

Arguments For God

Why the Universe Is Better Explained by a Creator than by Nothing at All

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I. What an Argument for God Can and Cannot Do

No single argument in this essay is meant to compel, and the reader should distrust any book that promises otherwise. What follows is a convergence: several independent lines pointing the same way, none decisive on its own, and together harder to set aside than any one of them. Saint Paul claims this is how it has always been—that God’s “eternal

power and deity” are “clearly perceived in the things that have been made” (Rom. 1:20). Not proved by a syllogism. Perceived, in what is already there.

It helps to say at the outset what standard of proof is in play, because the wrong standard decides the question before it is asked. Mortimer Adler, who spent a philosophical lifetime on this argument, borrowed the standard from the courtroom: existential conclusions—conclusions that something exists—are never established with the certitude of mathematics, in theology or anywhere else. What can be asked is whether belief in God is supported *beyond a reasonable doubt*, or at least *by a preponderance of the evidence*. That is the standard by which every other existence claim in human life is settled, from courtrooms to laboratories, and it is the standard the skeptic himself uses for everything except this question.¹

One more preliminary. The arguments below establish, at most, what philosophers call the God of natural theology: a necessary, immaterial, intelligent source of the world and its moral order. They do not establish the Trinity, the Incarnation, or the Resurrection; no philosophical argument could. Whether the God the arguments point to has in fact spoken and acted in history is a further question, with evidence of a different kind, taken up on this site’s pages on the Bible, on miracles, and on the Resurrection. Philosophy carries the inquiry to the door. It does not force anyone through it.

II. Why There Is Anything at All

The universe did not have to exist. Nothing about it explains why it is here rather than absent; it is the sort of thing that could have failed to be. Whatever is like that needs something outside itself to account for it. That is the argument from contingency, and stated carefully it is the oldest and strongest thing in natural theology.

The standard objection believes itself to be devastating: then what caused God? But the objection answers a rule the argument never laid down. The rule was never “everything has a cause.” It was that whatever *could have failed to exist* needs a cause. God is not one more item of that kind; that is the entire content of the word. To ask who made God is to ask who made the thing that by definition was not made.

The careful skeptic presses two sharper points, and both deserve answers. That the Principle of Sufficient Reason is unproven: true, but rejecting it costs more than theism—all inquiry, science first of all, runs on the expectation that things have explanations, and a skeptic who abandons that expectation at exactly one door has stopped reasoning at the moment reasoning became inconvenient. And the argument needs only the modest form: not that everything must have an explanation, but that a thing which could have one and exists anyway invites the question. That inferring the whole’s contingency from the parts is a composition fallacy: some inferences of that shape fail, but this one does not, because

contingency is the kind of property that survives assembly. A chain in which every link hangs from another does not hold itself up however long it grows; a stack of IOUs, however tall, never adds up to cash. If every member of the collection borrows its existence, the collection has nowhere to borrow from—and “it is just there” is not an answer to the question; it is the decision to stop asking it.

Could the universe itself be that unmade thing? It could, if it showed the marks of necessity: not changing, not assembled from parts, not one item among others. It shows none of them. It changes constantly, it is made of parts, and every part of it depends on the rest. Adler put the dependence precisely: a contingent thing “does not have its *raison d’être*, or the cause of its continuing existence, in itself, but in another,” and what cannot account for its own continuing existence cannot be the final account of anything else’s.²

III. The Form Aquinas Actually Gave It

The argument is regularly refuted in a form Aquinas never gave it. The caricature runs: everything has a cause; the chain of causes cannot go back forever; therefore a first cause started things off long ago. Against this the critic observes, correctly, that the first premise contradicts the conclusion, and that nobody has shown the past cannot be infinite. But Aquinas’ argument was never about the past.

His causal series runs downward, not backward. Consider what holds a picture on the wall this instant: the picture depends on the hook, the hook on the wall, the wall on the foundations, the foundations on the earth—a chain of simultaneous dependence, every link borrowing its power to hold from the link beneath. Such a series cannot regress forever, not because long chains are impossible, but because a chain of borrowers with no lender never explains where the borrowed thing came from. Aquinas’ first cause is not the first domino at the beginning of time; it is the ground floor beneath every moment, the one being whose existence is not borrowed. He was himself untroubled by an eternal universe—he thought philosophy could not disprove one—because an eternal universe would need a sustaining ground exactly as much as a young one.³

