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Knowledge about God

We live in an age of seemingly endless gods, goddesses, religions, and spiritualities. As a result, it is very difficult to pursue knowledge of God. After all, if there is such widespread disagreement over whether or not God or gods exist, why should anyone try to form his or her own conclusions on the matter? Moreover, if someone wanted to arrive at a personal conviction on the question of whether or not there is a God, how should he or she begin the journey? Historically, much ink has been spilled over this matter, and I will seek to briefly explain some of the common conclusions.

To begin, we must determine whether or not a God or gods and goddesses do actually exist. Many philosophical arguments have been proposed to prove the existence of God. Among the most popular are the arguments from the highest ideal (ontological argument), intelligent design (teleological argument), first cause (cosmological argument), time (Kalam argument), and morality (axiological argument). Each of these arguments is complex and can be presented in multiple ways. Generally speaking, these philosophical arguments are each inductive in form, meaning they reason from what God has done to an understanding of who God is. The one exception is the ontological argument, which is a deductive argument. To help you consider the merits of these arguments, I will summarize each briefly.

Ontological Argument from Highest Ideal

The philosopher Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) first formulated the argument from the highest ideal, also called the ontological argument (*ontos* means “being”). The ontological argument seeks to prove the existence of God by reasoning that human beings, regardless of their culture or period in history, continually conceive of a perfect being that is greater than they are—so great that no greater being can be conceived of. This perfect being is God. The argument follows that since the human mind is only able to conceive of that which actually exists, God must exist because we would not be able to conceive of God unless there was God. Likewise, everything else that we conceive of, from automobiles to the color blue, does exist. Therefore, our idea about this perfect highest being called God is derived from the actual existence of this God. This argument is rooted in Exodus 3:14, where God reveals himself to Moses as “I AM WHO I AM.”

Historically, this argument for the existence of God has been highly controversial. Its defenders include René Descartes (1596–1650) and Benedict Spinoza (1632–1677). Its critics include Christian Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) and atheist David Hume (1711–1776). While not without merit, this argument’s complexity and controversy make it perhaps not the most compelling argument for God’s existence in comparison to the inductive arguments that we will now explore.

Teleological Argument from Design

The teleological argument seeks to convince from the amazing harmony in all of creation that the world has been ordered by an Intelligent Designer who is God. The name itself bears this out, as it is taken from the word *telos*, which means purpose or design. In its simple form, the argument contends that when we see something that

is designed, we rightly assume that it was created by an intelligent designer. Further, the more complicated something is, the more intelligent the designer must have been. For example, if we were walking through the woods and found a small house built out of Legos, we would not only assume that it was created by an intelligent designer, but we may also surmise that a child was responsible for the creation. On the other hand, if we found a fifty-story building complete with central heating and a solar-powered electrical system, we would assume that not only was the building created, but also that the designer was more intelligent than that of the Lego building, namely a skilled architect.

The teleological argument finds biblical support in regards to the universe in such places as Psalm 19:1: “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork” and Romans 1:20: “[God’s] 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.”

Support for the argument in regards to our own bodies is found in Psalm 139:13–14, which says, “For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works. . . .” Further findings in science continually increase our understanding of the wondrous complexity of our body, including the fact that just one human DNA molecule holds roughly the same amount of information as one volume of an encyclopedia.

God himself even used teleological reasoning in an argument with a man named Job. Beginning in Job 38:1, God peppers Job with sixty-four questions about the design of creation, including: “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell

me, if you have understanding.”¹ As an aside, God’s questioning of Job was God seeking in love to bring Job to the understanding that just as God had a purposeful design for his creation, so too he had a purposeful design in mind for Job’s suffering.

Advocates of the teleological argument from design include Christian philosopher Thomas Aquinas. Perhaps the most famous articulation of the argument was by William Paley (1743–1805). His watchmaker analogy stated that if you came across something as complex as a watch, you would rightly assume that an intelligent designer made it. Likewise, as we walk through the world, we continually encounter things made with far greater complexity than a watch, such as the eye you are using to read these words. Therefore, we are logically compelled to believe that these things were intelligently designed by God. Although belief in an Intelligent Designer became less prominent as a result of the rise of modern science, many scientists, including non-Christians, have accepted the intelligent design theory as quantum mechanics has replaced Newtonian physics as the prevailing scientific worldview. Furthermore, numerous media outlets including *Time* and *PBS* have featured stories on the growing acceptance of intelligent design theory in recent years.

