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Arguing about Gods

In this book, Graham Oppy examines contemporary arguments for and against the existence of God. He shows that none of these arguments is powerful enough to change the minds of reasonable participants in debates on the question of the existence of God. His conclusion is supported by detailed analyses of the contemporary arguments, as well as by the development of a theory about the purpose of arguments, and the criteria that should be used in judging whether or not arguments are successful. Oppy discusses the work of a wide array of philosophers, including Anselm, Aquinas, Descartes, Locke, Leibniz, Kant, Hume, and, more recently, Plantinga, Dembski, White, Dawkins, Bergman, Gale, and Pruss.

Graham Oppy is Associate Dean of Research in the Faculty of Arts at Monash University. He is the author of *Ontological Arguments and Belief in God* and *Philosophical Perspectives on Infinity*. He is an Associate Editor of the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, and he serves on the editorial boards of *Philo*, *Philosopher's Compass*, *Religious Studies*, and *Sophia*.

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GRAHAM OPPY

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Frontmatter
[More information](#)

*In memory of my father,
Edmund Thomas (Ted) Oppy
December 15, 1929–May 31, 1999*

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page ix</i>
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>Introduction</i>	<i>xv</i>
1. Preliminary Considerations	1
1.1. <i>Arguments about the Existence of Monotheistic Gods</i>	2
1.2. <i>Arguments</i>	6
1.3. <i>Some Considerations about Agnosticism</i>	15
1.4. <i>Parallel Cases for ‘Alternative’ Deities</i>	35
2. Ontological Arguments	49
2.1. <i>My ‘General Objection’ Reconsidered</i>	50
2.2. <i>Mereological Ontological Arguments</i>	59
2.3. <i>Gödel’s Ontological Argument</i>	70
2.4. <i>On That Than Which No Worse Can Be Conceived</i>	72
2.5. <i>Concluding Remarks</i>	96
3. Cosmological Arguments	97
3.1. <i>Some Initial Considerations</i>	97
3.2. <i>Aquinas’ First Three Ways</i>	98
3.3. <i>Descartes’ Causal Argument</i>	107
3.4. <i>Leibniz’s Argument</i>	119
3.5. <i>Meyer and the Axiom of Choice</i>	123
3.6. <i>Koons and Contingency</i>	125
3.7. <i>Gale, Pruss, and ‘Weak’ Sufficient Reason</i>	130
3.8. <i>Craig and the Kalām Arguments</i>	137
3.9. <i>Smith’s Atheological Cosmological Arguments</i>	154
3.10. <i>Concluding Remarks</i>	168
4. Teleological Arguments	174
4.1. <i>Biological Design: Paley</i>	174

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-86386-5 - Arguing about Gods
Graham Oppy
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

viii	<i>Contents</i>	
4.2.	<i>Biological Design: Behe</i>	187
4.3.	<i>Cosmic Fine-Tuning</i>	200
4.4.	<i>Hume's Criticisms of Arguments for Design</i>	228
4.5.	<i>Concluding Remarks</i>	240
5.	<i>Pascal's Wager</i>	241
5.1.	<i>The Argument</i>	241
5.2.	<i>Some Objections to the Argument</i>	243
5.3.	<i>Objections Involving Infinity</i>	249
5.4.	<i>Modified Wagers</i>	255
5.5.	<i>Concluding Remarks</i>	258
6.	<i>Arguments from Evil</i>	259
6.1.	<i>Preliminary Considerations</i>	260
6.2.	<i>'Logical' Arguments from Evil</i>	262
6.3.	<i>Evidential Arguments from Evil (co-written with Michael J. Almeida)</i>	289
6.4.	<i>The Problem of Heaven (co-written with Yujin Nagasawa and Nick Trakakis)</i>	314
6.5.	<i>Concluding Remarks</i>	329
7.	<i>Other Arguments</i>	331
7.1.	<i>Arguments from Authority</i>	332
7.2.	<i>Arguments from Religious Experience</i>	345
7.3.	<i>Arguments from Morality</i>	352
7.4.	<i>Arguments from Miracles</i>	376
7.5.	<i>Arguments from Consciousness</i>	382
7.6.	<i>Arguments from Puzzling Phenomena</i>	401
8.	<i>Concluding Remarks</i>	414
8.1.	<i>Clifford</i>	416
8.2.	<i>James</i>	422
8.3.	<i>Concluding Remarks</i>	425
	<i>References</i>	427
	<i>Index</i>	445