This is why the deepest form of the argument is about existence itself. In everything we meet, what a thing is and that it is are distinct: knowing the definition of a tiger settles nothing about whether any tigers exist. A being of that kind holds its existence as a loan. The argument concludes to something in which the distinction collapses—something whose nature simply is to exist, requiring nothing, lending to everything. When the Catholic tradition reads Exodus, where God names Himself “I am,” it hears the same claim made from the other side.⁴

IV. A Beginning, and What Would Follow

A second cosmological argument does concern the past, and it has had a modern revival because the science moved its way. William Lane Craig states it in two premises: “The universe began to exist,” and “If the universe began to exist, then the universe has a transcendent cause.” The second premise is close to self-evident; from nothing, nothing comes, and a universe that begins cannot be its own beginner. The work is all in the first premise, and for most of history the argument’s opponents could simply deny it and assert an eternal cosmos.⁵

The twentieth century made that denial expensive. The expansion of the universe, the background radiation, and the singularity theorems all point to a cosmos with a finite past; the standard model of cosmology has a first moment, and alternatives that avoid one have a way of relocating the beginning rather than eliminating it. The science is provisional, as science is, and this essay rests no weight on its staying fixed. The point is narrower: the premise the argument needs is the one the current evidence favors, and the discomfort that fact produced among cosmologists who saw its implications is a matter of record.

V. A World That Can Be Understood

Darwin explained the appearance of design in living things, and explained it well. He did not explain, and never claimed to, why there is a universe whose laws hold steady enough for evolution to work in. The design argument did not die with Paley; it moved down a level, from organisms to the conditions that make organisms possible.

Begin with the strangest fact of all: the universe can be understood. Chesterton saw before the physicists said so that the regularities of nature are not logical necessities. That two and one make three is necessary; that trees bear fruit is not—in his words, we keep “this sharp distinction between the science of mental relations, in which there really are laws, and the science of physical facts, in which there are no laws, but only weird repetitions.” The repetitions could have been otherwise. Nothing in logic requires an orderly world, still less a world whose order is written in mathematics that human minds, worked out for their own sake with no eye on the sky, keep discovering they already possess. That is not what one would expect of brute matter with no mind behind it, and the physicists who called the effectiveness of mathematics “unreasonable” were conceding as much.⁶

And the selection effect does not reach this one: survival required minds that track middle-sized objects—fruit, predators, faces—not minds whose idle abstractions anticipate the tensor calculus a century before physics needs it. An orderly world explains why evolved creatures find some order; it does not explain why the deepest order keeps answering to the games mathematicians played for beauty’s sake.

VI. The Fine-Tuning, with the Figures

Fine-tuning presses the point quantitatively. When the laws of nature are written as equations, certain constants appear in them, and certain initial quantities define the conditions on which the laws operate. Craig summarizes the discovery: these “fall into an extraordinarily narrow range of life-permitting values. Were these constants or quantities to be altered by less than a hair’s breadth, the life-permitting balance of nature would be destroyed, and life would not exist.”⁷

The figures deserve to be stated, because “narrow” understates them. The cosmological constant, which governs the expansion of space, is balanced to roughly one part in 10^{120} . The ratio of the electromagnetic force to gravity is set to about one part in 10^{40} ; shift it and stars either cannot form or burn too fast for chemistry. Roger Penrose calculated the precision of the universe’s low-entropy initial state at one part in 10 to the power 10^{123} —a number whose zeros could not be written on all the particles in the observable universe. These are not the figures of apologists; they are the figures the physics literature itself supplies, and they are why the fine-tuning problem is discussed in physics departments that have no interest in theology.⁸

Three explanations are on offer, and Craig’s trilemma states them: physical necessity, chance, or design. Necessity fails because the constants are independent of the laws; nothing in physics fixes their values. Chance, at these odds, is not an explanation but the refusal of one. That leaves design—or the one remaining escape, which deserves its own section.

Even the most famous atheist of the twentieth century felt the force of this. Antony Flew, who did not end his life a Christian, wrote that for anyone who already had rational grounds to believe in God, it would be “entirely reasonable” to see “the fine tuning argument as providing substantial confirmation of their belief in the existence of that God.” His own movement late in life from atheism to a bare deism traveled substantially on this road.⁹

VII. What the Multiverse Would Have to Cost

The multiverse answers by multiplying universes until ours is unremarkable: if every possible combination of constants is tried somewhere, some universe wins the lottery, and only winners contain observers to be surprised. It is a very large purchase, unobserved and by its own construction unobservable, made to avoid a conclusion. But the objection to it is not merely aesthetic.

