

## CHAPTER 4

# God

Earl Conee

'Religion is entirely a matter of opinion, of course, and you are as entitled to your religious opinions as I am to mine.' We've all heard that. We may have said it ourselves. It seems to be a safe and sensible judgment, until we stop trying to be so agreeable and take it seriously. Then it starts to look like a premature judgment, maybe even a dogmatic one.

When a disputed topic is entirely a matter of opinion, there is no better reason to take one side than another. So if religion is entirely a matter of opinion, then either the reasons for and against any religious view balance out evenly, or there are no reasons at all. Before we go along with the thought that religion is like that, shouldn't we look to see what the reasons are?

Religion and metaphysics overlap on the question of God's existence. It is a metaphysical matter because part of metaphysics, *ontology*, concerns the most basic kinds of beings. God is basic. For one thing, God is the creator of the universe, if God exists. It would be of tremendous metaphysical interest to learn that a great portion of reality depends for its existence on the creative choice of one being.

Several lines of reasoning are aimed at establishing that God exists. We'll investigate three sorts of arguments where many of the surrounding issues are metaphysical.

### Getting It All Started

#### *Effects*

Our first version of an argument for God's existence relies on one fact about the world. The fact is that some things are caused to happen. Many things that are taking place now are clearly effects of various causes. This includes things that are happening to you right now. You see these words as an effect of light that is beamed to your eyes and you understand these words as an effect of your learning English and applying your knowledge of it.

Okay, so there are effects. What is the connection to God's existence?

We next observe that the causes of effects are themselves caused. Those causes in turn have their causes, and so on.

The reasoning from this point that gets us to God's existence is not supposed to rely on anything that we find out by observing the world around us. We are supposed to see its force by thinking about the relation of cause and effect. First we note that the sequences of cause and effect might go back indefinitely. But could this go on without limit? The argument asserts that each causal sequence must have gotten started. There must have been a first cause that was not caused, to get each sequence into existence. Thomas Aquinas was the major medieval proponent of this sort of argument. Aquinas observed that, if you take away the cause, then you take away the effects. We see effects. He inferred that there must be some first cause of the existing effects. The argument concludes that the first cause of all is the creator of the universe, God.

The argument proceeds in two phases. The premises of the argument are the assumptions that it relies on. The conclusion of each phase is the claim that is supposed to be proven by that phase.

#### *First Cause Argument*

##### *Phase 1*

*Premise1:* There are effects.

*Premise2:* Any effect derives eventually from a first cause.

*Conclusion1:* There is a first cause.

The second phase builds on the first. It starts with the conclusion that Phase 1 is supposed to prove. It adds another assumption and draws the First Cause argument's final conclusion.

##### *Phase 2*

*Conclusion1:* There is a first cause.

*Premise3:* If there is a first cause, then it is God.

*Conclusion2:* God exists.

We have to select ways to understand 'God' and 'exists'. People mean various things by 'God.' Sometimes someone's 'God' is whoever the person idolizes. It might be the person's favorite musician. This meaning is no good for present purposes. It is not a major metaphysical matter whether or not any given musician exists (however major a musical matter it is). In contrast, it is metaphysically huge to find out about the existence of a being like this: a creator of the universe who is all-knowing, all-powerful, and morally perfect. We'll understand 'God' so that God is a being who is all-knowing, all-powerful, morally perfect, and the creator, if 'God' applies at all. By using the word only for a being with these extreme attributes, we make the issue of God's existence a topic of metaphysical significance and we use a meaning that is recognizable to those in Western religious traditions.

We'll understand 'exists' in a broad way. 'Exists' applies to anything that is in reality at all, whether past, present, or future, whether in space or not. What 'exists' does not apply to are merely apparent realities, the merely mythical, the illusory, the fictional.

An argument relies on its premises. They must be entirely reasonable to believe if the argument is to establish its conclusion. If there is some serious unresolved doubt about a premise, then the argument does not prove its conclusion.

Let's consider Premise2 ('P2' for short). The claim made by P2—that any sequence of cause and effect must have gotten started—holds a powerful grip on many people. It can seem just obvious that a series of things must have a first one. This grip loosens, though, when we try to spell out anything that would justify this claim. Exactly why can't each cause in a series have its own cause, with no beginning?

'No beginning' must be rightly understood. It just means that nothing is first in the series. There are familiar precedents for this. The series of numbers known as the integers has no first one. The integers include  $-1$ , which is preceded by  $-2$ , which is preceded by  $-3$ , and so on. The integers go back infinitely.

