

Arguments for the existence of God

■ Ontological arguments

Descartes' version of the ontological argument	Anselm's version of the ontological argument
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1 God is a supremely perfect being.2 A supremely perfect being would have all the 'perfections'.3 Existence is a perfection (meaning that something is better if it exists than if it doesn't – in order to be perfect, something must first exist).4 Therefore, a supremely perfect being would have existence.5 Therefore, God exists.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1 God is the greatest conceivable thing. Nothing greater can be conceived than God.2 If God exists only as an idea, then God is not the greatest thing conceivable, because it is greater to exist in reality than only as an idea.3 Therefore, God must exist in reality in addition to existing as an idea.4 Therefore, God exists.

'Ontology' is just a fancy word for the study of the way something exists – the nature of its being. This is a difficult word to understand, but in this case 'ontological' just refers to the fact that each argument starts from a definition of the idea 'God': each of the premises numbered 1 in the table above are a claim about God's nature or the kind of thing God is thought to be. Descartes says the word 'God' refers to a being which is 'supremely perfect' or 'has all perfections' and Anselm says that 'God' refers to the being who is the greatest being we can think of (these two claims amount to roughly the same thing).

The ontological argument can be best explored as a TOK topic in terms of how we should be constructing knowledge of the real world we live in. Should it be through the exercise of pure reason (like the arguments above), or should it be based on evidence from the real world? Generally, knowledge of the world is developed through the scientific method, which requires experiments to find out if claims should be considered true or false. We can say what we want about the world, but if there is no observable evidence to back it up, then what we say cannot be thought to be a justifiable claim about the real world. The ontological arguments, however, only offer conceptual evidence gathered through the exercise of reason (ie, thinking), not observational ('empirical') evidence for the claim that there is a God in the real world.

What the ontological arguments are attempting to do is to start from a definition of an idea (in this case the idea of 'God') and show that there is a real thing in the world that the idea is referring to. Both Descartes and Anselm say that the idea of God contains within it another idea, that of 'existence'. This would be like saying that part of our idea of a 'sister' is of a female sibling. This is what our analysis of the concept 'sister' tells us; its *definition* includes 'female'. So far so good. But the conclusion of the arguments is that God exists in the real world, not only in the world of ideas. We call claims about what does or might exist, or what things might be like in the real world, 'empirical claims' and empirical claims about the real world need evidence from the real world.

The problem with the ontological arguments is that there has been no observable/real-world evidence offered in favour of the claim that God exists. Suppose we look to the legends (ideas, not reality) to understand what we know about 'King Arthur' (of the round table) and discover that part of his 'definition' is that he was married to a woman named Guinevere. Suppose now that we accept that there is evidence to suggest that there was a *real* 'Arturus Rex' living in post-Roman Britain. The question of whether Guinevere was the wife of the *real* King Arthur is something we need evidence to decide – these are empirical claims and empirical claims need evidence from the world to be taken seriously.

So, just because Descartes and Anselm want to say that the concept of 'existence' can be found to be embedded in the idea of 'God', they cannot use this alone to say that there is a God in the real world. For that sort of empirical claim, we would need evidence from the real world, not merely an analysis of the concept of God.

