

The Existence of God and Revelation

Use the following checklist to make sure you have revised everything.

Philosophical arguments for and against the existence of God	√
The Design argument including its strengths and weaknesses.	
The First Cause argument including its strengths and weaknesses	
The argument from miracles including its strengths and weaknesses and one example of a miracle.	
Evil and suffering as an argument against the existence of God.	
Arguments based on science against the existence of God.	
The nature of the divine and revelation	
Special revelation as a source of knowledge about the divine (God gods or ultimate reality) including visions and one example of a vision.	
Enlightenment as a source of knowledge about the divine.	
General revelation: nature and scripture as a way of understanding the divine.	
Different ideas about the divine that come from these sources:	
- omnipotent and omniscient	
- personal and impersonal	
- immanent and transcendent.	
The value of general and special revelation and enlightenment as sources of knowledge about the divine including:	
- the problems of different ideas about the divine arising from these experiences	
- alternative explanations for the experiences and the possibility that the people who claimed to have them were lying or mistaken	

The existence of God and revelation Glossary

Agnostic: Belief that there is insufficient evidence to say whether God exists or not.

All-compassionate: Characteristic of God; all-loving, omnibenevolent.

All-merciful: Characteristic of God; always forgiving and never vindictive.

Atheism: Belief that there is no God.

Benevolent: Characteristic of God; all-loving.

Conscience: Sense of right and wrong; seen as the voice of God within our mind by many religious believers.

Design argument: Also known as teleological argument. An argument purporting to prove God's existence by focusing on evidence of design in the world, which therefore proves the existence of a designer – God. One version put forward by William Paley in the 18th century.

First cause argument: An argument purporting to prove God's existence by logical argument that everything is caused by something else. This requires an uncaused cause, which must be God. One version put forward by Thomas Aquinas in 13th century.

General revelation: God making himself known through ordinary things which can be experienced by everybody.

Humanism: Belief system which excludes God but focuses on the morally good behaviour of human beings.

Illusion: That something is not real, but a trick of the mind.

Immanent: Characteristic of God; at work in the world, involved in the creation, e.g. miracles.

Impersonal: Characteristic of God; beyond human understanding.

Miracle: An event that contradicts the laws of nature, so should be impossible, e.g. recovering from a terminal illness; usually attributed to God.

Omniscient: Characteristic of God; all-knowing.

Omnipotent: Characteristic of God; all-powerful.

Personal: Characteristic of God; relatable, humans can build close relationships with this God.

Polytheist: Belief that there are many gods/deities.

Reality: What is real, actual or provable by science.

Revelation: When God reveals Himself; can be special or general.

Special Revelation: God making himself known through personal experiences.

Science: The collection of knowledge from observation and testing.

Transcendent: Characteristic of God; beyond space and time, controlled by neither.

Ultimate reality: Hindu concept of God.

Vision: Seeing something which is not physically real.

Philosophical Arguments for and against the existence of God

Many people simply have faith that God exists and don't feel the need to find evidence for God's existence. Other people wish to prove beyond doubt that God is real. This leads to a variety of arguments which aim to show that there is evidence that God exists.

The Design argument including its strengths and weaknesses.

The Bible says "*In the beginning, God created the Heavens and the Earth.*" The Design Argument states that there is evidence in the design of the world to show that God truly did create it.

William Paley used the Design argument to prove the existence of God.

- He used the idea that if we found a watch, we would assume that someone had put the watch together for a specific purpose and that someone had designed it for that purpose.
- Paley believed that there was evidence of design in the world e.g. the eye.
- Paley believed that as the world is more complicated than a watch, then it must have a designer who is more intelligent than human watchmakers.

Isaac Newton agreed with the Design Argument. He believed that the opposable thumb, which is only found in humans and some primates, gives the hand precise and delicate movement. This and the fact that each thumbprint is unique gave Newton the evidence he needed to believe in the Design Argument. He said "In the absence of any other proof, the thumb alone would convince me of God's existence."

Aquinas also supported the Design Argument, arguing that only an intelligent being could keep things in the universe in regular order. The planets, sun, moon and stars rotate in the solar system in a set pattern because God holds them in place.