In recent decades, the “fine-tuning argument” has also gained prominence as a form of the teleological argument. Astrophysicists, such as the Christian Hugh Ross, and others proposing the argument note that several basic physical constants must fall within very narrow limits if intelligent life is to develop. For example, our world’s constant gravitational force, the rate of universe expansion, the average distance between stars, the nature of gravity, earth’s distance from the sun, earth’s rotation period,

1. Job 38:4.

and even our carbon dioxide levels are so finely tuned for life on our planet that no logical explanation other than God is tenable.

Cosmological Argument from First Cause

The cosmological argument comes from the word *cosmos*, which means “orderly arrangement.” The word was purportedly first used to explain the universe by the sixth-century-BC Greek philosopher Pythagoras. The argument from first cause asserts that for every effect there is a cause. (This is referred to formally as the law of causality.) Therefore, the material world must have a beginning, and that beginning must be outside of the material world to cause it to come into existence. The first cause, also called the uncaused cause, is God. On this point, the astronomer Fred Hoyle claimed that “the probability of life arising on earth (by purely natural means, without special divine aid) is less than the probability that a flight-worthy Boeing 747 should be assembled by a hurricane roaring through a junkyard.”²

This argument has been popular with many non-Christian thinkers such as Plato (428–348 BC), Aristotle (384–322 BC), the Muslim philosopher Al-Farabi (872–950), as well as the Jewish thinker Moses Maimonides (1135–1204). Noteworthy Christian thinkers advocating the cosmological argument include Augustine (354–430), Anselm, Descartes, and Aquinas. They have reasoned that in addition to the material world, immaterial things such as emotions and intelligence are simply not possible apart from a God who created the world in general and humans in particular. Simply, the cause of our emotions and thoughts cannot be emotionless and unintelligent matter.

2. Fred Hoyle, quoted in Alvin Plantinga, “The Dawkins Confusion,” *Books & Culture* 13, no. 2 (March/April 2007): 21, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/bc/2007/002/1.21.html>.

Therefore, we must have been created by an emotional and intelligent God, which explains the effect of our feelings and thoughts.

The cosmological argument for creation from a first cause is rooted in many places in Scripture. The biblical creation story tells us that an eternal, necessary first cause (God) created the universe and all that is in it. God is eternal³ and is therefore separate and apart from his creation as the necessary first cause. The first two chapters of Genesis report that God eternally existed before any aspect of creation and that God alone is the Creator and Cause of our world.

In explaining how God is the cause of creation, it is common to hear the phrase *ex nihilo*. *Ex nihilo* is Latin for “out of nothing” and is commonly used to explain how God made creation out of nothing. The Bible teaches that God made creation *ex nihilo* in Hebrews 11:3, which says, “By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.”

Opponents of this argument have sought to negate its claims by offering alternatives to the concept that the world had a cause and a beginning. For example, solipsists suggest that the world is simply an illusion. Nevertheless, they hypocritically look both ways before crossing a busy street. Some have argued that the world is self-created, which seems as illogical as coming home to find a new flat-screen television complete with remote control and high-definition cable and believing that the television, remote, and cable hookup each caused itself to spring into existence and work together in perfect harmony. Others have reasoned that the material world came from nothing and was made by nothing, which also seems illogical because no-thing cannot create a-thing. Believing that matter and energy sprang from nothing requires a leap of faith more giant than believing that creation is the work of God. Finally, others

3. Ps. 90:2.

have opposed the argument from first cause by suggesting that the universe is eternal. Yet most scientists believe that the universe is winding down to an eventual end based upon the Second Law of Thermodynamics and the Big Bang Theory, which proves that it likewise had a beginning. This leads us to the argument from time, which we will examine next. As a curious historical footnote, even the great father of evolution, Charles Darwin, was clear in *On the Origin of Species* that he remained convinced that God existed in agreement with the cosmological argument.

Kalam Argument from Time

The basic Kalam argument is that the existence of time necessitates a beginning as a reference point from which time proceeds. This reference point would have to be outside of time to begin time, and that eternal reference point is God, who is outside of time but initiated time. To put it another way, the universe is not eternal and therefore must have a beginning. Behind that beginning must be a cause that is eternal, or apart from time. Therefore, the cause of time and creation is God.

