

The Concept of God in Classical and Modern Philosophy: A Critical Examination of Theistic Arguments

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Abstract:

The concept of God has been a central theme in philosophical discourse since ancient times. Philosophers across different traditions have attempted to explore, define, and justify the existence and nature of God through various philosophical arguments. Classical philosophy presented influential theistic arguments such as the cosmological, teleological, and ontological arguments to establish the rational basis of belief in God. In modern philosophy, these arguments have been critically examined, reformulated, and challenged by both theistic and atheistic thinkers. This research article critically examines the concept of God in classical and modern philosophical traditions by analyzing the major theistic arguments and the criticisms raised against them.

The study explores the philosophical contributions of thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Descartes, Kant, and contemporary philosophers. It also investigates the relevance of theistic arguments in contemporary philosophical debates concerning faith, reason, and metaphysics. The study argues that while traditional arguments for the existence of God may not provide definitive proof, they continue to offer significant philosophical insights into metaphysical inquiry, moral reasoning, and the search for ultimate reality.

Keywords: *God, Theism, Ontological Argument, Cosmological Argument, Teleological Argument, Philosophy of Religion, Metaphysics.*

Introduction:

The concept of God occupies a fundamental position in philosophical inquiry, particularly within the field of philosophy of religion. Since the earliest philosophical reflections in ancient Greece, thinkers have attempted to understand the ultimate cause, purpose, and structure of reality. The idea of God has often been associated with the concept of an ultimate being responsible for the creation and governance of the universe.

Philosophical discussions about God attempt to address several essential questions: Does God exist? What is the nature of God? Can the existence of God be demonstrated through rational arguments? These questions have inspired numerous philosophical debates throughout history. Classical philosophers developed arguments intended to demonstrate the rational necessity of God's existence, while modern philosophers often subjected these arguments to rigorous critique.

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The study of the concept of God involves not only theological reflection but also logical, metaphysical, and epistemological analysis. Philosophers have used reason and argumentation to explore whether belief in God can be justified independently of religious revelation.

Objectives: This research article aims to critically examine the major theistic arguments proposed in classical and modern philosophy and evaluate their strengths and limitations.

The Concept of God in Classical Philosophy

Classical philosophy laid the intellectual foundation for later philosophical discussions regarding the nature and existence of God. Ancient Greek philosophers sought to understand the ultimate principles that govern the universe and explain the origin, order, and purpose of reality. Although early philosophers did not always describe God in a strictly theological sense, their metaphysical inquiries led to the development of ideas about a supreme principle or ultimate cause underlying the cosmos. These philosophical reflections significantly influenced later religious and philosophical traditions, particularly in medieval Christian, Islamic, and Jewish thought (Copleston, 1993; Kenny, 2010). Two of the most influential classical philosophers who contributed to the concept of the divine were Plato and Aristotle, whose metaphysical systems provided important foundations for later theistic arguments.

Plato's Concept of the Divine: Plato did not present a fully developed theological doctrine of God; however, his philosophical writings contain important ideas about the nature of ultimate reality and the divine. In his metaphysical theory, Plato proposed the existence of eternal and perfect Forms or Ideas, which represent the highest and most fundamental level of reality. According to Plato, the physical world is merely an imperfect reflection of these eternal Forms (Plato, trans. 2007).

Among these Forms, the Form of the Good occupies the highest position. Plato describes the Good as the ultimate source of truth, knowledge, and existence. It illuminates the intelligibility of all other Forms and makes knowledge possible. Although Plato did not explicitly equate the Good with a personal God, it functions as a supreme metaphysical principle similar to the concept of God in later philosophical and theological traditions (Copleston, 1993).

