Three Flavors of Moral Argument for the Existence of God

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Introduction

Moral arguments for the existence of God need only one premise to be categorized as such—that an absolute and universal moral law exists. However, many moral arguments share little besides this and their conclusion. But moral arguments fall readily into three groups—practical, explanatory, and disjunctive. Here, I review at least one of each group, highlighting its strengths and weaknesses. In evaluating each argument, I note weak premises and explain the gap between the argument's conclusion and the traditional theistic God. In each case, I mention a small sampling of similar arguments from recent literature.

Cosmological, teleological, and ontological arguments represent well-defined categories. Nearly all cosmological arguments, for example, have a premise about the existence of physical things and some version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR). Teleological arguments, similarly, involve a premise about design or beauty in the world and an even more restricted PSR. Ontological arguments typically define 'God' in a superlative way in order to show that God's existence is logically necessary. So, nearly all of them, modal versions excluded, have a definition for 'God' and a premise like "Necessary existence is a positive quality." Thus, typical arguments in each of these categories share at least two premises.

Moral arguments are not nearly so homogenous. Of course, all moral arguments take as a premise that a universal and absolute moral law exists. But the accompanying premises vary greatly. Practical arguments claim that the moral law entails something that makes human life hopeless without God. Kant's argument represents this group here. Explanatory arguments explain the existence of the moral law by a moral legislator or explain human knowledge of the moral law by a moral informant. No particular philosopher's argument appears as representative here, only a characteristic sketch. But a few variations on that sketch receive some treatment. Disjunctive arguments simply use the moral law to show the materialism's lack of explanatory value. C. S. Lewis provides a typical example. For all categories, details of these arguments are abridged to make the categories more obvious.

Practical Arguments

Kant often receives credit for the first moral argument for the existence of God. His practical moral argument runs as follows:

(1)   The moral law exists. (Premise).

(2)   If the moral law exists then one's happiness is or will be in proportion to one's virtue. (Premise).

(3)   Therefore, one's happiness is or will be in proportion to one's virtue. (By 1 & 2).

(4)   One's happiness is or will be in proportion to one's virtue either on analytic (i.e., logical or mathematical) grounds or by synthetic (i.e., metaphysical) grounds. (Premise).

(5)   One's happiness is or will be not in proportion to one's virtue on logical grounds. (Premise).

(6)   Therefore, one's happiness is or will be in proportion to one's virtue on synthetic grounds. (By 4 & 5).[1]

The argument is valid with only (4), (5), and (6). But (1), (2), and (3) show whence comes the happiness in proportion to virtue. The need for God follows from a need for Judgment Day. Without it, moral life is a practical paradox.

Kant calls his argument 'practical' as opposed to 'speculative' or 'transcendental' because of the second premise. For him, moral action depends primarily on motive, not on actual results. But the universe's refusal to conform to moral expectations turns human efforts into vanity. 'Happiness,' for Kant, is personal contentment, having states of affairs in conformity with one's wishes. Without happiness in proportion to virtue, the moral law is a farce. Thus, (2), the correlation of happiness to virtue, comes about by practical necessity, a subjective need, not an empirical observation or *a priori* logical proof.

Kant's practical necessity is probably the weakest point in his argument. An opponent might accept the moral law but reject that human moral life amounts to vanity without the world's conforming to justice. In fact, Richard Swinburne suggests that one typically affirms either (1) or (2) but not both.[2] The first premise takes a deontological approach to ethics, while the second assumes a teleological paradigm. The deontologist might claim that attention to ultimate consequences ignores morality. William Sorley argues that the universe's nonconformity to justice makes heroes and saints feasible. Human greatness requires pain and struggle. Injustice makes morality possible, not vain.[3] The consequentialist could argue that moral choices are determined by outcomes. So, the world does conform to justice insofar as right consequences

define right action. On the other hand, the conjunction of Kant's premises implies no obvious contradiction. A virtue ethicist might readily affirm both. And those with hybrid or indistinct ethical models might find them reasonable. Arguments like Kant's have been and will continue to be influential for many.

