something rather than nothing. Why might that be?

The classic answer is the simplest: there is something because there *must be*. We can further explain why *there must be something* in terms of a self-existent, necessary foundation of all things. The foundation exists *on its own*, without any help from anything. It exists just because it *cannot not exist*. On this theory, reality divides into two sections. There is the bottom section, which is fundamental, uncaused, and self-existent. It exists because of its *necessarily existent* nature. The upper section of reality, by contrast, is dependent, caused, and explained by a prior or more fundamental state of reality. Call this theory “Foundation”.

Reason repels the alternative. Suppose for a moment that there are *only* dependent things: each dependent thing depends upon another in an infinite, bottomless stack. The problem is that nothing within the stack could make the stack itself *independent*. By merely stacking together *dependent* things, you cannot produce an *independent* thing or stack: from dependence comes only more dependence. How then can the dependent stack stand in existence without any foundation? It seems it cannot.

We may summarize the above reasoning—as support for (3)—as follows:

- 3.1. Every stack of dependent things is itself dependent.
- 3.2. Therefore, the stack of all dependent things is dependent.
- 3.3. The stack of all dependent things cannot depend upon a dependent thing.
- 3.4. Therefore, the stack of dependent things depends upon an independent foundation.

This argument implies that the Foundation theory not only provides the *best* explanation of existence, it also provides the *only* genuinely possible explanation.

The next part of the Argument from Existence is the “identification” part. Its main premise, (4), is about the nature of the foundation. It says that the best explanation of its nature is in terms of a Supreme Foundation.

We shall examine two reasons in support of (4). The first is that *theism* (the thesis that God exists) gives us the *simplest possible*—and thus least contrived, least arbitrary, and most intrinsically probable—theory of the foundation’s nature. The theistic account of the foundation allows us to grasp the nature of the foundation with a single basic concept: *perfection*. From perfection, we deduce the classical attributes of God: perfect in power, knowledge, and goodness. These attributes, unlike the attributes of a Flying Spaghetti Monster, are far from arbitrary. The theistic attributes are all positive—*great-making*—to the maximal conceivable degree.¹ To illustrate what I mean by “great-making,” suppose someone begins to praise you saying, “you are so great: you are stronger than everyone I know, you have much wisdom, and you tend to be rather cruel.” If the third attribute just mentioned strikes you as out of step with the others, then you probably grasp the relevant concept of greatness. A “great-making” attribute contributes to something’s overall greatness, excellence, or praiseworthiness. A *perfect* reality, then, is something that merits the highest degree of admiration and praise. It is maximally great: it has the most greatness that anything could have. Anything less than perfect, by contrast, has specific boundaries and parameters, such as the power to produce up to (say) 9,102,231,231,232,132,151,453,642,999,823,122,873,122 electrons. Such non-maximal specifications require far greater complexity to express. One reason, then, to anticipate that the foundation is perfect is that this hypothesis is the simplest and least arbitrary.

Of course, there is other data to consider, and sometimes the simplest theory is not the correct one. The suggestion so far is just that we have some weight on the side of theism. If that is correct, then until counterweights are identified, we have reason to at least *lean* toward the theistic explanation by default.

Here is a second, related reason in support of the theistic explanation. Suppose the foundation has some *limit*, such as with respect to its total power. Then that limit would be arbitrary. Why *that* limit? The problem here is that nothing “underneath” the foundation could explain its basic features. Unlike you and me, the foundation is capable of existing and having features without any help from anything. That means that there cannot be a deeper, more fundamental explanation of its basic features. Yet any limits would require an explanation. Therefore, the foundation cannot have limits. We may summarize this argument from limits—as further support for (4)—as follows:

- 4.1. Only a perfect Being can be unlimited in every respect.²
 - 4.1.1. Whatever is unlimited in every respect is unlimited in greatness.
 - 4.1.2. Whatever is unlimited in greatness is perfect.
 - 4.1.3. Therefore, whatever is unlimited in every respect is perfect.
- 4.2. The foundation of all things cannot have any limit in any respect.
- 4.3. Therefore, the foundation of all things is a perfect Being.

