

6.

The Divine Universe

Personal Intentions as Explanation

We have thus far considered three types of explanations that are highly familiar to us in our daily lives: scientific causation, mathematical relationships, and the value that different things may hold for us. Every day we navigate the world with a keen awareness of the gravity holding us to the floor, the basic mathematics underpinning the way we make quantitative calculations, and the cherished values motivating our decisions. At the same time, our experience encompasses another kind of explanation that is so pervasive and immediate to the way that we interact with the world that it is easy to overlook. In particular, an event or state of affairs may result from a person's intentional actions.¹ I am directly aware of my self-forming intentions and acting upon them. My hand reaches for the door and opens it because I intended that it do so. In this chapter, we will consider an approach to explaining the world's existence that is based in the actions of a personal being who intentionally created the physical world.

The term “God” can take on a wide variety of meanings for different people. For some, God is the divine being described by their particular religious tradition or belief system. For others, God represents whatever they consider to have the greatest significance in the universe or in their lives. God may also stand for the grandest mysteries about the nature of the world

¹ Bruce R. Reichenbach, “Explanation and the Cosmological Argument,” in *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Michael L. Peterson and Raymond J. VanArragon (Blackwell, 2004), 100–01, 113.

that stubbornly resist our comprehension. Adopting a view often referred to as “pantheism,” some people conceive of God as encompassing virtually everything in the universe itself, while others profess belief in multiple gods. People also differ in regard to the role that beliefs about the divine play in their lives. Divine beings may be the focus of worship, the touchstone for how to live, or a center of communal and cultural life.

Given manifold meanings that people attach to the idea of theism, it is worth emphasizing that this chapter will use the term in a particular way. We are interested specifically in the claim that the reason for the world’s existence is to be found in personal explanation: that is, in the intentional actions of a divine being. To be sure, not everyone accepts that personal explanation provides a genuinely distinct kind of reason for events. Some believe that human actions are entirely the product of material processes beyond our control, and that scientific explanations alone can fully account for the way we behave. As we are using the term, a theistic explanation for the world’s existence necessarily maintains that intentions can have a reality that is not dependent on the existence of physical things. More specifically, the accounts of theism that we will be exploring insist that at least for one (divine) being, personal explanation has a reality beyond the playing out of scientific natural laws. As an extremely powerful, immaterial being, God can bring things about in a way that does not depend on anything else, and God’s intentional action is responsible for the reality of physical existence itself.

Our interest will be specifically in arguments for (and against) theism that are based in reason; that is, in arguments developed through the natural ability of the human mind to draw conclusions from principles considered to be reliable independently of faith or revelation. People have different reasons for their belief that God exists. Some make a commitment of faith to maintain belief in God regardless of the extent to which they find that belief to be supported by evidence or rational argument alone. Belief in God may also be based in words believed to have come directly from the deity. As important as other epistemic grounds are for some believers, we will focus in particular on reasoned arguments bearing on the existence of God.

Our examination will center on three historically influential kinds of arguments for the existence of an all-powerful God: ontological arguments, cosmological arguments, and a style of reasoning known as inference to the best explanation. As we will see, these arguments differ in important ways. Transcending these differences, however, is a core commitment to showing that the reason for the world’s existence ultimately rests in the intentions of a divine being.

Ontological Arguments

Ontological arguments are especially intriguing due to the sheer ambition of their claims. They seek to show that God necessarily exists, and they do so entirely with a priori reasoning, meaning that the arguments do not depend on things that we can observe with our senses. Instead of empirical evidence, a priori arguments are rooted in rational reflection. The classic ontological arguments are centered on an analysis of the kind of thing that God is. According to this kind of argument, one can recognize that God must exist just by properly understanding the concept of God. Ontological arguments aim to demonstrate God's existence from indubitable starting points with the deductive rigor that is the bread and butter of mathematics.

One of the most influential ontological arguments was developed by the medieval monk St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109 CE). Anselm drew a distinction between the idea of something that we have in our minds and its actual existence. “[I]t is one thing for an object to exist in the understanding,” he wrote, and “quite another to understand that the object exists [in reality].”² I might form an idea of a river flowing with caramel and chocolate, but sadly this does not guarantee that it exists in reality. Ordinarily, if someone describes an idea of something that you have never seen, it is appropriate to respond, “Yes, but is there any such thing in reality?” The burden of Anselm's ontological argument is to show that God is an exception in this respect. If you understand the idea of God, you appreciate that God must exist in reality.

