

The Theistic Argument

by Olin Alfred Curtis

Olin Alfred Curtis presents a compelling case for the existence of a personal God through the exploration of causation, personal experience, and the unity of purpose in the universe.

Scripture: Psalm 19:1, Proverbs 3:5, Isaiah 55:8, Romans 1:20, 1 Corinthians 1:25

Topics: "Theistic Argument", "Existence Of God"

Description

Olin Alfred Curtis delves into the complexities of demonstrating the existence of a good, wise, living, and personal God, acknowledging the challenges in proving it conclusively but emphasizing the multitude of convincing reasons for belief. He explores the concept of anthropomorphism and the inherent human tendency to attribute human attributes to the Great Cause of things, drawing parallels between personal experiences and the understanding of causation and intention in the universe. Curtis discusses the theistic argument as a rational explanation of the universe, highlighting the importance of personal experience in shaping our understanding of causation, power, and intention in the cosmos.

Transcript

I hold, then, it is true, that all the so-called demonstrations of God either prove too little, as that from the order and apparent purpose in nature; or too much, namely, that the world is itself God; or they clandestinely involve the conclusions in the premises, passing off the mere analysis or explication of an assertion for the proof of it -- a species of logical legerdemain not unlike that of the jugglers at a fair, who, putting into their mouths what seems to be a walnut, draw out a score yards of ribbon -- as in the postulate of a First Cause. ... All this I hold. But I also hold that this truth, the hardest to demonstrate, is the one which of all others least needs to be demonstrated; that though there may be no conclusive demonstrations of a good, wise, living, and personal God, there are so many convincing reasons for it, within and without, a grain of sand sufficing, and a whole universe at hand to echo the decision! -- that, for every mind not devoid of all reason and desperately conscience -- proof, the truth which it is the least possible to prove it is little less than impossible not to believe; only, indeed, just so much short of impossible as to leave some room for the Will and the moral election, and thereby to keep it a truth of religion, and the possible subject of a commandment.

-- From Coleridge's Aids to Reflection, Works, i, 220, 221.

I am aware, of course, that among a large number of advanced minds at the present time nothing is considered more absurd and out of date than what is called anthropomorphism, or the endowing of the

Great Cause of things with human attributes. To believe that the Deity is constructed after the model of our own mind is considered as ridiculous as to believe that the earth is the center of the universe, and human beings the objects for whose special delectation the whole galaxy of suns and planets and stars have been created. Nevertheless, in Spite of the agreement and weight of opinion on this point, I shall venture to affirm, on the contrary, that to believe that the cause of the universe can be conceived of in terms other than those of our own personality (or a part of our personality) is as hopeless an hallucination as to believe that by any effort whatsoever one can jump off one's own shadow. . . . I will undertake to show in any system of philosophy whatever that has a coherent scheme where the author's conception of the cause of things is drawn from theories or experiences of the human mind.

-- John Beattie Crozier, *Civilization and Progress*, pp. 192-194.

Now, to the plain man it will always seem that if our very notion of causality is derived from our own volition -- as our very notion of energy is derived from our sense of effort in overcoming resistance by our volition -- presumably the truest notion we can form of that in which causation objectively consists is the notion derived from that known mode of existence which alone gives us the notion of causality at all.

-- George John Romanes, *Thoughts on Religion*, pp. 117, 118.

The word demonstration, when exactly used, means an argument of such cogency as to compel anyone who understands the process to accept the conclusion. In this exact sense the theistic argument is not a demonstration. A man of sanity, intelligence, and entire honesty can follow the process step by step and yet not be convinced that there is a personal God. In truth, there are today many such men, men who are not carried by any or all the proofs of theism, genuine agnostics who say with Mr. Darwin, "I am conscious that I am in an utterly hopeless muddle." And yet the theistic argument has real value as an explanation of the universe. When we become more modest and look upon the universe as a problem to be explained, then the theistic argument grants us the most rational explanation of that problem from the standpoint of our personal experience. In the first place, because man is a free person, he dares to assume that his problem can be explained -- that the universe is "not a farrago of nonsense," but is amenable to rational search. Then, he further dares to take for granted the reliability of his own personal experience and to explain his problem in the terms of that experience. What these terms are we will now try to discover.

Causation. Hume, it seems to me, never understood the principle of causation. It is not, as he held, an outcome of habit, a thing founded on the observation of an invariable sequence of events. Time and time again there is such sequence (as when day follows night), and yet we do not regard the events as cause and effect. The two ideas, indeed, that of sequence and that of causation, are altogether different. One is a surface relation, and the other is an efficient connection. A mere precedence may be inactive and even impotent, but a cause must have inherent efficiency and must bring something to pass. The pith of the idea is the idea of power. A cause is power at work. But where does this idea of power come from? How do we ever get the notion at all? We get it from the experience of self-assertion, and self-assertion in check. We ourselves make an effort to do something, and it is done. Then we try again, and, meeting an obstacle too great for our strength, our self-assertion is in check. It is this double experience of doing things and failing to do things .which gives us the idea of power and the idea of power at work. Thus, by means of personal experience men obtain the notion of cause and effect. Causation is the first term of personal experience by which men explain the problem of the universe. The universe is to them an effect produced by power at work. And in the very nature of the case they regard this power at work as will-power, for all the power they profoundly know is will-power.

Personal Intention. One of the most peculiarly interesting speculations in theistic discussion is John Stuart Mill's "argument for a first cause." In the cosmos he finds, he says, not merely a feature of change as events come to pass, but also two abiding features, namely, force and matter. In the feature of change, the events are caused by the abiding, impersonal force acting upon the eternal matter in fruitful junctures of collocation. This "collocation" reminds us instantly of "the arrangement and position" (*taxis kai thesis*) of Democritus; and, given in brave English, it means that the universe originated in haphazard.

