

A Study Based on “God, Are You There? Five Reasons God Exists and Three Reasons It Makes a Difference” by William Lane Craig

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1 Introduction

Motivation:

- World’s greatest thinkers have wrestled with the question of God.
- Is there a personal, transcendent being who created the universe and is the source of moral goodness?
- Today’s university student is not trained to deal with this issue.
- Instead of reflecting rationally on the issue, many students absorb uncritically the easy answers and secular prejudices of their teachers.
- People who think that it doesn’t make a difference what you believe about God simply reveal that they haven’t thought very deeply about the question.
- Even atheist philosophers, e.g., Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, recognized that the question makes a tremendous difference.

Three reasons it makes a difference:

1. If God does not exist, then life is ultimately meaningless.
2. If God does not exist, then we must ultimately live without hope.
3. If God does exist, then not only does life have meaning and hope, but there is also the possibility of coming to know God and his love personally.

None of this shows that God exists. But it does show that it makes a tremendous *difference* whether God exists.

- Blaise Pascal: even if the evidence for and against the existence of God were absolutely equal, the rational thing to do would be to believe that God exists.
- Presumption of theism: presume that God exists unless we have some good reason to think that atheism is true.
- But in fact the scales of the evidence are not equally balanced!

2 Arguments for the Existence of God

What is an argument?

- A set of statements that serve as premises leading to a conclusion.
- Deductive argument: guarantees that the conclusion is true if the premises are true.
- Inductive argument: makes it probable that the conclusion is true if the premises are true.

What makes for a good argument?

1. It must be logically sound.
 - Follow the rules of logic.
2. It must not be question-begging.
 - The reasons for believing the premises to be true must be independent of the conclusion.
3. The premises of the argument must be more plausible than their denials.
 - Not required to have 100% certainty (not possible anyway).
 - Alternatives are possible; the question is not whether the denial of a particular premise is possible or even plausible; the question is whether the denial is *as plausible or more plausible* than the premise.

Plausibility

- Plausibility is subjective.
- Often, we deny premises for the wrong reason (e.g., because we don't like the conclusion!).
- Existence of God has such personal significance that issues of the heart take on paramount importance.
- J. I. Packer's analogy on two sorts of people with an interest in God: travelers and balconeurs.
- The "skeptical inquirer" is not really an inquirer at all: he wants *not* to believe.
- Important to consider arguments with an open mind and open heart.

Five arguments

- These are only a part of the evidence for God's existence.
- See, e.g., Plantinga's two dozen or so arguments.
- Together, these constitute a powerful cumulative case.

3 First Reason: God makes sense of the origin of the universe

The argument

1. Whatever begins to exist has a cause.
2. The universe began to exist.
3. Therefore, the universe has a cause.

(A *deductive* argument.)

The universe began to exist

Actual infinities do not exist

- If the universe did not begin to exist, then the number of past events in history is infinite.
- David Hilbert: “The infinite is nowhere to be found in reality. It neither exists in nature nor provides a legitimate basis for rational thought. The role that remains for infinite to play is solely that of an idea.”
- Operations involving infinity cannot be put in correspondence with the real world (e.g., subtraction and cardinality of sets).
- Past events are not just ideas, but are real. Therefore, the number of them must be finite.

The Big Bang

- Astrophysical evidence suggests a point around 15 billion years ago when the universe began to exist.

Whatever begins to exist has a cause

- An intuitively plausible metaphysical principle.
- *Ex nihilo, nihil fit.*
- Anthony Kenny (philosopher): “A proponent of the big bang theory, at least if he is an atheist, must believe that the universe came from nothing and by nothing.”
- Kai Nielson (atheist philosopher): “Suppose you suddenly hear a loud bang ... and you ask me, ‘What made that bang?’ and I reply, ‘Nothing, it just happened.’ You would not accept that. In fact, you would find my reply quite unintelligible.”
- Arthur Eddington (scientist): “The beginning seems to present insuperable difficulties unless we agree to look on it as frankly supernatural.”