In his dialogue *Timaeus*, Plato introduced another important concept known as the Demiurge, which refers to a divine craftsman or cosmic architect. The Demiurge does not create the universe out of nothing but organizes pre-existing chaotic matter according to rational and mathematical principles. This concept emphasizes the idea that the universe is structured in an orderly and purposeful manner, reflecting the presence of an intelligent guiding principle (Plato, trans. 2007). Plato's philosophical system therefore presents a vision of the cosmos governed by rational order and ultimate goodness, which later philosophers interpreted as an early philosophical conception of the divine.

Aristotle's Unmoved Mover: Aristotle further developed the philosophical understanding of the divine through his theory of the Unmoved Mover. In his work *Metaphysics*, Aristotle attempted to explain the nature of motion and change in the universe. He observed that everything in the natural world is subject to movement or transformation and that every motion must be caused by something else (Aristotle, trans. 2009).

However, Aristotle argued that an infinite chain of causes is logically impossible because it would fail to provide an ultimate explanation for motion. Therefore, he proposed the existence of a First Cause or Unmoved Mover, which initiates motion without itself being moved by anything else. This being serves as the ultimate source of all motion and change in the universe.

Aristotle described the Unmoved Mover as possessing several essential characteristics, including pure actuality, perfect intellect, eternal existence, and absolute immutability. Unlike the gods of mythology, Aristotle's divine principle is not involved in the physical world through direct intervention. Instead, it functions as a final cause that attracts all things toward perfection and order (Kenny, 2010).

Although Aristotle's God does not create the universe in a temporal sense, it provides the ultimate metaphysical explanation for motion, order, and intelligibility within the cosmos. Aristotle's concept of the Unmoved Mover later became highly influential in medieval philosophical theology, particularly in the works of Thomas Aquinas, who incorporated it into the cosmological argument for the existence of God.

Theistic Arguments in Medieval Philosophy

Medieval philosophy witnessed a significant development in the philosophical understanding of God, as thinkers attempted to reconcile classical Greek philosophy with the theological doctrines of Christianity. Influenced by the works of Plato and Aristotle, medieval philosophers sought to provide rational justifications for religious beliefs through systematic philosophical arguments. During this period, several influential theistic arguments were formulated to demonstrate the existence of God through reason and logical analysis. Among the most important of these are the ontological, cosmological, and teleological arguments, which played a central role in medieval philosophical theology (Copleston, 1993; Davies, 2004).

The Ontological Argument: The ontological argument was first articulated by St. Anselm of Canterbury in the eleventh century in his work *Proslogion*. Anselm attempted to demonstrate the existence of God through purely rational and logical reasoning, independent of empirical observation. He defined God as "that than which nothing greater can be conceived," meaning that God represents the greatest possible being that the human mind can imagine (Anselm, 1965).

Anselm's reasoning proceeds by arguing that a being that exists both in the mind and in reality is greater than a being that exists only as an idea in the mind. If God existed only in the mind, then it would be possible to conceive of a greater being—one that exists both in the mind and in reality. Since God is defined as the greatest conceivable being, such a situation would be contradictory. Therefore, Anselm concluded that God must exist in reality.

The ontological argument is unique among theistic arguments because it attempts to prove the existence of God solely through conceptual analysis rather than empirical evidence. Although it has been widely debated and criticized, Anselm's argument remains one of the most influential contributions to philosophical theology (Davies, 2004).

The Cosmological Argument: The cosmological argument seeks to demonstrate the existence of God by examining the existence and structure of the universe. This argument is rooted in the philosophical tradition of Aristotle but was systematically developed by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century. In his famous formulation known as the *Five Ways*, Aquinas presented several arguments that attempt to establish the existence of God as the ultimate cause of the universe (Aquinas, 1945).

Aquinas argued that the observable world reveals patterns of motion, causation, contingency, and order. For example, everything that moves is moved by something else, and every effect must have a cause. However, an infinite regress of causes is logically unsatisfactory because it fails to provide a final explanation for the existence of things. Therefore, Aquinas concluded that there must be a First Cause or Necessary Being that explains the existence of all other things. This ultimate cause, which is not itself caused by anything else, is identified as God.

