

## EXCERPT



### ***Does God Exist?***

*A History of Answers to the Question*

March 9, 2021 | \$35, 328 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-5300-7

## How Do Humans Think About God?

It seems that human beings have been thinking about God from the very beginning. The first chapters of the Bible certainly have it so. Recent excavations of Gobekli Tepe, located right where those same chapters place the Garden of Eden, show a society centered on worship dated by many archaeologists to around 10,000 BC. The late nineteenth-century sociologist of religion Andrew Lang documented how even the most isolated cultures around the world know of God, and refer to him as creator and maker, often even as father.

Eventually the insights and intuitions that our world is unimaginable without a creator take on the status of formal arguments: the characters of this story. This provides them a life of their own. Why this human endeavor begins in sixth-century-BC Greece has long been a matter of speculation, and I have nothing really to add to the discussion after teaching ancient philosophy for some forty years. Suffice it to say, many forces came together and produced the Milesian school of Thales, and the philosophical discussion of these arguments has never ceased since then. That is the story of this book.

Initially this interaction was focused on what Aristotle called the search for the *archē*, the source and origin, the operating principle, of our universe. It took two hundred years of discussion after Thales to bring this idea to the explicit concept of God. This initial argument about the cause of existence of the universe comes to be called the cosmological argument. It stems from our everyday observations that things around us exist as parts of sequences of causal connections. Nothing we have observed, though of course we have not observed everything, simply exists by itself, but only within fields, networks, chains, trees of other things to which it is connected in cause-effect relationship. From this observation, our reasoning concludes that there must be an ultimate or final "something" that is itself uncaused.

A second type of argument is lurking behind this same reasoning. The causal connections in the universe do not exist in some random way, but in what appears to us to be lawlike, purposeful, and designed patterns. This organization itself seems to demand an explanation. Given our experience of our own artistic and technological inventions, the most likely explanation would have to be some creative and intelligent source. This argument has come to be known as the teleological argument.

A third type of argument emerges as a special case of this observed orderliness and lawfulness of our universe: the moral argument. One thing that is truly unique about us as human beings is our perception of moral obligation. We experience ourselves as part of a social order that expects us to act justly, lovingly, tolerantly, but also not to act with hatred, violence, or discrimination. And we seem intuitively to expect the same of others, society as a whole, and even ourselves. This demands a much more specialized explanation, since only a personal and intentional intelligence would appear to fit the bill here.

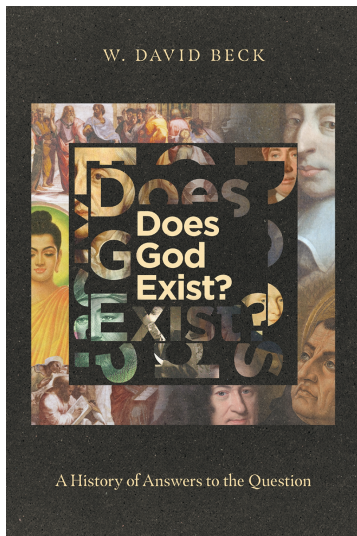


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There is a fourth and quite different sort of argument that comes to us from the great medieval theologian and philosopher Anselm of Canterbury: the ontological argument. What is different here is that it is not based on observations of states of affairs in the real world and is thus not a posteriori but a priori—that is, it is based solely on the logic of the words or concepts involved.

A comment is in order here regarding my use of the word *argument* in this book. I mean by it simply any pattern or sequence of reasoning that implies a conclusion. Logicians distinguish three general types: deductive, inductive, and abductive. I will have more to say about these differences later as the story develops.

The word I will avoid, except where it appears in quotations, is the word *proof*. This is actually the traditional word. In more recent years, however, *proof* has come to be used for the kind of reasoning unique to mathematics. This is a sort of purely logical relationship that exists quite apart from any real or actual world considerations, and derives entirely from the particular rules of a given mathematical system.

Using the word *argument* is also meant to avoid the idea that any one of these stands by itself as a once-and-for-all clinching proof for a fully defined God. What we will see is that each argument has a very narrow focus, in terms of both the evidence used in the premises and the scope and the strength or probability of the conclusion. And so each of these arguments, along with others I will only mention in passing, functions best as part of a cumulative case.

The idea here is that of a court case as presented by the attorneys. There is not simply a single argument given for guilt or innocence. Rather, there is a whole story that is woven together from many pieces of evidence, eyewitnesses, character witnesses, elimination of alternatives, and so on. The same is true here. We need to look at multiple arguments of different types, based on different sorts of evidence, with each giving us a different part of a larger conclusion. Of course, each piece of the case needs to be a sound argument in order to give us, overall, the best explanation.

I will then take a brief look at some preliminary stages in the development of arguments for the reality of a God. I will avoid trying to advance some sort of minimal definition of God. This is an issue fraught with controversy. I will simply ignore the matter and allow the arguments themselves to define their conclusions, to whatever extent they do, as we go along. None of them, not even the ontological argument, as is often alleged, actually presuppose some sort of minimal definition of God, and then argue circularly back to God so defined. They begin, rather, with certain known facts or observations, including *possible* definitions, from which explanatory conclusions may be drawn.

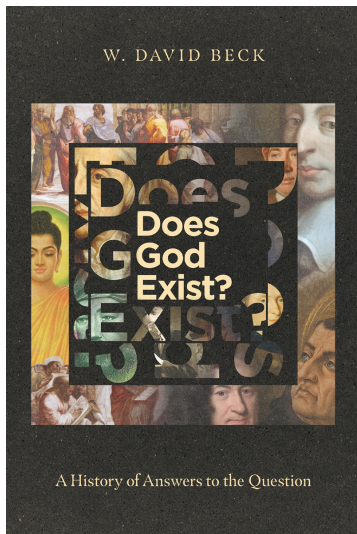


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One more matter: What does all of this have to do with faith or belief? To answer this, we need an important distinction between believing *that* and believing *in*. When one says the Apostles' Creed beginning with "I believe in God the Father almighty," what is happening? This is clearly an affirmation of my trust, commitment, loyalty, or confidence in the person to whom I am referring. When I say that I believe in my wife, I mean that I trust her and have confidence in her. These are not statements about someone's existence, though there is certainly an underlying assumption that they do in fact exist.

That is what I have in mind. The question here is whether we can, and how we can, *know* that God exists. And knowing is having a justified true belief. This is a justified true belief *that*. So knowing *that*, including believing *that* God exists, is very different from believing *in* God. On the other hand, how can I commit myself or be loyal to someone unless I first know that they really exist? So faith has to have a basis in justified true belief. You cannot have real faith in, or trust, God unless you "believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him" (Heb 11:6). I will come back to this at the end of my story.

That brings me to the last up-front matter. The July 2018 cover of *Time* magazine asked this critical question: "Is Truth Dead?" This is, I think, the most important question of our day. *Time* was mostly interested in the political ramifications. Crucial, no doubt! But even more destructive to our now global culture has been the loss of truth related to religion in general. It is largely considered intolerant, warmongering, hateful, and misconceived to even ask for the truth about God.

—Adapted from chapter one "The Beginnings of the Arguments"



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