This infinity is not mind-boggling. We don't have to think of all of the integers separately. We understand the infinity adequately if we get the idea that each integer has a new integer as its predecessor. This arrangement is an understandable way for a sequence to exist while having 'no beginning'.

We see how the negative integers are arranged. Why couldn't causes and effects be arranged that way too? Why couldn't there be causes preceding effects backward in time infinitely into the past with no beginning? We cannot picture a whole infinite series like that. But we cannot do this picturing just because we have no way to picture the series' 'far end', since it has none. We still do understand the structure of the series, without a picture. So again, what reason do we have to deny the possibility of an

infinite series of causes and effects that is structured in the same way? Nothing comes to mind.

This possibility undercuts the credibility of P2. P2 is supposed to be worth assuming because we are supposed to see the need for a first cause in order to have a causal sequence at all. P2 is doubtful if we don't see the need. And now we don't.

Trouble for the First Cause argument does not stop there. Phase 2 has a weakness as well, namely, P3. Suppose that a causal series has some first cause. P3 asserts that the first cause is God in particular. Why so?

Here is an answer: only almighty God is great enough for self-creation. So God can exist without having something else as a cause. Anything other than God has to have help in order to exist.

This answer assumes that each thing has to have a cause. It assumes that either the cause is something other than the effect, or the cause and the effect are one and the same. The answer claims that only God is fit to be a self-cause.

Why must each thing have any cause at all, though? It seems possible that something just happens to happen, without being caused at all. This possibility does not imply that anything is so powerful, or otherwise magnificent, that it causes itself. For all we can tell by thinking about causes and effects, it is possible that something just does happen in nature, without a cause, and it starts a causal series. Whether or not this ever actually happens, we don't seem to have any way to exclude it as impossible. So thinking about causes and effects does not give us any good basis to accept the claim made by P3 that any first cause is God.

There is a different defense of the claim that God is a special sort of cause. The new idea is that God is so great that God does not need to get caused into existence. In contrast, all lesser beings require help in order to exist.

But what does greatness have to do with getting caused? Why couldn't some tiny insignificant particle just pop into existence

without anything making it exist, and then cause other things? The continuing appearance that this sort of first cause is possible casts doubt on P3.

Maybe the need for God stems from a need for *explanations*. We could not correctly *explain why* a first cause just pops up, because there would be no explanation. Is that an objection to the possibility? Yes, if we have some assurance that everything has some correct explanation. The claim that there is an explanation for everything is known as the **Principle of Sufficient Reason**.

The Principle of Sufficient Reason requires an explanation for the existence of any first cause. The principle also raises questions about infinite causal series that do not have a first cause. Maybe each item *in* an infinite series is explained as an effect of prior causes. But according to the Principle of Sufficient Reason, that is not all that needs explaining. The *whole series* is something too. The principle requires an answer to the question of what explains why the whole series exists. Thus, first causes and infinite series of causes both require explanation, according to the principle.

A first response to the question that the principle raises about infinite causal series is that the whole series may have a *derivative* explanation. Perhaps when each event in the series has been explained, the combination of all of those explanations explains the whole thing.

That first response may seem fishy. Maybe each element in the series *causes* the next one. But do those causal facts entirely *explain why* that particular contingent series exists at all?

Suppose not. The Principle of Sufficient Reason requires that there be some explanation. But what assures us that this principle is true? When we think about how things might possibly have gone, it seems possible that some things just do exist with no explanation. Why not? The situation would be intellectually disappointing. But what guarantee do we have that intellectual

satisfaction is always available? The Principle of Sufficient Reason declares that explanations always exist. Again, why believe it? The lofty title, 'Principle of Sufficient Reason', doesn't make the principle true. Anyway, it is easily matched. The Principle of Insufficient Reason says that some things have no explanation. The two principles conflict. Thinking about possibilities seems to tell us that each of the principles might have been true. Thinking about how things might be gives us no reason to believe the Principle of Sufficient Reason in particular.

If nothing assures us that the Principle of Sufficient Reason is true, then the principle does not help the argument. It does not justify our denying apparent possibilities that go against P<sub>3</sub>. For instance, it seems possible that everything started with the Big Bang, rather than God, and the Big Bang has no explanation. Until we have a sound basis for denying that any such possibility obtains, P<sub>3</sub> is in doubt.