FR Tennant argued that God designed the world so that everything was right for humans life to develop. He said that if things like the strength of gravity and the power and speed of the explosion caused by the Big Bang had been just a tiny bit different, then life would not exist. Everything is so finely tuned it appears to be deliberate.

Strengths of the Design Argument:

- ✓ Helps give answers that science can't give us yet
- ✓ For theists, it allows space for God in the Big Bang

Weaknesses of the Design Argument:

- ✗ Evolution explains how thumbs and the eye appear to be designed
- ✗ What about suffering? If the world was designed by God, surely He would have designed it without including suffering
- ✗ There are so many planets in the universe that it is inevitable that one of them would be perfect for sustaining life. This isn't design, just chance.

The First Cause argument including its strengths and weaknesses

This is also called the Cosmological argument.

Aquinas said that, as nothing we observe today can cause itself to exist:

1. There must be an infinite chain of effects preceded by causes *or*
2. There must be a first cause which by definition must be uncaused

Aquinas believed that 1. was impossible so 2. must be true and the first cause was God

- Everything that exists or begins to exist must have a cause.
- The universe exists so it must have a cause.
- There had to be something eternal that was not caused by anything.
- The eternal first cause is God.
- Therefore, God exists.

Strengths:

- ✓ Helps give answers that science can't give us yet
- ✓ For theists, it allows space for God in the Big Bang
- ✓ Gives us an answer for how we came to be here

Weaknesses:

- ✗ Contradiction – if everything has a cause, what caused God?
- ✗ Why can't the universe be eternal?
- ✗ Perhaps the Big Bang was random and uncaused

The argument from miracles including its strengths and weaknesses and one example of a miracle.

Definition of a **miracle**: A seemingly impossible event, usually good, that cannot be explained by natural or scientific laws and is thought to be the action of God.

Most Christians agree that Jesus performed miracles. Many Christians believe that miracles still happen today. One of the most famous examples of the miracles of Jesus is the feeding of the five thousand.

Jesus feeds the five thousand

Jesus's apostles had been preaching to many people. They met up with Jesus and a large crowd of people followed. Jesus began speaking to them and it became time for dinner. His apostles told Jesus to send the people to get some food.

'Jesus answered, "You give them something to eat." They said to him, "That would take eight months of a man's wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?" "How many loaves do you have?" he asked. "Go and see." When they found out, they said, "Five - and two fish." Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to set before the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish. The number of men who had eaten was five thousand.'

Mark 6:37-44

Christians believe God works in the world through miracles and that Jesus performed miracles to show the power or love of God.

Theists would argue that miracles prove the existence of God because He is the only being that is outside nature and powerful enough to perform them. Some atheists convert to Christianity because of a miracle. Many Christians believe that miracles still happen and there have been 69 recognised miracles at the pilgrimage town of Lourdes.

However, not all Christians believe God performs miracles. If God performs miracles, then it means that he picks and chooses who to help. Why would he allow children to die in war or from cancer? Why not stop the Holocaust? A God who allows these things and decides not to intervene isn't very loving. For some Christians, God is loving, he just can't intervene in our world.

Strengths:

- ✓ Shows theists that God intervenes in our world
- ✓ For some theists, it shows that God answers prayer
- ✓ Shows that God is powerful

Weaknesses:

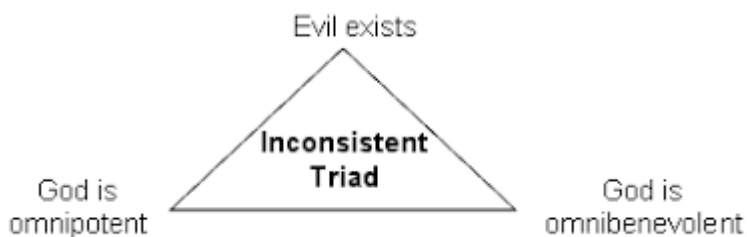
- ✗ Why does God not perform miracles for everyone who asks for it?
- ✗ Just because we can't explain 'miracles' now doesn't mean we won't in the future
- ✗ Not all claims of miracles are true – some may be made up or delusions or wishful thinking.

Evil and suffering as an argument against the existence of God.