Preface

As I indicated in the preface to my book *Philosophical Perspectives on Infinity* (2006), this work on arguments about the existence of orthodoxly conceived monotheistic gods was initially intended to form part of a larger work under the title *God and Infinity*. However, while there are places in which I do appeal to my earlier work on infinity – and while there are also places where I try to note the ways in which considerations about the infinite have a differential impact on arguments about the existence of orthodoxly conceived monotheistic gods – I think that it is fair to say that the finished work is more in the nature of an interim summary of my views on arguments about the existence of orthodoxly conceived monotheistic gods.

There are various reasons why this work is only an interim summary. *First*, there are ways in which my views about the topics discussed in this book have changed over time; I see no reason why there will not be further changes in the future. *Second*, the nature of the subject ensures that there are many important topics that bear directly on the assessment of arguments about the existence of orthodoxly conceived monotheistic gods, but about which nothing is said in this book. While I would like to have given an encyclopedic discussion of the subject, it is doubtful that I would have found either publisher or readers if I had tried to do so. *Third*, I have no doubt that there will be interesting new formulations of arguments about the existence of orthodoxly conceived monotheistic gods that appear in the near future – and those new formulations may have important consequences for the chief claims that are defended in the present book. *Fourth*, there is another part of the projected larger work – on the topic of the properties that are typically assigned to orthodoxly conceived monotheistic gods – that forms a companion to the present work but that is not yet ready for publication. Some of the material that one might have thought ought to be discussed in the present work will actually turn up in that other volume, when it finally sees the light of day.

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 Graham Oppy
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Acknowledgments

Monash University supported the writing of this book in various ways, not least by employing me as a member of its academic staff and by providing me with sufficient time to pursue my research interests. In 2002 and again in 2003, I received generous Monash Research Fund grants that enabled me to make substantial progress on the manuscript. Then, in the first half of 2004, I was granted a sabbatical, during which I was able to devote myself full-time to the completion of this work (together with the completion of *Philosophical Perspectives on Infinity*). I am very grateful for the support that I have received from my colleagues at Monash, from within the School of Philosophy and Bioethics, from within the Faculty of Arts more widely, and from within the university community as a whole.

I have discussed the material in this book with more people than I can remember. I apologise in advance to anyone whose name ought to be on the following list, but who has been omitted: Jeremy Aarons, Mike Almeida, Dirk Baltzly, John Bigelow, John Bishop, David Braddon-Mitchell, John A. Burgess, Stephen Coleman, David Dowe, Robert Dunn, Peter Forrest, John Fox, Richard Gale, Steve Gardner, Karen Green, Alan Hájek, John Hawthorne, Allen Hazen, Lloyd Humberstone, Edward Khamara, Bruce Langtry, David Lewis, John Maher, Behan McCulloch, Peter Menzies, Yujin Nagasawa, Daniel Nolan, Camille Oppy, Alex Pruss, David Simpson, Quentin Smith, Richard Swinburne, Aubrey Townsend, Nick Trakakis, Suzanne Uniacke, Brian Weatherson, and Ed Zalta.

As always, there are some people who deserve special thanks. In particular, I note that there has never been a time – until now – during the lives of my children in which I have not been working on the material that appears in this book (and its companion volumes). Big thanks, then, to Camille, Gilbert, Calvin, and Alfie: I'm sure we'll find other ways to pass the time.

