Arguments for and against the existence of God

What do we mean by God?

Different kinds of theism
- Pantheism – Everything is god
- Polytheism – There are many gods
- Monotheism – There is only one God

Judeo-Christian concept of God
- God is omnipotent (all-Powerful)
- God is omniscient (all-Knowing)
- God is omni-benevolent (all-Good)
What is the purpose of theistic arguments?

- Historically, theistic arguments have been put forward for a number of different reasons.
- Are they meant to offer non-theists a demonstrable proof for the existence of God?
- Are they meant to provide theists with a rational justification for their own faith?
- It’s important to keep the purpose of the arguments in mind when we’re evaluating the ‘success’ or ‘failure’ of the arguments.

The difference between theism, atheism and agnosticism

Different kinds of cognitive stances

- There are three different cognitive stances that one can take toward any statement: one can affirm it, deny it, or suspend judgment about it.
- One can take these same attitudes with respect to the proposition that ‘God exists’ (GE)
- Affirm (GE) - theism
- Deny (GE) – atheism
- Suspend judgment on (GE) – agnosticism
The difference between *a priori* and *a posteriori* arguments

Arguments for the existence of God are commonly divided into *a posteriori* and *a priori* arguments.

- An *a posteriori* argument is based on premises that can be known only by means of our experience of the world.
- An *a priori* argument is based upon premises that can be known independent of our experience of the world.
- We'll be considering three kinds of theistic arguments (cosmological, teleological and ontological): two *a posteriori* and one *a priori*.

Cosmological arguments for the existence of God

- Generally speaking, a cosmological argument is an argument that attempts to derive the existence of God from certain features of the world (*cosmos*) given to us in experience: e.g. that the world came into being, that the world is contingent, that certain things in the world are causally dependent, etc.
- As such, cosmological arguments use a general pattern of argumentation that makes an inference from certain alleged facts about the world to the existence of a unique being, generally referred to as God.
St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274)

- Dominican Monk, Philosopher and Theologian
- Considered to be the greatest theologian of the Catholic church
- Heavily influenced by Aristotle
- Aquinas is best known for his ‘synthesis’ of Aristotelian philosophy and Christian theology
- In his *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas argued that “the existence of God could be proved in five ways...”

The Five Ways...

“The first and more manifest way is the argument from motion...”

- The argument from motion (often referred to as the argument from *change*) starts from the fact that there is motion in the world and argues that there must therefore be some first unmoved mover (or unchanged changer) from which all motion originated
The Five Ways...

“The second way is from the nature of the efficient cause...”

- The argument from efficient cause starts from the fact that there are things in the world that are clearly caused to exist and argues that there must therefore be an uncaused first efficient cause that accounts for existence of caused things.

The Five Ways...

“The third way is taken from possibility and necessity...”

- The argument from possibility and necessity (often referred to as the argument from contingency) starts from the fact that dependent beings exist and argues that there must therefore be an independent (or non-contingent, necessary) being on whom the dependent beings rely for their subsistence.
The Five Ways...

“The fourth way is taken from the gradation to be found in things...”

- The fourth way argues that since there are degrees of excellence in the world, there must be a perfect being from which all excellences originates

“The fifth way is taken from the governance of the world...”

- The fifth way argues that there is a harmony of nature that can only be explained by means of some divine designer

Aquinas’ first way...

The argument from motion/change

(1) Some things are in motion (or changing)
(2) Everything that is moved is moved by something else
(3) It is not possible for there to be an infinite series of movers

Therefore,

(4) There exists some first unmoved mover
(5) The name of that unmoved mover is God

Therefore,

(6) God exists
Aquinas’ first way...

Unpacking the reasoning of the first way

- We see in experience that certain things are in motion. And we also know from experience that whatever is moved is moved by something else.
- However, Aquinas says, this can’t go on to infinity since this would mean that there was no first mover. But there must be a first mover!! For without a first mover nothing else would have been moved, and so nothing could be in motion now. (remember, something can only move if it is first moved by something else)
- That there are things in motion now is a clear fact of experience. Hence there must have been a first mover that is not itself moved by anything else. And this first mover is what we call God.

Aquinas’ second way...

The argument from causation

1. Some things are caused to exist
2. Everything that is caused to exist is caused to exist by something else
3. It is not possible for there to be an infinite regress of causes
Therefore,
4. There exists some uncaused first cause
5. The name of that uncaused first cause is God
Therefore,
6. God exists
Aquinas’ third way...

