



## Arguments for the Existence of God

A. C. Ewing

**W**e [now turn to the question] of the existence of God. By 'God' I shall understand... a supreme mind regarded as either omnipotent or at least more powerful than anything else and supremely good and wise. It is not within the scope of a purely philosophical work to discuss the claims of revelation on which belief in God and his attributes has so often been based, but philosophers have also formulated a great number of arguments for the existence of God.

### THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

To start with the most dubious and least valuable of these, the ontological argument claims to prove the existence of God by a mere consideration of our idea of him. God is defined as the most perfect being or as a being containing all positive attributes. It is then argued that existence is a 'perfection' or a positive attribute, and that therefore, if we are to avoid contradicting ourselves, we must grant the existence of God. The most important of the objections to the argument is to the effect that existence is not a 'perfection' or an attribute. To say that something exists is to assert a proposition of a very different kind from what we assert when we ascribe any ordinary attribute to a thing. It is not to increase the concept of the thing by adding a new characteristic, but merely to affirm that the concept is realized in fact. This is one of the cases where we are apt to be misled by language. Because 'cats exist' and 'cats sleep', or 'cats are existent' and 'cats are carnivorous', are sentences of the same grammatical form, people are liable to suppose that they also express the same form of proposition, but this is not the case. To say that cats are carnivorous is to ascribe an additional quality to beings already presupposed as existing; to say that cats are existent is to say that propositions ascribing to something the properties which constitute the definition of a cat are sometimes true. The distinction is still more obvious in the negative case. If 'dragons are not existent animals' were a proposition of the same form as 'lions are not herbivorous animals', to say that dragons are not existent would already be to presuppose their existence. A lion has to exist in order to have the negative property of not being herbivorous, but in order to be non-existent a dragon need not first exist. 'Dragons are non-existent' means that nothing has the properties commonly implied by the word 'dragon'.

It has sometimes been said that 'the ontological proof is just an imperfect formulation of a principle which no one can help admitting and which is a necessary presupposition of all knowledge. This is the principle that what we really must think must be true of reality. ('Must' here is the logical, not the psychological must.) If we did not assume this principle, we should never be entitled to accept something as a fact because it satisfies our best intellectual criteria, and therefore we should have no ground for asserting anything at all. Even experience would not help us, since any proposition contradicting experience might well be true if the law of contradiction were not assumed to be objectively valid. This, however, is so very different from what the ontological proof as formulated by its older exponents says that it should not be called by the same name. And in any case the principle

that what we must think must be true of reality could only be used to establish the existence of God if we already had reached the conclusion that we must think this, i.e. had already justified the view that God exists (or seen it to be self-evident).

## THE FIRST CAUSE ARGUMENT

The cosmological or first cause argument is of greater importance. The greatest thinker of the Middle Ages, St. Thomas Aquinas (circ. 1225-74), while rejecting the ontological argument, made the cosmological the main intellectual basis of his own theism, and in this respect he has been followed by Roman Catholic orthodoxy. To this day it is often regarded in such circles as proving with mathematical certainty the existence of God. It has, however, also played a very large part in Protestant thought; and an argument accepted in different forms by such varied philosophers of the highest eminence as Aristotle, St. Thomas, Descartes, Locke, Leibniz, and many modern thinkers certainly ought not to be despised. The argument is briefly to the effect that we require a reason to account for the world and this ultimate reason must be of such a kind as itself not to require a further reason to account for it. It is then argued that God is the only kind of being who could be conceived as self-sufficient and so as not requiring a cause beyond himself but being his own reason. The argument has an appeal because we are inclined to demand a reason for things, and the notion of a first cause is the only alternative to the notion of an infinite regress, which is very difficult and seems even self-contradictory. Further, if any being is to be conceived as necessarily existing and so not needing a cause outside itself, it is most plausible to conceive God as occupying this position. But the argument certainly makes assumptions which may be questioned. It assumes the principle of causation in a form in which the cause is held to give a reason for the effect, a doctrine with which I have sympathy but which would probably be rejected by the majority of modern philosophers outside the Roman Catholic Church. Further, it may be doubted whether we can apply to the world as a whole the causal principle which is valid within the world; and if we say that the causal principle thus applied is only analogous to the latter the argument is weakened. Finally, and this I think the most serious point, it is exceedingly difficult to see how anything could be its own reasons. To be this it would seem that it must exist necessarily *a priori*. Now we can well see how it can be necessary *a priori* that something, p, should be true if something else, q, is, or again how it can be necessary *a priori* that something self-contradictory should not exist, but it is quite another matter to see how it could be *a priori* necessary in the logical sense that something should positively exist. What contradiction could there be in its not existing? In the mere blank of non-existence there can be nothing to contradict. I do not say that it can be seen to be absolutely impossible that a being could be its own logical reason, but I at least have not the faintest notion how this could be. The advocates of the cosmological proof might, however, contend that God was necessary in some non-logical sense, which is somewhat less unpalatable though still quite incomprehensible to us.