Personal cause

The cause

- Immediate conclusion from first two premises: the universe has a cause.
- The cause must be uncaused, changeless, timeless, and immaterial.
- But more can be said ...

Personal cause

- The cause cannot be “mechanical;” must be “personal.”
- A mechanical cause cannot exist without its effect. (But the cause of the universe existed timelessly without the universe.)
- A personal cause is associated with a free agent.
- The only way for the cause to be timeless and the effect to begin in time is for the cause to be a personal agent who freely chooses to create an effect in time without any prior determining conditions.
- Thus, we are brought, not merely to a transcendent cause of the universe, but to its personal creator.

Counter-arguments: Whatever begins to exist has a cause

Sub-atomic events are said to be uncaused.

- Not all scientists agree with this “Copenhagen Interpretation” of subatomic physics (e.g., [David Bohm]).
- Even with the above interpretation, particles do not come into being out of *nothing*, but out of the energy fluctuations in the sub-atomic vacuum. The same can be said about theories of the origin of the universe out of a primordial vacuum.
- Robert Deltete (philosopher of science): “There is no basis in ordinary quantum theory for the claim that the universe itself is uncaused, much less for the claim that it sprang into being uncaused from literally nothing.”

Premise 1 is true only for things *in* the universe, but it is not true *of* the universe.

- This objection misconstrues the nature of the premise: it is a *metaphysical* principle (a principle about the very nature of reality).
- J. L. Mackie (atheist): “I myself find it hard to accept the notion of self-creation *from nothing*, even given unrestricted chance. And how *can* this be given, if there really is nothing?”
- On the atheistic view, there wasn’t even the *potentiality* of the universe’s existence prior to the Big Bang, since *nothing* is prior to the Big Bang.

Counter-arguments: The universe began to exist

Actually infinite number of things can exist.

- For example: the number of members in the set of natural numbers $\{0, 1, 2, 3, \dots\}$ is infinite.
- Not all mathematicians and philosophers agree.
- Potential infinities vs. actual infinities.
- Existence in the mathematical realm does not imply existence in the real world.

There are alternative theories to the Big Bang that do not involve a beginning.

- The overwhelming verdict of the scientific community is that none of them are more probable than the Big Bang theory.
- Theories like the Oscillating Universe (which expands and re-contracts forever) and Chaotic Inflationary Universe (which continually spawns new universes) do have potentially infinite future but turn out to have only a finite past.
- Vacuum Fluctuation Universe theories (which postulate an eternal vacuum out of which our universe is born) cannot explain why, if the vacuum was eternal, we do not observe an infinitely old universe.
- Quantum Gravity Universe theory [Stephen Hawking], if interpreted realistically, still involves an absolute origin of the universe.
- Hawking: “Almost everyone now believes that the universe, and *time itself*, had a beginning at the Big Bang.”

Other counter-arguments

Just because we can't explain it doesn't mean God did it.

- Misconstrues the argument: this argument is deductive. If the premises are granted, the conclusion follows; it doesn't matter if it's explanatory or not.
- The argument does not postulate God to plug up a gap in our scientific knowledge. The scientific evidence is used only to support the plausibility of the truth of premise 2 (which is a religiously neutral statement and can be found in any textbook on astronomy).
- The hypothesis of God is, in fact, genuinely explanatory (though not scientific, but personal). It explains some effect in terms of an agent and his intentions.
- Personal explanations are valid and used all the time. Example: “Why is the kettle boiling? Because I put it on to make a cup of tea.”
- Richard Swinburne (philosopher): there *cannot* be a scientific explanation of the first state of the universe. So, without a personal explanation, there is no explanation at all—which is metaphysically absurd.

A cause must come before its effect, and there is no moment before the Big Bang.

- Many causes and effects are simultaneous.
- The moment of God’s causing the Big Bang just is the moment of the occurrence of the Big Bang.
- God’s existing alone without the universe is either before the Big Bang, not in physical time, but in metaphysical time, or else is strictly timeless but enters into time at the moment of creation.