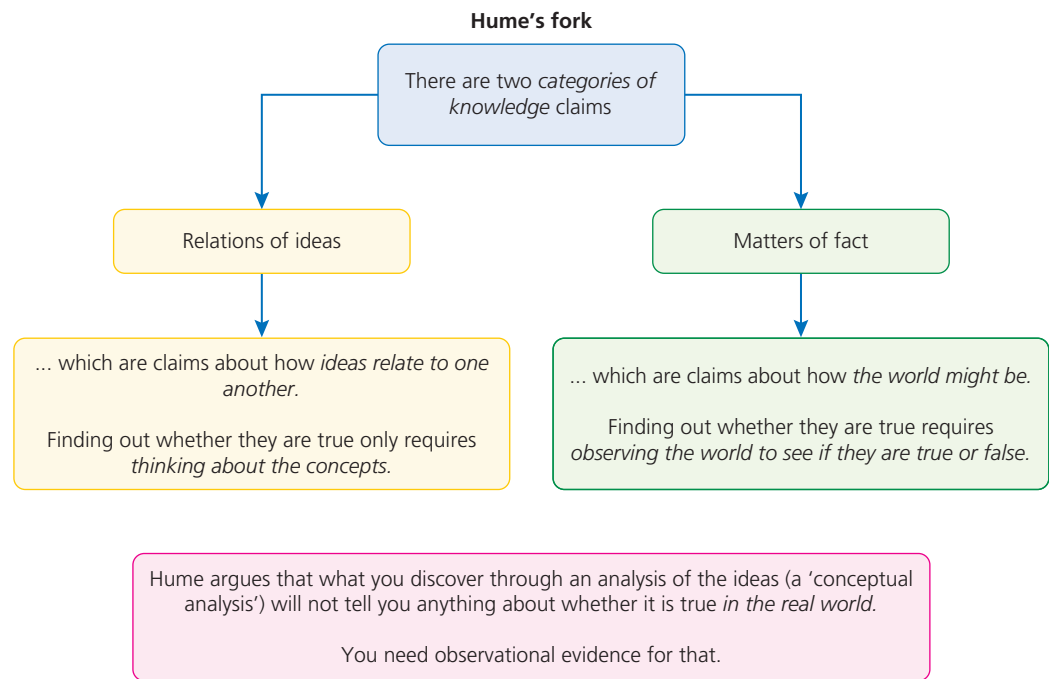
This critique stems from philosopher David Hume, who argued that all knowledge can be divided into either 'relations of ideas' or 'matters of fact' (see the diagram on the next page). Relations of ideas, he said, were claims which were true by definition and therefore do not need observations to determine if they are true. We only use 'conceptual analysis'. So, the claims 'triangles have three sides' or 'sisters are female' are 'relations of ideas': take the idea of 'sister' and unpack it, and you will find the idea 'female' (and 'sibling').

If you were not to understand this connection between 'sister' and 'female sibling', either you do not speak English, or you have not learned the definition of the words. Consider the claim 'bachelors are unmarried' and the opposite claim that 'bachelors are married'. How would we determine which is true? We certainly wouldn't round up all the bachelors in the world and check their marital status because, in picking out the bachelors in the first place, we would only be picking out those men that were unmarried. In other words, we already know that bachelors are unmarried because we understand the definition (a relation of ideas). To determine if bachelors are unmarried, we only need to consider the definition.

Hume's 'matters of fact', on the other hand, are those types of claims which need evidence from the world to find out if they are true. Consider the claims 'there are 23 students in the classroom' or 'there are more (or fewer) than 23 students in the room'. It is a genuine question whether these claims or their denials are true. Imagine we are going to test that claim, what do we have to do? We have to look, so start counting! Nothing within the concept 'classroom' has anything to do with '23 students' so an analysis of the concept will not help, we have to count. Even if there are more students or fewer, the original claim would still be in the category of matters of fact.

The main point is that 'matters of fact' are those claims which are about the world we live in, whereas 'relations of ideas' are about our ideas. Hume's point in distinguishing between these forms of knowledge is to say that nothing that we uncover through a conceptual analysis will show conclusively that the world is that way too. No matter how we define some concept or idea, whether there is anything in the world like that depends on us finding it in the world. This is a way of talking about the empirical nature of the natural sciences: the only way to find out if a claim is true in the sciences is to investigate the world and see if it is true.

In summary, the problem with the ontological arguments above stem from a belief about how best to determine what sorts of things exist in the world. If we think we require observational evidence, then offering only a conceptual analysis of the definition or idea of God will not tell us anything about whether God really exists. The argument appears valid only if we think the conclusion is about what the concept of 'God' entails (like how 'bachelor' entails 'unmarried man'), but the argument would be invalid if the conclusion refers to what actually exists in the world. You might also legitimately critique the initial definition, and the student book details the suggestion that 'existence' is not a genuine property of objects.



So what empirical evidence is there which can be used in arguments for the existence of God?

The other three arguments presented in the chapter each tries to offer evidence from the world, along with theoretical principles that seem, at first glance, plausible.

■ Teleological arguments

One formal version:

- 1 Every object which has been designed must have a designer.
- 2 The world's complexity shows that it must have been designed.
- 3 Therefore the world has a designer, who is God.