For theists, Kant's argument yields the smallest gap problem. The synthetic grounds that reconcile virtue to happiness are, by definition, a metaphysical something that judges the world, rewards the just, and punishes the wicked. Kant quickly attributes a will and an intellect to the synthetic grounds, faculties for desiring and determining justice. This something must also have the power to bestow punishment and reward and to know everything relevant for judging the entire world. So, although this argument fails to immediately yield omnipotence or omniscience, it does attribute supernatural power and knowledge. Simplicity and logically necessary existence might be beyond the reach of this argument. But it does provide a strong starting point for morally focused religions like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Some practical moral arguments place the paradox elsewhere. Alfred E. Taylor, for example, finds the disparity between the moral laws demands on human beings and their abilities to fulfill those demands.[4] Instead of Kant's second and third premise, Taylor argues that the moral law obligates human beings to follow it perfectly.[5] But, without help, this requirement exceeds their abilities and human life becomes vain. Taylor resolves this paradox by positing a divine moral aide. God has to step in to make moral life possible.

Contemporary practical arguments include Robert Adams's argument that deity enhances the human ability to live a moral life.[6] His case uses Kant's solution to solve Taylor's paradox. Knowledge that God will reward the good leads one to cheerfully and dedicatedly pursue a moral life. Another recent argument by Linda Zagzebski posits three levels of paradox in a moral life without God.[7] To avoid vanity, the moral human being must have confidence that he can acquire moral knowledge and have moral efficacy. Moreover, he must have confidence that others can do the same. Charles Layman has defended a semi-practical position that is beyond the scope of this discussion but should be reviewed by anyone with a serious interest in practical moral arguments.[8] His case blends elements of the practical and disjunctive approaches. Outside

these writers, practical moral arguments have had a relatively weak showing in the late twentieth century.

Explanatory Arguments

Explanatory arguments have been more popular. A typical divine command argument looks

something like this:

(7)   The moral law exists. (Premise).
(8)   All laws are created by legislators, either physical or metaphysical. (Premise).
(9)   If the moral law exists, it is not legislated by a physical legislator. (Premise).
(10)   Therefore, if the moral law exists, it is legislated by a metaphysical legislator (From 8 & 9).
(11)   Therefore, a metaphysical moral legislator exists. (From 7 & 10).

The divine command argument is short and clearly valid. God is the source of the moral law. Although such

an argument generally obligates one to a divine command meta-ethics, this need not be the case for all

explanatory arguments. Variations include an epistemic version, in which a supernatural God provides

knowledge of the moral law. The divine command argument's central feature is its attention to God as the

efficient cause of the moral law. Likewise, its epistemic cousin, explaining moral knowledge, posits God as

the efficient cause of such knowledge.

One of the first arguments of this kind came from Hastings Rashdall.[9] Rashdall reasons that if the

moral law exists, it must exist in some place. Since the place is clearly not physical and not complete within

any particular human or human mind (i.e., human beings are imperfect in their understanding and

appropriation of the moral law), the law must reside in the mind of God. From this, Rashdall quickly ascribes

an epistemic function to God as the source of human moral judgments. William Sorley expands Rashdall's

argument to make God the "Great Lawgiver."[10] Both ultimately seek a metaphysical explanation for

human knowledge of morality.

Sorley compared his moral argument to the cosmological argument. Both posit God as an explanation

for some fact. The lawgiver explains the moral law either meta-ethically or epistemically. These premises

are actually restricted versions of the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR). The Principle states that all

contingent facts must have explanation. The teleological argument makes a similar move in claiming that

things with design must have designers. As this is an often-attacked premise in the cosmological argument, it

is not surprising that its restricted version, (8), also receives significant criticism.

