

# The Existence of God



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# The Existence of God

By Peter Kreeft



## Can You Prove God Exists?

Before we answer this question, we must distinguish five questions that are often confused.

- First, there is the question of whether something *exists* or not. A thing can exist whether we know it or not.
- Second, there is the question of whether we *know* it exists. (To answer this question affirmatively is to presuppose that the first question is answered affirmatively, of course; though a thing can exist without our knowing it, we cannot know it exists unless it exists.)
- Third, there is the question of whether we have a *reason* for our knowledge. We can know some things without being able to lead others to that knowledge by reasons. Many Christians think God's existence is like that.
- Fourth, there is the question of whether this reason, if it exists, amounts to a *proof*. Most reasons do not. Most of the reasons we give for what we believe amount to probabilities, not proofs. For instance, the building you sit in may collapse in one minute, but the reliability of the contractor and the construction materials is a good reason for thinking that very improbable.
- Fifth, if there is a proof, is it a *scientific* proof, a proof by the scientific method, i.e., by experiment, observation, and measurement? Philosophical proofs can be good proofs, but they do not have to be scientific proofs.

I believe we can answer yes to the first four of these questions about the existence of God but not to the fifth. God exists, we can know that, we can give reasons, and those reasons amount to proof, but not scientific proof, except in an unusually broad sense.

There are many arguments for God's existence, but most of them have the same logical structure, which is the basic structure of any deductive argument. First, there is a major premise, or general principle. Then, a minor premise states some particular data in our experience that come under that principle. Finally, the conclusion follows from applying the general principle to the particular case.

In each case the conclusion is that God exists, but the premises of the different

arguments are different. The arguments are like roads, from different starting points, all aiming at the same goal of God. In subsequent essays we will explore the arguments from cause and effect, from conscience, from history, and from Pascal's Wager. The next essay explores the Argument from Design.

## Argument from Design

The argument starts with the major premise that where there is design, there must be a designer. The minor premise is the existence of design throughout the universe. The conclusion is that there must be a universal designer.

Why must we believe the major premise, that all design implies a designer? Because everyone admits this principle in practice. For instance, suppose you came upon a deserted island and found "S.O.S." written in the sand on the beach. You would not think the wind or the waves had written it by mere chance but that someone had been there, someone intelligent enough to design and write the message. If you found a stone hut on the island with windows, doors, and a fireplace, you would not think a hurricane had piled up the stones that way by chance. You immediately infer a designer when you see design.

When the first moon rocket took off from Cape Canaveral, two U.S. scientists stood watching it, side by side. One was a believer, the other an unbeliever. The believer said, "Isn't it wonderful that our rocket is going to hit the moon by chance?" The unbeliever objected, "What do you mean, chance? We put millions of manhours of design into that rocket." "Oh," said the believer, "you don't think chance is a good explanation for the rocket? Then why do you think it's a good explanation for the universe? There's much more design in a universe than in a rocket. We can design a rocket, but we couldn't design a whole universe. I wonder who can?" Later that day the two were strolling down a street and passed an antique store. The atheist admired a picture in the window and asked, "I wonder who painted that picture?" "No one," joked the believer; "it just happened by chance."

Is it possible that design happens by chance without a designer? There is perhaps one chance in a trillion that "S.O.S." could be written in the sand by the wind. But who would use a one-in-a-trillion explanation? Someone once said that if you sat a million monkeys at a million typewriters for a million years, one of them would eventually type out all of *Hamlet* by chance. But when we find the text of *Hamlet*, we don't wonder whether it came from chance and monkeys. Why then does the atheist use that incredibly improbable explanation for the universe? Clearly, because it is his only chance of remaining an atheist. At this point we need a psychological explanation of the atheist rather than a logical explanation of the universe. We have a logical explanation of the universe, but the atheist does not

like it. It's called God.

There is one especially strong version of the argument from design that hits close to home because it's about the design of the very thing we use to think about design: our brains. The human brain is the most complex piece of design in the known universe. In many ways it is like a computer. Now just suppose there were a computer that was programmed only by chance. For instance, suppose you were in a plane and the public-address system announced that there was no pilot, but the plane was being flown by a computer that had been programmed by a random fall of hailstones on its keyboard or by a baseball player in spiked shoes dancing on computer cards. How much confidence would you have in that plane? But if our brain computer has no cosmic intelligence behind the heredity and environment that program it, why should we trust it when it tells us about anything, even about the brain?

Another specially strong aspect of the design argument is the so-called anthropic principle, according to which the universe seems to have been specially designed from the beginning for human life to evolve. If the temperature of the primal fireball that resulted from the Big Bang some fifteen to twenty billion years ago, which was the beginning of our universe, had been a trillionth of a degree colder or hotter, the carbon molecule that is the foundation of all organic life could never have developed. The number of possible universes is trillions of trillions; only one of them could support human life: this one. Sounds suspiciously like a plot. If the cosmic rays had bombarded the primordial slime at a slightly different angle or time or intensity, the hemoglobin molecule, necessary for all warm-blooded animals, could never have evolved. The chance of this molecule's evolving is something like one in a trillion trillion. Add together each of the chances and you have something far more unbelievable than a million monkeys writing *Hamlet*.

There are relatively few atheists among neurologists and brain surgeons and among astrophysicists, but many among psychologists, sociologists, and historians. The reason seems obvious: the first study divine design, the second study human undesign.

But doesn't evolution explain everything without a divine Designer? Just the opposite; evolution is a beautiful example of design, a great clue to God. There is very good scientific evidence for the evolving, ordered appearance of species, from simple to complex. But there is no scientific proof of natural selection as the mechanism of evolution, Natural selection "explains" the emergence of higher forms without intelligent design by the survival-of-the-fittest principle. But this is sheer theory. There is no evidence that abstract, theoretical thinking or altruistic love make it easier for man to survive. How did they evolve then?