#### *Dependents*

Here is an interestingly different version of the argument. The new version is about a non-causal sort of dependence. **Ontological dependence** consists in one thing needing another simultaneously, in order to support its existence. The idea eludes precise definition, but it has one clear sort of illustration. Consider a tuna salad sandwich. At any given time, the sandwich derives its existence from the existence of the bread, the tuna salad, and any other ingredients that compose it. Without them, it would be nothing. The sandwich's ingredients do not *cause* it to exist. Rather, they give it existence directly. The sandwich 'ontologically depends' on its ingredients. Anything that does not depend in this way on any other entity is **ontologically independent**.

Using this idea of ontological dependence, the new version of the argument otherwise goes just like the previous one.

#### *Ontological Dependence Argument*

##### *Phase 1*

*Premise1:* There are ontologically dependent things.

*Premise2:* Anything ontologically dependent derives its existence eventually from something ontologically independent.

*Conclusion1:* Something ontologically independent exists.

##### *Phase 2*

*Conclusion1:* Something ontologically independent exists.

*Premise3:* If something ontologically independent exists, then God exists.

*Conclusion2:* God exists.

The claim made by P<sub>1</sub> about the existence of ontological dependence is fully credible. Many things, such as a tuna sandwich, illustrate its truth. P<sub>2</sub> is supposed to be true because an endless sequence of ontological dependence is supposed to be blatantly impossible. P<sub>3</sub> is supposed to be true because only God is powerful and knowledgeable enough to be able to exist independently of all other entities.

We can be efficient here. The doubts about the Ontological Dependence argument parallel the doubts about the First Cause argument.

First, concerning P<sub>2</sub>, exactly why couldn't there be an endless sequence of ontological dependents? For instance, why not an endless sequence of bigger parts depending for their existence on ever smaller parts? The sheer infinity of the sequence does not make it inconceivable. We saw that much by considering the negative integers. If it is otherwise impossible, why is that? Until we see a good reason, P<sub>2</sub> stands in doubt.

And why does only God qualify as ontologically independent? Suppose that there are point-sized physical particles that have no parts. Why think that they would have to depend on anything?

Until we have a good answer to this question, we have grounds to doubt that God is uniquely qualified for ontologically independence, as P<sub>3</sub> claims.

### Designing the World

When we stand back from the previous arguments and consider what they try to do, they seem amazingly ambitious. The only facts about the world around us that the arguments use are the facts that there are effects and that there are ontologically dependent things. Simple, abstract, neutral facts like those seem far removed from the existence of an all-knowing, all-powerful, morally perfect creator. It is no wonder that arguments on that meager basis turn out to fall short of proving God's existence.

The actual facts of the world are much more wonderful than just any old effects and dependencies that might have existed. Maybe some awe-inspiring facts about how things actually are can serve to establish God's existence.

Suppose that the whole universe was unplanned and purely accidental. What would it be like? We can apply to this question what we've observed about accidents. Accidents make messes. Car crashes, bridge collapses, and accidents generally, result in disarray. Yes, once in a while there is a fortunate accident where some structure happens to develop. Some inadvertently spilled paint occasionally forms some neat shape. But that is highly exceptional. And if the accidents keep coming, any structure in the situation eventually dissolves. Further accidental paint spills obliterate a pretty pattern. So, if the universe was entirely accidental, then our observations lead us to expect that it would display disorderly disarray, with the occasional pattern emerging briefly.

That is not what we find. Instead, we find an abundance of examples of organized structures resembling complex machines. The most impressive machine-like structures that we know of

involve life. The examples range from the intricate interrelationships of components within single cells to the tremendous complexities of whole organisms and eco-systems. Matter at sub-cellular levels is also highly organized, from the structures of molecules to the structures of atoms and sub-atomic particles. On larger scales we find planetary systems, galaxies, and groups of galaxies.

We have experience with how order gets introduced. What we observe is that machine-like order is imposed by minds. We see such order arise by design in everything from simple tools to amazingly intricate systems like computers and ocean liners. We do observe mindless robotic devices at work on assembly lines, arranging materials into planes, trains, and automobiles. But highly intelligent planning always lies behind the whole setup.

What does this comparison tell us about the origin of the universe? Proponents of a design argument for God's existence contend that it makes a strong case for a divine mind behind the whole thing. They contend that the universe has machine-like structure throughout. They add that the only mind up to the task of planning all this is the mind of the divine creator, God.

#### *First Version*

Here is our first version of this reasoning, in two phases.

#### *Demonstration by Design*

##### *Phase 1*

*Premiser:* The universe exhibits intricate machine-like structure on every scale of space and time.

*Premise2:* The only possible way for the universe to exhibit such structure is for it to have been intelligently designed.

*Conclusion1:* The universe was intelligently designed.

*Phase2*

*Conclusion1:* The universe was intelligently designed.

