

Sermon 12: Traditional arguments for God: Part One

OUTLINE

The ontological argument
The cosmological argument

INTRODUCTION

I would like us now to begin to look at some of the traditional arguments put forward as proof for the existence of God. These are the ontological, the cosmological and teleological arguments for God. Let me say a few things about how we view them before we lay them out. Firstly, we are in no doubt whether God exists or not. We believe as Romans 1:19-20 explains it that all human beings have a knowledge of God from nature, 'For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.'¹ The reason for unbelief is not a lack of data but sin and an unwillingness to believe. There is a suppression of the truth that is evidently clear. So as we look at these traditional arguments for God we are following the traditional approach of 'we believe in order to understand.' We do not see ourselves in a neutral position who with superior intellectual skills can penetrate all mysteries and subject God to our scrutiny. We confess our humble dependence upon God to reveal Himself to us. We are not looking to these arguments to ground our beliefs, but we they do still have a use for us. Firstly, they help confirm the faith we already have. Secondly, they demonstrate the reasonability of faith, and show by careful reasoning the reasonableness of faith. They show the agreement between what the Bible says and what reason can deduce. Reason is limited in what it can deduce, but in what it can attain it agrees with the Bible. The Bible is superior and is necessary to fill up what reason is unable to discover.

We must also add the limitations of these arguments. All truths are rationally avoidable if wrong assumptions are assumed, these are not irresistible truths, and many have raised objections to them. The raising of objections does not automatically disqualify an argument. All objections must proceed on certain philosophical commitments and those committed to worldviews contrary to Scripture will find arguments sufficient with their own starting point to deny what these arguments offer. Secondly, they are better view as probabilistic in nature not as undeniable. Thirdly, they can only demonstrate the reasonableness of theism in general and not Christianity and the gospel. Fourthly, humble faith in God does not come by overturning logical arguments but exposing our need for a Saviour and so these arguments must be part of a larger conversation about how we need Christ.

The ontological argument

The one most often associated with the ontological argument is Anselm of Canterbury who lived in the 11th century. Anselm write a book called the Monologion which was a reflection on the divine essence. This book set out to see if one could know this highest good. 'We have found then that there is something supremely good (because all good things are good through some one thing, namely that which is good through itself). But in the same way we arrive at the necessary conclusion that there is something supremely great, since whatsoever is great is great through some one thing, namely that which is great through

1 [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ro 1:19–20). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

itself. I do not mean great in terms of size, like some sort of body, but something which, the greater it is, the better or more valuable it is, like wisdom. And since only that which is supremely good can be supremely great, it is necessary that there is something that is best and greatest – i.e. of everything that exists, the supreme.²

Arguments can be put into two categories, *a priori* and *a posteriori*. An *a posteriori* belief we hold after having examined the evidence, and an *a priori* belief is believed before the evidence is considered. Anselm's first argument was *a posteriori*, based on experience. In particular he used the experience of good and reasoned from it to God. Someone describes it this way, 'Anselm points out that everyone has an idea of what is good from the pleasures of everyday life. He likens it to the climbing of a ladder. One begins by contemplating something whose goodness one can easily understand, and then places in a hierarchy higher and higher familiar goods, and so climbs up, until one is able to begin to get an idea of what the highest Good may be like.'

Feeling unhappy with the results Anselm wrote a second book called the Proslogion seeking to articulate a single argument for God rather than a string of arguments. This was an *a priori* argument. This single argument we now call the ontological argument for God. It gave rise to the famous phrase, 'That-which-no-greater-can-be-conceived'. The 3 steps of logic go like this, '(1) Our mind understands that God is, by definition, a being whom nothing greater can be conceived; (2) It is greater to exist both in the mind and in reality, rather than only in the mind; (3) Therefore, God is the greatest being, which means that He exists both in the mind and in reality.'³

The existence of God is proven from the concept of God. 'God is the greatest conceivable being. This is true by definition, for if we could conceive of something greater than God, then *that* would be God. So nothing greater than God can be conceived. It is greater to exist in reality than merely in the mind.... God is the greatest conceivable being. Hence, he must not merely exist in the mind, but in reality as well. Therefore, God exists.... A being whose non-existence is inconceivable is greater than a being whose non-existence is conceivable. But God is the greatest conceivable being. Therefore, God's non-existence must be inconceivable.'⁴

This is judged to be both a very weak argument and a notoriously difficult one to overturn. When originally written Gaunilo a contemporary rejected this argument, with a counter argument saying that if we could conceive of a perfect island, that that would not necessitate the existence of that Island. Anselm responded saying that this was true for all ideas except God, who is infinite and absolute being. In other words, islands and other things are contingent and dependent upon other things for their existence but God is a necessary being who has existence in Himself. Some have glibly cast off this argument as absurd because if I can think of a pink dragon it does not follow that pink dragons exist. As believers we view it as true because it is true. The God of the Bible who is unique and overall is the one whom no greater can be conceived. I would even point to the fact that religion and belief in this highest being is universal and practiced around the world. That it proves not merely to be a fabrication but a recognition that is universal. We have this thought of this highest being, this conception is above what our imaginations would conspire

2 Kelly, p66.

3 Ibid., p68

4 Reasonable Faith, p95.

to create, Christian suggest that this notion is put in the heart by God as a way to fit us to have fellowship with this God and be His worshippers.