This argument relies heavily on the Second Law of Thermodynamics, which affirms that the universe is running out of usable energy and is therefore winding down to an end. Practically, this means that since the universe will have an end, it is not eternal and must have also had a beginning. Also used in support of this argument is Big Bang cosmology, which states that the universe had a beginning and has been expanding ever since and is therefore not eternal.

The argument from time was formulated by Muslim philosophers such as Al-Farabi and Al-Ghazali (1058–1111) and is now popular among Muslims, Jews, Protestants, and Catholics who teach that the existence of time is evidence for God.

The argument does have merits and is helpful, but it does not prove that God is personal or intelligent. Neither does it determine the nature of God as deistic, pantheistic, or monotheistic. Therefore, by itself the Kalam argument can help us believe in a god but cannot clearly articulate any specific information about the nature of God.

Axiological Argument from Morality

The axiological argument takes its title from the word *axios*, which means “judgment.” The argument from morality contends that everyone, regardless of his or her culture, has an innate understanding of right and wrong. Simply, all sane people know that such things as rape and murder are wrong.

But where do these universal morals that exist in each of us come from? The moral argument responds that God has made us with a conscience that helps us navigate through life as responsible moral beings, though we often ignore the conscience he has given us. When we argue that the way something is is not the way it “ought” to be, the moral argument proponents would say we are not merely appealing to law, but ultimately to God who is the giver of the moral law implanted in our consciences.

This argument does agree with Scripture, which repeatedly appeals to our conscience in the knowledge of what is right and wrong. One such example is found in Romans 2:15, which speaks of non-Christians who are aware of their consciences: “the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them.” Simply, when we feel bad about what we have done or what someone else has done, we are bearing witness that God is the Lawgiver and has put an understanding of his law on our hearts through our conscience.

The axiological argument was formalized by the philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) and winsomely articulated by the great Christian thinker C. S. Lewis (1898–1963). Lewis insightfully commented that when we have been sinned against, we often appeal to the universal laws that define right and wrong, assuming that there is an authority above the person who acted unjustly toward us. We also anticipate that somehow everyone else will agree with our understanding of right and wrong because we know that they have a conscience in them, which explains why we appeal to it.

One of the beautiful results of the moral law is that it permits us to have a righteous anger. Because there is both a Lawgiver and Law, we are able to rise above the incessant postmodern pluralism that says that there is no Law but only cultural perspective on morality. Because the axiological argument is true, we do not have to accept evil atrocities and injustices committed in one culture; instead, as human beings we can appeal to the higher authority of God the Lawgiver who sits over all cultures in authority. This explains, for example, why Nazi Germany was stopped for violating God's unchanging laws regarding human dignity and not merely accepted as a law unto itself. Curiously, at the Nuremberg trials, one of the more common appeals by those on trial was that there was no Lawgiver or Law, and that they were simply obeying the law of their nation. In response, the axiological argument was given because human beings were made with a sense of right and wrong by a moral God who is our Lawgiver. Other glorious examples of the practical outworking of the axiological law are Abraham Lincoln's (1809–1865) and William Wilberforce's (1759–1833) battles against slavery, as well as Martin Luther King Jr.'s (1929–1968) fight for civil rights from religious convictions.

In conclusion, taken together as a cumulative case, the various arguments for God's existence reveal that God exists; he is the Intelligent Designer, the powerful Cause of all creation, apart from time but at work in time, and morally good.

Pascal's Wager

After surveying the varying arguments for the existence of God, you may remain unconvinced that God exists. To help convince you to continually pursue the truth about God, it will be helpful to examine the thoughts of Blaise Pascal (1623–1662). At the age of fourteen, Pascal was invited to join a weekly gathering of the leading geometricians from Paris. By the age of sixteen, he had written a groundbreaking book on geometry that some critics rejected, believing it was far too complicated to have been conceived by someone of his young age. At the age of nineteen, Pascal invented the first calculator in an effort to assist his father with complex mathematics. He made some fifty such machines, which became the distant cousins of the modern-day computer.

At the age of thirty-one, Pascal invented probability theory in response to questions his friend posed to him regarding gambling. He also clarified theories on pressure and vacuum, studied hydraulic fluids, created the first hydraulic press, and invented the syringe. Additionally, he created the first public transportation system, which was a bus line built for the poor residents of Paris. His scientific legacy is so profound that today an SI unit of pressure as well as a computer program are named in honor of Pascal.