*Premise3:* If the universe was intelligently designed, then it was designed by God.

*Conclusion2:* God exists.

P2 links the claim made by P1 about order in the universe to the conclusion of Phase 1 so that the conclusion follows inescapably. By doing this, though, P2 runs afoul of the possibility of the improbable. Consider the most orderly arrangement imaginable of the largest universe imaginable. Call it a MOHU, for 'Maximally Orderly Huge Universe'. If we somehow knew that we were in a MOHU, it would be ridiculous to assume that our MOHU happened to exist for no reason. That is so unlikely as to be virtually impossible. The problem for Phase 1 is that the accidental existence of a MOHU is only virtually impossible, not quite just plain impossible. No matter how much structure the MOHU has, its materials might possibly have happened to arrange themselves that way in a fluke random occurrence.

If we doubt this, our doubts can be worn away. We must acknowledge that some minimal structure could arise by chance, say, a simple shape arising from random fluctuations. How about just a little more structure? No doubt that is less likely, but still, it is a possibility. How about a little more, and more, and more? We find ourselves acknowledging the possibility of a structure exactly like a Rolls Royce arising at random. And we can't stop there. Only the likelihood decreases; we never reach any impossibility. Finally we have to admit that random typing by monkeys might possibly type out *Hamlet*. No defensible stopping place exists and we end up acknowledging the possibility of a chance MOHU. P2 denies this possibility, and that is bad for P2.

*Second Version*

There is an alternative version of the reasoning. Some arguments render their conclusions highly reasonable, though they offer something short of proof. If considerations of design could do that for the conclusion that God exists, it would be an important result. If we could be shown that affirming God's existence is as reasonable as denying that a MOHU happened by chance, then the claim that God exists would be very strongly supported. Even somewhat weaker support would be plenty interesting.

Let's return to what our observations show us about the origin of organized structure. Our observations make it grossly implausible that much machine-like order arose by accident. The claim that this order exists by accident seems a very poor *explanation* of it. In contrast, the claim that the order implements a planned design renders its existence understandable to us. Proponents of a design argument can offer God's design as the best explanation of the structure that we find in the universe. To capture this idea, we can replace P2 of the Demonstration from Design with a claim about explanation.

*Best Explanation by Design*

*Phase 1*

*Premise1:* The universe exhibits machine-like structure on every scale of space and time.

*Premise2:* The best explanation of the universe exhibiting such structure is that the universe was intelligently designed.

So probably:

*Conclusion1:* The universe was intelligently designed.

Phase 1 assumes that the best explanation of something is probably true. Phase 1 offers no proof that its conclusion C1 is true. But if it succeeds, then it makes for rational belief in C1.

Phase 2

*Conclusion1:* The universe was intelligently designed.

*Premise3:* If the universe was intelligently designed, then it was designed by God.

*Conclusion2:* God exists.

Not questioning P1 for now, how credible is P2e? Initially, it seems quite plausible. What could explain the high levels of order that we observe as well as the explanation claiming that the order resulted from an intelligent plan?

Here is a rival hypothesis: unplanned physical laws exist—laws of physics, chemistry, biology, and the other sciences—and these laws, operating on the physical materials in the universe, produce the high level of order. This natural sort of explanation does work. It gives an explanation of the machine-like organization that we observe in things like molecules, marsupials, and marshes. We can understand how some laws, operating on some materials that were in a position to develop into orderly arrangements by conforming to the laws, would yield the highly orderly systems that we find in the universe. It is a long story that science has yet to complete in detail. The point is that we see that this is one way to explain the development of the order.

An explanation saying that the order implements a creator's plan also works. We understand that machine-like order could have come about by implementing an intelligent design. P2e says that the latter explanation is best. But so far, the two explanations seem equally capable of explaining the phenomenon in question. So why think that the latter one is better?

It is sometimes complained that the purely physical explanation just takes for granted that the physical laws and materials that exist produce the observed order. 'Yes,' it might be conceded, 'we can understand the presence of order, given the presence of physical laws and materials that just happen to go together to produce it. But this only pushes back the phenomenon requiring

explanation: why is there this remarkable combination of physical materials and laws that mesh together so as to produce the observed high level of organization?'

Notice what this reply concedes. It acknowledges that the physical account explains the existence of the order. The complaint is that the physical account relies on something else, the combination of laws and the arrangement of materials, and they call for explanation.

This does not show that the physical explanation is worse than the explanation by design. The designing creator explanation relies on things too. It relies on the existence of an intelligent designer's plan for the universe to be as it is, and the designer's capacity to implement that plan in the universe. The existence of these things could use explaining too. It would be arbitrary simply to rest content with no explanation of them.