The argument from contingency

(1) Some things are contingent
(2) Contingent things depend on other things for their existence
(3) It is not possible for every thing to be a contingent thing

Therefore,

(4) There exists some non-contingent thing
(5) The name of that non-contingent thing is God

Therefore,

(6) God exists

Aquinas’ five ways...

A common structure to all of the arguments

- Uncontroversial empirical starting points
- In the world we find that there is motion (or change), an order of efficient causes, contingent beings, etc.
- The existence of what is observed in the world requires the existence of something else that is able to explain (or account for) the existence of these things
- An infinite regress of explanation is impossible
- Some first explanatory thing must therefore exist
- The identity of that first explanatory existent is God
A common structure to all of Aquinas’ arguments...

(1) In the world we observe that there is motion (or change), an order of efficient causes, contingent beings, etc
(2) The existence of what is observed in the world requires the existence of something else that is able to explain (or account for) the existence of these things
(3) An infinite regress of explanation is impossible
Therefore,
(4) Some first explanatory thing/being/agent must exist
(5) The identity of that first explanatory thing/being/agent is God
Therefore,
(6) God exists

Why does an explanatory account require a first member?
An argument justifying the claim of premise (3)

(1) If an infinite regress of explanation were to exist, then there would be no first cause.

(2) But without a first cause there would be no intermediate causes, and thus no current effects (i.e. the presence of motion, causes and contingent beings).

(3) But there are current effects.

Therefore,

(4) An infinite regress of explanation is impossible.

Are Aquinas’ arguments for the existence of God convincing?
Evaluating the arguments

Do the conclusions of the arguments really follow from the premises?

- Well, it really depends on where you stop the arguments
- If you don’t stop the arguments at their first conclusion (i.e. at the claim that a first mover, first cause, non-contingent being exists), then they are all definitely invalid and may be rejected on those grounds.
- If you do stop the arguments at their first conclusion, then they are valid. However, this may not be particularly helpful for the theist since there’s no reason to think that these entities can be identified with the Judeo-Christian concept of God.

Evaluating the arguments

Are the premises of Aquinas’ arguments true?

- Even if we grant that premises (1) and (2) are true, Aquinas still has a problem justifying his 3rd premise—namely, the premise that claims that an infinite regress is not possible.
- Why should we accept Aquinas’ claim that an infinite regress is impossible? What’s so bad about explaining the motion, causation and existence of dependent things that we observe in the world in terms of an endless series?
- Strictly speaking, isn’t it false that an explanatory series needs to have a first member in order to account for the other members in the series? Couldn’t the order of motion, causation and existence of dependent things be accounted for like this...
Can Aquinas’ arguments be rescued from these worries?

A modified version of the cosmological argument

- In the 18th century a modified version of Aquinas’ 3rd way was advanced by Samuel Clarke and other theists (such as Gottfried Leibniz) that supposedly avoids the “no infinite regress” reasoning that Aquinas’ version of the argument relies upon.

- More specifically, the 18th century proponents of the cosmological argument recognized that a causal series of dependent beings could be infinite, without there being a first member to start (or account for) the rest of the series.
A modified version of the cosmological argument

The modified argument from contingency

(1) Every thing that exists or ever did exist is either a dependent thing or a self-explaining thing
(2) Not every thing can be a dependent thing
Therefore,
(3) There exists (at least one) a self-explaining thing

A few things to consider about the modified argument...

- Note that this modified argument does not rely on Aquinas' problematic "impossibility of infinite regress" reasoning, nor does it explicitly claim that the identity of the self-explaining thing is the God of orthodox theism
- The key terms used in the argument are plausible notions that are not that difficult to understand:
  - A dependent thing is just a thing whose existence depends on something else for its existence
  - A self-explaining thing is just a thing whose existence does not depend on something else for its existence
Evaluating the modified argument from contingency

Does the conclusion of the argument really follow from the premises?

- Yes, the argument is formally valid (the argument has the same formal structure as: P or Q; not-P; therefore Q)

Are the premises of the modified argument true?

- Premise (1) simply divides all existing things into one of two categories: things whose existence stand in need of some explanation and things whose existence do not stand in need of some explanation
- An important principle that seems to be underwriting the reasoning here is known as the *Principle of Sufficient Reason* (PSR)

According to the (PSR), there must be a sufficient cause, reason or explanation for the existence of *every thing* and *every positive fact*

The important thing to recognize is that if (PSR) is true (and it seems like a pretty intuitive principle), then it looks like premise (1) is also true.