Can the cosmological argument, clearly invalid as a complete proof, be stated in a form which retains some probability value? It may still be argued that the world will at least be more rational if it is as the theist pictures it than if it is not, and that it is more reasonable to suppose that the world is rational than to suppose that it is irrational. Even the latter point would be contradicted by many modern thinkers, but though we cannot prove the view they reject to be true, we should at least note that it is the view which is presupposed by science, often unconsciously, in its own sphere. For, as we have seen, practically no scientific propositions can be established by strict demonstration and /or observation alone. Science could not advance at all if it did not assume some criterion beyond experience and the laws of logic and mathematics. What is this criterion? It seems to be coherence in a

rational system. We have rejected the view that this is the only criterion, but it is certainly one criterion of truth. For of two hypotheses equally in accord with the empirical facts, scientists will always prefer the one which makes the universe more of a rational system to the one which does not. Science does this even though neither hypothesis is capable of rationalizing the universe completely or even of giving a complete ultimate explanation of the phenomena in question. It is sufficient that the hypothesis adopted brings us a step nearer to the ideal of a fully coherent, rationally explicable world. Now theism cannot indeed completely rationalize the universe till it can show how God can be his own cause, or how it is that he does not need a cause, and till it can also overcome the problem of evil completely, but it does come nearer to rationalizing it than does any other view. The usual modern philosophical views opposed to theism do not try to give any rational explanation of the world at all, but just take it as a brute fact not to be explained, and it must certainly be admitted that we come at least nearer to a rational explanation if we regard the course of the world as determined by purpose and value than if we do not. So it may be argued that according to the scientific principle that we should accept the hypothesis which brings the universe nearest to a coherent rational system theism should be accepted by us. The strong point of the cosmological argument is that after all it does remain incredible that the physical universe should just have happened, even if it be reduced to the juxtaposition of some trillions of electrons. It calls out for some further explanation of some kind.

## **THE ARGUMENT FROM DESIGN**

The ideological argument or the argument from design is the argument from the adaptation of the living bodies of organisms to their ends and the ends of their species. This is certainly very wonderful: there are thousands of millions of cells in our brain knit together in a system which works; twenty or thirty different muscles are involved even in such a simple act as a sneeze; directly a wound is inflicted or germs enter an animal's body all sorts of protective mechanisms are set up, different cells are so cunningly arranged that, if we cut off the tail of one of the lower animals, a new one is grown, and the very same cells can develop according to what is needed into a tail or into a leg. Such intricate arrangements seem to require an intelligent purposing mind to explain them. It may be objected that, even if such an argument shows wisdom in God, it does not show goodness and is therefore of little value. The reply may be made that it is incredible that a mind who is so much superior to us in intelligence as to have designed the whole universe should not be at least as good as the best men and should not, to put it at its lowest, care for his offspring at least as well as a decent human father and much more wisely because of his superior knowledge and intellect. Still it must be admitted that the argument could not at its best establish all that the theist would ordinarily wish to establish. It might show that the designer was very powerful, but it could not show him to be omnipotent or even to have created the world as opposed to manufacturing it out of given material; it might make it probable that he was good, but it could not possibly prove him perfect. And of course the more unpleasant features of the struggle for existence in nature are far from supporting the hypothesis of a good God.