In summary, theism explains existence in the least arbitrary manner. With God at the foundation, we have a self-existent, necessary foundation upon which all other things ultimately depend. Since this theory is the simplest conceivable account of the foundation (if not the only possible

account via the argument from limits), we have some reason, then, to think the theistic theory is true.

As a way of further examining this argument, we will now consider several objections.

Objection 1. Who created God? If the universe must be created, why doesn't God?

Reply. This objection invites a clearer understanding of the concept of "God." The classical definition of "God" (the God of Abraham, Isaac, and the philosopher Anselm) is in terms of a *maximally supreme* being. Such a being would exist in the greatest way possible. Thus, it would enjoy *necessary existence* and would not depend on a creator for its existence. The very concept of God—as supreme—precludes the possibility of God having a creator. Things are different for limited beings. Anything less than supreme has certain arbitrary limits, such as a limit in power or goodness or greatness. Although limited things may require a cause, it does not follow that an *unlimited* Thing should, or even could, have a cause.

Objection 2. Maybe the universe is eternal. Perhaps for each physical state of the universe, some prior physical state explains it. Wouldn't an explanation of each *part* of history constitute an explanation of the entire infinite show?

Reply. This objection actually brings to light a strength of the Argument from Existence, which is that the argument *leaves open* the age of the universe. Even if the universe is eternal, we may still wonder why there is this eternal universe at all, rather than no universe or a different one. As Richard Taylor has suggested, the age of a thing does not by itself explain the existence of that thing. Suppose there were an infinitely old blue ball, for example.³ We could still wonder why there is that blue ball at all. Similarly, we can wonder why there is any universe at all, no

matter its age. The proposed answer is that the foundation of the universe has a special nature, which allows it to exist *independently* and *necessarily*. Readers are encouraged to consider whether there could be any better answer than that.

Objection 3. Maybe there simply is no explanation of the universe. As the philosopher David Hume has argued, even if each part of the universe has an explanation, it would be a fallacy (of “composition”) to infer that the whole thereby also has an explanation.⁴

Reply. I offer two replies. First, according to IBE, the best explanation is preferable to *no* explanation. If instead you allow for no explanation, then you face the problem of chaos: random universes or parts of universes might snap into—and out of?—existence anywhere at any time without any explanation. This is too implausible to believe. Moreover, giving up IBE threatens the value of reason itself. Why follow reason if your thinking (and memories) might exist without any explanation whatsoever? Reason itself pressures us to think there is an explanation.

Second, it is not fallacious to infer that dependent things stacked together form a dependent whole. Although it is a fallacy to assume that a whole has *all* the properties of its parts, it is far from fallacious to infer that a whole inherits *some* properties of its parts. For example, the intrinsic nature of Play-Doh does not change merely by lumping together more and more Play-Doh. Similarly, the intrinsic nature of dependent things does not change by stacking more and more dependent things. It is a basic principle of reason (and confirmed by all experience) that from dependence comes only dependence.

Objection 4. Adding a supernatural being to our world adds unnecessary complexity. Therefore, the best explanation of natural reality is a *natural* foundation, not a supernatural one.

Reply. There is wisdom in this objection. In fact, although people sometimes imagine “God” as referring to something spooky and wholly beyond our world, the classical view has allowed a more immanent conception of God. What is at issue is not whether the foundation is wholly “other”, but whether it is supreme. If we have a natural order with a natural foundation, still, we can consider how great the foundation is on the scale of conceivable greatness. The simplest theory of any foundation is that it is *perfect*, since any imperfections require a more complex theory about the details of its limits. In a sense, then, theism allows for the most “natural” account of the foundation. Pure naturalism *without* a supreme foundation, by contrast, is unnecessarily complex.

Objection 5. Maybe the foundation is “perfect” in some sense, but why think it is an omniscient, omnipotent, morally perfect personal being (i.e., God)?

Reply. I offer two considerations. First, absolute perfection is the highest level of greatness and so implies *no limits* with respect to any great-making attribute. A foundation that has some, but not all, great-making features would be less perfect—and so less simple and more arbitrary—than a foundation that is unlimited in greatness.