This book contains some material that has been published elsewhere. In particular: section 1.2 is taken from Oppy (2002d); section 1.3 is a very lightly edited version of Oppy (1994); section 1.4 is a very lightly edited version of

Oppy (2004c); section 2.1 is a very lightly edited version of Oppy (2001a); section 2.2 is an initial draft of Oppy (1997b); section 2.3 is taken from Oppy (1996a); section 2.4 contains some material taken from Oppy (1996c); section 3.9 includes a lightly edited version of Oppy (1997c); section 4.1 is a lightly edited version of Oppy (2002c); section 4.3 contains some material taken from (2004d); section 4.4 is a lightly edited version of Oppy (1996b); section 6.2 is a lightly edited version of Oppy (2004a); section 6.3 is a lightly edited version of Almeida and Oppy (2003); and section 6.4 is a lightly edited version of Nagasawa, Oppy, and Trakakis (2004). The remaining sections of the book, including most of section 2.4, almost all of chapter 3, section 4.2, section 4.3, all of chapter 5, section 6.1, all of chapter 7, and all of the various Introductions and Conclusions, are entirely new.

I am grateful to Ashgate Publishing for kind permission to reprint material from my “Some Questions about ‘The Hartle-Hawking Cosmology,’” *Sophia* 36, no. 1 (1997): 84–95; from my “Reply to Langtry,” *Sophia* 40, no. 1 (2001): 73–80; and from my “Review of *God and Design*, edited by Neil Manson,” *Sophia* 43, no. 1 (2003): 127–31.

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I am grateful to Springer Science + Business Media for kind permission to reprint material from my “Weak Agnosticism Defended,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 36 (1994): 147–67; from my “Hume and the Argument for Biological Design,” *Biology and Philosophy* 11, no. 4 (1996): 519–34; and from my “Arguments from Moral Evil,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 56 (2004): 59–87.

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I am grateful to Ed Zalta for kind permission to reprint material from my “Ontological Arguments,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2005 edition, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2005/entries/ontological-arguments>.

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Graham Oppy
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Acknowledgments

xiii

I am grateful to Quentin Smith, and to the Center for Inquiry, for kind permission to reprint material from my “Arguing about the *Kalām* Cosmological Argument,” *Philo* 5, no. 1 (2002): 34–61; and from my “Paley’s Argument for Design,” *Philo* 5, no. 2 (2002): 41–53.

Finally, I am grateful to ATF Press for kind permission to reprint material from my “God, God* and God’,” which first appeared in A. Fisher and H. Ramsay (eds.), *Faith and Reason: Friends or Foes in the New Millenium?* (Hindmarsh: ATF Press, 2004), pp. 171–86.

Last, but not least, thank you to the production team who helped to turn my manuscript into a book. In particular, Beatrice Rehl and Stephanie Sakson have done a sterling job in pushing this project through to completion, as they did in the case of *Philosophical Perspectives on Infinity*.

Introduction

As its title suggests, this book is about *arguments* about gods. More exactly, it is a book about arguments about orthodoxly conceived monotheistic gods. In particular, it focuses on the kinds of arguments that contemporary Christian philosophers of religion typically give when they give arguments on behalf of the claim that the orthodoxly conceived monotheistic god in which they happen to believe exists.

In this book, I take it for granted that there is nothing incoherent – doxastically impossible – in the idea that our universe was created *ex nihilo* by an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being. I propose to consider this question further in a companion volume that is currently incomplete; however, I do not propose there to defend the view that there is something incoherent – doxastically impossible – in the idea that our universe was created *ex nihilo* by an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being.

The main thesis that I wish to defend in the present book is that there are no *successful* arguments about the existence of orthodoxly conceived monotheistic gods – that is, no arguments that ought to persuade those who have reasonable views about the existence of orthodoxly conceived monotheistic gods to change their minds. Since I also contend that there is a very wide range of reasonable views about the existence of orthodoxly conceived monotheistic gods that it is possible for reasonable people to maintain, I take it that the main thesis that I wish to defend is denied by many contemporary philosophers. If the argument of my book is successful, then at least some of those philosophers will be led to change their minds about some things.