But does the argument justify any conclusion at all? It has been objected that it does not on the following ground. It is an argument from analogy, it is said, to this effect: animal bodies are like machines, a machine has a designer, therefore animal bodies have a designer. But the strength of an argument from analogy depends on the likeness between what is compared. Now animal bodies are really not very like machines, and God is certainly not very like a man. Therefore the argument from analogy based on our experience of men designing machines has not enough strength to give much probability to its conclusion.

This criticism, I think, would be valid if the argument from design were really in the main an argument from analogy, but I do not think it is. The force of the argument lies not in the analogy, but in the extraordinary intricacy with which the details of a living body are adapted to serve its own interests, an intricacy far too great to be regarded as merely a coincidence. Suppose we saw pebbles on the shore arranged in such a way as to make an elaborate machine. It is theoretically possible that they might have come to occupy such positions by mere chance, but it is fantastically unlikely, and we should feel no hesitation in jumping to the conclusion that they had been thus deposited not by the tide but by some intelligent agent. Yet the body of the simplest living creature is a more complex machine than the most complex ever devised by a human engineer.

Before the theory of evolution was accepted the only reply to this argument was to say that in an infinite time there is room for an infinite number of possible combinations, and therefore it is not, even apart from a designing mind, improbable that there should be worlds or stages in the development of worlds which display great apparent purposiveness. If a monkey played with a typewriter at random, it is most unlikely that it would produce an intelligible book; but granted a sufficient number of billions of years to live and keep playing, the creature would probably eventually produce quite by accident a great number. For the number of possible combinations of twenty-six letters in successions of words is finite, though enormously large, and therefore given a sufficiently long time it is actually probable that any particular one would be reached. This may easily be applied to the occurrence of adaptations in nature. Out of all the possible combinations of things very few would display marked adaptation; but if the number of ingredients of the universe is finite the number of their combinations is also finite, and therefore it is only probable that, given an infinite time, some worlds or some stages in a world process should appear highly purposeful, though they are only the result of a chance combination of atoms. The plausibility of this reply is diminished when we reflect what our attitude would be to somebody who, when playing bridge, had thirteen spades in his hand several times running according to the laws of probability an enormously less improbable coincidence than would be an unpurposed universe with so much design unaccounted for and then used such an argument to meet the charge of cheating. Our attitude to his reply would surely hardly be changed even if we believed that people had been playing bridge for an infinite time. If only we were satisfied that matter had existed and gone on changing for ever, would we conclude that the existence of leaves or pebbles on the ground in such positions as to make an intelligible book no longer provided evidence making it probable that somebody had deliberately arranged them? Surely not. And, if not, why should the supposition that matter had gone on changing for ever really upset the argument from design? Of course the appearance of design may be fortuitous; the argument from design never claims to give certainty but only probability. But, granted the universe as we have it, is it not a much less improbable hypothesis that it should really have been designed than that it should constitute one of the fantastically rare stages which showed design in an infinite series of chance universes? Further, that matter has been changing for an infinite time is a gratuitous assumption and one not favoured by modern science.

But now the theory of evolution claims to give an alternative explanation of the adaptation of organisms that removes the improbability of which we have complained. Once granted the existence of some organisms their offspring would not all be exactly similar. Some would necessarily be somewhat better equipped than others for surviving and producing offspring in their turn, and their characteristics would therefore tend to be more widely transmitted. When we take vast numbers into account, this will mean that a larger and larger proportion of the species will have had relatively favourable variations transmitted to them by their parents, while unfavourable variations will tend to die out.

Thus from small beginnings accumulated all the extraordinarily elaborate mechanism which now serves the purpose of living creatures.