Here is a second consideration. The foundation has some *ability* to cause or sustain the existence of things, for it is the foundation of all things. Now the simplest, least arbitrary theory of how much ability it has is this: *the greatest conceivable*. Conceptual analysis reveals that the greatest conceivable ability includes cognitive and moral abilities. Therefore, the simplest, least arbitrary theory of the foundation’s abilities *implies* that the foundation has maximal cognitive and moral abilities, just as a perfect Person would.

All these considerations invite further inquiry. To advance that inquiry, it is useful to separate the Argument from Existence into its two parts: foundation and identification. Maybe the foundation part appeals more to your mind, while the identification part inspires additional questions. Even still, the foundation part can provide a backbone for other arguments. The foundation argument gives us a self-existent foundation of all things (putting aside whether that foundation is supreme in other ways). One may then look at other data points to identify its nature further, as we shall do in the next section.

Explaining Much More

In this section, we will examine how theism best explains a wide range of data points. Toward that end, I will consider a sample of relevant data: the existence of logic, fine-tuning, biological evolution, morality, and minds. I will first present an argument structure designed to help determine the best explanation of data more generally, and then I will fill in the structure in terms of the above examples. My goal is to present an introductory survey of a family of important arguments.

To find the best explanation, it helps to see whether relevant data increases or decreases the probability of candidate explanations. Suppose we have some data D and a candidate hypothesis H . We may consider whether D makes H more likely by considering the following probability argument:

Probability Premise 1: D is expected (likely) if H is true.

Probability Premise 2: D is unexpected (unlikely) if H is not true.

Conclusion: D supports—makes more likely— H .

To illustrate the reasoning in play, let H be the hypothesis that it rained last night, and D be your observation that everything you see outside is wet. Then, assuming your observation of wetness is more likely if H is true than if H is not true, your observation of wetness *supports* the hypothesis that it rained last night. This argument underwrites ordinary and scientific reasoning. We can use this probability argument structure when considering data with respect to the God hypothesis. Let H be the hypothesis that God exists, and let D stand for various data points. If D is more expected on theism than on atheism, then D *supports* the theistic explanation. I will briefly survey five examples as a way of illustrating this general method of investigation.

Reason (Logic)

Logic is the study of *rules of reason*, such as the rule that a statement cannot be both true and false simultaneously. Why, however, do such rules exist? Moreover, how do mere molecules and chemical reactions discover and follow these rules?

The “*mind-first*” hypothesis predicts good answers. For suppose the foundation of all things is a self-existent, perfect mind. The foundational mind includes all rules of reason, since it reasons perfectly. Therefore, it follows (from the rules of reason themselves) that theism *predicts* the existence of rules of reason. Moreover, with a mind at the foundation, there is literally a “reason” within the Foundation of reality for that Foundation to intend the existence of other minds capable of apprehending rules of reason.

Imagine, by contrast, that a bunch of material stuff springs into existence from nothing, with no mind behind it. In that case, it is far from clear that there would even *be* logic. If there are no minds, why would there be rules telling minds how to think rationally? Moreover, if there

are no minds, why would any force within reality be inclined to produce a mind? Imagine the material stuff breaks apart into particles that eventually evolve to form molecules and chemical reactions. Even if natural selection leads to an array of complex machines, there is no reason within the fabric of reality for any pattern of particles to become “aware” of logical principles. Thus, even if we grant that mind from non-mind is somehow possible (not a trivial assumption), the suggestion here is that without a foundational mind, the existence of reason and other minds is far from *expected*.

Reason gives this result, therefore: the existence of minds that apprehend rules of reason is more likely—expected—with a mind at the foundation than without any such mind. Therefore, one may infer that rules of reason themselves support the mind-first hypothesis.

Fine-tuning

You may have heard that the universe is finely tuned for the existence of life. The idea is that many things have to be *just right* for there to be lifeforms. Physicist Alan Lightman recounts a bunch of examples of “right for life” features of our universe in his book, *The Accidental Universe*. Elsewhere he writes in summary: “[I]f these fundamental parameters were much different from what they are, it is not only human beings who would not exist. No life of any kind would exist.”⁵

Fine-tuning expert Robin Collins estimates that the degree of fine-tuning is analogous to hitting a target an inch in diameter with a dart launched across the Milky Way.⁶ It would be easier to do that by chance, he calculates, than to get a universe suitable for life by chance.