Furthermore, could the design that obviously now exists in man and in the human brain come from something with less or no design? Such an explanation violates the principle of causality, which states that you can't get more in the effect than you had in the cause. If there is intelligence in the effect (man), there must be intelligence in the cause. But a universe ruled by blind chance has no intelligence. Therefore there must be a cause for human intelligence that transcends the universe: a mind behind the physical universe. (Most great scientists have believed in such a mind, by the way, even those who did not accept any revealed religion.)

*You can't get more in the effect than you had in the cause.*

How much does this argument prove? Not all that the Christian means by God, of course — no argument can do that. But it proves a pretty thick slice of God: some designing intelligence great enough to account for all the design in the universe and the human mind. If that's not God, what is it? Steven Spielberg?

## The First Cause Argument

The most famous of all arguments for the existence of God are the "five ways" of Saint Thomas Aquinas. One of the five ways, the fifth, is the argument from design, which we looked at in the last essay. The other four are versions of the first-cause argument, which we explore here.

The argument is basically very simple, natural, intuitive, and commonsensical. We have to become complex and clever in order to doubt or dispute it. It is based on an instinct of mind that we all share: the instinct that says everything needs an explanation. Nothing just is without a reason why it is. Everything that is has some adequate or sufficient reason why it is.

Philosophers call this the Principle of Sufficient Reason. We use it every day, in common sense and in science as well as in philosophy and theology. If we saw a rabbit suddenly appear on an empty table, we would not blandly say, "Hi, rabbit. You came from nowhere, didn't you?" No, we would look for a cause, assuming there has to be one. Did the rabbit fall from the ceiling? Did a magician put it there when we weren't looking? If there seems to be no physical cause, we look for a psychological cause: perhaps someone hypnotized us. As a last resort, we look for a supernatural cause, a miracle. But there must be some cause. We never deny the Principle of Sufficient Reason itself. No one believes the Pop Theory: that things just pop into existence for no reason at all. Perhaps we will never find the cause, but there must be a cause for everything that comes into existence.

Now the whole universe is a vast, interlocking chain of things that come into

existence. Each of these things must therefore have a cause. My parents caused me, my grandparents caused them, et cetera. But it is not that simple. I would not be here without billions of causes, from the Big Bang through the cooling of the galaxies and the evolution of the protein molecule to the marriages of my ancestors. The universe is a vast and complex chain of causes. But does the universe as a whole have a cause? Is there a first cause, an uncaused cause, a transcendent cause of the whole chain of causes? If not, then there is an infinite regress of causes, with no first link in the great cosmic chain. If so, then there is an eternal, necessary, independent, self-explanatory being with nothing above it, before it, or supporting it. It would have to explain itself as well as everything else, for if it needed something else as its explanation, its reason, its cause, then it would not be the first and uncaused cause. Such a being would have to be God, of course. If we can prove there is such a first cause, we will have proved there is a God.

Why must there be a first cause? Because if there isn't, then the whole universe is unexplained, and we have violated our Principle of Sufficient Reason for everything. If there is no first cause, each particular thing in the universe is explained in the short run, or proximately, by some other thing, but nothing is explained in the long run, or ultimately, and the universe as a whole is not explained. Everyone and everything says in turn, "Don't look to me for the final explanation. I'm just an instrument. Something else caused me." If that's all there is, then we have an endless passing of the buck. God is the one who says, "The buck stops here."

If there is no first cause, then the universe is like a great chain with many links; each link is held up by the link above it, but the whole chain is held up by nothing. If there is no first cause, then the universe is like a railroad train moving without an engine. Each car's motion is explained proximately by the motion of the car in front of it: the caboose moves because the boxcar pulls it, the boxcar moves because the cattle car pulls it, et cetera. But there is no engine to pull the first car and the whole train. That would be impossible, of course. But that is what the universe is like if there is no first cause: impossible.

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Here is one more analogy. Suppose I tell you there is a book that explains everything you want explained. You want that book very much. You ask me whether I have it. I say no, I have to get it from my wife. Does she have it? No, she has to get it from a neighbor. Does he have it? No, he has to get it from his teacher, who has to get it. . . et cetera, etcetera, ad infinitum. No one

actually has the book. In that case, you will never get it. However long or short the chain of book borrowers may be, you will get the book only if someone actually has it and does not have to borrow it. Well, existence is like that book. Existence is handed down the chain of causes, from cause to effect. If there is no first cause, no being who is eternal and self-sufficient, no being who has existence by his own nature and does not have to borrow it from someone else, then the gift of existence can never be passed down the chain to others, and no one will ever get it. But we did get it. We exist. We got the gift of existence from our causes, down the chain, and so did every actual being in the universe, from atoms to archangels. Therefore there must be a first cause of existence, a God.

In more abstract philosophical language, the proof goes this way. Every being that exists either exists by itself, by its own essence or nature, or it does not exist by itself. If it exists by its own essence, then it exists necessarily and eternally, and explains itself. It cannot not exist, as a triangle cannot not have three sides. If, on the other hand, a being exists but not by its own essence, then it needs a cause, a reason outside itself for its existence. Because it does not explain itself, something else must explain it. Beings whose essence does not contain the reason for their existence, beings that need causes, are called contingent, or dependent, beings. A being whose essence is to exist is called a necessary being. The universe contains only contingent beings. God would be the only necessary being – if God existed. Does he? Does a necessary being exist? Here is the proof that it does. Dependent beings cannot cause themselves. They are dependent on their causes. If there is no independent being, then the whole chain of dependent beings is dependent on nothing and could not exist. But they do exist. Therefore there is an independent being.

Saint Thomas has four versions of this basic argument.