The empirical evidence offered here (and discussed in the student book) is that we find a sometimes astonishing level of complexity in the world, like the flagellum of bacteria. The basic claim is that complexity is so complex that it cannot be accounted for through 'natural explanations', like the theory of evolution through natural selection. What then can explain this level of complexity? This is where the analogy with design comes into the equation. We know from experience that when we see an object so intricate as, say, a pocket watch, we naturally think there is some designer who created it. We 'see' evidence of design and naturally conclude that there is a designer, it could not have created itself. So, if we see something so complex it must have been designed, then there must be a designer. The designer is God.

In the student book we emphasize the point that some scientists do consider the world designed but don't use concepts like 'god' in their scientific explanations. They keep those domains separate, accepting that religious explanations and natural explanations appeal to different sets of concepts. Another approach would be to explore the second claim shown above, and its implication that the complexity cannot be explained through a purely scientific explanation. It is a misunderstanding of science to suggest that what is not known currently means that it cannot be discovered in the future. Scientific knowledge grows and develops with further evidence. So, while it might be correct to say that there is not a scientific explanation of some phenomenon now, it does not mean that there will not be in the future.

Here is one possible activity based on this argument that is designed to get students thinking about the nature of science:

ACTIVITY

Consider the second premise in the argument above ('The world's complexity shows that it must have been designed').

- 1 What assumptions about the nature of science do you think it is making?
- 2 Is there an understanding of how science works (or how it has worked in the past) which might show that this premise is incorrect?

■ Cosmological arguments

One version of a cosmological argument can be formalized in the following way:

- 1 Everything must have a cause.
- 2 The world itself (the cosmos) is a thing, so must have a cause.
- 3 The cause of the world cannot itself be in the world.
- 4 The cause of the world is outside the world.
- 5 The cause of the world is God.

The basic structure of these arguments is to start from some systematic feature of the world and think about what must be the case for such a system to exist. Thomas Aquinas in the twelfth century offered three different ways of using this basic strategy, based on causation, motion (or change) and contingency. 'Contingency' refers to the fact that the way things are in the world did not have to be this way. Your name, for instance, is not a necessary fact about you – you could have been named something else. The idea is that all facts about this world are 'contingent facts', they could have been otherwise, if things had been different.

Taking 'causation' as our example, we start with the experience of causation in the world, we see it happening all around us. We will start with an example of a game of billiard balls. When one billiard ball rolls into another (the first event) it causes the other ball to move (the second event). Any movement could be described as an effect of some previous collision with other balls. That is individual cause and effect. Any movement is caused by other movement. But what about this question: why are there any billiard balls hitting one another in the first place? We cannot explain the whole system of balls and collisions by referring to just another collision, we want to know what started the whole game itself. To do that we have to step outside the game and talk about the creator or initiator of the game.

In our everyday world we see this sort of cause and effect, things moving other things about, events causing other events. Suppose then that we develop the general claim that every event must have a cause, the basic principle of cause and effect. This is all well and good for individual causes and effects (like balls colliding on a billiard table), but what if we ask, 'Why is this whole system of cause and effect real?' What caused this system of causes and effects? The argument then steps outside the system for an explanation, because you cannot explain a system or process by appealing to that process itself, something else must be used to explain it. This is how the cosmological arguments step out of the natural world and into a 'supernatural' explanation ('super' = 'above'). It is God who created this whole system of cause and effect in the world.

Below are some further knowledge questions taken from the TOK subject guide to consider in relation to this discussion:

- What knowledge, if any, is likely to always remain beyond the capabilities of science to investigate or verify?
- Do the natural sciences rely on any assumptions that are themselves unprovable by science?

Both of these knowledge questions from the natural sciences section of the TOK subject guide can be explored here. The questions explore whether there are things that ‘science’ or the scientific method just cannot discuss. We might suggest that science is all about discovering and articulating the cause-and-effect relationship we find in the natural world. The chemical equations in chemistry, the study of genes, the application of maths to discussions of force – all these are ways to explain why one thing happens after another: cause and effect. The cosmological arguments, however, ask about why the world has any of these processes at all. Why are the physical laws and physical forces in the universe the way that they are and not some other way? One response provided by science is that the forces and laws of nature originated at the ‘Big Bang’. This is a model for understanding the universe, suggesting that we can take what we know about the universe and its physical laws, run it backwards and find that there was a ‘singularity’ where all the potential of the cosmos was present in an infinitely dense point in space (the only point in space) at one moment (the first moment) some 13 billion years ago. This singularity went through a massive expansion which over time resulted in the world we know and describe through physical laws. The point, however, is that the laws we use to describe the universe and which are used to create this model of the creation of the universe, are themselves part of the universe, so they cannot explain themselves. This presents a limit to the scope of the methods of science: the suggestion is that the Big Bang itself created the laws of physics – they simply didn’t exist before? Explaining the Big Bang (what came before or what caused it), requires us to step out of the world of our known physical laws and find something outside of it. But of course, science, which is about observing this world, cannot step outside of it. So, there seems to be a pretty strong limit to what science can tell us. What science will say is there is no coherence to the claim about what happened before or beyond the initial singularity, because there would not have been any time or space before then. The Big Bang created time and space, so asking about before or beyond is incoherent.