There can be no question for a properly informed person of denying the evolution theory, but only of considering whether it is adequate by itself to explain the striking appearance of design. If it is not, it may perfectly well be combined with the metaphysical hypothesis that a mind has designed and controls the universe. Evolution will then be just the way in which God's design works out. Now in reply to the purely evolutionary explanation it has been said that for evolution to get started at all some organisms must have already appeared. Otherwise the production of offspring and their survival or death in the struggle for existence would not have come into question at all. But even the simplest living organism is a machine very much more complex than a motor car. Therefore, if it would be absurd to suppose inorganic matter coming together fortuitously of itself to form a motor car, it would be even more absurd to suppose it thus coming together to form an organism, so without design the evolutionary process would never get started at all. Nor, even granting that this miracle had occurred, could the evolutionists claim that they had been altogether successful in removing the antecedent improbability of such an extensive adaptation as is in fact shown by experience. It has been urged that, since we may go wrong in a vast number of ways for one in which we may go right, the probability of favourable variations is very much less than that of unfavourable; that in order to produce the effect on survival required a variation would have to be large, but if it were large it would usually lessen rather than increase the chance of survival, unless balanced by other variations the occurrence of which simultaneously with the first would be much more improbable still; and that the odds are very great against either a large number of animals in a species having the variations together by chance or their spreading from a single animal through the species by natural selection. The arguments suggest that, so to speak, to weight the chances we require a purpose, which we should not need, however, to think of as intervening at odd moments but as controlling the whole process. The establishment of the evolution theory no doubt lessens the great improbability of the adaptations having occurred without this, but the original improbability is so vast as to be able to survive a great deal of lessening, and it does not remove it.

Some thinkers would regard it as adequate to postulate an unconscious purpose to explain design, but it is extraordinarily difficult to see what such a thing as an unconscious purpose could be. In one sense indeed I can understand such a phrase. 'Unconscious' might mean 'unintrospected' or 'unintrospectible', and then the purpose would be one which occurred in a mind that did think on the matter but did not self-consciously notice its thinking. But this sense will not do here, for it already presupposes a mind. To talk of a purpose which is not present in any mind at all seems to me as unintelligible as it would be to talk of rectangles which had no extension. The argument from design has therefore to my mind considerable, though not, by itself at least, conclusive force. It is also strange that there should be so much beauty in the world, that there should have resulted from an unconscious unintelligent world beings who could form the theory that the world was due to chance or frame moral ideals in the light of which they could condemn it. It might be suggested that a mind designed the organic without designing the inorganic, but the connection between organic and inorganic and the unity of the world in general are too close to make this a plausible view.

The counter argument from evil is of course formidable, but I shall defer discussion of it to a later stage in the chapter, as it is rather an argument against theism in general than a specific objection to the argument from design. I must, however, make two remarks here. First, it is almost a commonplace that the very large amount of apparent waste in nature is a strong *prima facie* argument against the world having been designed by a good and wise

being. But is there really much 'wasted'? A herring may produce hundreds of thousands or millions of eggs for one fish that arrives at maturity, but most of the eggs which come to grief serve as food for other animals. We do not look on the eggs we eat at breakfast, when we can get them, as 'wasted', though the hen might well 'do so. It is certainly very strange that a good God should have designed a world in which the living beings can only maintain their life by devouring each other, but this is part of the general problem of evil and not a specific problem of waste in nature. Secondly, the occurrence of elaborate adaptations to ends is a very much stronger argument for the presence of an intelligence than its apparent absence in a good many instances is against it. A dog would see no purpose whatever in my present activity, but he would not therefore have adequate grounds for concluding that I had no intelligence. If there is a God, it is only to be expected *a priori* that in regard to a great deal of his work we should be in the same position as the dog is in regard to ours, and therefore the fact that we are in this position is no argument that there is no God. The occurrence of events requiring intelligence to explain them is positive evidence for the presence of intelligence, but the absence of results we think worth while in particular cases is very slight evidence indeed on the other side where we are debating the existence of a being whose intelligence, if he exists, we must in any case assume to be as much above ours as the maker of the whole world would have to be. The existence of positive evil of course presents a greater difficulty to the theist.

## OTHER ARGUMENTS FOR GOD

Besides the specific argument from design there is a general argument which on the whole impresses me more strongly. When I consider the physical world as a whole, its order, its beauty, its system strongly suggest that it is a product of mind, or at any rate that the least inadequate category for interpreting it is mind. It displays the characteristics which we expect in and regard as essentially connected with a high-grade mind and its products. And in particular the characteristic of beauty has made very many feel as though they saw through it not only the wisdom but the supreme goodness of God.

