

Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods*: Arguments for and Against God(s) Existence

One of this dialogue's most interesting features is that in its course, the interlocutors not only disagree and debate about the nature of the gods – they also provide a different kind of arguments – arguments intended to prove the existence of god(s) – and criticisms of those arguments. It takes some work to dig out the arguments from their contexts in the dialogue. But, each of the arguments made for God(s) existence by the Epicurean philosopher (**Velleius**) and the Stoic philosopher (**Balbus**) are one or another classic argument – sometimes with a twist, though. The Epicurean or Stoic philosophers add something, some additional considerations, some fuller argument to the original arguments. The Academic philosopher (**Cotta**) provides criticisms of the arguments for God(s) existence. Note: he's *not* arguing that God(s) doesn't exist.

Argument from Common Consent

Typical Formulation of This Argument

All cultures have some conception of and belief in the divine (god or gods)
If all cultures agree in something, what they agree in must be true

Therefore, God (or gods) exists

Epicurean Articulation of This Argument

In each culture, nobody requires or forces people to have notions of gods
Humans all do have a common preconception of the gods
This common conception must have some basis in our nature
Whatever has a basis in our nature must reflect a true view of matters

Academic Criticism of (Epicurean) Argument

Do we even know what all the foreign cultures believe? -- some perhaps are so savage as to have no ideas of the gods
There are some people who don't believe in god(s) or who aren't sure – so there isn't some common conception in us by nature

Stoic Articulation of This Argument

If an idea does not have a basis in reality, but only imagination, it does not last
But the ideas people have of the gods are getting stronger each generation
If an idea is just getting stronger over time, it must be a common conception

Academic Criticisms of (Stoic) Argument

Just because an idea is catching on, doesn't mean that it's a good or true idea – why submit truth to the beliefs of the foolish?

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Argument from Miracles

Typical Formulation of This Argument

If there are divine interventions or manifestations, God must exist
There are divine interventions or manifestations

Therefore, God (or gods) exists

Stoic Articulation of This Argument

Many accounts exist of gods appearing or intervening in human affairs
Also, if interpreters exist for something, then that thing must exist
there are interpreters of the gods
Therefore the gods exist

Academic Criticisms of This Argument

Some of these miracles seem very implausible
We can't really be sure that these events happened, or were instances of divinity
Divination does not seem to be a rational art of interpretation

Argument from Design (Teleological Argument)

Typical Formulation of This Argument

There cannot be design in something without some designer who put it there
Design is observable in nature and world
Only a divine designer could do that
Therefore, God (or gods) exists

Stoic Articulation of This Argument

Natural things in which we see design, complexity, or regularity are beyond the power of the human intellect to cause
Whatever does design or order these things – or the universe – is far above human capacities
Also, reason is the most excellent thing, so if gods don't exist, nothing is above human reason – which would be arrogant for a human being to think

Academic Criticisms of This Argument

Order and regularity that we observe in nature calls for rational explanations – not explanation by attributing it to gods
The kind of "construction" we see in nature doesn't really resemble products of human intentional activity
It might be arrogant to value oneself more than the world – but not to realize one is conscious and rational, and that natural phenomena are not

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Argument from Intelligence

Typical Formulation of This Argument

Intelligence must come from a cause
Things can only come from a cause
either equal or greater than them
Intelligence or reason is higher or
greater than anything else
Only a (higher) intelligent being could
be the cause for intelligence in us
Therefore, God (or gods) exists

Stoic Articulation of This Argument

We get every one of the attributes we
possess from something in the world.
Reason could only come from something
that itself contains reason, is rational
If the universe did not contain reason, it
would not be as good as rational beings.
The universe is better and more beautiful
than anything else in the universe

Academic Criticisms of This Argument

Other faculties, like music and speech,
we didn't get from the world.
We got these from Nature, imparting
these by motions and changes to things
The idea of rationality being in the world
or parts of it (e.g. the sea) is very unclear,
and nobody really knows what it means
Reason or intelligence is not always a
good thing, or used for good

Argument from Degrees of Being

Typical Formulation of This Argument

For anything that can be compared
there are higher and lower degrees of it
There must be some highest degree,
supplying a standard and a cause
We are not at this highest degree, but
we realize that highest degree must be
Therefore, God (or gods) exists

Stoic Articulation of This Argument

There are four main types of beings in
the world, each of which naturally
develops towards its full perfection
The lower three types (Plants, Animals,
Human Beings) encounter obstacles to
their full development and perfection
Nature can't encounter obstacles, so
perfectly rational beings must exist

Academic Criticisms of This Argument

(possible criticism: if the world is
supposed to be completely rational,
because it is the highest kind of being –
then we ought to expect it to also read
books, make music, do other things that
rational human beings do as well!)