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Does God Exist?

“We hold these truths to be self-evident,” wrote Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence, “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” Whatever their sectarian inclinations, the Founding Fathers (with the possible exception of Thomas Paine) would have agreed with Jefferson’s first assumption, namely, that there exists a Supreme Being from whom all rights, and the natural laws they are predicated on, originate.



Freedom and limited government as unquestioned goods depend ultimately on the notion that God is real, and that freedom and natural rights are gifts from Him to His children, to be safeguarded by properly constituted government. But is the existence of God, an almighty cosmic lawgiver, anything more than unprovable dogma, an article of personal faith lying outside the realm of reason?

The caricatures of Christianity offered up by its enemies notwithstanding, Christian theology has always sought to ground itself in reason. Proving the existence of God has been a fruitful exercise since the days of early Christian thinkers such as Augustine of Hippo, who sought to prove the existence of God by showing, via the inherent perfection of numbers and mathematical proofs, that man could not possibly be the highest being.

Perhaps the best-known and most influential proofs of the existence of God were served up by that quintessential thinker of the high Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas. With characteristic concision Aquinas laid out his *Quinque Viae* or “Five Ways” by which the existence of God could be proven. These ways are the unmoved mover, the first cause, the argument from contingency, the argument from degree, and the teleological argument or argument from design.

By the first argument, Aquinas meant that all things in this world are in constant change, and every change is effected by some agency that is itself changing. Yet change cannot be infinitely recursive; somewhere far up the chain of causation, there must be some unchanging agency that is the source of and standard for all change. This unchangeable source is held to be God.

The argument of first cause holds that all things have some cause external to themselves but, as with change, it is impossible to conceive of an infinite concatenation of cause and effect. There must be some first cause that is not the effect of some other prior cause, from which all other causes, and their effects, spring. This first cause is God.

According to the argument from contingency, all things in our mortal experience are perishable and will only exist for a finite time span, however long. Yet if we assume an infinite past, then all things in a perishable universe should have ceased to exist. The fact that this is not so implies the existence of



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Something that is eternally imperishable, which is God.

The argument from degree is one of Aquinas' strongest. By this argument, we recognize degrees of goodness, virtue, truth, and so on, such that we can recognize, e.g., that A is better than B, or C is more correct than D. But in a universe with no absolutes, such distinctions would be impossible. Thus there must exist some ultimate, perfect standard for goodness, beauty, virtue, truth, and the like, and that perfect standard is God.

Finally, Aquinas' teleological argument asserts that, just as intelligent beings behave in regular, purposeful ways to achieve ends, so too do non-intelligent things behave in regular ways to bring about predictable results. A seed planted in the ground will produce a plant of determinate type (and not, say, a rock or an animal), while a stone thrown in the air will follow a predictable trajectory. But such results can only obtain if guided by some type of intelligent agency, and if the thing in question does not possess such agency, it must be guided by an outside intelligence, which is God.

Nor was Aquinas alone in seeking to prove the greatest of all questions. A couple of American thinkers of surpassing originality and penetrating insight added proofs of their own. Charles Sanders Peirce, the brilliant philosopher, logician, and scientist who was the son of America's first mathematical physicist and astrophysicist, Benjamin Peirce (and who is credited, alongside his father, with the invention of that most essential of modern mathematical tools, the matrix), was deeply religious after his own fashion. In one of his better-known papers, "A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God," Peirce pointed out the remarkable and seemingly contradictory circumstance of immense variety in a universe clearly governed by law. Peirce saw law as something conceptually distinct from God Himself, observing that "the endless variety in the world has not been created by law. It is not of the nature of uniformity to originate variation, nor of law to beget circumstance. When we gaze upon the multifariousness of nature we are looking straight into the face of a 'living spontaneity.'"

Elsewhere, Peirce clarified his point: "The variety of the universe ... which we see whenever and wherever we open our eyes, constitutes its liveliness, its vivacity. The perception of it is a direct, though darkling perception of God."

In other words, while laws may originate with God, in and of themselves laws tend toward uniformity and predictability. We are thus left with the need to explain diversity and spontaneity, and God must be the direct source of these.

Another American philosopher and near contemporary of Peirce, Josiah Royce, argued that error, or human fallibility, of all things, was the strongest evidence for the existence of God. For where could men have gotten the notion of fallibility and error in the first place, much less the capacity to confront and overcome error, if not from some perfect Source? A world without God would perforce be a world in which the very notion of error would be inconceivable.

These are but a smattering of the many arguments for the existence of God brought forth by humanity's most ingenious intellects. None of them, of course, will move the dogmatic skeptics among us. But the fact remains that God does exist, and that He is the ultimate author of our liberty and laws.



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