Everyone knows that suffering and evil exist as they can be experienced. **Moral evil** takes place when people do cruel things for others e.g. theft, murder, assault. **Natural evil** takes place when suffering is caused by nature e.g. earthquakes or diseases. The existence of evil and suffering leads people to the following questions:

- ☐ If God is all loving, why doesn't he stop us from suffering?
- ☐ If God is all powerful, can't he stop suffering?
- ☐ Does suffering exist because God doesn't?

Theists end up with a problem known as the inconsistent triad. They believe three things at once, and yet it seems impossible for all three of them to be true.



This problem leads many people to say that God cannot exist.

Strengths:

- ✓ Even if we are responsible for suffering towards others, natural suffering is out our control, which argues against a designer
- ✓ If God made us, then he made us with the capability to hurt others

Weaknesses:

- ✗ God gave us free will and we do more good than bad in this world
- ✗ It's only when we suffer do we realise the good in our lives
- ✗ It is up to us, not God, to stop evil and suffering

Arguments based on science against the existence of God.

Some atheists believe that developments in scientific knowledge challenge belief in God. Science can give us reliable explanations, supported by evidence & fact, for a lot of things previously credited to God e.g. creation. We no longer 'need' God to explain how we got here.

Many Christians don't have a problem with science and don't see it as being in conflict with their beliefs. Most Christians accept that the world was created by the Big Bang, not God. This is supported by Pope Francis (the leader of the Roman Catholic Church) who said in 2014, "The Big Bang does not contradict the divine act of creation." Some Christians see scientific development as a way of learning more about life on earth, which also deepens their relationship with God.

The Nature of the Divine and Revelation

Revelation is seen by Christians (and those of other faiths) as being a way in which God shows his characteristics (his nature). There are two broad types of revelation: General and Special.

General revelation: God making himself known through ordinary things which can be experienced by everybody.

Special Revelation: God making himself known through personal experiences.

“When there is a prophet among you, I, the Lord, reveal myself to them in visions, I speak to them in dreams.” Numbers 12:6

General Revelation: nature and scripture as a way of understanding the divine.

General revelation is where God can reveal aspects of his character to anyone. As it is general, it means that anyone can find out about the nature of God through the following ways:

- **Nature**
- **Scripture**
- Reason
- Worship
- Morality
- Conscience

What does nature tell us about God?

“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.” Psalm 19:1-4

This is the way that most people experience God. The beauty and order of the natural world can suggest that God has designed an amazing world for our benefit. From nature, we can see that God is:

- **Powerful:** Can be seen in the power of storms
- **Complex:** The detail in the human body
- **Loving:** Creating a world that enables us to thrive
- **Caring:** the wonder of a new born baby

This can give people a sense of awe and wonder about God as it can make them feel like God is such a powerful supreme being. It can also make people feel that God is clever or artistic when they experience different elements of the world and appreciate its beauty. Even an atheist can feel a sense of awe and wonder about the planet, they just won't attribute it to God.

What does scripture tell us about God?

Religious scripture tells theists what God is like, how God acted in the past and how God wants people to live. The Bible is divided into the Old and New Testaments.

- Old Testament: The covenant between God and the Jewish people
- New Testament: the life and teaching of Jesus, the spread of early Christianity
- The Bible also contains poetry, myth, history, law, letters and prophecy.

Christians believe that the Bible was inspired by God, but they interpret it in different ways. Literal: The Bible is the actual word of God, must not be changed and should not be questioned. Liberal (non-literal): While the Bible is inspired by God, it should be interpreted for people today.

They also believe that while the text can provide insight into God's character, it should be understood in its social and historical context. However, the Bible was written by different humans, and it contains errors. It was also written over a long period of time, translated from a variety of languages into all the languages spoken around the world. It was also written before we knew a lot about our world e.g. Creation/Big Bang and therefore may not be accurate.

Different ideas of the divine that come from these sources

The following ideas about the nature of God can be understood through revelation:

Omnipotent: *All Powerful, has unlimited power*

- This enables God to do things that humans cannot do.
- It also means that God can do things we cannot understand nor replicate
- Most people understand it in a way that means God can do everything, which is why he is considered to be the Designer of the Universe and First Cause.

