

# The Rational Search for God

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*An Analysis of Three Abstract Arguments for God's Existence*

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## Introduction

There are many theists who have never experienced the Supreme Personal Being (hereafter called “God”), never observed his actions in the world firsthand, and who reject volitional belief as a method for establishing a personal belief in God. Yet still they believe. Why? Many theists offer abstract arguments as their main (or only) reasons for belief in God—usually the design argument, the cosmological argument, the moral argument, and/or the ontological argument.

These arguments are ancient—typically first credited to Greek philosophers such as Plato or Aristotle—yet still very common; any modern theist is likely to give one or more such argument. However, careful thought and analysis shows that none of these abstract arguments are valid or useful. They persist only because they are relatively easy arguments for anybody to understand, and they can seem very logical and almost self-evident when first presented.

## The Inductive Teleological Argument

In these days of widespread understanding of modern evolutionary theory, the inductive teleological argument is often seen as the most compelling of the arguments from design. This argument tends to focus on physics, rather than biology, noting how incredibly fine-tuned our universe is for supporting life, and how even a slight change to one of numerous fundamental physical constants or aspects of earth's place in the universe would prevent life from ever appearing. For example, according to theistic astrophysicist Hugh Ross, “much less than one chance in a quintillion exists that even one [life-supporting] planet would occur anywhere in the universe” (Ross 134), even if the laws of physics were disposed to allow biological life. Surely, goes the argument, the only explanation for this fine-tuning is that an omnipotent, caring being designed our universe with humanity in mind.

Despite the confidence and impressive statistics presented by the proponents of the inductive teleological argument, there are many philosophers, physicists, and cosmologists who dismiss it as a solipsistic misportrayal of our universe, loaded with faulty assumptions. Nobel Prize winning physicist Steven Weinberg points out that “any possible universe could be explained as the work of some sort of designer. Even a universe that is completely chaotic...could be supposed to have been designed by an

idiot.”<sup>1</sup> In response, the theist typically claims that our universe demonstrates such perfection that it must be the work of a perfect designer. Is that so? Paul Kurtz asserts that “the universe indeed appears to manifest dissonance and discordance as well as constancy and symmetry” (Kurtz 297), and asks why a perfect eternal being would create a universe characterized by change and impermanence. Weinberg, again, says that “We don't know the final laws yet, but as far as we have been able to see, they are utterly impersonal and quite without any special role for life... As Richard Feynman has said, when you look at the universe and understand its laws, ‘the theory that it is all arranged as a stage for God to watch man's struggle for good and evil seems inadequate.’”

Finally, even if you make the unwarranted assumption that the universe does demonstrate a seemingly impossible level of perfection, it does not follow that this perfection was created by God. Physicists such as André Linde proposed the theory of “chaotic inflation”, which “showed that the present state of the universe could have arisen from quite a large number of different initial configurations [and] that the initial state did not have to be chosen with great care” (Hawking 137). Of late, others such as Leonard Susskind, have taken refuge in the seemingly limitless but purely abstract mathematical possibilities of string theory, arguing for a “cosmic landscape”: a huge megaverse of randomly varying fundamental laws where each little part has different physical constants and is a seemingly isolated universe – almost guaranteeing that some small pocket of a universe (e.g., ours) could support life. These theories show that a Creator is not the only logically consistent explanation for a finely-tuned universe.

## The Cosmological Argument

Especially in light of the scientific discovery that space and time had a beginning, many ask, “What caused the big bang? Why does anything exist, rather than nothing?” The cosmological argument approaches these questions by positing that though the universe exists, it could conceivably not exist, and so there must be a cause outside the universe that explains why the universe does in fact exist—and the only cause, it is claimed, that provides a satisfactory answer to this question is that an eternal, uncaused, necessary being exists. This “first cause” we call God.

Unfortunately, this argument is simultaneously appealing and suspect due to the limited experience of humanity—a species restricted by minds that have evolved to understand life on earth and not life transcending earth’s universe. Our experience and understanding is limited to a small portion of a spatial universe with one time dimension. We do not know enough about what happens in the absence of time to say there must have been a Cause that got time started. Every “cause” we have ever observed has been something that temporally precedes or coincides with its effect. Thus it does not necessarily follow that outside of our universe, the beginning of space and time had a cause.

Finally, even if it could be established that there must be an “uncaused cause,” that cause would probably be more like a simple fundamental law governing everything than a conscious being. For if

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes from Steven Weinberg come from an article based on a speech he gave in 1999 at the Conference on Cosmic Design in Washington, D.C. The article is available online at [http://www.physlink.com/Education/essay\\_weinberg.cfm](http://www.physlink.com/Education/essay_weinberg.cfm)

anyone claims that the uncaused cause has certain attributes, the unanswerable question remains as to why it has those attributes and not any other conceivable attributes.

## The Ontological Argument

For most people, the ontological argument is easily the least compelling of the three arguments I discuss in this paper. This argument, most influentially formulated by the Christian theologian Anselm in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, goes something like this (although there are many variations):

1. I have an idea of “a being of which none greater can be conceived.”
2. If this being did not exist, his greatness would be diminished and he would not be “a being of which none greater can be conceived”, because I can conceive of a greater being that actually exists.
3. Ergo, God exists.

Thinkers have raised countless objections to this argument even during the time of Anselm himself. The most devastating problem is that one could use precisely the same argument to derive the existence of “a being of which none worse can be conceived.” Since such a being would destroy the earth or at least make almost everybody on earth utterly miserable and violent (otherwise he would not be the worst conceivable being) but there are many good and happy people living today, he does not exist and the argument *must* be invalid.

## Conclusion

We do not know why or how the universe began, or why it exists at all. We do not know why the universe is somewhat stable and suitable enough for life to exist. What we do know is that neither the teleological argument, the cosmological argument, nor the ontological argument mandate God’s existence. We also know that the history of science is one of human discoveries continually reducing the number of mysteries attributed to God. Today, nobody attributes the once-divine rainbows and thunderstorms to anything but impersonal natural forces. Even the diversity of life can be explained via evolution through natural selection. One day, the apparent fine-tuning of the universe or the existential paradox may be likewise explained.

## Works Cited

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