The division of the material in the book is, in some ways, quite conventional: there is a chapter on ontological arguments, a chapter on cosmological arguments, a chapter on teleological arguments, a chapter on Pascal's wager, a chapter on arguments from evil, and a chapter on other arguments. Book-ending these chapters, there is an introductory discussion of relevant issues and a concluding discussion that revisits some of the matters raised

in the introductory discussion. However, there is not much material in this book that can be found in other books that cover more or less the same territory.

In chapter 1, after some brief remarks about taxonomies of arguments about orthodoxly conceived monotheistic gods, there are three related topics that are discussed. The first of these topics concerns the nature of arguments and argumentation, and the connections that obtain between successful argumentation and reasonable believing. In this section, I sketch my views about rationality and rational belief revision, arguments, rational argumentation amongst rational agents, and the bearing of our departures from perfect rationality on each of the aforementioned topics. The second topic taken up in the first chapter concerns the tenability of agnosticism. Here, I argue that there is no reason at all to suppose that there cannot be reasonable agnostics, that is, reasonable people who suspend judgment on the question of whether there are orthodoxly conceived monotheistic gods. The third topic taken up in the first chapter concerns the bearing of the construction of cases for the existence of unorthodoxly conceived monotheistic gods – for example, perfectly evil monotheistic gods – on the reasonableness of belief in orthodoxly conceived monotheistic gods. Here, I try to defend the view that, while non-theists can reasonably judge that the case for a given unorthodoxly conceived monotheistic god is no less strong than the case for any orthodoxly conceived monotheistic god, theists can reasonably judge that this is not so.

In chapter 2, the discussion of ontological arguments takes for granted the material that is contained in my earlier book on this topic: Oppy (1995c). In the first section of this chapter, I criticise the ‘general objection to ontological arguments’ that I presented in my earlier book; I no longer believe that this ‘general objection’ has any teeth. In the second section of this chapter, I discuss a category of ontological arguments – mereological ontological arguments – that received almost no attention in Oppy (1995c). In the third section of this chapter, I provide a slightly more extensive discussion of Gödel’s ontological argument than is to be found in Oppy (1995c). In particular, I defend the claim that there is an application of Gaunilo’s famous ‘lost island’ criticism of St. Anselm’s ontological argument that can be applied to one version of Gödel’s ontological argument. Finally, in the fourth section of this chapter, I provide a careful examination of the arguments of Chambers (2000), and respond to some criticisms of Oppy (1995c) that are made in that work.

The discussion of cosmological arguments that occurs in chapter 3 has several parts. First, I have included some discussion of historically important cosmological arguments in the work of Aquinas, Descartes, and Leibniz. Next, I turn my attention to contemporary defences of cosmological arguments in the work of Bob Meyer, Robert Koons, Richard Gale and Alex

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 Graham Oppy
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Introduction

xvii

Pruss, and William Lane Craig. Finally, I consider the novel atheological cosmological argument that is defended by Quentin Smith. Since there are many cosmological arguments that are not considered in this discussion, it is important that I note here that I consider these to be the best arguments of this kind that have been advanced thus far. Given that none of these arguments is successful, there is very good reason to think that no cosmological argument that has been advanced hitherto is successful.

In chapter 4, I begin with a reconsideration of Paley's argument for design. I argue that this argument has been misunderstood by almost everyone who has commented on it in the past fifty years. Moreover, I claim that, when the argument is properly understood, it is readily seen to be deficient. Finally – and importantly – I claim that there is no reason to suppose that Michael Behe's recent revival of Paley's argument avoids the criticisms that are sufficient to sink Paley's argument. After a fairly careful discussion of Behe's work, I move on to consider the recent enthusiasm for 'cosmic fine-tuning' arguments for design. Following Manson (2003), I distinguish several different variants of this type of argument, and then argue that none of the variants that I consider is successful. Again, it is important that I note here that I take it that I have examined the best arguments of this kind that have thus far been propounded. Finally, I turn to a discussion of Hume's famous critique of arguments for design in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. I'm a big fan of Hume's *Dialogues*; so it should come as no surprise that I defend the claim that it is a mistake to suppose that the various arguments for intelligent design can be shown to be unsuccessful without any appeal to the kinds of philosophical considerations that make an appearance in Hume's *Dialogues*.