If the universe must have a cause, then what is God’s cause?

- Reveals an inattentiveness to the formulation of the argument.
- Not “Whatever *exists* has a cause” but “Whatever *begins to exist* has a cause.”
- God never began to exist, and hence would not require a cause.
- This is not a special pleading for God, since the atheist who believes in an eternal and uncaused universe relies on this too.

Isn’t God infinite? So how can God exist?

- The argument was that an actually infinite *number of things* cannot exist. God is not a collection of an actually infinite number of things!
- In theology, “God is infinite” in a qualitative, not quantitative, sense. (God is absolutely holy, all-powerful, all-knowing, etc.)

4 Second Reason: God makes sense of the complex order in the universe

The argument

1. The fine-tuning of the universe is due to either law, chance, or design.
2. It is not due to law or chance.
3. Therefore, it is due to design.

Fine-tuning of the universe

- Existence of intelligent life depends upon a complex and delicate balance of initial conditions given in the Big Bang itself.
- Old belief: Whatever the initial conditions of the universe, eventually intelligent life might evolve.
- Current belief: Our existence is balanced on a knife’s edge. A life-*prohibiting* universe is much more likely than a life-*permitting* universe like ours.

Specific examples:

- Stephen Hawking: if the rate of the universe's expansion one second after the Big Bang had been smaller by even one part in 10^{15} , the universe would have re-collapsed.
- P.C.W. Davies: The odds against the initial conditions being suitable for star formation is at least $10^{10^{21}}$.
- P.C.W. Davies: A change in the strength of gravity or the weak force by one part in 10^{100} would have prevented a life-permitting universe.
- Roger Penrose: Odds of the Big Bang's low entropy condition existing by chance are on the order of one out of 10^{1230} .
- There are around 50 such quantities and constants present in the Big Bang that must be fine-tuned in this way if the universe is to permit life.
- Not just must *each* quantity be fine-tuned, their *ratios* must also be fine-tuned.

Law, chance, or design

- Law: the fine-tuning of the universe is physically necessary. It had to be that way, and there was no (or little) chance of its not being life-permitting.
- Chance: the fine-tuning of the universe is due entirely to chance.
- Design: an intelligent Mind behind the cosmos.
- Which is the most plausible?

Law

- Requires that a life-prohibiting universe be virtually impossible.
- Extraordinarily implausible. Requires strong proof or evidence.
- John Leslie: "The claim that blind necessity is involved—that universes whose laws or constants are slightly different 'aren't real physical possibilities' ... is eroded by the various physical theories, particularly theories of random symmetry breaking, which *show* how a varied ensemble of universes might be generated." If subatomic indeterminacy (or uncausedness) is real, then it *must* be possible for the universe to be different.
- Even if the laws of nature were necessary, we still have to supply initial conditions. Hence, the physical universe is not necessarily unique [P.C.W. Davies].
- If there is a single physically possible universe, this would itself be strong evidence for a designer.
- *Strong Anthropic Principle*: often taken as indicative of God's existence [Barrow and Tipler].

Chance

- It could have happened by chance, but the odds against it are incomprehensibly great. We would never embrace such a hypothesis in any other area of our lives. But it's not just probably that's at stake here; see next point.
- *Specified probability*: demonstration that the event in question is not only improbable but also conforms to an independently discovered pattern. Example: chimpanzee typing "To be or not to be; that is the question."

Many Worlds Hypothesis

- Theorists who defend the chance alternative have adopted the Many Worlds Hypothesis (that there are many parallel universes).
- This is a sort of backhanded complement to the design hypothesis in that the fine-tuning cries out for explanation.
- The Many Worlds Hypothesis is no more scientific, and no less metaphysical, than the hypothesis of a Cosmic Designer [John Polkinghorne].
- The designer hypothesis is arguably superior because it is simpler.
- No good explanation for *generating* a World Ensemble. (The only consistent inflationary model is Linde's Chaotic Inflationary Theory, but it requires fine-tuning to start the inflation.) [Robert Brandenburger]
- The Many Worlds Hypothesis faces a challenge from biological evolutionary theory.