Omniscient: *knowing everything, past, present and future*

- God knows what is going to happen in the future – for some this makes them question whether God has the power to stop bad things happening e.g. the Holocaust
- God knows every little thing humans do – for Christians, this then has an impact on the afterlife
- This also emphasises the idea that God is omnipotent

Personal: *The idea that God is someone you can have a relationship with, like a friend*

- People who believe that God is personal believe that God has human characteristics, like merciful or compassionate
- They also believe that God knows and loves every individual

- When they pray, they believe that God can hear them and answer them

Impersonal: *God can be unknowable and mysterious, more like a force*

- At times, God isn't involved in the lives of people
- God is simply a force that has power but isn't like us in any way

Immanent: *God is involved and active in the world*

- This generally refers to God as Jesus and as the Holy Spirit
- God can influence what goes on e.g. perform miracles
- If a Christian believes that God is immanent, they will believe that he will listen to their prayers and possibly respond

Transcendent: *God is beyond time and space and not active in the universe*

- This generally refers to God the Father
- As God is a supreme being, he is not bound by time and space, like we are.
- This supports the idea that God is eternal
- It also means that God does not intervene in the world or in the lives of people who pray to him

Special revelation as a source of understanding about the divine including visions and one example of a vision

Special Revelation: This is when people experience God directly in a particular event. It is a **direct personal experience**. It can be through a dream, **vision**, prophecy or miracle. It can be received alone or in a group. They usually have a huge impact on the recipient and can change their lives completely, which is why they are considered to be reliable.

Visions: This is a form of special revelation that comes in picture or image form. People see holy people angels or hear messages from God. A vision holds a deep meaning for the person receiving it and enables them to become aware of reality in a new way or with a new intensity. Saul, who later become known as Paul, received a vision on the road to Damascus that completely changed his life. The Bible teaches that people who were given visions and dreams for specific reasons.

“When there is a prophet among you, I, the Lord, reveal myself to them in visions, I speak to them in dreams.”

Numbers 12:6

The conversion of Saul

Saul was a well-known persecutor of Christians. He was on his way to Damascus with a group of other men. On his way there, he suddenly saw a great light from the sky and heard a voice saying, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" The voice belonged to Jesus and told him to carry on with his journey and that once he got to Damascus, he would be told what to do. Saul was completely blinded by the light and could not see for three days. Saul's sight was restored by Ananias on the instructions of God. Saul was then baptised and began preaching to people to follow Jesus.

Enlightenment as a source of knowledge about the divine

In Christianity, special and general revelation are the ways in which people learn about God. In Buddhism, Enlightenment is seen as a way of understanding the divine. Enlightenment refers to the gaining of true knowledge about God or the divine through meditation and self-discipline. The story of the Buddha, whom Buddhists follow, helps to show what Enlightenment means.

Prince Siddhartha Gautama was born into a royal family in the village of Lumbini in present-day Nepal, and his privileged life insulated him from the sufferings of life; sufferings such as sickness, age and death.

One day, after growing up, marrying and having a child, Siddhartha went outside the royal enclosure where he lived. When he went outside he saw, each for the first time, an old man, a sick man, and a corpse. This greatly disturbed him, and he learned that sickness, age, and death were the inevitable fate of human beings - a fate no-one could avoid.

Siddhartha had also seen a monk, and he decided this was a sign that he should leave his protected royal life and live as a homeless holy man. Siddhartha's travels showed him much more of the suffering of the world. He searched for a way to escape the inevitability of death, old age and pain first by studying with religious men. This didn't provide him with an answer.

Siddhartha encountered an Indian ascetic who encouraged him to follow a life of extreme self-denial and discipline. The Buddha also practised meditation but concluded that in themselves, the highest meditative states were not enough. Siddhartha followed this life of extreme asceticism for six years, but this did not satisfy him either; he still had not escaped from the world of suffering.

He abandoned the strict lifestyle of self-denial and asceticism but did not return to the pampered luxury of his early life. Instead, he pursued the Middle Way, which is just what it sounds like; neither luxury nor poverty.

One day, seated beneath the Bodhi tree (the tree of awakening) Siddhartha became deeply absorbed in meditation, and reflected on his experience of life, determined to penetrate its

truth. He finally achieved Enlightenment and became the Buddha, which means 'awakened one'.