The cosmological argument

This argument moves from that which exists to the existence of a first cause which caused its existence, a First Cause. This was an ancient Greek philosophical notion which was developed by Muslim and Christian thinkers. There are three types, the kalam cosmological; the Thomistic cosmological and the Leibnizian cosmological arguments.

Kalam

Kalam is the Arabic word for speech. This argument originated with Christian thinkers attempting to refute Aristotle's view of an eternal universe, but it was developed by Islamic scholars who were Aristotelian in their outlook. Al Ghazali put it this way, 'Every being which begins has a cause for its beginning; now the world is a being which begins; therefore it possesses a cause for its beginning.' The various premises are defended. Firstly, every being that has a beginning has a cause. For something to come into existence at a particular time, not later or earlier is dependent upon a cause for it being so. Secondly, the world has a beginning. He argues against the impossibility of an infinite past by the idea that we would not have a present. The present is the end of an infinite past is a logical impossibility for infinity cannot have an end. A present precludes the existence of an infinite past. Ghazali identified the cause as the eternal God.

Thomistic

Thomas develops five arguments for God, the first three of which go towards a cosmological argument, (movement, causation, contingency, goodness, design). The first three are all arguments for a first cause, and are often used to defend theism.

First the argument from motion which proves an unmoved mover. All things that move are moved by something else. Anything with the potential to move cannot actualise its own potential and must be moved by another. An infinite regress of causes is impossible therefore there must be a first mover. A watch with its gears all moving simultaneously is the picture we ought to have not a series of dominoes, and without a spring none of the gears moving. Souls move bodies, but souls are made by God.

Secondly, this is the argument from causation. From nothing nothing comes. Nothing can be the cause of its own existence. All effects have a cause. There cannot be an infinite chain of causes but there must be an uncaused causer. Just as the first argument argued for an unmoved mover. This is God.

Thirdly, the argument from contingency. This will perhaps be the most alien of all Thomas's arguments because it assumes a certain relationship between existence and essence.

Ralph McInerny puts it forward in 11 points:

- “(1) Some of the things that are, since they are generated and corrupt, can either be or not be. (they have potentiality and not actuality)
- (2) It is impossible that everything that is should be such that it can either be or not be. (it cannot be and not be at the same time)
- (3) Whatever is such that it cannot be is not.
- (4) Thus if everything were such that it could either be or not be, at some time there was nothing.
- (5) But if once there was nothing, there would be nothing now, since that from which not being comes to be requires a cause which is.

- (6) Therefore if once there was nothing, nothing could have come to be, and even now there would be nothing, which is clearly false
- (7) Therefore not everything is possible and there must be something that is necessary.
- (8) That which is necessary either has a cause of its necessity from elsewhere, or it does not.
- (9) It is impossible that all necessary beings should have a cause of necessity outside themselves.
- (10) Therefore there must be a necessary being whose necessity is not caused by another but which is necessary of itself.
- (11) Such a necessary being we call God."

Otherwise put, "...we see things which come into existence, and these things (which can also go out of existence) must have been caused to exist."

"The existence of things that come into being and then decay requires the existence of One that always is." (Kelly 85-86).

Leibnizian

'Why is there something rather than nothing?' Nothing happens without a sufficient reason. The existence of the universe cannot be found in anything in the universe. Past states of the universe are merely collective contingencies having no explanation. Everything in the universe is itself contingent and not necessary. Therefore the reason for the universes existence must be found outside the universe not in it, in a being whose sufficient reason for existence is self-contained. Not self-caused but self-contained.

Something cannot come from nothing, from nothing nothing comes. This is the basic premise that undergirds this argument and I think it has persuasive power. However it has limitations. Some will posit that matter is eternal and avoid the problem of cause altogether. William Lane Craig who uses this in his apologetic efforts points to an expanding universe and the Big Bang theory to argue against such an objection. He also points to the 2nd law of thermodynamics, that everything ends in heat death, to prove the universe is not eternal. If the universe is eternal it can never reach its end, yet there is a theoretical end in sight. A second difficulty is that if it proves a cause it cannot prove whether God or gods, or some other thing was the cause. It can only prove so much and this not much at all. In fact we would say that it proves less than what all people can glean from nature as Romans 1 describes.

That said it can force an unbeliever to reckon more deeply with the question of a Creator. It can be used to demonstrate the illogical nature of suppressing the knowledge of our Creator. We could use it to expose the culpability to denying obvious truths and point to the sinful heart that has a bias to do so. We could talk about the guilt involved in this and Christ as the only solution. We as Christians know that this Creator is the God of the Bible, that Trinitarian God who made all things for His glory.