Counter-arguments: Fine-tuning of the universe

We really don't know how much certain constants and quantities could have varied from their actual values.

- This admitted uncertainty becomes less important when the number of variables to be fine-tuned is high.
- Example: The chances of all 50 variables being fine-tuned, even if each has a 50% chance of being its actual value, is less than 3 out of 10^{17} .

The existence of any universe is equally improbable, and therefore there is nothing to be explained.

- In light of specified probability, can immediately see the fallacy.
- It's not the probability of some universe or other's existence, but the specified probability of a life-permitting universe's existing.

We shouldn't be surprised at the finely tuned conditions of the universe, for if the universe were not fine-tuned, then we wouldn't be here to be surprised about it.

- True statement: "We shouldn't be surprised that we do not observe conditions of the universe incompatible with our existence."

- It does not follow that: “We shouldn’t be surprised that we *do* observe conditions of the universe that *are* compatible with our existence.”
- John Leslie’s analogy.

Counter-arguments: Designer

The Designer Himself remains unexplained; an intelligent designer also exhibits complex order, so that if the universe needs an explanation, so does its designer.

- Based on a misconception of “explanation.”
- If the best explanation of a disease is a previously unknown virus, we cannot dismiss the explanation just because we can’t explain the virus.
- The complexity in a Mind is not analogous to the complexity of the universe. A mind’s ideas may be complex, but a mind itself is a remarkably simple thing. In order to be a mind, it must have certain properties like intelligence, consciousness, and volition. These are not contingent properties that it might lack.

What about alleged designs that are evil or hurtful?

- Irrelevant to the design hypothesis, which says nothing about the moral qualities of the Designer. (But see next reason.)

5 Third Reason: God makes sense of the objective moral values in the world

The argument

1. If God does not exist, objective moral values do not exist.
2. Objective moral values do exist.
3. Therefore, God exists.

Objective moral values

- Morals that are binding whether or not anybody believes them.
- Example: the Holocaust was objectively wrong even though the Nazis who carried it out thought that it was right.
- Many theists and atheists concur on premise 1 (e.g., [Bertrand Russell, Michael Ruse, Friedrich Nietzsche]).
- If there’s no God, what’s so special about human beings and their morality?
- On the atheistic view, there’s nothing really *wrong* with rape. But somehow we all recognize that rape *is objectively wrong*, not just socially unacceptable (perhaps for preservation of our species).

Important: We are not saying:

- “We must believe in God to live moral lives.”
- “We must believe in God to recognize objective moral values.”
- “We must believe in God to formulate an adequate system of ethics.”

Counter-arguments: If God does not exist, objective moral values do not exist

Objective moral values can exist in the absence of God.

- “Atheistic Moral Realism.”
- Incomprehensible. Example: what does it mean for *justice* to exist?
- Moral values exist as properties of persons, not as abstractions.
- Moral duty or obligation is incompatible with Atheistic Moral Realism [Richard Taylor].
- It is highly improbable that just that sort of creatures would emerge from blind evolution who correspond to the abstractly existing realm of moral values.

Counter-arguments: Objective moral values do exist

But objective moral values don't exist (because there is no God).

- Agreed. This follows from premise 1 if we assume there is no God.
- But what other reason is there to think that this is true?

The only reason you believe objective moral values exist is that you believe in God!

- *Genetic fallacy*: invalidating an argument by showing how it originated (e.g., the only reason you believe in democracy is that you were raised in a democratic society).
- The truth of a statement is independent of how the statement originated, or the motives of the person asserting it.

If objective moral values exist, why is it that we change our view of morals over time?

- Our gradual and fallible apprehension of the moral realm no more undermines the objective reality of that realm than our gradual and fallible apprehension of the physical world undermines the objective reality of the physical realm.

If objective moral values exist, why can't we all agree universally about what is moral?