- First, he argues that the chain of movers must have a first mover because nothing can move itself. (Moving here refers to any kind of change, not just change of place.) If the whole chain of moving things had no first mover, it could not now be moving, as it is. If there were an infinite regress of movers with no first mover, no motion could ever begin, and if it never began, it could not go on and exist now. But it does go on, it does exist now. Therefore it began, and therefore there is a first mover.
- Second, he expands the proof from proving a cause of motion to proving a cause of existence, or efficient cause. He argues that if there were no first efficient cause, or cause of the universe's coming into being, then there could be no second causes because second causes (i.e., caused causes) are dependent on (i.e., caused by) a first cause (i.e., an uncaused cause). But there are second causes all around us. Therefore there must be a first cause.
- Third, he argues that if there were no eternal, necessary, and immortal being,

if everything had a possibility of not being, of ceasing to be, then eventually this possibility of ceasing to be would be realized for everything. In other words, if everything could die, then, given infinite time, everything would eventually die. But in that case nothing could start up again. We would have universal death, for a being that has ceased to exist cannot cause itself or anything else to begin to exist again. And if there is no God, then there must have been infinite time, the universe must have been here always, with no beginning, no first cause. But this universal death has not happened; things do exist! Therefore there must be a necessary being that cannot not be, cannot possibly cease to be. That is a description of God.

- Fourth, there must also be a first cause of perfection or goodness or value. We rank things as more or less perfect or good or valuable. Unless this ranking is false and meaningless, unless souls don't really have any more perfection than slugs, there must be a real standard of perfection to make such a hierarchy possible, for a thing is ranked higher on the hierarchy of perfection only insofar as it is closer to the standard, the ideal, the most perfect. Unless there is a most-perfect being to be that real standard of perfection, all our value judgments are meaningless and impossible. Such a most-perfect being, or real ideal standard of perfection, is another description of God.

There is a single common logical structure to all four proofs. Instead of proving God directly, they prove him indirectly, by refuting atheism. Either there is a first cause or not. The proofs look at "not" and refute it, leaving the only other possibility, that God is.

Each of the four ways makes the same point for four different kinds of cause: first, cause of motion; second, cause of a beginning to existence; third, cause of present existence; and fourth, cause of goodness or value. The common point is that if there were no first cause, there could be no second causes, and there are second causes (moved movers, caused causers, dependent and mortal beings, and less-than-wholly-perfect beings). Therefore there must be a first cause of motion, beginning, existence, and perfection.

How can anyone squirm out of this tight logic? Here are four ways in which different philosophers try.

- First, many say the proofs don't prove God but only some vague first cause or other. "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, not the God of philosophers and scholars", cries Pascal, who was a passionate Christian but did not believe you could logically prove God's existence. It is true that the proofs do not prove everything the Christian means by God, but they do prove a transcendent, eternal, uncaused, immortal, self-existing, independent, all-



perfect being. That certainly sounds more like God than like Superman! It's a pretty thick slice of God, at any rate—much too much for any atheist to digest.

- Second, some philosophers, like Hume, say that the concept of cause is ambiguous and not applicable beyond the physical universe to God. How dare we use the same term for what clouds do to rain, what parents do to children, what authors do to books, and what God does to the universe? The answer is that the concept of cause is analogical—that is, it differs somewhat but not completely from one example to another. Human fatherhood is *like* divine fatherhood, and physical causality is like divine causality. The way an author conceives a book in his mind is not exactly the same as the way a woman conceives a baby in her body either, but we call both causes. (In fact, we also call both conceptions.) The objection is right to point out that we do not fully understand how God causes the universe, as we understand how parents cause children or clouds cause rain. But the term remains meaningful. A cause is the *sine qua non* for an effect: if no cause, no effect. If no creator, no creation; if no God, no universe.
- Third, it is sometimes argued (e.g., by Bertrand Russell) that there is a self-contradiction in the argument, for one of the premises is that everything needs a cause, but the conclusion is that there is something (God) which does not need a cause. The child who asks "Who made God?" is really thinking of this objection. The answer is very simple: the argument does not use the premise that everything needs a cause. Everything in motion needs a cause, everything dependent needs a cause, everything imperfect needs a cause.
- Fourth, it is often asked why there can't be infinite regress, with no first being. Infinite regress is perfectly acceptable in mathematics: negative numbers go on to infinity just as positive numbers do. So why can't time be like the number series, with no highest number either negatively (no first in the past) or positively (no last in the future)? The answer is that real beings are not like numbers: they need causes, for the chain of real beings moves in one direction only, from past to future, and the future is caused by the past. Positive numbers are not caused by negative numbers. There is, in fact, a parallel in the number series for a first cause: the number one. If there were no first positive integer, no unit one, there could be no subsequent addition of units. Two is two ones, three is three ones, and so on. If there were no first, there could be no second or third.

If this argument is getting too tricky, the thing to do is to return to what is sure and clear: the intuitive point we began with. Not everyone can understand all the abstract details of the first-cause argument, but anyone can understand its basic point: as C. S. Lewis put it, "I felt in my bones that this universe does not explain itself."

## The Argument from Conscience

The argument from conscience is one of the only two arguments for the existence of God alluded to in Scripture, the other being the argument from design (both in Romans). Both arguments are essentially simple natural intuitions. Only when complex, artificial objections are made do these arguments begin to take on a complex appearance.

The simple, intuitive point of the argument from conscience is that everyone in the world knows, deep down, that he is absolutely obligated to be and do good, and this absolute obligation could come only from God. Thus everyone knows God, however obscurely, by this moral intuition, which we usually call conscience. Conscience is the voice of God in the soul.

Like all arguments for the existence of God, this one proves only a small part of what we know God to be by divine revelation. But this part is significantly more than the arguments from nature reveal about God because this argument has richer data, a richer starting point. Here we have inside information, so to speak: the very will of God speaking, however obscurely and whisperingly, however poorly heard, admitted, and heeded, in the depths of our souls. The arguments from nature begin with data that are like an author's books; the argument from conscience begins with data that are more like talking with the author directly, live.