First, the observer-selection reply is true but idle: that I could only notice the firing squad missed if it had missed does not make the missing unremarkable. Surviving a hundred

marksmen calls for an explanation, not a shrug that survivors are the only ones who wonder.

Second, the mechanism has a pathology its defenders discovered themselves. In any ensemble of random universes, small fluctuations are overwhelmingly more probable than large ones—and a lone brain fluctuating briefly into existence, complete with false memories, is incomparably cheaper than fourteen billion years of ordered cosmos. If the multiverse were true, the overwhelmingly typical observer would be such a brain observing an otherwise empty world. We are not. As Craig puts it, that strongly disconfirms the hypothesis; and the phrase Richard Dawkins supplied for other people's theories—"an unparsimonious extravagance"—fits nothing in the literature better than an infinity of unobservable worlds postulated to make one observable one unsurprising.¹⁰

VIII. The Weight of Right and Wrong

The moral argument begins from something everyone already knows: some things are really wrong. Not disapproved of, not maladaptive, not contrary to local custom—wrong, in a way that would remain wrong if every human being were conditioned to approve. Torturing a child for pleasure is the standard example precisely because no honest person can bring himself to treat it as a matter of taste.

If there is no God, that universal conviction has no object. On a strictly naturalistic account, moral values are the by-products of biological evolution and social conditioning, useful for cooperation and binding on no one. Some naturalists accept this consequence with open eyes: the philosopher Alex Rosenberg, quoted by Craig, states flatly that "there is no such thing as... morally right or wrong," that human life is "without ultimate moral value," and that "nihilism is true." The honesty is admirable and the position is unlivable, and almost nobody who asserts it in a seminar keeps asserting it at a funeral.¹¹

C. S. Lewis pressed the deeper point: morality cannot be an invention awaiting improvement, because every attempted improvement borrows its standard from the thing it claims to replace. "The human mind has no more power of inventing a new value than of imagining a new primary colour, or, indeed, of creating a new sun and a new sky for it to move in." The reformer who rejects traditional morality in the name of justice has taken justice from the tradition he is rejecting; and "if my duty to my parents is a superstition, then so is my duty to posterity." A moral law that no human mind made, binding on every human mind, is at home in a universe with a moral lawgiver, and homeless in any other.¹²

IX. Why the Moral Argument Survives the Evolutionary Account

The standard rejoinder is that evolution explains morality, so no lawgiver is needed. But the rejoinder confuses two different claims. Evolution can explain why we *feel* obligation. It cannot explain why some things *are* wrong. Those are two different claims, and the objection slides from one to the other without noticing. An account of how the moral sense arose is not an account of whether the moral sense perceives anything; there is an evolutionary story about how vision arose, and it does not show there is nothing to see.

Press the debunking argument and it proves too much. If the moral sense is only inherited instinct, then torturing a child is not wrong; it is merely something we are built to dislike, as we are built to dislike bitter flavors. Yet the man who calls morality an evolved instinct still means it—means it about the world, not about his own wiring—when he says cruelty is wrong. And the same debunking blade cuts reason itself: our faculties of logic and arithmetic are as much products of selection as our consciences, and selection rewards useful belief, not true belief. The naturalist who trusts his evolved reason enough to argue against God has already exempted one evolved faculty from the debunking; he owes an explanation of why conscience alone must stay debunked.¹³

X. The Mind That Does the Arguing

One more datum sits closer to the arguer than any of these: the arguing itself. Thoughts are about things; the reader's present thought is about this sentence. No physical object has that property. A stone is not about anything; neither, considered simply as tissue, is a brain. Materialist philosophers have seen the problem clearly enough that some, like Rosenberg, deny that we ever really think about anything—a denial that must be thought about to be asserted. A universe in which mind comes first, and finite minds are made in the image of an infinite one, has no such difficulty. A universe of mindless matter must produce aboutness from ingredients that have none, and the project has not so much as a sketch of a beginning.¹⁴

XI. Where the Objection Is Strongest

The problem of evil is the hardest thing said against belief in God, and a believer who pretends otherwise forfeits his credibility. It is the one argument on the other side with real weight, which is why this site gives it an entire page and why this essay will not dispose of it in a section. What a section can do is locate it honestly.