Tragically, Pascal, who was sick throughout his life, died in Paris on August 19, 1662, two months after his thirty-ninth birthday. He never did get to write his crowning book; *Pensées* (“Thoughts”) is simply a compilation of the various thoughts he

had scattered on scraps of paper. Amazingly, his unfinished thoughts alone were so profound that they remain a bestselling book over three hundred years later.

With his death imminent, Blaise Pascal gave his home to a poor family suffering with smallpox. Fittingly, Pascal's final words from his deathbed were, "May God never abandon me."

Pascal's now-famous concept of "The Wager" is described in *Pensées*:

"Either God is or he is not." But to which view shall we be inclined? Reason cannot decide this question. Infinite chaos separates us. At the far end of this infinite distance a coin is being spun which will come down heads or tails. How will you wager? Reason cannot make you choose either, reason cannot prove either wrong. . . . Yes, but you must wager. There is no choice, you are already committed. . . . Let us weigh up the gain and the loss involved in calling heads that God exists. Let us assess the two cases: if you win you win everything, if you lose you lose nothing. Do not hesitate then; wager that he does exist.⁴

The gist of Pascal's argument is that life is a voyage toward or away from God that we embarked on the moment we were born. When it comes to believing in God, everything begins with a bet that everyone makes with his or her life. If you believe there is a God and you die to discover you are right, then you win your bet. If you believe in God and then die, but there is no God, you have lost nothing, gained nothing, and simply come out even on your bet. This bet is safe because you have nothing to lose and everything to gain.

On the other hand, if you do not believe in God, you are making a very risky bet, because you have everything to lose and nothing to gain. If you do not believe in

4. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (New York: Penguin, 1966), 150–51.

God and when you die you discover you were wrong, you literally have hell to pay. And if you do not believe in God and then die and God does not exist, then you have gained nothing, lost nothing, and simply come out even on your bet. Pascal's point is that your life is a bet, and it is most reasonable to bet that there is a God.

Clearly, Pascal's wager is limited: Pascal does not tell us which God or gods we should worship. Most religions teach that their God is the only God. As a result, even if you do bet on a god, you will still end up in some form of hell if you've bet on the wrong God, gods, or goddesses. Therefore, even though Pascal's wager wisely encourages us to start pursuing God, we must go further. The question persists: how can we know God?

In his defense, Pascal's intentions with "The Wager" were modest. Rather than trying to answer every question someone may have about God, he merely sought to motivate people to pursue true knowledge of God. Indeed, he may have been guided by sections of Scripture such as Jeremiah 29:13–14a, where God says, "You will seek me and find me. When you seek me with all your heart, I will be found by you." In light of this, Pascal was not trying to convince people about God as much as compel them to pursue the truth for themselves.

The pursuit of that truth about God is likely the very reason why you are reading this book in the first place. To arrive at the truth about God, we must move from philosophical speculation, which is the human attempt to discover God, to biblical revelation, which is God's attempt to reveal himself to us. This move is vital because God, who is infinite, cannot be uncovered by those of us who are part of his finite creation unless he reveals himself to us.

Fortunately, the Bible has a lot to say about God revealing himself to us. The Bible repeatedly teaches that the truth about God can be truly known.⁵ At the same time,

5. Jer. 9:24; John 17:3; 2 Tim. 1:12.

the Bible teaches that God cannot be fully known because he is infinite. We are finite and, therefore, incapable of understanding all that he is and does.⁶ The Bible further describes some of the reasons we are unable to fully know God: (1) he has secrets that he will not reveal to us;⁷ (2) as a result of our finitude and sin, we see only in part;⁸ (3) he hides parts of his person from our knowledge;⁹ and (4) we suppress much of what God has made known to us about himself because we don't like what God says.¹⁰ Thus, arriving at a true knowledge of God requires both a desire to learn what has been revealed and a humility to follow the truth wherever it should lead us. In that spirit, we start our journey to the truth about God by first wandering down some of the philosophical and religious paths that do not lead to God.

6. Job 11:7–8; Pss. 97:2; 145:3; Isa. 40:28; 45:15; 55:8–9; 1 Cor. 2:11.

7. Deut. 29:29.

8. 1 Cor. 13:12.

9. Isa. 45:15.

10. Rom. 1:18–25.