Before beginning, we should define and clarify the key term *conscience*. The modern meaning tends to indicate a mere feeling that I did something wrong or am about to do something wrong. The traditional meaning in Catholic theology is the knowledge of what is right and wrong: intellect applied to morality. The meaning of conscience in the argument is knowledge and not just a feeling; but it is intuitive knowledge rather than rational or analytical knowledge, and it is first of all the knowledge that I must always do right and never wrong, the knowledge of my absolute obligation to goodness, all goodness: justice and charity and virtue and holiness; only in the second place is it the knowledge of which things are right and which things are wrong. This second-place knowledge is a knowledge of moral facts, while the first-place knowledge is a knowledge of my personal moral obligation, a knowledge of the moral law itself and its binding authority over my life. That knowledge forms the basis for the argument from conscience.

If anyone claims he simply does not have that knowledge, if anyone says he simply doesn't see it, then the argument will not work for him. The question remains, however, whether he honestly doesn't see it and really has no conscience (or a radically defective conscience) or whether he is repressing the knowledge he

really has. Divine revelation tells us that he is repressing the knowledge (Rom 1:18b; 2:15). In that case, what is needed before the rational, philosophical argument is some honest introspection to see the data. The data, conscience, is like a bag of gold buried in my backyard. If someone tells me it is there and that this proves some rich man buried it, I must first dig and find the treasure before I can infer anything more about the cause of the treasure's existence. Before conscience can prove God to anyone, that person must admit the presence of the treasure of conscience in the backyard of his soul.

Nearly everyone will admit the premise, though. They will often explain it differently, interpret it differently, insist it has nothing to do with God. But that is exactly what the argument tries to show: that once you admit the premise of the authority of conscience, you must admit the conclusion of God. How does that work?

Nearly everyone will admit not only the existence of conscience but also its authority. In this age of rebellion against and doubt about nearly every authority, in this age in which the very word *authority* has changed from a word of respect to a word of scorn, one authority remains: an individual's conscience. Almost no one will say that one ought to sin against one's conscience, disobey one's conscience. Disobey the church, the state, parents, authority figures, but do not disobey your conscience. Thus people usually admit, though not usually in these words, the absolute moral authority and binding obligation of conscience.

Such people are usually surprised and pleased to find out that Saint Thomas Aquinas, of all people, agrees with them to such an extent that he says if a Catholic comes to believe the Church is in error in some essential, officially defined doctrine, it is a mortal sin against conscience, a sin of hypocrisy, for him to remain in the Church and call himself a Catholic, but only a venial sin against knowledge for him to leave the Church in honest but partly culpable error.

So one of the two premises of the argument is established: conscience has an absolute authority over me. The second premise is that the only possible source of absolute authority is an absolutely perfect will, a divine being. The conclusion follows that such a being exists.

How would someone disagree with the second premise? By finding an alternative basis for conscience besides God. There are four such possibilities:

*The only possible source of absolute authority is an absolutely perfect will.*

- something abstract and impersonal, like an idea;
- something concrete but less than human, something on the level of animal

instinct;

- something on the human level but not divine; and
- something higher than the human level but not yet divine. In other words, we cover all the possibilities by looking at the abstract, the concrete-less-than-human, the concrete-human, and the concrete-more-than-human.

The first possibility means that the basis of conscience is a law without a lawgiver. We are obligated absolutely to an abstract ideal, a pattern of behavior. The question then comes up, where does this pattern exist? If it does not exist anywhere, how can a real person be under the authority of something unreal? How can more be subject to "less"? If, however, this pattern or idea exists in the minds of people, then what authority do they have to impose this idea of theirs on me? If the idea is only an idea, it has no personal will behind it; if it is only someone's idea, it has only that someone behind it. In neither case do we have a sufficient basis for absolute, infallible, no-exceptions authority. But we already admitted that conscience has that authority, that no one should ever disobey his conscience.

The second possibility means that we trace conscience to a biological instinct. "We must love one another or die", writes the poet W. H. Auden. We unconsciously know this, says the believer in this second possibility, just as animals unconsciously know that unless they behave in certain ways the species will not survive. That's why animal mothers sacrifice for their children, and that's a sufficient explanation for human altruism too. It's the herd instinct.

The problem with that explanation is that it, like the first, does not account for the absoluteness of conscience's authority. We believe we ought to disobey an instinct – any instinct – on some occasions. But we do not believe we ought ever to disobey our conscience. You should usually obey instincts like mother love, but not if it means keeping your son back from risking his life to save his country in a just and necessary defensive war, or if it means injustice and lack of charity to other mothers' sons. There is no instinct that should always be obeyed. The instincts are like the keys on a piano (the illustration comes from C. S. Lewis); the moral law is like sheet music. Different notes are right at different times.

Furthermore, instinct fails to account not only for what we ought to do but also for what we do do. We don't always follow instinct. Sometimes we follow the weaker instinct, as when we go to the aid of a victim even though we fear for our own safety. The herd instinct here is weaker than the instinct for self-preservation, but our conscience, like sheet music, tells us to play the weak note here rather than the strong one.

Honest introspection will reveal to anyone that conscience is not an instinct. When

the alarm wakes you up early and you realize that you promised to help your friend this morning, your instincts pull you back to bed, but something quite different from your instincts tells you you should get out. Even if you feel two instincts pulling you (e.g., you are both hungry and tired), the conflict between those two instincts is quite different, and can be felt and known to be quite different, from the conflict between conscience and either or both of the instincts. Quite simply, conscience tells you that you ought to do or not do something, while instincts simply drive you to do or not do something. Instincts make something attractive or repulsive to your appetites, but conscience makes something obligatory to your choice, no matter how your appetites feel about it. Most people will admit this piece of obvious introspective data if they are honest. If they try to wriggle out of the argument at this point, leave them alone with the question, and if they are honest, they will confront the data when they are alone.