What best explains the existence of a universe suited for life? Some theorists have proposed we can explain the fine-tuning of our universe in terms of many, many random

universes. Given enough universes, perhaps it is probable that *some* universe would happen to be fit for life just by chance.

A problem with the “many universe” explanation, however, is that it pushes back the question as to why there are the “right” many universes. Consider that an infinite number of car factories will never produce a turtle. Similarly, an infinite number of universes does not automatically guarantee life. We need a many-universe theory that explains how the probability of getting life in some universe is not so low. Interestingly, Collins argues that the best many-universe theory is a *theistic* one: the foundation of all universes is a mind. The thinking here is that minds are known to be inclined to create complex, interesting things, and a multiverse that includes a life-suitable universe counts as complex and interesting. By contrast, a purely material, non-mental universe-generator requires a high degree of fine-tuning and specification of its own. Therefore, it is unclear how a many-universe theory could explain fine-tuning unless there is a mind at the foundation of the many universes.⁷

Biological Evolution

We live on a planet where complex lifeforms have evolved. Why has that happened? Part of the answer is *natural selection*: the more fit organisms are more likely to pass on their genes. But natural selection cannot be the whole story. A few years ago I wrote a grant-funded computer program that simulated randomized evolution (for the Randomness and Divine Providence group), and I discovered that randomized natural selection in a randomized environment tends to select *simpler* organisms, not more complex ones. In order to get complex structures, I had to fine-tune the environment in which the evolution would take place. The complexity research at the Santa Fe Research Institute further confirms this result.⁸ The data, then, is this: evolution has

produced complex lifeforms. Computer simulations show—decisively to my mind—that evolution of complex lifeforms is far *less likely* to happen without a design plan than with one. Therefore, the existence of biological evolution further supports a theistic explanation of the fine-tuning of the universe itself.

Morality

In addition to rules of right thinking (reason), we also recognize rules of *right living*. For example, inflicting pain on someone in order to feel powerful falls off the rails of right living. We may debate where all the moral lines are, and even whether our moral sense actually reveals an objective moral order outside our heads. Nevertheless, at least this much is clear: we have concepts of good and bad.

Why are there beings with moral concepts in the first place? Unguided evolution is not a complete explanation. The computer-based simulations of evolution to date have never produced creatures with a genuine moral sense—not even close. That is not surprising: without a moral foundation and a design plan, there is no reason to *expect* the existence of morally sensitive beings to emerge ever. On the contrary, we may expect non-moral states to continue producing non-moral states indefinitely. The theistic foundation, by contrast, predicts the existence of a moral order at the foundation because it predicts that the foundation is morally perfect. Moreover, on theism there is a reason at the foundation of reality to intend there to be other moral beings who can apprehend that order. Therefore, by the probability argument, we have reason to infer that moral debates themselves point—at least to some extent—to a transcendent moral order rooted in a Supreme Foundation.

Minds

Your thoughts are not merely patterns of particles organized into brain states. Here is how you can know that:

M1. You are currently aware of your thoughts but not aware of any of your brain states.

M2. For any A and B, if $A = B$, then you cannot be aware of A without being aware of B.

M3. Therefore, your thoughts are not brain states.

The first premise is justified by your immediate experience of your own thoughts and *lack of experience* of the neurons inside your brain. The second premise is justified by the logic of identity: if A is identical to B, then whatever is true of A is true of B. The conclusion follows: your thoughts are not brain states.⁹

To be clear, brain science tells us that thoughts *affect* brain states, and vice versa. However, it would be a mistake to infer that thoughts *are* brain states. No science shows that. It is sometimes suggested in response that perhaps awareness of our thoughts is nothing more than a subjective way of being aware of our brain. Consider that Lois Lane can be aware of Clark Kent without realizing he is actually Superman. Similarly, perhaps you can be aware of your thoughts without realizing that those thoughts are actually brain states.