Here’s why...

- If it’s true that there must be a sufficient cause, reason or explanation for the existence of every thing and for every positive fact, then it seems like there can only be two kinds of things that exist:
- Dependent things: things whose existence is accounted for by the causal activity of other things
- Self-explaining things: things whose existence is accounted for by its own nature
What about premise (2) of the argument?

- At first glance, the reasoning behind premise (2) looks like the same sort of “no infinite regress” reasoning that Aquinas used in his versions of the argument.
- However, this is NOT the reasoning that is used to support the truth of (2). Advocates of the modified cosmological argument recognized that a causal series of dependent things could be infinite, without there being a first member to explain the rest of the series.
- These philosophers rejected the idea that every thing that exists or ever did exist is dependent not because there would then be no first member to the series of dependent things, but rather because there would then be no explanation for the fact that there are and always have been dependent things.

Evaluating the modified argument from contingency

- Note that on this picture there is no individual dependent thing in the series that lacks an explanation: A accounts B, B accounts for C, etc.
- So what’s the problem exactly? What is it that lacks an explanation if every dependent thing is accounted for?
- Well, how about the series itself?
- In other words, what explains the fact that there are any dependent beings at all?
Evaluating the modified argument from contingency

In other words, (2) seems true *because* (PSR) is true

For if (PSR) is true then there must be a sufficient explanation for every thing and every positive fact. So even if there were an infinite series of dependent things, each one accounting for the existence of the other, there would still be a few things left without any explanation:

1. That there is something rather than nothing at all
2. That there exists a certain infinite collection of dependent things

The important point to note is this– no appeal to individual dependent things is going to be able to explain either of these facts. Thus, there must be some thing, over and above the set of dependent things, which provides the sufficient explanation for these two facts.

Is the modified argument from contingency *convincing*?
A few worries to consider...

- Does premise (1) exhaust all of the options? What about the category of things that are explained by nothing at all?
- According to some of our best theories of modern physics, there are some events that occur in nature which simply do not have sufficient causes or reasons.
- For example, consider indeterminacy of radioactive decay which is impossible to predict... in other words, there are no sufficient conditions able to explain it’s behavior.

A few worries to consider...

- Isn’t it a mistake to treat a collection of dependent things as though it were itself a dependent thing thus requiring an explanation?
- In other words, the collection of dependent things is not itself a dependent thing any more than say a collection of stamps is itself a stamp.
A few worries to consider...

- Just because each member of the collection of dependent things has a cause, it doesn’t follow that the collection itself must have a cause.
- Such reasoning seems just as fallacious as the following inference:
  - The human race (that is, the collection of human beings) must have a mother because each member of the collection (each individual human being) has a mother.

A few worries to consider...

- Isn’t a collection of things sufficiently explained once each of the individual things making up the collection are explained? A sufficient explanation of a collection of things seems to require nothing more than an explanation of each of the things making up the collection.
- In other words, doesn’t an explanation of the parts explain the whole? If each thing in the collection has an explanation, what further explanation is required?
A few worries to consider...

Maybe the (PSR) is unjustified

- Some critics of the argument contend that the Principle of Sufficient Reason is suspect.
- After all, how is the truth of PSR supposed to be justified? What reasons do we have for thinking that the PSR is true?
- As Hume argued, there are no compelling reasons for thinking that the truth of PSR can be established on either *a priori* or *a posteriori* grounds

Is there some other way to construct a convincing cosmological argument?
The *Kalam* Cosmological Argument

- A slightly different version of the cosmological argument than both Aquinas’ and the modified 18th century version that was originally developed by the Arabic Islamic philosophers al-Kindi and al-Ghazali in the Middle Ages is known as the *Kalam* cosmological argument.

- Many philosophers think that if any version of the cosmological argument will be convincing, it will be some version of the *Kalam* argument.

- This particular version of the cosmological argument has been recently revived and defended (most forcefully) by philosopher William Lane Craig.

“I find the the *Kalam* cosmological argument for a temporal first cause of the universe to be one of the most plausible arguments for God’s existence.”