A third possibility is that other human beings (or society) are the source of the authority of conscience. That is the most popular belief, but it is also the weakest of all the four possibilities. For society does not mean something over and above other human beings, something like God, although many people treat society exactly like God, even in speech, almost lowering the voice to a whisper when the sacred name is mentioned. Society is simply other people like myself. What authority do they have over me? Are they always right? Must I never disobey them? What kind of blind status quo conservatism is this? Should a German have obeyed society in the Nazi era? To say society is the source of conscience is to say that when one prisoner becomes a thousand prisoners, they become the judge. It is to say that mere quantity gives absolute authority; that what the individual has in his soul is nothing, no authoritative conscience, but that what society (i.e., many individuals) has is. That is simply a logical impossibility, like thinking stones can think if only you have enough of them. (Some proponents of artificial intelligence believe exactly that kind of logical fallacy, by the way: that electrons and chips and chunks of metal can think if only you have enough of them in the right geometrical arrangements.)

The fourth possibility remains, that the source of conscience's authority is something above me but not God. What could this be? Society is not above me, nor is instinct. An ideal? That is the first possibility we discussed. It looks as though there are simply no candidates in this area.

And that leaves us with God. Not just some sort of God, but the moral God of the Bible, the God at least of Judaism. Among all the ancient peoples, the Jews were the only ones who identified their God with the source of moral obligation. The gods of the pagans demanded ritual worship, inspired fear, designed the universe, or ruled over the events in human life, but none of them ever gave a Ten Commandments or said, "Be ye holy for I the Lord your God am holy." The Jews

saw the origin of nature and the origin of conscience as one, and Christians (and Muslims) have inherited this insight. The Jews' claim to be God's chosen people interprets the insight in the humblest possible way: as divine revelation, not human cleverness. But once revealed, the claim can be seen to be utterly logical.

To sum up the argument most simply and essentially, conscience has absolute, exceptionless, binding moral authority over us, demanding unqualified obedience. But only a perfectly good, righteous divine will has this authority and a right to absolute, exceptionless obedience. Therefore conscience is the voice of the will of God.

Of course, we do not always hear that voice aright. Our consciences can err. That is why the first obligation we have, in conscience, is to form our conscience by seeking the truth, especially the truth about whether this God has revealed to us clear moral maps (Scripture and Church). If so, whenever our conscience seems to tell us to disobey those maps, it is not working properly, and we can know that by conscience itself if only we remember that conscience is more than just immediate feeling. If our immediate feelings were the voice of God, we would have to be polytheists or else God would have to be schizophrenic.

## The Argument from History

This argument is both stronger and weaker than the other arguments for the existence of God. It is stronger because its data (its evidence) are some facts of history, things that have happened on this planet, rather than principles or ideas. People are more convinced by facts than by principles. But it is weaker because the historical data amount only to strong clues, not to deductive proofs.

The argument from history is the strongest psychologically with most people, but it is not the logically strongest argument. It is like footprints in the sands of time, footprints made by someone great enough to be God.

There are at least eight different arguments from history, not just one.

**First**, we could argue from the meaningfulness of history itself. History, both human and prehuman, has a storyline. It is not just random. The atheist Jean-Paul Sartre has his alter ego Roquentin say something like this about history in the novel *Nausea*: "I have never had adventures. Things have happened to me, that's all." If atheism is true, there are no adventures, nothing has intrinsic significance, life is "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing". But life is not that. Life is a story. Stories are not told by idiots. In J. R. R. Tolkien's great epic *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo and Sam are crawling through the slag heaps of Mordor desperately attempting to fulfill their perilous quest when Sam stops to

ask, "I wonder what kind of story we're in, Mr. Frodo?" It is a great question, a concrete way of asking the abstract question, "What is the meaning of life?" That the question is asked at all shows that we are in a story, not a jumble, and a story points to a storyteller. Thus the general argument from history is a version of the argument from design.

A **second** argument concentrates more specifically on the moral design in history. Thus it can be seen as similar to the argument from conscience in that it uses the same evidence, morality. But in this case the premise is the justice revealed in history rather than the obligation imposed by individual conscience. The historical books of the Old Testament constitute an extended argument for the existence of God based on the history of the Jewish people. The argument is implicit, not explicit, of course; the Bible is not a book of philosophical arguments. It is not so much an argument as an invitation to look and see the hand of God in history. Whenever God's laws are followed, the people prosper. When they are violated, the people perish. History shows that moral laws are as inescapable as physical laws. Just as you can flout gravity only temporarily before you fall, so you can flout the moral laws of God only temporarily before you fall. Great tyrants like Adolf Hitler flourish for a day, like the mayfly, and perish. Great saints experience apparent failure, and emerge into triumph and joy. The same is true of nations as well as individuals. The lesson is scorned not because it is unknown or obscure but because it is so well known; it is what our mothers and nurses told us as children. And however "square" it may be, it is true. History proves you can't cut the corners of the moral square. In geometry, you can't square the circle, and in history you can't circle the square. Now is this moral design (which the East calls karma) mere chance or the product of a wise moral will, a lawgiver? But no human lawgiver invented history itself. The only adequate cause for such an effect is God.

A **third** argument from history looks at providential "coincidences", like the Red Sea's parting (moved by an east wind, according to Exodus) at just the right time for the Jews to escape Pharaoh. Our own individual histories usually have some similar bits of incredible timing. Insightful and unprejudiced examination of these "coincidences" will bring us at least to the suspicion, if not to the conviction, that an unseen divine hand is at work here. The writers of the Bible often shortcut the argument and simply ascribe such natural events to God. Indeed, another passage in Exodus says simply that God parted the sea. This may not be miracle; God may have worked here, as he continues to work, through the second causes of natural agents. But it is God who works, and the hand of the Worker is visible through the work, if we only look. The argument is not a logical compulsion but an invitation to look, like Christ's "come and see."