Objections vary depending on the precise version of the PSR-like premise. A meta-ethical statement, as in (8), is more difficult to defend than an epistemic one. In the first case, one questions whether a moral law dictated by a lawgiver can be said to be absolute. Some believe that absoluteness implies logical necessity. Given this universe and this God, it is impossible for the moral law to be any other way, even by exercise of God's free will. If the law is logically necessary, it is also its own explanation and requires no meta-ethical foundation. On the other hand, an argument like Rashdall's demands something like a Platonic form. The metaphysical entity, God's thought, anchors the moral law. In this case, the law is neither contingent nor arbitrary, yet it still depends on God as a foundation. It is necessary insofar as God is necessary and God's idea of it is necessary. Of course, opponents might argue that, by PSR, God's thought about the moral law requires an explanation. For them, God's thought is not an ultimate explanation but an arbitrary stopping point along the explanatory chain.

The epistemic case is simpler. It argues that God guarantees human knowledge of the moral law. Human knowledge of the moral law is contingent, yet humans have such knowledge. Possession of such knowledge demands an explanation. Since the moral law is non-physical, the means by which humans know the moral law must overlap the non-physical. Moreover, since human beings are contingent, so are their capacities for acquiring knowledge. So, even an epistemic faculty like a conscience requires an explanation. Thus, the epistemically restricted PSR premise holds relatively well.

In explanatory approaches, the gap problem varies, depending on the premises. Either moral perfection or perfect moral wisdom follows almost immediately. If one casts God as a moral legislator, although not necessarily omnipotent, God is the most powerful being in the universe. An argument like Rashdall's yields a God who sustains metaphysical things. From there, an analogy to mathematical truths might ground them in God's thought as well. The same goes for aesthetic truths. Perhaps, one could expand this pattern to include all sorts of Platonic forms and get omniscience of essences. In the epistemic model, one infers that God has perfect moral wisdom and can communicate moral truths. Other attributes are more difficult. As in all moral arguments, some traditional divine attributes, like simplicity, seem beyond the

scope of the inquiry.

Adapted versions of Rashdall's argument are popular among Christian apologists today. Robert Adams's version is probably the strongest.[11] Rather than beginning with the entire moral law or the concept of good, Adams only seeks an explanation for moral obligation. He holds that moral obligation is identical with God's command, much like a Platonic form. Of course, this position lends itself to the same attacks as Rashdall's, although limiting the discussion to moral obligation probably wards off some criticism. Paul Copan has written extensively in favor of a position much like Adams's.[12] Moreover, William Lane Craig has advanced such an argument in multiple public debates.[13] For explanatory arguments from moral knowledge, see Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli's two moral arguments, one of which is based on the epistemic faculty of conscience.[14]

Disjunctive Arguments

Perhaps the most read moral argument of all time is C. S. Lewis's version in *Mere Christianity*. Here is an abridged version:

(12)   The moral law exists. (Premise).
(13)   Either theism is true or everything is material (physical). (Premise).
(14)   If the moral law exists, then not everything is material. (Premise).
(15)   Therefore, not everything is material. (From 12 & 14).
(16)   Therefore, theism is true. (From 13 & 15).[15]

Lewis's argument is also valid. To avoid misinterpretation the reader should notice the prominence of the disjunct, (13), in Chapter 4.[16] Lewis bases it on a historical observation. Moreover, the note at the end of the chapter prevents the opponent from going between the horns.[17]

Ultimately, the disjunctive argument is a negative explanatory argument. It hinges on what materialism cannot explain. Because of the disjunct, Lewis is free from having to spell out the connection between theism and morality. But that leaves a significant gap problem. To bridge the gap, Lewis borrows from explanatory arguments. Rather than a divine command position, he assumes theism as an explanation of moral knowledge. In this sense, Lewis's is a hybrid argument. Such approaches are not unusual.

Cosmological arguments often conclude with a threadbare conception of God. So, the theist borrows from teleological or moral arguments to flesh out God's attributes. Clearly, any attributes besides existence will require more than a simple disjunctive argument. However, like Lewis, one can infer several morally related attributes from human awareness of the moral law. Or one might take Lewis's other approach, comparing major world religions to see which one harmonizes best with the moral law.