Freedom is worth its price. Love that could not be refused would not be love, and a world of creatures able to love is worth more than a world of well-behaved machinery. But the objection is right that this covers the torturer and not the tumor. It answers the evil we

do. It does not answer the evil that simply happens. What looks purposeless from inside time may not be—we see a fragment and pronounce on the whole—and that too is a real answer and a limited one, cold comfort if offered by itself to someone in grief.

The last thing is not an argument, and it is where Christianity actually differs from every other answer on offer. The claim is not that God explains suffering from a safe distance, but that He entered it—was betrayed, tortured, and executed—and turned it, in the Resurrection, toward redemption. That does not make evil good or grief lighter. It means the sufferer is not addressing someone who has never been where he is. The full treatment, with the philosophical replies weighed one by one, is the companion essay on suffering.¹⁵

XII. Augustine, Aquinas, and the Replies to Hume

The Christian answers to evil are old, and knowing their shape matters, because the modern debate largely reenacts an older one. Augustine's contribution is the diagnosis of what evil is: "it must first be inquired, what is evil, which is nothing else than corruption, either of the measure, or the form, or the order, that belong to nature." Evil is not a substance God made and must answer for; it is the corruption of substances that are good, as blindness is not a thing in the eye but the failure of one. The diagnosis does not lessen anyone's pain. It relocates the question from "why did God create evil" to "why does God permit His good creation to be corrupted"—which is the question the rest of the tradition takes up.¹⁶

Aquinas answers it in a single clause that contains the whole Christian bet: God permits evil only because He is powerful and good enough to bring good even out of it. The claim is not that every horror has a visible silver lining; it is that omnipotence is never cornered, and the Cross is the demonstration—the worst crime in history made the instrument of the world's redemption.¹⁷

Hume gathered the skeptical replies into their permanent form: the argument from design proves at most a finite designer, perhaps a committee, perhaps an apprentice; and the world's misery testifies against its maker's goodness. The modern replies are worth having. Against the first: the design argument was never the whole case, and the contingency argument, which Hume's objection does not touch, supplies exactly the unity and necessity the design argument alone cannot; the arguments were always meant to converge, and Hume answered them one at a time. Against the second: the fine-tuning evidence is quantitative and pre-biological, untouched by the biological miseries Hume catalogued, and the moral standard by which he indicted the world's maker is itself the subject of the moral argument—the indictment borrows the law to accuse the lawgiver.¹⁸

XIII. Why God Does Not Simply Appear

If the arguments are this good, why does God not settle the matter—appear unmistakably, tomorrow, to everyone? The tempting reply—that unmistakable evidence would force belief and so destroy freedom—is one the record itself forbids. God has sometimes appeared unmistakably: to Paul on the Damascus road, to Thomas with the wounds held out—and neither man’s love was thereby forced, as Judas, who watched three years of miracles and left, proves from the other side. What evidence compels is at most belief that; and belief—that was never the object—“even the demons believe, and shudder” (Jas. 2:19). What God seeks is trust, which no theophany can force, and He measures His self-disclosure to persons as He wills, judging each by the light he was given (Luke 12:48). A God who wants love rather than mere assent courts rather than conquers.

Lewis put the principle in the mouth of his devil, who knew it from the losing side: “the Irresistible and the Indisputable are the two weapons which the very nature of His scheme forbids Him to use. Merely to over-ride a human will... would be for Him useless. He cannot ravish. He can only woo.” The complaint that God has given too little evidence and the complaint that He demands too much belief are the same complaint, and this is its answer: the courtship is real, so the evidence invites rather than compels.¹⁹

XIV. What the Arguments Deliver, and What They Cannot

Taken singly, each line of argument admits a reply, and this essay has tried to state the replies at their strongest. Taken together they are another matter. A universe that did not have to exist, that runs on constants that did not have to permit us, that yields to mathematics it had no reason to obey, in which cruelty is actually wrong and minds actually think about things—this is a great deal to explain, and “it just is” explains none of it. The theist’s claim is not that any one argument corners the skeptic. It is that one hypothesis accounts at a stroke for everything on the list, while its rival must treat each item as a separate brute fact and call the treatment rigor.

What the arguments deliver is the God of natural theology: necessary, immaterial, intelligent, the ground of the moral law. What they cannot deliver is the God who forgives sins. Between the two lies not another argument but a history—a people, a Man, an empty tomb—and the evidence for that is of another kind, examined on its own pages. Pascal’s distinction stands: the God of the philosophers is not yet the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob. But the first is the second, met from a distance; and the arguments’ work is done when the reader, persuaded that the universe has an Author, becomes willing to ask whether the Author has written.