The cosmological argument and the argument from design have often been supplemented or even replaced by other arguments based on the nature of causation. Two I have already mentioned, namely, the argument that causation involves will and the argument that it is incredible that conscious rational mind should have originated from unconscious irrational matter. The latter seems to depend mainly on the assumption that the effect cannot possess quite new kinds of properties which are not present in the cause.

A stronger argument seems to me to be that it is exceedingly difficult to see how we can be entitled to have faith in our intellectual processes at all if they originally spring from unconscious matter alone. The case seems clearest if we start by thinking of the epiphenomenalist. According to him the only cause of a mental event is a physical change in the brain. In that case we do not believe anything because we have good reasons for it, but only because something has changed in our brain. It would follow that all our beliefs were unjustified, and this has already been used by me as an objection to epiphenomenalism. Most opponents of theism are, however, not epiphenomenalists. They believe that mental processes can play a part in causing other mental, and even bodily, processes. But, if they believe that these, even ultimately, originate solely from an unconscious, or at least (even if pan-psychism be true) an unintelligent, matter incapable of purposes and itself not directed or created by a purposing mind, it may be argued that they are only putting the difficulty further back. Have we any guarantee 'that we are so constructed that our mental processes are any more likely to be right than wrong if they were the result originally of mere unpurposed accidents? For us to be entitled to accept any of the results of our thought

on any subject, must we not therefore assume that our mental processes, and the bodily ones on which they depend, are originated for a purpose and a purpose we can trust? It may thus be contended that a certain faith is needed even to be a scientist or a critical philosopher; we must trust the universe so far as to believe that it has not made us such as to be irretrievably misled in our thought by the nature of our minds or bodies, and is it consistent to assume this in the sphere of thought without also assuming that it is in general trustworthy? If we must, in order to escape complete scepticism, treat the universe as if it were made with a good purpose at least as regards our thinking, is this not an argument for taking up the attitude that its purpose is also conducive to the fulfilment of the best moral ideals that can be conceived? The pre-supposition of this argument is simply that we cannot be thorough-going sceptics. It will not appeal to anybody who is prepared to adopt the position of complete scepticism about everything; but is there such a person? Even confirmed agnostics about religion and metaphysics are very far from being complete sceptics about science or about their sense-experience, yet even this much departure from scepticism involves assumptions as to the validity of their mental processes which are hard to square with their beliefs as to the origin of the latter. Nor does it seem an adequate reply to the argument merely to assert agnosticism as to the ultimate origin of the human mind. If we are not entitled to say anything more than that, are we entitled to trust our minds at all, since we have *ex hypothesi* no justification for thinking that they have been constructed for the purpose of attaining any truth? We cannot argue that they may be trusted merely because trusting them has worked, because we can only decide whether they have worked or not by using our minds and therefore by already trusting them. (The argument is not of course intended to imply that God created each man's mind specially at birth, only that the whole world-process on which we depend is subject to divine guidance.)

If the view about matter known as idealism is accepted on general philosophical grounds, it may be used to provide an additional argument for the existence of God, as it was by Berkeley. The idealist, having by means of his arguments reached the conclusion that matter necessarily involves mind, may then argue that we must believe it to be independent of human minds and must therefore suppose a super-human mind on which it depends for its existence. The conclusion is based on two premises one or the other of which has been accepted by the great majority of philosophers. The great majority of philosophers have either been idealists so far as to believe that matter logically implies mind or realists so far as to believe that matter is independent of our minds. Nor are the two premises, though not usually combined, in themselves incompatible with each other. The difficulty is to establish the first premise by arguments which will not refute the second. For most of the arguments used by idealists are of such a character as to show, if valid at all, not merely that physical objects imply dependence on some mind or other, but that they imply dependence on the human mind or are mere abstractions from human experience, or at least that, if they exist independently of us, we are not justified in making any assertions about them. An idealism based on such arguments could not consistently be used as a ground for theism. There are, however, some idealist arguments which do not have this effect and the idealist who was also a theist might rely on those.

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