The cosmological argument thus attempts to establish God as the foundational explanation for the existence and order of the universe. It has remained one of the most influential arguments in the philosophy of religion and continues to be discussed in contemporary philosophical debates (Copleston, 1993).

The Teleological Argument: The teleological argument, commonly known as the argument from design, is based on the observation that the universe appears to exhibit order, complexity, and purposeful organization. Medieval philosophers interpreted this apparent order as evidence of an intelligent designer responsible for the structure of the natural world.

Thomas Aquinas developed a version of this argument in his *Fifth Way*, where he observed that natural objects that lack intelligence often behave in ways that achieve specific ends or purposes. For example, natural processes consistently produce ordered and beneficial outcomes, suggesting that they are directed toward particular goals. Aquinas argued that such purposeful behavior cannot occur without guidance, and therefore it must be directed by an intelligent being (Aquinas, 1945).

According to this reasoning, the existence of order and purpose in the natural world indicates the presence of a guiding intelligence that governs the universe. This intelligent designer is identified as God. The teleological argument later influenced many early modern thinkers and became an important component of natural theology (Davies, 2004).

Modern Critiques of Theistic Arguments:

With the emergence of modern philosophy and the development of scientific inquiry during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, traditional theistic arguments began to face critical examination. Philosophers of the modern period questioned the logical structure and evidential basis of classical arguments for the existence of God. Rather than accepting theological doctrines as self-evident truths, modern thinkers emphasized empirical observation, critical reasoning, and epistemological analysis. As a result, influential philosophers such as Immanuel Kant and David Hume raised serious objections to the traditional ontological and teleological arguments, thereby reshaping philosophical debates about the existence of God (Davies, 2004; Copleston, 1993).

Kant's Critique of the Ontological Argument: Immanuel Kant offered one of the most influential critiques of the ontological argument in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant challenged the logical basis of Anselm's reasoning by arguing that existence cannot be treated as a predicate or property of a concept. According to Kant, predicates are characteristics that add information about a subject, whereas existence merely indicates that a concept corresponds to something in reality (Kant, 1998).

Kant illustrated this idea by explaining that the concept of a hundred real coins does not contain any additional properties compared to the concept of a hundred possible coins. The difference lies not in the concept itself but in whether such coins actually exist. Therefore, simply defining God as a perfect being does not logically prove that such a being exists in reality.

Through this critique, Kant concluded that the ontological argument fails because it attempts to derive existence from purely conceptual analysis. His criticism significantly weakened confidence in purely a priori proofs of God's existence and encouraged philosophers to reconsider the relationship between logic, metaphysics, and theology (Davies, 2004).

David Hume's Criticism of the Design Argument: Another influential critique of traditional theistic reasoning was developed by David Hume, particularly in his work *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Hume questioned the validity of the teleological argument, which claims that the order and complexity of the universe imply the existence of an intelligent designer (Hume, 1998).

Hume argued that the analogy between the universe and human-made machines is weak and philosophically problematic. While objects such as watches or buildings clearly have designers because they resemble artifacts created by human beings, the universe itself does not necessarily resemble such designed objects. Therefore, it may be inappropriate to infer the existence of a divine designer based solely on observed order in nature.

Furthermore, Hume suggested that natural processes could potentially explain the apparent order and complexity of the universe without invoking divine design. Even if the universe were the result of design, he argued that such evidence would not necessarily prove the existence of a perfect, infinite, or omnipotent God. It might instead indicate a limited or imperfect designer. Hume's critique significantly influenced later philosophical and scientific discussions concerning natural theology and the argument from design (Copleston, 1993).