This response fails, however, to account for the different *states* of the one person. Consider that the only way Lois can get confused about Clark Kent in the first place is that there is a *difference* between the “Clark Kent” states (such as sitting in an office, wearing glasses, etc.) and “Superman” states (flying around, no glasses, etc.). Although there is one person who has both kinds of states, the states are not the same. In the same way, in order for you to be aware of

your thoughts without being aware of your brain states, there must be a *difference* between the mental and material states of you.

Here, then, is our data: there are mental states in addition to material states. The existence of these mental states is precisely what we expect if the foundation is a mind that precedes the existence of all mater. By contrast, there is no reason to expect the existence of mental states from a purely non-mental foundation.

Summing Up

Many books have been devoted to exploring, debating, and unpacking each of the arguments we have considered. This brief introduction sows seeds for further thought.

I will close this section by offering a summary assessment of the explanatory power of theism. Theism—understood in terms of a Supreme Foundation—provides a simple, non-arbitrary explanation of a wide range of data. No competing explanation of all the relevant data is simpler and less arbitrary. To be clear, there are challenging data points, such as the existence of pointless suffering, harms from religion, and God’s hiddenness. One must weigh all these considerations in the balance. Even here, however, there is an important asymmetry. Arguments from harm typically require an inference from what we *don’t see*. For example, we *don’t see* God’s reasons for allowing every case of harm. Interestingly, our lack of sight may be expected—at least to some extent—if God *exists*: for if there is an unlimited mind, you might expect there to be events that occur for reasons that are currently beyond what we see.

Developing an argument against God from harm is tricky because harm itself requires many of the conditions—life, consciousness, moral sense—that are expected on *theism*. In any case, the arguments we considered in support of theism depend upon an inference from what we *see*

immediately within ourselves: rules of reason, the existence of complex life, moral sense, and our own thoughts. In conclusion, one could reasonably think that theism provides the best explanation of what is seen.

Faith that Sees

The biggest threat to the discovery of God, and to productive truth seeking more broadly, is *blind faith*. I join my non-theist friends, therefore, in proclaiming the great value of following reason and evidence wherever they lead. Be a free thinker. Seek truth. Follow the evidence. Align with reason. It is the only way to be free from the traps of groupthink and the errors of religion. There is a cost to count: if you follow reason and evidence wherever they lead, you risk finding truth you do not like. On the other hand, you may come to discover that the foundation of reality is greater than you had imagined.

¹ The advanced reader may wonder whether some *conceivable* perfections may be *impossible*. Consider, for example, the power to convert a prime number into a prime minister. That power is conceivable (in some sense). Yet no *possible* being has that power. Should we say, then, that some perfections are impossible? My answer is that impossible features cannot actually be perfections because they *mar* a being by precluding these perfections: *coherence* and *necessary existence*. Alternatively, we may also proceed with the more modest account of perfection in terms of features that a greatest possible something would have.

² Note that any being that is unlimited in a negative attribute—like moral evil—would not be unlimited in *every* respect. For it would be limited in its total *greatness*.

³ Taylor, Richard. 1992. *Metaphysics*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, p. 84-94.

⁴ Hume, David, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (London. Reprinted Indianapolis: Hackett), 1980, pp. 58-9.

⁵ Lightman, Alan. “The Accidental Universe,” *Harper's Magazine*. December 2011, p. 3.

⁶ Collins, Robin. 2003. “God, Design, and Fine-Tuning,” in *God Matters: Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*. Longman Publications.

⁷ There is Tegmark’s multiverse theory that all possible geometries are real. This theory faces the problem of *incoherence*, however: the possible geometry consisting of a single dot surrounded by endless nothing in every dimension cannot coherently exist in the same reality as any other possible geometry.

⁸ For more on this subject, see, for example, Wagner’s *Arrival of the Fittest: Solving Evolution's Greatest Puzzle* (New York: Penguin Group).

⁹ I give a more advanced, mathematical argument for this same conclusion in “Building Thoughts from Dust: a Cantorian Puzzle” (2015), *Synthese* 192: 393-404. I argue, in brief, that there can be a conceivable thought about any given brain states, while there cannot be a conceivable *brain* state for any given brain *states* (plural)—else there would be more conceivable brain states than conceivable brain states, which is contradictory.