Anselm's ontological argument begins with a definition and a crucial premise. The definition of God is “that than which nothing greater can be thought,”³ and the premise holds that it is greater to exist in reality than to exist in the mind alone. Anselm makes his case in the form of a *reductio ad absurdum* argument (or *reductio*, for short), which assumes the opposite of the conclusion one wishes to support and shows that it generates absurd results. If assuming that X is true leads to something obviously wrong—such as a logical contradiction—then X must be false.

Why would assuming that God does not exist lead to an absurd result? Anselm reasons that if God does not exist in reality, then we can conceive of a being greater than God: namely, a being like God who exists in reality. However, by definition, God is the greatest conceivable being. Thus, to deny God's existence is tantamount to saying that there is a being greater than the greatest conceivable being, which is a contradiction. Therefore, the

² Anselm, *Monologion and Proslogion with the Replies of Gaunilo and Anselm*, trans. Thomas Williams (Hackett, 1996), *Proslogion* ch. 2.

³ Anselm, *Proslogion*, ch. 2.

assumption that God exists in the mind alone must be wrong. In Anselm's words,

if that than which a greater cannot be thought exists only in the understanding, then that than which a greater *cannot* be thought is that than which a greater *can* be thought. But that is clearly impossible. Therefore, there is no doubt that something than which a greater cannot be thought exists both in the understanding and in reality.⁴

Gaunilo of Marmoutiers announced a famous objection almost as soon as the ink on Anselm's ontological argument was dry. As a fellow monk, Gaunilo did not question God's existence; rather, the debate concerns the merits of Anselm's argument. To discredit Anselm's ontological argument, Gaunilo's argument employs a *reductio* of its own. In particular, the argument aims to show that if one assumes the soundness of Anselm's argument it leads to an absurd result: namely, the conclusion that there exists in reality any number of other incomparable entities, such as an island greater than which no island can be thought.

To make this "Lost Island" argument, Gaunilo asks us to imagine an island "more excellent than all others on earth," which is "more plentifully endowed than even the Isles of the Blessed with an indescribable abundance of all sorts of riches and delights."⁵ Applying Anselm's reasoning, once we have the idea of this most wondrous island in our mind, we must recognize that such an island actually exists. After all, if there were no such island, then we could imagine an even greater island: one that exists in reality. But this is a contradiction, because we began with the idea of the greatest imaginable island. Nor is there any reason to stop at islands; one can with the same reasoning demonstrate the existence of an unsurpassable paper weight, bowl of soup, or mud pile. Since this result is preposterous, the assumption that Anselm's argument is sound must be mistaken.

Although Anselm did not fully explicate a defense of his proof from the Lost Island argument, his reply to Gaunilo suggests the kernel of a rebuttal: that God is unique.⁶ God's uniqueness derives from the idea, accepted by many medievals, that there is a hierarchical order of being. Belief in such a hierarchy dates to ancient Greek thought. As discussed earlier, Plato posits two distinct realms of existence—forms and particulars—with the former clearly superior to the latter.⁷ Though departing from Plato in many

4 Anselm, *Proslogion*, ch. 2.

5 Gaunilo, "Reply on Behalf of the Fool," in Anselm, *Monologion and Proslogion with the Replies of Gaunilo and Anselm*, trans. Thomas Williams (Hackett, 1996), 124.

6 E.C. Copleston, *A History of Medieval Philosophy* (Harper & Row, 1972), 75–76.

7 See Chapter Five.

respects, Aristotle, too, views the cosmos as deeply hierarchical. Aristotle describes rational human beings as positioned higher in the cosmic hierarchy than the beasts but lower than the perfect and incorruptible celestial spheres, which are themselves driven by perpetual yearning toward the being that is the cause of all motion in the universe. Building from Plato's ideas centuries later, the influential Neoplatonist school conceived the One as the apex of reality, whose emanations generated the cosmos's successively lower levels of existence. While the Abrahamic tradition could not fully accept any pagan accounts, it embraced the idea that being was ordered from a supreme being down to angels, humans, and lesser creatures.⁸