“The argument shows that the universe began to exist.... [And] anything that begins to exist must have a cause that brings it into being. So the universe must have a cause.... [And] philosophical analysis reveals that such a cause must have several of the principal theistic attributes...”

William Lane Craig
The Kalam Cosmological Argument

Unlike the 17th century modification of Aquinas’ argument from contingency, the Kalam argument does not argue from the existence of contingent or dependent things to the existence of some non-contingent, self-explaining entity.

Rather, the Kalam cosmological argument takes its primary starting point from the claim that everything that “begins to exist, including the universe, must be caused to exist.”

One simple way to formulate Craig’s version of the Kalam cosmological argument...

(1) Whatever begins to exist has a cause of its coming to exist

(2) The universe began to exist

Therefore,

(3) The universe has a cause of its coming to exist
Evaluating the Kalam Cosmological Argument

Does the conclusion of the argument really follow from the premises?

- Well, once again, it really seems to depend on where you stop Craig’s version of the *Kalam* argument.
- If we evaluate the argument in terms of the simple “three-step” version put forward in the last slide (which is also put forward by Craig), then Yes, the argument is formally *valid*. In fact, the argument has the same formal structure as: All A’s are B; C is an A; Therefore, C is a B.
- However, if we evaluate the argument in terms of what Craig expresses right before he presents the simple version in his article, then No, the argument is formally *invalid*. For strictly speaking, there is no way to get to the conclusion that “God exists” from the following argument...

The Kalam Cosmological Argument

Another way to formulate Craig’s version of the *Kalam* cosmological argument...

1. Whatever begins to exist has a cause of its coming to exist
2. The universe began to exist

Therefore,

3. The universe has a cause of its coming to exist

4. “Philosophical analysis reveals that such a cause must have several of the principal theistic attributes…”

Therefore,

5. God exists
The Kalam Cosmological Argument

Yet way to formulate Craig’s version of the the Kalam cosmological argument...

(1) Whatever begins to exist has a cause of its coming to exist
(2) The universe began to exist
Therefore,

(3) The universe has a cause of its coming to exist
(4) Since no naturalistic scientific explanation (in terms of physical laws) can provide a causal account of the origin of the universe, the cause must be (in a sense) super-natural and personal
Therefore,

(5) God exists

Evaluating the Kalam Cosmological Argument

Are the premises of the simple Kalam argument true?

- According to Craig, the truth of premise (1) “is so intuitively obvious that I think scarcely anyone could sincerely believe it to be false. I therefore think it somewhat unwise to argue in favor of it, for any proof of the principle is likely to be less obvious than the principle itself... [And] the old axiom ‘out of nothing, nothing comes’ remains as obvious today as ever.”

- Some critics of the Kalam think that the principle expressed by (1) is simply false since it leaves out the possibility that “we came from nothing, by nothing and for nothing”. As such, some critics think that it’s (far) more rational to deny premise (1) and accept the conclusion that the universe came to being out of nothing than it is to affirm premise (1) and accept the conclusion that God created the universe.
Evaluating premise (2) of the *Kalam* Cosmological Argument

**Reasons for thinking that premise (2) of the *Kalam* Cosmological Argument is **true**

- Defenders of the *Kalam* usually try to support premise (2) in two ways:
  - First, philosophically, by arguing that the existence of an “actually infinite” series of things, events, etc is not possible since it can lead to absurd (and in some cases contradictory) consequences.
  - Second, scientifically, by appealing to the findings of current cosmological research which supports the claim that the universe exploded into existence roughly 14 billion years ago.

Hilbert’s hotel and the *impossibility* of an “actual infinite”

- Hilbert’s Hotel is a philosophical/mathematical paradox about infinite sets that was developed by German mathematician David Hilbert.
- Hilbert’s Hotel is a hypothetical hotel with an infinite number of rooms, each one of which is occupied. So conceived, the hotel gives rise to a paradox: the hotel is full, and yet it has vacancies.
- That the hotel is full seems obvious. It has an infinite number of rooms, and an infinite of guests; As such, every room is occupied.
Hilbert’s hotel and the impossibility of an “actual infinite”

- However, that the hotel has vacancies is a little more difficult to demonstrate. Suppose, that a new visitor arrives: Can she be accommodated?
- At first it seems that she cannot, after all, the Hotel is full. But then the Hotel clerk has an idea: He will simply move the guest in Room 1 to Room 2, and the guest in Room 2 to Room 3, etc until every guest has been moved to the next room up. Since doing so would seem to leave Room 1 vacant for the new visitor, it seems that the infinitely guested hotel also has vacancies.