It is far from clear which explanation is in better shape here. A powerful intelligent being who planned and created the whole universe would be the most amazing thing in the world. Such a being can seem much *more* remarkable than the existence of natural laws and materials that happen to work together to generate the observed order. After all, we acknowledged some possibility of natural things just happening to produce a high degree of order, however unlikely it was. Is a designing creator even *that* likely? If the existence of the right physical ingredients calls for explanation, then the existence of a designing creator cries out for explanation.

Some have claimed that God's existence is self-explanatory; others have denied that it requires explanation. These claims are seriously obscure and doubtful. The first one seems to say that God exists because God exists—???. It never explains anything just to repeat what needs explaining. An all-powerful God would have what it takes to sustain a *continued* existence, if God exists. But God's existence in the first place is what we are concerned about now. Similarly, it is baffling to be told that God's existence

requires no explanation. Why not? And if some reason can be given, why doesn't that reason also apply to the laws and materials of the physical account? Why do they still need explaining?

If there is anything finally better about the design explanation, it remains to be seen. Until it is definitely seen, P<sub>2e</sub> stands in doubt.

What about P<sub>1</sub>? Is the universe really so well organized all over the place? This is not clear. On the largest spatial scale that we currently observe, the galaxies are not randomly distributed. They tend to cluster. But that's it. They are not arrayed in some pinwheel pattern or any other fancy structure. As examples of organization, clusters are not impressive. Similarly, on the smallest spatial scale that we currently have information about, the scale of particles composed of quarks, we have trios of quarks bound closely together and jiggling about. That is not much like a complicated machine. When we look far back and far forward in time, the leading current cosmological views find considerably less intricate organization than is present today. Going far back toward the Big Bang, the theories say that things become ever less machine-like in structure. Going far forward toward the Big Chill, the theories say the same thing. So P<sub>1</sub> is open to question.

We could replace P<sub>1</sub> with a premise about the more localized order that is more clearly present in the world. But the smaller the portion of reality that displays machine-like order, the more probable it is that the order is accidental. Recall that our observations of accidents allow occasional patterns to be purely accidental effects of natural laws in operation. Does the extent of machine-like order in the whole world, throughout all of space and time, rise above that level? This is a question of detailed fact with no obvious answer.

There are other kinds of order that are sometimes cited in design arguments. One kind is the order that consists in the unbroken regularity of the operation of *natural laws*. This order is present throughout the known universe, including regions

where machine-like structure is absent. If we replace P<sub>1</sub> with a claim about the existence of this lawful order, does that make a better case for a designing creator?

The second premise will have to be adjusted too. It will have to claim that intelligent design best explains this lawful order. This new premise is open to doubt. When it comes to machine-like order, we are familiar with how minds introduce it. We have observed minds producing machines. But when it comes to something as perfectly uniform as the operation of a natural law, we have not observed minds implementing any such thing. Natural laws are like rules. Minds do invent rules. But intelligent minds in our experience do not enforce the same rules with no variation, ever, no matter what. Attributing such order to an intelligent design does not enable us to understand why the order exists, at least until we see a good enough reason for the absolute constancy.

This is an initial ground for doubt. Some views about God offer candidate reasons for God to institute unvarying laws. Also, according to some religious views natural laws are not perfectly constant, since they have been miraculously violated. These views in turn are disputed.

Another sort of order that some people point to as evidence of design is a kind of fine-tuning among physical magnitudes. According to current theories, if certain basic physical magnitudes had not been almost exactly the quantities that they are, they would have disallowed the development of complex atoms, much less human life. Does this argue that the universe was designed for us to exist in it?

Again, there is some ground for doubt. Suppose that human life depends on some exactly appropriate basic magnitudes in nature. Still, human life occupies an extremely small fraction of the known universe and it is extremely recent by cosmological standards. If the universe was designed for us by a mind intelligent and powerful enough to adjust physical magnitudes so that

we would eventually get here, why didn't the mind produce us more efficiently?

Again, the initial doubt may be answerable. Perhaps the huge lifeless portion of space and time serves other intelligent purposes. Such purposes have been proposed, and disputed.

This issue will not be resolved here. There is no brief way to decide the merits of replacing our first premise with one about these other sorts of order. However the best version of the first premise finally works out, Phase 2 of the Design arguments has a problem that deserves our attention.