Contemporary Perspectives on the Existence of God:

In contemporary philosophy, discussions about the existence of God continue to evolve through new philosophical frameworks and interdisciplinary approaches. Rather than relying solely on traditional metaphysical arguments, modern philosophers have developed alternative perspectives that incorporate epistemology, scientific discoveries, and probability theory. Two notable approaches include reformed epistemology and the fine-tuning argument, both of which attempt to reconsider the rational basis of belief in God (Peterson et al., 2014).

Reformed Epistemology: Reformed epistemology, associated primarily with philosophers such as Alvin Plantinga, challenges the assumption that belief in God must be supported by formal logical proofs or empirical evidence. According to Plantinga, belief in God can be considered a properly basic belief, meaning that it can be rationally held without being derived from other propositions or arguments (Plantinga, 2000).

Plantinga argues that many everyday beliefs—such as belief in the existence of other minds or the reliability of memory—are accepted without requiring formal proof. Similarly, belief in God may arise naturally from human cognitive faculties when functioning properly in appropriate circumstances. From this perspective, religious belief is not necessarily irrational simply because it lacks demonstrative proof.

Reformed epistemology thus shifts the philosophical debate away from attempts to prove God's existence and toward questions concerning the rational justification of religious belief. This approach has played an important role in contemporary philosophy of religion and has generated extensive discussion regarding the nature of faith and rationality (Peterson et al., 2014).

The Fine-Tuning Argument: Another contemporary argument that has gained attention in philosophical and scientific discussions is the fine-tuning argument. This argument is based on observations from modern cosmology suggesting that the physical constants and fundamental laws of the universe appear to be precisely calibrated in a way that allows for the existence of life (Collins, 2009).

Proponents of the fine-tuning argument argue that even extremely small variations in physical constants—such as the strength of gravitational forces or the rate of cosmic expansion—could render the universe incapable of supporting life. The remarkable precision of these conditions has led some philosophers and scientists to suggest that the universe may have been intentionally designed or structured to support life.

Although the fine-tuning argument does not provide conclusive proof of God's existence, it has revived philosophical discussions about design and purpose in the universe. Critics, however, argue that alternative

explanations, such as the multiverse hypothesis or natural cosmological processes, could account for these observations without invoking divine intervention (Peterson et al., 2014).

Faith and Reason in Philosophical Thought:

The relationship between faith and reason has long been a central issue in philosophical and theological inquiry. Throughout the history of philosophy, thinkers have debated whether religious belief should rely primarily on rational arguments or whether faith possesses its own independent epistemic value. Medieval philosophers such as Thomas Aquinas maintained that faith and reason are complementary, arguing that rational inquiry can lead to knowledge of God while revelation provides truths beyond the reach of reason (Aquinas, 1945).

In contrast, some modern philosophers have adopted more skeptical positions, questioning whether religious beliefs can be justified through rational arguments alone. Empiricists and positivists often argued that metaphysical claims about God fall outside the scope of verifiable knowledge.

Despite these disagreements, contemporary philosophy increasingly recognizes that faith and reason need not be mutually exclusive. Many philosophers suggest that rational reflection can coexist with religious commitment, allowing individuals to explore spiritual beliefs while engaging in critical philosophical inquiry. As a result, the ongoing dialogue between rational theology and philosophical skepticism continues to shape modern debates about the nature of religious belief and the existence of God (Davies, 2004).

Conclusion:

The concept of God has played a central role in philosophical inquiry from ancient to modern times. Classical philosophers laid the foundations for philosophical theology by proposing rational arguments for the existence of God. Medieval thinkers refined these arguments and attempted to integrate them with religious doctrine.

Modern philosophers introduced powerful critiques that challenged the logical validity of traditional theistic arguments. However, the debate about the existence of God remains an important and dynamic field within philosophy.

While no argument may provide conclusive proof of God's existence, philosophical discussions about the divine continue to contribute to broader questions concerning metaphysics, ethics, and the meaning of human life. The ongoing dialogue between belief and skepticism ensures that the philosophical investigation of God remains a vital area of intellectual inquiry.

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