What the disjunctive argument lacks in the gap problem it makes up for with its rhetorical strength. The most difficult point is (14), showing that morals necessitate something beyond the physical. That a completely materialistic world has no place for morals seems intuitive. The sustaining political thoughts and writings of the modern world depend on some significance beyond the simple material. For example, most liberal societies protect human beings on the basis of rights, ascription of significant value beyond one's material nature. Although a disjunctive argument might not receive unanimous assent, its premises are relatively strong.

Some recent apologists have formulated disjunctive constructions. Most of them, like Lewis, eventually commit themselves to a positive explanatory approach to bridge the gap problem. But their emphasis on what materialism or nihilism cannot explain also fits them into disjunctive group. C. Stephen Evans's argument from reason and mystery follows expands Lewis's position to include more unexplainable phenomena than just the moral law.[18] The other of Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli's moral arguments parallels Lewis nicely.[19] And N. T. Wright offers the newest disjunctive formulation, which contains several persuasive examples.[20] Although none of these formulations has had Lewis's impact, they are relatively easy to follow and readily available at the popular level.

Conclusion

One suspects that those persuaded by practical arguments will also accept explanatory and disjunctive arguments. But those who reject disjunctives will probably also reject explanatory and practical arguments. On the other hand, the gap problem in the practical argument leads immediately toward traditional religions, whereas the disjunctive argument requires a bit more work. Explanatory arguments lie somewhere in the

middle. One should be especially aware of divine command arguments as they commit one to a controversial theological position. Moreover, one should be aware that not all moral arguments entail divine command theory. In recent and popular writing, the explanatory and disjunctive arguments have seen the most attention, while practical arguments have gone relatively unnoticed. The moral argument for the existence of God has a young but diverse family tree. Perhaps this categorization and analysis will help philosophers and theologians continue the discussion by isolating appropriate parts of the debate to their respective branches.

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[1] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Lewis White Beck (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1956), 114-136.

[2] Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 175-179.

[3] William R. Sorley, *Moral Values and the Idea of God: The Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Aberdeen in 1914 and 1915*, 2d ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1921), 332-333.

[4] Alfred E. Taylor, *The Faith of a Moralist: Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of St. Andrews, 1926-1928*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1931).

[5] Taylor's language involves human beings striving toward the good rather than conformity to a law.

[6] Robert M. Adams, *The Virtue of Faith and Other Essays in Philosophical Theology* (New York: Oxford University, 1987), 144-159.

[7] Linda Zagzebski, "Does Ethics Need God?" *Faith ad Philosophy* 4 (1987), 294-303.

[8] Charles S. Layman, "God and the Moral Order," Faith and Philosophy 19 (2002): 304-316.

[9] Hastings Rashdall, *The Theory of Good and Evil: A Treatise on Moral Philosophy*, 2d ed. (New York: Kraus Reprint, 1971), 2: 211-13.

[10] Sorley, 348.

[11] Adams, 144-150.

[12] E.g., Paul Copan, "A Moral Argument," in *To Everyone an Answer: A Case for the Christian Worldview: essays in honor of Norman L. Geisler*, ed. Francis J. Beckwith, William Lane Craig, and J. P. Moreland (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 108-123. This essay includes a strong defense of the divine command position against traditional criticisms.

[13] William Lane Craig and Anthony Flew, Does God Exist?, ed. Stan W. Wallace (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 21-22; William Lane Craig and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, God? A debate between a Christian and an Atheist, Point/Counterpoint Series (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 17-21.

[14] Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics: Hundreds of Answers to Crucial Questions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 72-75.

[15] C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, in *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002), 11-25.

[16] Ibid., 20.

[17] Ibid., 22.

[18] C. Stephen Evans, *Why Believe: Reason and Mystery as Pointers to God*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 39-49.

[19] Kreeft and Tacelli, 72-75.

[20] N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006).