The doubts that were just raised about explanations by design are similar in spirit to some of David Hume's ideas in his wonderful work, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. P<sub>3</sub> in Phase 2 is subject to some of Hume's powerful points. Hume suggests that we make use of *more specific details* in our observations of the origins of order. For instance, any large building project in our experience has multiple designers who have limited knowledge and ability. The universe was the largest building project of them all, if it was created by design. So our experience would lead us to expect a huge team of limited designers for such a project, rather than one all-knowing all-powerful God. Do we know anything else that overrides this lesson of experience? If not, then P<sub>3</sub> is highly questionable.

### Conceptually Guaranteeing God

A **concept** is a way of classifying something in our thinking. All of us have approximately a zillion concepts. We have the concept of a mammal, the concept of molasses, the concept of a toy, the concept of friendship, the concept of gravity, the concept of eyesight, the concept of danger, the concept of a boringly long list, and so on. A **singular concept** is a classification that brings to mind a single thing, if the concept applies at all. Singular

concepts are entirely familiar. Examples from ordinary life abound. When Donna's daschund Dobson is in Donna's house alone, he is fond of luxuriating on the sofa, occupying his chosen pillow in regal comfort. While Dobson is doing this, we can bring him to mind in many ways—for example, by conceiving of him as the pooch on the couch, as the daschund on the pillow, and as the dog in the house. These are singular concepts that apply to Dobson.

One important line of thinking has it that God is the greatest being that anyone could bring to mind. If so, then one singular concept of God is the concept of the greatest conceivable being. We'll need the phrase 'greatest conceivable being' a lot. Let's abbreviate it with its initials: GCB.

Almost a thousand years ago the medieval philosopher Anselm argued that the GCB concept has to apply to an existing entity who is God, because of facts that we can discover by appreciating the nature of the concept itself. The reasoning is called 'Anselm's ontological argument'.<sup>1</sup> In one version or another, ontological arguments are particularly appealing to many philosophers. This appeal has something to do with the remarkable fact that we are supposed to be able to find out, just by thinking correctly, all that we need to know to see them prove their point. They are pure philosophy with a powerful payoff—if they work. The ontological argument that we'll consider is a reconstruction of Anselm's highly influential reasoning.

It'll be helpful to have a label for what a singular concept singles out. In other words, we want a term for the entity that meets the specifications of the concept, if anything does. The concept of Donna's dog, for instance, calls for a dog that is the

<sup>1</sup> The aim of this chapter in considering Anselm's argument is to think about whether it shows that God *actually* exists. In the chapter 'Why Not Nothing?' two other ontological arguments are discussed. The aim there is to determine whether they can show that a *necessary* being exists, whether or not the being qualifies as God.

cue owned by Donna. The concept applies to such a dog, or it does not apply. Let's label the entity that is singled out by a singular concept the *target* of the concept.

Typical singular concepts need not have a target. Consider the concept of the spoon on the moon. If a single spoon happens to be on the moon—maybe an astronaut left one there—then this concept has that spoon as its target. Otherwise the concept of the spoon on the moon has no target. Either way, the concept of the spoon on the moon is one of our concepts. The same goes for the singular concept of the pooch on the couch, the singular concept of the farthest star from the Earth, and so forth.

Key question: could our GCB concept lack a target?

No, according to Anselm. He asks us to suppose that the GCB concept has no target. In other words, suppose that the GCB does not exist. Anselm argues that if this were so, then we could form another concept that would be a concept of something *greater* than the GCB. Starting with our GCB concept, we can add the idea of existing. This gives us the concept of the *existing* GCB (the EGCB for short). Anselm holds that under circumstances where no GCB existed, our EGCB concept would be the concept of something greater than the GCB. The reason is that existing is a better status than not existing and we would be explicitly requiring existence in our EGCB concept.

But wait! Anselm points out that there is no possible way for us to form a concept of any being that is greater than the greatest conceivable one. The GCB is the greatest being that we can conceive of—it says so right in the concept itself. Therefore we cannot conceive of a greater being. Yet in the situation just described, we are supposed to be conceiving of a greater being. Since this is impossible, as we just saw, we must have assumed something untrue in setting up the situation. Anselm holds that the only questionable assumption in the setup is the initial one, the assumption that the GCB concept does not have a target. If that assumption is the mistake, then the GCB concept *does* apply

to something. So the target of the GCB concept, the GCB, exists. The GCB is God. So God exists.

This reasoning can be summarized as follows.

*Anselm's Ontological Argument*

*Phase 1*

*Temporary Assumption:* The GCB concept has no target.

Now add this premise:

*Premise1:* If the GCB concept has no target, then the EGCB concept is a concept of something greater than the GCB concept.