The cosmological argument exploits two things: first, the inability to go before or beyond the singularity, and second, the intuitive reluctance to say that this is the only possible answer. The appeal to God as the originator of the Big Bang seems to cohere much more strongly with our basic understanding that all things must have a cause, even the universe itself.

Students might be quick to point out, however, that if everything has a cause, then why not God? What caused God? The traditional response is that this is an incoherent question because God is not a part of this world and that only things within the universe need a cause. But if this is the case, then perhaps the physicist can also claim that privilege for the universe; perhaps it didn’t need a cause, either.

■ The moral argument

- 1 There are universal moral values.
- 2 The natural world cannot create moral values.
- 3 There must be a cause of moral values.
- 4 That cause is God.

Here again, the argument begins from an observation about things in the world (moral values) and then uses this as evidence for the existence of God. This argument, however, is probably the most contentious, particularly in the first premise.

This could, however, become a real teaching opportunity. If students are completely unconvinced by the premise that there are such things as moral values and if they can move beyond their disagreement with that premise and consider only the logical progression of the ideas, then they will have developed an important skill. Being able to set aside our agreement or disagreement and consider only the logic of an argument opens up a wide variety of approaches when evaluating arguments. In fact, it creates better, more precise, debate or discussion to say, 'I appreciate your logic, but I don't accept your premises.'



The moral argument as stated here takes a particular ethical stance called moral or ethical 'realism', which is basically the principle that moral values exist in the world, and are not simply dependent on human beings thinking them into reality. Ethical realism is discussed more fully in the online 'Introduction to Teaching Ethical Theory' that can be accessed using the QR code on the left. Evil is a real feature of the world, or good is a real feature of the world. This is highly contentious. In a TOK classroom you might ask how we can know this. What evidence or justification can we find to show it to be true? What methods are appropriate for finding and describing the evidence or justifications? Maths seems inappropriate, but perhaps religious knowledge systems would be a way forward.

Again, this argument exploits a presumed limitation of science, namely that these ethical values which exist in the world cannot be properly explained using the principles of science. The moral argument really hinges on whether this fact/value or is/ought distinction works. David Hume thought the distinction did work (science cannot give us ethical values), but he did not think that God's existence was the solution. He denied the validity of the argument (in other words the premises might be true, but the conclusion still does not follow), arguing that it is emotions that give us our ethical values, not religion. So, Hume would not have agreed with the move to something outside our universe to explain ethics. This points out a problem with the second premise of the moral argument – while it might be true that science and ethics are distinct forms of knowing, we nevertheless might provide a scientific explanation of our ethical intuitions, perhaps by linking them to emotions (as Hume did) or by some other feature of the natural world (perhaps the notion of 'what makes us happy' or the natural functioning and flourishing of conscious beings).

The exploration of these arguments for the existence of God in the TOK classroom needs to be handled sensitively and it is very easy for the discussions to devolve into actual investigations into whether God exists, rather than to maintain a sort of TOK-distance from the first-order facts and consider what the arguments have to say about the various AOKs involved. The real point to emphasize here in relation to religious knowledge systems is two-fold.

- Religious knowledge systems are not 'all about faith' – they make use of reasoned argument, which we might accept as logically rigorous even if we don't agree with the premises or the conclusion.
- Religious knowledge systems do use evidence in their arguments for the existence of God. We might agree or disagree that the evidence and the arguments making use of that evidence are compelling or convincing, but to say that there is no evidence is simply mistaken. These arguments draw on evidence from the world.

A further point worth discussing is the relative weighting of these arguments against other sources of religious knowledge such as faith or experience. What would be more convincing, an experience of something you think is the divine (special revelation) or an argument?