Concerning such fortuitous origin Lord Kelvin has said: "Is there anything so absurd as to believe that a number of atoms by falling together of their own accord could make a crystal, a sprig of moss, a microbe, or a living animal?" And the same absurdity we must associate with Mill's most ingenious statement of fortuity. But why is it so absurd? Why might not a great, abiding, impersonal power, with a certain amount of good luck in collocation, do everything? such a power would be a cause, for the eternal force is at work behind the events which take place.

And perhaps Mill would allow us the idea of will-power if we were able to chasten it of true personal content. Let us, then, generously state the question thus: Why may we not believe that the universe is an effect produced by an impersonal willpower acting in fortunate chance-combinations? I answer: Because such a conception is in violation of man's second term of personal experience, the experience of personal intention. We ourselves not only do things; but we also do things which we intend to do things which unequivocally express our personal intention.

These things have often unmistakable marks of design. Not bare intelligence, but intelligence in such complicated combinations of effect as surely to manifest self-conscious purpose. Who, for instance, could examine a telescope, and not be altogether certain that it was made by personal intention? Such a combination can be interpreted in no other way without violating a fact of our own personal experience. Precisely so in regard to our interpretation of the world about us. In nature we discover countless marks of purpose.

Some say that these marks have been obliterated by modern scientific study; but this is not so. Science has not even obscured the marks. If it has, here and there, taken away an item, it has given us a more purposeful combination than we ever had. What does it matter if the theist lose the web-foot of a duck, if he find about the duck a vast and complicated movement which ceaselessly manifests personal intention? With a few unimportant modifications, the argument from design can be made today much more effective than it was in the time of Paley.

I say, then, that in nature we discover plain marks of purpose. And these marks we treat in harmony with our own experience as persons. To the charge that this is a plain case of anthropomorphism, our reply is, that is just what it should be. It is only a doctrinaire who would expect men to explain the world from any standpoint other than that of their own fundamental experience.

The Term of Unity. Following Kant, many writers on theism have pointed out the inherent weakness in the argument from design. With this argument, you can show that the great cause of things probably is personal, but you cannot make it evident that the personal cause is one person. In the marks of purpose, superficially examined, there is no trace of unity. To clearly bring out the point, let us go back to our telescope. To explain the making of the telescope, we do need power at work with personal intention, but we do not need one person alone. There might be several, or many persons, connected with the making, and even with the designing, of the telescope, and still it would express personal intention. Just so when

he try to explain the cosmic problem, we do not require monotheism to account for apparent design. Thus we reach the question, Why may we not posit a polytheism to explain the problem of the universe? In our day the trend in science and philosophy is so monistic that our question is academic rather than practical. And yet it should be thoroughly answered.

In Professor Everett's valuable lectures, *The Psychological Elements of Religious Faith*, he says: "What reason have we, then, for believing in a unity which cannot be proved by induction? The only answer is that we cannot help believing in it. We cannot think of causation without thinking of unity, we cannot make large generalization without going beyond them to universal assumption. We receive a new thought, and we must at once bring it into relation with all our former experience. But no chain can support anything unless it is attached to something; an endless chain of reasoning is powerless, and we cannot help recognizing unity as that to which all reasoning ultimately attaches itself." This is well said, but it does not express more than a part of the truth, as I understand the matter. The first idea of unity we certainly do get from our own personal experience. Not only so, but because of our inner experience in self-consciousness we have what may be called a proclivity for unity, we want unity, we seek unity, we never rest until we find unity. Even were there no moral condition involved, no polytheism could ever seriously dominate the convictions of men. It is not natural for men to be satisfied with a crisscross of power and purpose at the bottom of things. But it is not true that in the world itself there are no indications of unity. When we more closely scrutinize the marks of purpose; when we note how things enter into intricate combinations and exist in relations of harmony and reciprocity, we discover trace after trace of underlying unity. No one can watch a storm gather and burst, or a gull fly against the wind, or a child grow into manhood, and not perceive a fitness in things. And from this idea of fitness to the idea of unity in a cosmic plan is not a long journey. I would not say, though, that by induction alone we obtain or could obtain a belief in unity. The two things I have said must be joined. From our personal experience we have the idea of unity and the bias toward unity; and with these two alive and alert the marks of unity appeal to us convincingly. Then we add these marks of unity to our data, and explain our problem by means of a unitary, personal cause.

The Transfer of the Infinite. There is one more question: When we have explained our cosmic problem by positing a unitary, personal power, why does the principle of causation not demand a cause behind this posited cause, and then cause behind cause, until we have an infinite series? To this question several answers have been given. One answer is that with our finite limitation we find an infinite series unendurable. As a tired land-bird in mid-ocean will light on the mast of a ship, so we in our mental weariness must have a resting place. Another answer is that in the experience of personality we ourselves make an original beginning in causation. We are, to that extent, out of causal connection; and so there is a sense in which every free person is a first cause. The longer I study the case the less am I satisfied with either answer. The true answer is profounder, I believe. We make at last a transcendent addition to our personal cause. There is an effort to satisfy the whole man, and so we utilize our sense of the supernatural. Already, as we have seen, there is in all our moral and religious life the conception of the supernatural as the infinite beyond nature. This infinite is to us a necessary stopping place, an almighty finality. No man can or needs to urge his thinking on beyond his sense of the infinite. I do not claim that to all men the infinite means as much as the absolute means to the philosopher; but it does mean as much as the first cause means to the theist. There is nothing beyond it, and it is self-sufficient. Having, then, this great conception in his own experience, it is natural for a person to use it in dealing with his cosmic problem; and so he transfers the infinite to the Creator of the universe, and now he has a cause that is potent, personal, unitary, and uncaused.

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