Chapter 5 is a brief discussion of Pascal's wager argument. I think that it is pretty obvious that this argument has nothing going for it; nonetheless, it is not hard to find contemporary philosophers who disagree. I list a dozen or so considerations, each of which seems to me to be sufficient to establish that Pascal's wager argument is unsuccessful or, at any rate, to establish that there are large classes of non-theists who are quite properly unmoved by the argument.

In chapter 6, I turn my attention to arguments from evil. As I note at the outset, I am quite happy to allow that there are no successful arguments from evil. However, there are many contemporary philosophers of religion who are prepared to take some arguments for the existence of orthodoxly conceived monotheistic gods seriously while off-handedly dismissing arguments from evil. I claim that this is a mistake. There is perhaps more to be learned from a reconsideration of Mackie's 'logical' argument from evil than there is to be learned from a close examination of cosmological arguments – or so I am prepared to contend. At the very least, 'logical' arguments from evil are in no worse shape than any of the positive arguments that can be

advanced on behalf of the existence of orthodoxly conceived monotheistic gods. Moreover, it is equally a mistake to suppose that currently popular ‘sceptical theist’ critiques of evidential arguments from evil establish that there is something wrong with the rationality of those who make the kinds of judgments that are required for endorsement of the premises of those arguments. I am happy enough to grant that those judgments are not rationally required; but I deny that sceptical theists have shown that those judgments are rationally impermissible. Finally, I think that it is a mistake to suppose that one can get a satisfactory response to arguments from evil merely by appealing to the claim that there is a paradisiacal afterlife that at least some of us will enjoy. If you are serious about ‘defending’ the claim that there is no inconsistency amongst the various propositions that make up the traditional ‘problem of evil’, then you cannot hope to mount this ‘defence’ by appealing to other controversial propositions that you happen to accept.

The arguments that are discussed in chapter 7 are quite diverse. I consider arguments from *authority*, that is, arguments from consensus, historical tradition, expert testimony, and scripture; arguments from *religious experience*, focussing in particular on the argument of Swinburne (1979); arguments from *morality*, that is, arguments from objective values, virtue, happiness, scripture, justice, the costs of irreligion, heavenly reward, conscience, convergence, and practical reason; arguments from *miracles*; arguments from *consciousness*, focussing again on Swinburne (1979); and arguments from *puzzling phenomena*, that is, arguments from providence, efficacy of prayer, mathematical knowledge, the nature of Jesus, unbelief, mystery, information, and beauty. In this section, some of the arguments that are considered are not even *prima facie* plausible; however, almost all of them have at least some contemporary defenders.

Finally, in chapter 8, there is a brief discussion of the contrasting views of Clifford and James on the ethics of belief. I defend the view that, while both Clifford and James are strictly speaking mistaken in the claims that they advance, there is something in the ballpark of Clifford’s famous Principle that ought to be accepted: *it is, indeed, irrational, always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything that is not appropriately proportioned to the reasons and evidence that are possessed by that one*. But this version of Clifford’s Principle has no interesting consequences for the discussion of arguments about the existence of orthodoxly conceived monotheistic gods; rather, it coheres nicely with the claim that there are no successful arguments about the existence of orthodoxly conceived monotheistic gods.

As I make clear at various places in the text, I view the argument of this book as a work in progress. I am very firmly of the belief that there are no supernatural entities of any kind; *a fortiori*, I am very firmly of the belief that there are no orthodoxly conceived monotheistic gods. I am also pretty firmly of the belief that, even by quite strict standards, those who

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Graham Oppy
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Introduction

xix

believe in the existence of orthodoxly conceived monotheistic gods need not thereby manifest some kind of failure of rationality. If I cannot find a satisfactory way to put these two beliefs together, then it will certainly be the latter that falls by the wayside; but I see no reason for thinking that it is not possible consistently – and, indeed, reasonably – to hang on to both beliefs.