Endnotes

1. Mortimer J. Adler, *How to Think About God* (1980), on the judicial standards of existential inference; his phrasings “beyond a reasonable doubt” and “by a preponderance of the evidence” are quoted from the copy in the site’s reference library. Adler, then a pagan by his own description, concluded the book by affirming God’s existence beyond a reasonable doubt; he entered the Church years later.
2. Adler, *How to Think About God*, quoted exactly from the library copy.
3. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 2, a. 3 (the Second and Third Ways), with I, q. 46, a. 2, where Aquinas argues that the world’s beginning in time cannot be demonstrated by reason and is held by faith—summarized rather than quoted. The essentially ordered (simultaneous) causal series is his, expounded rather than caricatured.
4. Aquinas, *De Ente et Essentia* ch. 4, on the real distinction between essence and existence, summarized; Exodus 3:14.
5. William Lane Craig, *Does God Exist?*, Philosophy Now (Nov./Dec. 2013); both premises quoted exactly from the copy in the site’s reference library.
6. G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (1908), ch. 4, “The Ethics of Elfland,” quoted exactly from the library copy. Eugene Wigner’s phrase “the unreasonable effectiveness of mathematics” (1960) is summarized.
7. Craig, *Does God Exist?*, quoted exactly.
8. The cosmological-constant and force-ratio figures follow the standard physics literature, e.g. Martin Rees, *Just Six Numbers* (1999); Penrose’s initial-entropy calculation is in *The Emperor’s New Mind* (1989), ch. 7—all summarized rather than quoted.
9. Antony Flew and Gary Habermas, *My Pilgrimage from Atheism to Theism*, *Philosophia Christi* 6, no. 2 (2004), quoted exactly from the library copy. Flew’s care should be preserved: the sentence states what it is rational for a prior believer to conclude, and his own final position was deism, not Christianity.
10. Craig, *Does God Exist?*, for the Boltzmann-brain objection and the Dawkins phrase, both quoted exactly from the library copy.
11. Alex Rosenberg, *The Atheist’s Guide to Reality* (2011), pp. 145, 17, 95, as quoted in Craig, *Does God Exist?*; the intermediate source is the library copy of Craig’s article.

- 12.** C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (1943), ch. 2, both sentences quoted exactly from the copy in the site's reference library.
- 13.** The evolutionary-debunking dilemma is pressed in Alvin Plantinga's evolutionary argument against naturalism (*Warrant and Proper Function*, 1993, ch. 12), summarized rather than quoted.
- 14.** Craig, *Does God Exist?*, on intentionality and Rosenberg's denial, summarized with brief quotation from the library copy.
- 15.** See the companion essay *Would a Good God Permit Evil and Suffering?* on this site's theodicy page, where each reply is weighed and its limits stated.
- 16.** Augustine, *On the Nature of Good* (De Natura Boni) 4, quoted exactly from the copy in the site's reference library.
- 17.** Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 2, a. 3, ad 1, itself quoting Augustine (*Enchiridion* 11), summarized.
- 18.** David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), Parts V and X–XI, summarized rather than quoted.
- 19.** C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (1942), Letter VIII, quoted exactly from the copy in the site's reference library.

For Further Reading

Answering Atheism—How to Make the Case for God with Logic and Charity, by Trent Horn.

The Devil's Delusion—Atheism and Its Scientific Pretensions, by David Berlinski.

Faith of the Fatherless—The Psychology of Atheism, by Paul C. Vitz.

The Myth of Religious Neutrality—An Essay on the Hidden Role of Religious Belief in Theories, by Roy A. Clouser.

Knowing with the Heart—Religious Experience and Belief in God, by Roy A. Clouser.

The Doors of the Sea—Where Was God in the Tsunami?, by David Bentley Hart.

Making Sense Out of Suffering, by Peter Kreeft.

Why a Suffering World Makes Sense, by Chris Tiegreen.

God, Evil, and Innocent Suffering—A Theological Reflection, by John E. Thiel.

God, Relationships, and Evil, by Loren Meierding.

* * *

“The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.”
— Psalm 19:1

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning,
is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

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A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author’s articulation of *the case for the existence of God*, drawing on Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church Fathers, and the major theological tradition. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church’s teaching. Where this defense is fortunate enough to align with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author’s alone.