- Some moral questions have clear answers, others do not.
- If we fail to see the objective moral truth about a matter, then we are simply morally handicapped, like a color-blind person that cannot tell red from green. This impairment should not make us question what we do see clearly.

Counter-arguments: God and moral values

If we say “God is good,” we must have some independent meaning of the word “good.”

- Plato’s Euthyphro Argument.
- Basic dilemma: either something is good because God commands it or else God commands it because it is good. Former: right and wrong are arbitrary; latter: goodness is independent of God.
- Plato’s solution: God himself is the Good. God’s commandments are not arbitrary, but necessarily flow from his own nature.

Some things are evil, but God is good and he created everything.

- *Problem of evil*: classical atheistic defense.
- But how do we know that something is evil? It must be that we have a moral yardstick by which to judge evil.
- Gives rise to an argument for God’s existence:
 1. If God does not exist, objective moral values do not exist.
 2. Evil exists.
 3. Therefore, objective moral values exist (some things are truly evil).
 4. Therefore, God exists.
- But we still haven’t answered *why* God permits evil. That’s a wholly separate question.

6 Fourth Reason: God makes sense of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus

The argument

1. There are four established facts concerning the fate of Jesus of Nazareth: his honorable burial by Joseph of Arimathea, the discovery of his empty tomb, his post-mortem appearances, and the origin of his disciples’ belief in the resurrection.
2. The hypothesis “God raised Jesus from the dead” is the best explanation of these facts.
3. The hypothesis “God raised Jesus from the dead” entails that God exists.
4. Therefore God exists.

Steps 3 and 4 are obvious. It remains only to examine steps 1 and 2.

Four established facts concerning Jesus's death

- In defending this premise, Craig does not treat the New Testament as inspired and therefore inerrant, but simply as a collection of Greek documents coming down to us out of the first century.

Fact 1: After his crucifixion, Jesus was buried by Joseph of Arimathea in a tomb.

- Highly significant because it means that the location of Jesus's tomb was known to Jew and Christian alike in Jerusalem.
- Evidence supporting this fact:
 1. Jesus' burial is attested in the very old information handed on by Paul in his first letter to the church in Corinth, Greece.
 2. The burial account is part of very old source material used by Mark in his gospel.
 3. As a member of the Jewish high court that condemned Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea is unlikely to be a Christian invention.
 4. The burial story lacks any signs of legendary development.
 5. No other competing burial story exists.

Fact 2: On the Sunday after the crucifixion, Jesus' tomb was found empty by a group of his women followers.

- Evidence supporting this fact:
 1. The old information transmitted by Paul implies the empty tomb (e.g., "he was buried ... he was raised").
 2. The empty tomb story is also part of Mark's very old source material.
 3. The story is simple and lacks signs of legendary embellishment.
 4. The tomb was probably discovered empty by women. This is significant because in Jewish society, the testimony of women were regarded as unreliable.
 5. The earliest known Jewish response to the proclamation of Jesus' resurrection presupposes the empty tomb.
- Jacob Kramer: "By far most exegetes hold firmly to the reliability of the biblical statements concerning the empty tomb."

Fact 3: On multiple occasions and under various circumstances, different individuals and groups of people experienced appearances of Jesus alive from the dead.

- Evidence supporting this fact:
 1. The list of eyewitnesses to Jesus' resurrection appearances that is quoted by Paul imply that such appearances occurred. (Cephas, the Twelve, more than 500 brethren, James, all the apostles, Paul. [I Cor. 15:5-8])
 2. The appearance narratives in the gospels provide multiple, independent attestation of the appearances. Gerd Lüdemann: "It may be taken as historically certain that Peter and the disciples had experiences after Jesus' death in which Jesus appeared to them as the risen Christ."

Fact 4: The original disciples suddenly and sincerely came to believe that Jesus was risen from the dead despite their having every predisposition to the contrary.