The value of general and special revelation and enlightenment as sources of knowledge about the divine

Revelation, in its various types, is extremely important to many religious people as, without it, they would have significantly less knowledge about God. Some of the ways in which revelation is valuable include the following:

- Help people to understand the nature of God (what God is like) e.g. omnipotent, benevolent
- Give religious people knowledge of the rules that God wishes them to follow
- Provide evidence of proof that God exists
- Make individuals aware of the purpose that God has for them
- Enable people to understand the greatness of God and to experience awe and wonder
- Change people's lives for the better, for example as Saul was transformed from persecutor into evangelist
- Give people strength to face difficulties in their lives

The problems of different ideas of the divine arising from these experiences

Different people have very diverse experiences of the divine. For example, the Buddhist beliefs in Nirvana and enlightenment that are experienced through meditation is very different than the Christian belief in an all-powerful and benevolent God. For some people, these contradictions are proof that religious experiences aren't real.

One of the most important elements of general revelation in Christianity, the Bible, is interpreted in many different ways by different people. This gives different Christians contradictory ideas about what God wants from them. Examples can be seen in all of the ethics topics we have studied, for example the contrast between the Catholic and the Protestant views on abortion.

Alternative explanations for these experiences and the possibility that the people who claimed to have them were lying or mistaken

There are many ways in which atheists explain why people have religious experiences:

- The effects of drugs or alcohol
- A result of mental illness
- A delusion caused by people desperately wanting to see or experience something
- The impact of physical challenges such as illness, exhaustion, dehydration etc., which can lead people to have hallucinations or to confuse dreams with reality

In addition, it is possible that some people lie and pretend that they have had religious experiences. They may do this for a variety of reasons, for example to get attention, fame or money.

How can we tell whether religious experiences are real?

We will never know whether people's religious experiences are real or not, but there are some questions we can ask to help decide whether or not they are likely to be real.

1. Did the experience have a significant positive impact on the individual? E.g. the case of Saul, who completely changed his life or the example of John Pridmore, who went from being a criminal to preaching to people about Christ.
2. Does the experience fit with other people's experiences of God or of the divine? If it is similar to other people's experiences then it seems more likely that it is accurate.
3. Did the experience fit with common religious beliefs, e.g. showing God as benevolent or showing a significant person such as the Virgin Mary? If so, then it seems more likely that it is accurate.
4. Is there further evidence to support the experience? E.g. when Bernadette saw the Virgin Mary at Lourdes she was told to drink from a spring. If the water from this spring can be proven to heal people then it seems more likely that Bernadette really did experience something.
5. Did the experience make an atheist or agnostic believe in God? E.g. Saul converting to Christianity having previously persecuted Christians.

Sample Exam Questions

1 Mark Questions

- 1.1 Which one of the following describes the way that God shows himself to individuals?
- 2.1 Which one of the following is a seemingly impossible event made possible by God?
- 3.1 Which one of the following is the argument that God must exist because He is the first actor in a chain of events?
- 4.1 Which one of the following means the gaining of knowledge about the divine through meditation?

2 Mark Questions

- 1.2 Give two terms which describe the nature of God.
- 2.2 Give two examples of special revelation.
- 3.2 Give the names of two arguments for the existence of God.
- 4.2 Give two types of general revelation.

4 Mark Questions

- 1.3 Explain two contrasting arguments for the existence of God.
- 2.3 Explain two contrasting ways in which God reveals his nature.
- 3.3 Explain two contrasting descriptions of God's nature.
- 4.3 Explain two ways in which revelation is valuable.

5 Mark Questions

In each answer you must refer to sacred writings or another source of Christian belief and teaching.

- 1.4 Explain two reasons a Christian may give for believing in God.
- 2.4 Explain two ways in which special revelation helps people to understand God.
- 3.4 Explain two ways in which nature can help people understand the divine.

4.4 Explain two reasons for supporting the first cause argument.

12 Mark Questions

Each question will include a statement and the following instructions:

Evaluate this statement. In your answer, you should:

- *refer to Christian teaching*
- *give developed arguments to support this statement*
- *give developed arguments to support a different point of view*
- *reach a justified conclusion.*

1.5 “The existence of evil and suffering proves that God does not exist.”

2.5 “Special revelation is the only way to truly understand God.”

3.5 “The design argument provides enough evidence for belief in God.”

4.5 “It is impossible to believe in miracles in the modern world.”