From TA and P<sub>1</sub>, infer:

*Temporary Conclusion:* The EGCB concept is a concept of something greater than the GCB concept.

Add another premise:

*Premise2:* No concept is a concept of something greater than the GCB concept.

Premise<sub>2</sub> says that TC is untrue, so the temporary assumption TA that got us TC must be false. In other words, infer:

*Conclusion1:* The GCB concept does have a target.

*Phase 2*

*Conclusion1:* The GCB concept does have a target.

*Premise3:* If the GCB concept does have a target, then the GCB exists.

*Conclusion2:* The GCB exists.

*Phase 3*

*Conclusion2:* The GCB exists.

*Premise4:* The GCB is God.

*Conclusion3:* God exists.

Let's start our critical consideration of this argument on a positive note by contemplating P<sub>3</sub>. It is entirely okay. If a singular concept has a target, then the concept does apply to some existing thing. For example, since the singular concept of Donna's dog has Dobson as a target, Donna's dog exists.

Now let's consider the final assumption, P<sub>4</sub>. It seems pretty credible at first. But maybe we can conceive of something greater than God. Such as? Well, consider someone with limited abilities who overcomes adversity and acts heroically. In a way, such a person seems to be better than any being of unlimited power and knowledge who is morally flawless. That sort of being is too knowledgeable and powerful to be heroic. Maybe heroism is one feature of a conceivable being who would be overall greater than a being who has the power and knowledge of the traditional God.

This is debatable. God could still turn out to be the greatest. For instance, the greatness of God might consist in God's having all of the important positive properties, like knowledge, ability, and moral goodness, to a *maximum* extent. That sounds like an unbeatable combination.

This idea that God has the maximum degree of greatness is a risky one, though. The important positive properties may not all have a *possible* maximum. For example, part of being morally good is doing good. Yet no matter how much good someone does, it seems *possible* to have done more good. So moral goodness may not have a maximum. If not, then we don't get the GCB by conceiving of a being who is *maximally* morally good, because we get an impossible being. Any being that does exist and is good surely outdoes the greatness of any impossible being. Thus, the maximum idea of God is a problematic way to try to establish God as the GCB.

Much more thinking is needed to draw a justified conclusion about the truth of P<sub>4</sub>. But regardless of how well Phase 3 with P<sub>4</sub> works out, successful reasoning through Phase 2 would be

nothing to sneeze at. A proof of Phase 2's conclusion, C<sub>2</sub>, would be mighty metaphysically interesting. Establishing the actual existence of the greatest conceivable being would show us something wonderful about reality.

P<sub>1</sub> and P<sub>2</sub> are taken for granted in Phase 1. If either one of them is untrue, then C<sub>1</sub> is not proven in Phase 1. Without success in Phase 1, the whole argument collapses. Let's think more about P<sub>1</sub>.

P<sub>1</sub> says that if the GCB concept has no target, then the EGCB concept is 'of' something greater. The interpretation of the small word 'of' turns out to be crucial to assessing the argument. Two interpretations should be distinguished. First, for a concept to be 'of' a greater being, on one interpretation, is for a greater being to be the concept's target. This interpretation gives us:

P<sub>1i</sub>: If the GCB concept has no target, then the target of the EGCB concept is a greater thing than the target of the GCB concept.

If the GCB concept has no target, then it is easy for *some* other concept to have a greater target. The other concept would just have to apply to something that is greater than nothing. Again, anything good is greater than nothing. So a concept of a good thing that exists would qualify as having a greater target than the GCB concept. But would the EGCB concept in particular have a greater target, as P<sub>1i</sub> says?

Suppose that the GCB concept has no target. Recall that this means that the GCB concept does not apply to anything. If nothing is the greatest conceivable being, then nothing is the *existing* greatest conceivable being either. Thus, if the one concept applies to nothing, then so does the other. Since they both lack targets, the greatness of their targets is the greatness of nothing—worthless! Therefore, if the GCB concept has no target, then the GCB concept and the EGCB concept would be tied at zero for the greatness of their targets. This denies the P<sub>1i</sub>

claim that the EGCB concept would have a *greater* target. So if we have interpreted P<sub>1</sub> correctly as P<sub>1i</sub>, then it is untrue.