A **fourth** argument from history, the strongest one of all, is the argument from

miracles. Miracles directly and inescapably show the presence of God, for a miracle, in the ordinary sense of the word, is a deed done by supernatural, not natural, power. Neither nature nor chance nor human power can perform a miracle. If miracles happen, they show God's existence as clearly as reproduction shows the existence of organic life or rational speech shows the existence of thought.

If I were an atheist, I think I would save my money to buy a plane ticket to Italy to see whether the blood of Saint Januarius really did liquefy and congeal miraculously, as it is supposed to do annually. I would go to Medjugorje. I would study all published interviews of any of the seventy thousand who saw the miracle of the sun at Fatima. I would ransack hospital records for documented "impossible", miraculous cures. Yet, strangely, almost all atheists argue against miracles philosophically rather than historically. They are convinced a priori, by argument, that miracles can't happen. So they don't waste their time or money on such an empirical investigation. Those who do soon cease to be atheists—like the sceptical scientists who investigated the Shroud of Turin, or like Frank Morrison, who investigated the evidence for the "myth" of Christ's Resurrection with the careful scientific eye of the historian—and became a believer. (His book *Who Moved the Stone?* is still a classic and still in print after more than sixty years.)

The evidence is there for those who have eyes to see or, rather, the will to look. God provided just enough evidence of himself: enough for any honest and open-minded seeker whose heart really cares about the truth of the matter but not so much that dull and hardened hearts are convinced by force. Even Christ did not convince everyone by his miracles. He could have remained on earth, offered to walk into any scientific laboratory of the twentieth century, and invited scientists to perform experiments on him. He could have come down from the Cross, and then the doubters would have believed. But he did not. Even the Resurrection was kept semiprivate. The New Testament speaks of five hundred who saw him. Why did he not reveal himself to all?

He will, on the last day, when it will be too late to change sides. His mercy gives us time to choose and freedom to choose. The evidence for him, especially his miracles, is clear enough throughout history so that anyone with an honest, trusting, and seeking heart will find him: "All who seek find." But those who do not seek will not find. He leaves us free. He is like a lover with a marriage proposal, not like a soldier with a gun or a policeman with a warrant.

A **fifth** argument from history is Christ himself. Here is a man who lived among us and claimed to be God. If Christ was God, then, of course, there is a God. But if Christ was not God, he was a madman or a devil—a madman if he really thought he was God but was not, and a devil if he knew he was not God and yet tempted



men to worship him as God. Which is he – Lord, lunatic, or liar?

Part of the data of history are the Gospel records of his life and his character. Reading the Gospels is like reading Plato's accounts of Socrates, or Boswell's account of Dr. Johnson: an absolutely unforgettable character emerges, on a human level. His personality is distinctive and compelling to every reader of the Gospels, even unbelievers, even his enemies, like Nietzsche. And the character revealed there is utterly unlike that of a lunatic or a liar. If it is impossible that a lunatic could be that wise or a liar that loving, then he must be the Lord; he must be the one he claims to be.

This is the progress of the argument in Scripture: you meet God through Christ, and (as the next argument will show) you meet Christ through Christians, through the Church. The logical order is: first prove the existence of God, then prove the divinity of Christ, then prove the authority of Christ's Church. But the actual order in which an individual confronts these things is the reverse: he meets Christ through Christians (first, the apostles and writers of the Gospels; then the saints, past and present) and God through Christ. Once again, the "argument" is more like an invitation to "come and see."

A **sixth** argument is the saints, especially their joy. G. K. Chesterton once said that the only unanswerable argument against Christianity was Christians. (He meant bad and sad Christians.) Similarly, the only unanswerable argument for Christianity is Christians—saintly Christians. You can argue against Mother Teresa's theology if you are sceptical of mind, but you cannot argue against Mother Teresa unless you are hopelessly hard of heart. If there is no God, how can life's most fundamental illusion cause life's greatest joy? If God didn't do it, who put smiles on the lips of martyrs? "By their fruits you shall know them." Illusions do not have the staying power that the Faith has.

*Who put smiles on the lips  
of martyrs?*

And that brings us to our **seventh** argument from history: the conversion of the world. How explain the success of the Faith in winning the hearts of men? Hard-hearted Romans give up worldly pleasures and ambitions, and often life itself. Worldly men pin their hopes on otherworldly goals and do it consistently, en masse, century after century. If Christianity is not true and there are no miracles, then the conversion of the world is an even greater miracle. Greek philosophy won converts through rational proofs, and Mohammed through force of arms in the jihad, or holy war, but Christ won the hearts of men by the miracle of "amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me." (I almost believe it is our high and holy duty to sing loudly the original "wretch" line that our liturgical experts have bowdlerized out of that great old song whenever the congregation sings the bland version instead. God in

his wisdom saw that the American Church lacked persecutions and so sent her liturgists.)

The **eighth** and last argument from history is from our own individual history and life's experiences. The Christian faith is verifiable in a laboratory, but it is a subtle and complex laboratory: the laboratory of one's life. If God exists, he wants to get in touch with us and reveal himself to us, and he has promised that all who seek him will find him. Well, then, all the agnostic has to do is to seek, sincerely, honestly, and with an open mind, and he will find, in God's way and in God's time. That is part of the hypothesis, part of the promise.