- Imagine the situation the disciples faced following Jesus' crucifixion:
 1. Their leader was dead.
 2. Jesus' execution exposed him as a heretic.
 3. Jewish belief about the afterlife precluded anyone's rising from the dead before the general resurrection at the end of the world.
- Nevertheless, the disciples suddenly came to believe so strongly that God had raised Jesus from the dead that they were willing to die for the truth of that belief.
- Luke Johnson: "Some sort of powerful, transformative experience is required to generate the sort of movement earliest Christianity was."
- N.T. Wright: "That is why, as an historian, I cannot explain the rise of early Christianity unless Jesus rose again, leaving an empty tomb behind him."

Best explanation of these facts

- C. B. McCullagh, in *Justifying Historical Descriptions*, lists six tests historians use in determining the best explanation for a given body of historical facts:
 1. It has great explanatory scope.
 2. It has great explanatory power.
 3. It is plausible.
 4. It is not ad hoc or contrived.
 5. It is in accord with accepted beliefs.
 6. It far outstrips any of its rival theories in meeting conditions 1–5.
- The hypothesis "God raised Jesus from the dead" passes all these tests.

Counter-arguments

What about alternative hypotheses, like "the disciples stole the body" or "Jesus wasn't really dead?"

- These are "old theories."
- Universally rejected by contemporary scholarship (more info in Craig's debate with Brian Edwards).

"God raised Jesus from the dead" lies beyond the reach of a strict historian.

- Probably most scholars would agree.
- The fact is that there just is no plausible *naturalistic* explanation of the facts.

- A historian may simply choose to remain agnostic about this. But surely insofar as we are not merely historians, but human beings searching for the meaning of our existence, we cannot be debarred from drawing such a conclusion. (See next point.)

Most historians have reservations about the resurrection hypothesis.

- Why? Because the resurrection is a miracle.
- Gerd Lüdemann: “Historical criticism ... does not reckon with an intervention of God in history.”
- Thus, the resurrection *cannot* be historically established; it is excluded *a priori*.
- Lüdemann’s only justification for this crucial presupposition of the impossibility of miracles is vague references to Hume and Kant. Philosophers consider Lüdemann’s procedure here of merely dropping names of famous philosophers unsound [Thomas Morris]. (Lüdemann was not a philosopher, but a New Testament theologian.)

But miracles don’t exist!

- How do we know?
- The only way we can reject the notion of miracles if we can show that God does not exist (i.e., that atheism is true).

Craig-Edwards debate on the resurrection

Listen to the debate between William Lane Craig and Brian Edwards, Easter 2001:

<http://media.gospelcom.net/rzim/Nzdebate.mp3>

7 Fifth Reason: God can be immediately known and experienced

- Not really an argument for God’s existence.
- Rather, it’s the claim that we can know that God exists wholly apart from the arguments simply by immediately experiencing Him.
- This is the way people described in the Bible knew God [John Hick].
- God was not inferred to be the best explanation of their religious experiences; rather in their religious experience they came to know God *directly*.
- Philosophers call beliefs like this *properly basic beliefs*.

Basic beliefs

- Basic beliefs are not based on some other beliefs; rather they are part of the foundations of a person's system of beliefs.
- Examples of basic beliefs:
 - Reality of the past;
 - Existence of the external world;
 - Presence of other minds like our own.
- Basic beliefs cannot be proved; but that doesn't mean that they are arbitrary.
- They are grounded in the sense that they are formed in the context of certain experiences.

Grounding for belief in God

- Belief in God is a properly basic belief grounded in experience of God, as we discern him in nature, conscience, etc.
- But what about those who claim to have properly basic beliefs that are inconsistent with belief in God?
- William Alston: in such a situation, neither party knows how to demonstrate to the other that he alone has veridical (true), rather than delusory, experience.
- But this standoff does not undermine rationality of belief in God: for even if the believer's process of forming his belief were as reliable as can be, he'd still have no way of giving a proof of this fact.
- How to break this deadlock? Alston: do whatever is feasible to find common ground, like logic and empirical facts.

8 Conclusion

Listen to the debate between William Lane Craig and Brian Edwards, Easter 2002:
<http://media.gospelcom.net/rzim/Nzdebate2.mp3>