There is another interpretation of P<sub>1</sub>. The new idea is that if the GCB concept has no target, then the EGCB concept demands more greatness than does the GCB concept. In other words, if no GCB exists, then in the competition for being our way of conceiving of the greatest being that we can possibly conceive of, the EGCB concept would beat out the GCB concept. Both concepts clearly require extreme greatness to apply. But according to P<sub>1</sub> as we are now interpreting it, in the absence of a real GCB, the EGCB concept would require the greater greatness. This gives us:

P<sub>1ii</sub>: If the GCB concept has no target, then the greatness needed for the EGCB concept to apply is more than the greatness needed for the GCB concept to apply.

P<sub>1ii</sub> does not stand scrutiny. The GCB concept goes all out in its demand for greatness—it demands 'the greatest'. It *demand*s maximal greatness, whether or not its demand is *met*. For example, existing appears to be part of what it takes to be the greatest thing that we can conceive of. Any 'things' that could have existed, but don't exist, at most *could have been* great. 'They' aren't great. 'They' aren't anything, much less anything great. If this appearance that existence is needed for greatness is correct, then the GCB concept demands existence just as much as the EGCB concept. If this appearance is incorrect, then the EGCB concept does not demand more greatness by explicitly demanding existence.

There is just no way for the GCB concept to be beaten in this competition. The GCB concept requires 'the greatest', and that's that! Yet P<sub>1ii</sub> alleges that under one particular condition—the nonexistence of the GCB—the EGCB concept demands more greatness. We have just seen that it couldn't, though. So this other interpretation of P<sub>1</sub> is untrue and does not help Anselm's ontological argument. Phase 1 of the argument relies on the truth of some interpretation of P<sub>1</sub>. Since the argument needs

phase 1 to work in order to get anywhere, the argument goes nowhere if our criticism is correct.

### Putting it All Together

We have found problems in each of the arguments for God's existence that we have considered. Let's not leap to any conclusions. Even if we had found problems in *all* arguments for God's existence, it would not follow that God does not exist. Entities whose existence cannot be proven by us might exist. They might exist without being in any revealing sort of relation to us. God could be like that. Or God could be revealed by an argument that we have not considered.

Let's not leap away from any conclusions either, though. The arguments that we have seen for God's existence do not work.

Sometimes each clue to a crime on its own does not mean much, while together they argue powerfully for a certain culprit. Likewise, the thoughts from several arguments might work better in combination. The most reasonable belief that we can have about something is one based on *all* relevant available evidence. So before we draw any conclusive conclusions about God's existence, we would do best to look at the combined strength of our arguments.

There are initial indications of an improved case. For instance, it seems to become more reasonable to think that the universe had God as first cause when we add in the observations from our discussion of the design argument that support the idea that the universe displays various sorts of order. On the other hand, the doubts raised about whether the universe really is organized as though by an intelligent designer carry over as doubts that God was its first cause.

Assessing the strength of a combined case for God's existence would require assessing together everything in the First Cause

and Design arguments, and the Ontological argument as well. Having done this, we would still not be in a position to draw the most rational conclusion. More evidence exists. There are other arguments for God's existence. There are arguments against God's existence too. The most prominent one—the Problem of Evil—contends that an all-powerful, all-knowing, morally perfect being would never allow all of the bad things that exist in this world, and so no such being exists. Several versions of this argument have been developed. They have in turn received intense critical scrutiny. All of that is more of the evidence available on the topic of God's existence. And then there's the challenge of assembling and weighing the totality of the evidence . . . We never said that metaphysics was quick and easy!

There's no need to get discouraged, either. With our consideration of the central metaphysical arguments, a serious investigation of God's existence is well under way.

#### FURTHER READING

Philosophy on the topic of God's existence comprises a huge literature. Here are two significant recent books. The first one is favorably disposed toward arguments against the existence of God; the second one is favorably disposed toward arguments for the existence of God. Jordan Howard Sobel, *Logic and Theism* (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God, 2nd edn.* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

## CHAPTER 5

# Why Not Nothing?

Earl Conee

### Introduction

Suppose that you find pickles in your potato soup. You ask indignantly, 'Why are there pickles in my potato soup?' You are told that Mort put them in when he prepared your soup. He did so because good old Bob told him, as a prank, that you favor pickles in your potato soup.

You may well remain dissatisfied, but the presence of the pickles has been explained to you. It is not an exhaustive explanation. It takes much for granted. It doesn't explain Bob's desire to play a prank or Mort's capacity to make soup. More fundamentally, it doesn't explain the existence of Mort, Bob, or the pickles. A fuller explanation would explain those things. It too would take a lot for granted, though, probably including some background conditions and general principles of psychology and biology.

The explanatory structure of this example seems to be completely typical. Seemingly, any answer to any question has to take something for granted. Explanations use some things to explain others.