How to seek? Not just by arguing but by praying, not just by talking about God, as Job's three friends did and did not find him, but by talking to God, as Job did, and found him. I always tell a sceptic to pray the prayer of the sceptic if he really wants to know whether God exists. This is the scientific thing to do, to test a hypothesis by performing the relevant experiment. I tell him to go out into his backyard some night when no one can see and hear him and make him feel foolish, and say to the empty universe above him, "God, I don't know whether you exist or not. Maybe I'm praying to nobody, but maybe I'm praying to you. So if you are really there, please let me know somehow, because I do want to know. I want only the Truth, whatever it is. If you are the Truth, here I am, ready and willing to follow you wherever you lead." If our faith is not a pack of lies, then whoever sincerely prays that prayer will find God in his own life, no matter how hard, how long, or how complex the road, as Augustine's was in the *Confessions*. "All roads lead to Rome" if only we follow them.

## The Argument from Pascal's Wager

Most philosophers think Pascal's Wager is the weakest of all arguments for believing in the existence of God. Pascal thought it was the strongest. After finishing the argument in his *Pensées*, he wrote, "This is conclusive, and if men are capable of any truth, this is it." That is the only time Pascal ever wrote a sentence like that, for he was one of the most sceptical philosophers who ever wrote.

Suppose someone terribly precious to you lay dying, and the doctor offered to try a new "miracle drug" that he could not guarantee but that seemed to have a 50-50 chance of saving your beloved friend's life. Would it be reasonable to try it, even if it cost a little money? And suppose it were free – wouldn't it be utterly reasonable to try it and unreasonable not to?

Suppose you hear reports that your house is on fire and your children are inside. You do not know whether the reports are true or false. What is the reasonable thing to do – to ignore them or to take the time to run home or at least phone

home just in case the reports are true?

Suppose a winning sweepstakes ticket is worth a million dollars, and there are only two tickets left. You know that one of them is the winning ticket, while the other is worth nothing, and you are allowed to buy only one of the two tickets, at random. Would it be a good investment to spend a dollar on the good chance of winning a million?

No reasonable person can be or ever is in doubt in such cases. But deciding whether to believe in God is a case like these, argues Pascal. It is therefore the height of folly not to "bet" on God, even if you have no certainty, no proof, no guarantee that your bet will win.

To understand Pascal's Wager you have to understand the background of the argument. Pascal lived in a time of great scepticism. Medieval philosophy was dead, and medieval theology was being ignored or sneered at by the new intellectuals of the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century. Montaigne, the great sceptical essayist, was the most popular writer of the day. The classic arguments for the existence of God were no longer popularly believed. What could the Christian apologist say to the sceptical mind of this age? Suppose such a typical mind lacked both the gift of faith and the confidence in reason to prove God's existence; could there be a third ladder out of the pit of unbelief into the light of belief?

Pascal's Wager claims to be that third ladder. Pascal well knew that it was a low ladder. If you believe in God only as a bet, that is certainly not a deep, mature, or adequate faith. But it is something, it is a start, it is enough to dam the tide of atheism. The Wager appeals not to a high ideal, like faith, hope, love, or proof, but to a low one: the instinct for self-preservation, the desire to be happy and not unhappy. But on that low natural level, it has tremendous force. Thus Pascal prefaces his argument with the words, "Let us now speak according to our natural lights."

Imagine you are playing a game for two prizes. You wager blue chips to win blue prizes and red chips to win red prizes. The blue chips are your mind, your reason, and the blue prize is the truth about God's existence. The red chips are your will, your desires, and the red prize is heavenly happiness. Everyone wants both prizes, truth and happiness. Now suppose there is no way of calculating how to play the blue chips. Suppose your reason cannot win you the truth. In that case, you can still calculate how to play the red chips. Believe in God not because your reason can prove with certainty that it is true that God exists but because your will seeks happiness, and God is your only chance of attaining happiness eternally.

Pascal says, "Either God is, or he is not. But to which view shall we be inclined? Reason cannot decide this question. [Remember that Pascal's Wager is an argument for sceptics.] Infinite chaos separates us. At the far end of this infinite distance [death] a coin is being spun that will come down heads [God] or tails [no God]. How will you wager?"

The most powerful part of Pascal's argument comes next. It is not his refutation of atheism as a foolish wager (that comes last) but his refutation of agnosticism as impossible. Agnosticism, not-knowing, maintaining a sceptical, uncommitted attitude, seems to be the most reasonable option. The agnostic says, "The right thing is not to wager at all." Pascal replies, "But you must wager. There is no choice. You are already committed [embarked]." We are not outside observers of life, but participants. We are like ships that need to get home, sailing past a port that has signs on it proclaiming that it is our true home and our true happiness. The ships are our own lives and the signs on the port say "God". The agnostic says he will neither put in at that port (believe) nor turn away from it (disbelieve) but stay anchored a reasonable distance away until the weather clears and he can see better whether this is the true port or a fake (for there are a lot of fakes around). Why is this attitude unreasonable, even impossible? Because we are moving. The ship of life is moving along the waters of time, and there comes a point of no return, when our fuel runs out, when it is too late. The Wager works because of the fact of death.

*We are like ships  
that need to get home.*

Suppose Romeo proposes to Juliet and Juliet says, "Give me some time to make up my mind." Suppose Romeo keeps coming back day after day, and Juliet keeps saying the same thing day after day: "Perhaps tomorrow." In the words of a small, female, red-haired American philosopher, "Tomorrow is always a day away. And there comes a time when there are no more tomorrows. Then "maybe" becomes "no". Romeo will die. Corpses do not marry. Christianity is God's marriage proposal to the soul. Saying "maybe" and "perhaps tomorrow" cannot continue indefinitely because life does not continue indefinitely. The weather will never clear enough for the agnostic navigator to be sure whether the port is true home or false just by looking at it through binoculars from a distance. He has to take a chance, on this port or some other, or he will never get home.