The stratified reality that Anselm took for granted fits hand in glove with recognition of a singular, supreme being at the pinnacle of the cosmic hierarchy. Anselm defines God in superlative terms. God is that single being than which none greater can be conceived. There are degrees of existence, and it stands to reason that one being occupies a position above all the rest. This set of assumptions allows Anselm to treat his ontological argument as applying exclusively to God. At the apex of being, God encompasses every possible good characteristic to a maximal degree. Since there can be only one highest being, the same reasoning that leads to the conclusion of God's necessary existence does not apply to Gaunilo's island or to anything else.

Anselm uses his idea of a highest being to further illuminate God's nature. One need only ask which attributes would characterize the greatest possible being. For instance, God must be omnipotent, because if God had less than complete power then it would be possible to conceive a greater being: one with a larger degree of power. Anselm uses similar reasoning to conclude that God is omniscient, omnibenevolent, and eternal. There is a coherence inherent in the very idea of God that is lacking in other ideas, like that of Gaunilo's lost island.⁹

René Descartes (1596–1650) advanced another prominent version of the ontological argument half a millennium later. Descartes offers a different definition of God, but the structure of his argument is similar in important respects to Anselm's. Descartes defines God as a "supremely perfect being."¹⁰ Given this definition, Descartes contends, denying that such a being exists in reality leads to a contradiction. Since a logical contradiction cannot be true, it must be the case that God exists not only as an idea in our minds, but as a being in reality as well. Like Anselm, Descartes assumes that existing is better than not existing, or, in Descartes's terminology, that existence is a perfection. It follows from the definition of God as a supremely perfect being

8 MacDonald, *Being and Goodness*, 102.

9 William E. Mann, "The Perfect Island," *Mind* 85, no. 339 (1976): 417–21, 419.

10 René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Michael Moriarty (Oxford University Press, 2008), Fifth Meditation, 65.

that God possesses every perfection (including omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence). Since existence is a perfection, God possesses that perfection, too, which is to say that God exists. Existence, then, is not merely accidental to the divine being, but is essential to it, just as having three angles that add up to 180 degrees is an essential feature of what it means to be a triangle. A great mathematician himself, Descartes claims to demonstrate God's existence with the same necessity as a geometrical proof.¹¹

Cosmological Arguments

Ontological arguments are not the only way that theists have sought to establish God's existence. Another strategy encompasses a variety of demonstrations collectively known as "cosmological arguments." In contrast with ontological arguments, cosmological arguments are not *a priori*. That is, unlike ontological arguments, they include among their premises at least one empirical observation about the world. As the term "cosmological" suggests, the observation that serves as the argument's jumping off point is characteristically of a highly general nature, identifying a feature of the universe as a whole. Examples include the observations that events have causes and that things change.

Because ontological and cosmological arguments work differently, some thinkers embrace arguments of one kind while rejecting the other. One of the most prominent proponents of cosmological arguments, Thomas Aquinas (1225–74 CE), rejected *a priori* demonstrations of God's existence. A Christian theologian who embraced much of Aristotle's thought—including the view that knowledge begins from empirical observations—Aquinas offered multiple versions of the cosmological argument, known collectively as the "Five Ways." We will consider the First Way, an influential version of the argument that Aquinas himself viewed as especially significant.¹² The First Way begins from the empirical observation that some things are in motion. (In Aquinas's Aristotelian parlance, this is similar to saying that things undergo changes.) We will see how Aquinas reasons from this observation to the conclusion that there is an "unmoved mover" (God) that puts other things in motion yet is not itself in motion.¹³

11 Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Fifth Meditation, 66. As discussed further below, a number of contemporary scholars have developed ontological arguments designed to shore up earlier versions from potential objections by focusing on modal logic (which involves the ideas of contingent, possible, and necessary existence).

12 Rudi Te Velde, *Aquinas on God: The 'Divine Science' of the Summa Theologiae* (Ashgate, 2006), 48.

13 See Thomas Aquinas, "The Treatise on the Divine Nature," trans. Brian J. Shanley, in *Basic Works*, ed. Jeffrey Hause and Robert Pasnau (Hackett, 2014), part I, question 2, article 3.