Because Hilbert’s paradox is so counterintuitive, it has often been used (by Craig and others) as an argument against the existence of an actual infinity and for the conclusion that the universe “began to exist”

“Although there is nothing mathematically impossible about the existence of such a hotel (or any other infinite object), intuitively no such object could ever exist, and this intuition is a specific case of the broader intuition that no actual infinite could exist. Since a temporal sequence receding infinitely into the past would constitute such an actual infinite, time must have “started” at some point...”
Hilbert’s hotel and the *impossibility* of an “actual infinite”

An argument for the conclusion that the universe “began to exist”

(1) An actually infinite number of things cannot exist

(2) A beginning-less series of events in time entails an actually infinite number of things

Therefore,

(3) A beginning-less series of events in time cannot exist

Therefore,

(4) The universe began to exist

Evaluating premise (2) of the *Kalam* Cosmological Argument

Reasons for thinking that premise (2) of the *Kalam* Cosmological Argument is *false*

- Critics of the *Kalam* argument usually try to undermine premise (2) in two ways:
  - First, by arguing that the philosophical/mathematical reasoning used to support the impossibility of an “actually infinite” series is out-dated and mistaken
  - Second, by showing that the argument is guilty of some equivocation since the notion of “begin to exist” expressed in premise (1) is different than the notion of “began to exist” expressed in premise (2).
“Craig argues that the universe must have had a beginning, because it cannot be infinite. Why not? Craig answers, ‘what is infinity minus infinity? Well, mathematically, you get self-contradictory answers... Infinity minus infinity is infinity... [and] infinity minus infinity is 3... This implies that infinity is just an idea in your mind and not something that exists in reality’... Craig derives his contradiction by subtracting infinity from infinity. How do mathematicians avoid this contradiction? They simply limit the operation of subtraction to a certain domain, so that you are not allowed to subtract infinity. Why not? Because it gets you into contradictions! There is nothing strange or dubious about this limit on subtraction. Mathematicians also limit the operation of division. You can’t divide any number by zero. Why not? Because this would yield contradictions...”

Walter Sinnott-Armstrong

“However, this does not show that zero is not a number or is not real. The number of pink elephants in this room really is zero, believe me. So the limit on subtraction also does not show that infinity is not a number or is not real or is only in your mind or anything like that... I admit that infinity is puzzling. It seems strange that the number of odd integers is equal to the total number of integers (both odd and even) in the sense that there is a one-to-one correspondence between the members of the set. That’s weird. But it is not contradictory. So this can’t show that infinity does not exist in reality (whatever that means)... Craig might [even] admit that infinity is not self-contradictory, but still deny that anything infinite actually exists. However, actual infinities are are not to hard to find...”

Walter Sinnott-Armstrong
Is Craig’s version of the argument guilty of some *equivocation*?

Two senses of “begin” to consider...

- There seem to be at least two different ways to understand the notion of “beginning to exist” that are relevant to Craig’s argument:
  1. A narrow sense: “begins to exist” *within* time.
  2. A broad sense: “begins to exist” *either within or with* time.

- According to the broad sense, “X begins to exist” does not imply that there was a time at which X did not exist, because the past may itself be finite in which case something that begins to exist at the first moment in time is such that there never was a time at which it did not exist. In other words, according to the broad sense, something that “begins to exist” can begin *with* time and *not* in time.

Craig’s version of the *Kalam* Cosmological Argument

Reformulating Craig’s version of the *Kalam* cosmological argument in terms of the equivocation...

1. Whatever “begins to exist *within* time” (narrow sense) has a cause of its coming to exist
2. The universe “began to exist *with* time” (broad sense)

Therefore (?),

3. The universe has a cause of its coming to exist
Craig’s version of the Kalam Cosmological Argument

Reformulating Craig’s version of the Kalam cosmological argument in terms of the equivocation...

(1) Whatever is a “bank” (in the ATM/Money sense) has a cause of its coming to exist

(2) The universe is a “bank” (in the shore of a river sense)

Therefore (?),

(3) The universe has a cause of its coming to exist

The conclusion just doesn’t follow from the premises...

1. All A’s are B
2. C is a A*

Therefore (?),

3. C is an B
Is the Kalam cosmological argument for the existence of God a convincing argument?