Once it is decided that we must wager; once it is decided that there are only two options, theism and atheism, not three, theism, atheism, and agnosticism; then the rest of the argument is simple. Atheism is a terrible bet. It gives you no chance of winning the red prize. Pascal states the argument this way:

You have two things to lose: the true and the good; and two things to stake: your reason and your will, your knowledge and your happiness; and your nature has two things to avoid: error and wretchedness. Since you must necessarily choose, your reason is no more affronted by choosing one rather than the other. That is one point cleared up. But your happiness? Let us weigh up the gain and the loss involved in calling heads that God exists. Let us assess the two cases: if you win, you win everything; if you lose, you lose nothing. Do not hesitate then: wager that he does exist.

If God does not exist, it does not matter how you wager, for there is nothing to win after death and nothing to lose after death. But if God does exist, your only chance of winning eternal happiness is to believe, and your only chance of losing it is to refuse to believe. As Pascal says, "I should be much more afraid of being mistaken and then finding out that Christianity is true than of being mistaken in believing it to be true." If you believe too much, you neither win nor lose eternal happiness. But if you believe too little, you risk losing everything.

But is it worth the price? What must be given up to wager that God exists? Whatever it is, it is only finite, and it is most reasonable to wager something finite on the chance of winning an infinite prize. Perhaps you must give up autonomy or illicit pleasures, but you will gain infinite happiness in eternity, and "I tell you that you will gain even in this life" — purpose, peace, hope, joy, the things that put smiles on the lips of martyrs.

Lest we take this argument with less seriousness than Pascal meant it, he concludes: "If my words please you and seem cogent, you must know that they come from a man who went down upon his knees before and after."

To the high-minded objector who refuses to believe for the low motive of saving the eternal skin of his own soul, we may reply that the Wager works quite as well if we change the motive. Let us say we want to give God his due if there is a God. Now if there is a God, justice demands total faith, hope, love, obedience, and worship. If there is a God and we refuse to give him these things, we sin maximally against the truth. But the only chance of doing infinite justice is if God exists and we believe, while the only chance of doing infinite injustice is if God exists and we do not believe. If God does not exist, there is no one there to do infinite justice or infinite injustice to. So the motive of doing justice moves the Wager just as well as the motive of seeking happiness. Pascal used the more selfish motive because we all have that all the time, while only some are motivated by justice, and only some of the time.

Because the whole argument moves on the practical rather than the theoretical level, it is fitting that Pascal next imagines the listener offering the practical

objection that he just cannot bring himself to believe. Pascal then answers the objection with stunningly practical psychology, with the suggestion that the prospective convert "act into" his belief if he cannot yet "act out" of it.

If you are unable to believe, it is because of your passions since reason impels you to believe and yet you cannot do so. Concentrate then not on convincing yourself by multiplying proofs of God's existence but by diminishing your passions. You want to find faith, and you do not know the road. You want to be cured of unbelief, and you ask for the remedy: learn from those who were once bound like you and who now wager all they have. . . . They behaved just as if they did believe.

This is the same advice Dostoevsky's guru, Father Zossima, gives to the "woman of little faith" in *The Brothers Karamazov*. The behavior Pascal mentions is "taking holy water, having Masses said, and so on". The behavior Father Zossima counsels to the same end is "active and indefatigable love of your neighbor." In both cases, living the Faith can be a way of getting the Faith. As Pascal says: "That will make you believe quite naturally and will make you more docile." "But that is what I am afraid of." "But why? What have you to lose?"

An atheist visited the great rabbi and philosopher Martin Buber and demanded that Buber prove the existence of God to him. Buber refused, and the atheist got up to leave in anger. As he left, Buber called after him, "But can you be sure there is no God?" That atheist wrote, forty years later, "I am still an atheist. But Buber's question has haunted me every day of my life." The Wager has just that haunting power.



## Arguments for the Existence of God

from 'Fundamentals of Catholic Faith' by Peter Kreeft<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.ignatius.com/ViewProduct.aspx?SID=1&Product\\_ID=623&AFID=12](http://www.ignatius.com/ViewProduct.aspx?SID=1&Product_ID=623&AFID=12)

# Recommended Readings and Resources

## Recommended Links

### The Catholic Faith

[www.thecatholicfaith.info](http://www.thecatholicfaith.info)

The home of The Catholic Faith booklets.

### Catholic Education Resource Center

[www.catholiceducation.org](http://www.catholiceducation.org)

An invaluable Catholic education resource for all Catholics.

### Catholic Answers

[www.catholic.com](http://www.catholic.com)

One of the best websites for Catholic apologetics (defence of Catholic doctrines).

### Peter Kreeft

[www.peterkreeft.com](http://www.peterkreeft.com)

Articles and MP3 lectures by the renowned Catholic author and philosopher.

### Radio Replies

[www.icatholicism.net/apologetics/radio-replies.html](http://www.icatholicism.net/apologetics/radio-replies.html)

The famed anthology of Q&A's about virtually any topic on the faith.

### Catholic Culture Site Reviews

[www.catholicculture.org/reviews](http://www.catholicculture.org/reviews)

Find links and check Catholic any websites on fidelity, resources and useability.

## Recommended Books<sup>2</sup>

### Mere Christianity by C. S. Lewis

One of the most famous works of Christian apologetics that is also easy to read. Written by the Anglican author of the Chronicals of Narnia.

### Handbook of Christian Apologetics by Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli

An exceptional Christian apologetics resource on topics such as faith and reason, the existence of God, the problem of evil, the divinity of Christ, and objective truth.

### How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization by Thomas E. Woods

An eye-opening book outlining how the Church had an indispensable role in every facet of Western civilization, including science, economics, morality, law, and fine arts.

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<sup>2</sup> Some of these are available for preview at [books.google.com](http://books.google.com). For purchases, see [amazon.com](http://amazon.com) and, in New Zealand, [thenile.co.nz](http://thenile.co.nz), and [jeromes.co.nz](http://jeromes.co.nz). See also your local library catalogue, which can be found from [nzlibraries.com](http://nzlibraries.com).