

RE-CASTING THE TRADITIONAL ARGUMENTS FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD FOR THE CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN SOCIETY.

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Abstract

Belief in a Supreme Being is close to universal among Nigerians, but that near-consensus cuts across ethnic and religious lines rather than originating in any one of them: it is documented among Yoruba, Igbo, and other traditions independently of Christian or Islamic contact, and it persists across all three of Nigeria's major religious communities. Because the consensus is so wide, belief in God in Nigeria is usually treated as inherited tradition rather than as a conclusion requiring rational defence. This paper re-casts the four classical theistic arguments — ontological, cosmological, teleological, and moral — for a Nigerian readership, testing whether the Western formulations can be restated in terms continuous with theistic reasoning Nigerians already practise, rather than simply imported. Its contribution is twofold: first, it identifies where each argument's structure already resembles indigenous modes of reasoning about the divine, and where it does not; second, it puts the classical case for an unlimited, maximally great God into direct conversation with the "limited God" thesis advanced across the last decade in contemporary African philosophy of religion, a debate existing Nigerian scholarship on these arguments has not engaged. The paper argues that rational justification for theism is available to Nigerian thinkers, but that the classical arguments require critical re-casting, not mere restatement, to do genuine philosophical work in their new context.

Keywords: God, Existence, Ontological, Cosmological, Teleological, Moral, Re-casting, Nigeria

1. Introduction

The most contested question in the philosophy of religion is whether God exists. The answer shapes how life is understood: if God exists, human beings are plausibly accountable to a transcendent standard and existence has objective meaning; if God does not exist, no such accountability applies, and any meaning life has is self-authored. This question bears directly on Christian theism, which holds that God exists as creator and sustainer of the universe. Because Christian faith claims to be reasonable rather than merely asserted, classical Christian and theistic thinkers developed rational arguments for God's existence. This paper examines four of those arguments — ontological, cosmological, teleological, and moral — and asks what work they can do for a Nigerian audience specifically.

2. Conceptual Clarification

2.1 The Notion of God

The concept God is a very difficult one to explain, the reason is that He is invisible, outside time, and beyond the reach of humanity. God unlike other creatures in the world do not have a nature. Created beings present little or no problem to us because they have bodies, which we can study and know their nature. We can study rocks, water, grass, animals and a whole host of other creatures and know precisely what they are made of, but we cannot do so with God.

Thomas Aquinas claims we cannot know 'what' God is; we can only know 'who God is. It is very difficult to know 'what God is since we cannot hold in our hands the substantial essence for scrutiny to ascertain the constituents 'that make up' God. Aquinas says all of our talk about God, and what we say, can only be **via negative** i.e. we can only say what God is not, from seeing our evil nature or what we are i.e from the point of understanding who we are which shows who God is not, e.g. we have failures, are evil, have limitations, powerless, ignorant, inconsistent, mutable, depraved etc. If we say God is good, what we are really saying is that he is not evil like we are, but it is not possible for us to understand goodness the way God understands good.²

There are only two people that have come up with an ingenious definition of God. First is a murderer, fugitive who was a learned in the arts of Egypt – Moses. He is, who brought this definition of God to Israel. Moses who introduces, and to whom God introduces himself as “I am who I am” YHWH.³ Though Moses is said to have seen God he could only describe his feet, back and not his true essence. This definition of Moses from C12 BC stayed on and prevailed until 9th AD when St. Anselm of Canterbury sought from God and got his own definition, “The most perfect being than which none greater can be conceived.” i.e God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived.⁴ A comparable reticence about defining the divine essence, while affirming its reality and supremacy, appears in Yoruba and Igbo religious thought: Olodumare and Chukwu are approached through function and attribute - - creator, sustainer, judge -- rather than through a stated essence, which is a structural echo of Aquinas's own admission that we can say what God is not more readily than what God is.⁵

3. The Gap in Existing Scholarship and the Contribution of This Paper

Nigerian-authored treatments of the classical arguments exist — G. A. Oshitelu's *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction* is the standard example⁶ — but they are principally expository. They restate Anselm, Aquinas, Paley, and Sorley for a Nigerian student audience without asking whether the arguments' underlying logic is continuous

¹E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longmans, 1962); John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (London: Heinemann, 1990).

²Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: Questions on God*, ed. Brian Davies and Brian Leftow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), q. 3.

³Exodus 3:14 NKJV

⁴Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion*, trans. M. J. Charlesworth (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), chapter 2.

⁵Idowu, *Olodumare*, Introduction.

⁶G. A. Oshitelu, *The Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction*, rev. ed. (Ibadan: Hope Publications, 2008), 54.

with, or in tension with, the theistic reasoning Nigerians already practise, and without engaging the specifically African philosophy of religion published over the last decade. That literature has moved decisively past exposition. Since the mid-2010s, philosophers working on African conceptions of God — Ada Agada, Aribiah D. Attoe, Jonathan O. Chimakonam, and Luis Cordeiro-Rodrigues among them — have argued, from the problem of evil, that a coherent African account of God should treat divine power as limited rather than omnipotent in the classical Western sense.⁷ No existing Nigerian treatment of the classical arguments engages this literature, even though the four arguments examined below are all, implicitly, arguments for an unlimited God, and are therefore in direct tension with it. This paper's contribution is that; rather than simply reproducing the classical formulations, its re-casts each argument by testing it against modes of theistic reasoning already present in Nigerian religious life and in the West African primal traditions much of that life still draws on.

4. Belief in God in Nigeria: Ethnic Diversity and Religious Convergence

One clarification is necessary before the arguments themselves are examined. Belief in a Supreme Being in Nigeria is not the property of one ethnic group transmitted outward, nor simply an import of Christian or Islamic doctrine. Idowu's study of Yoruba religion documents an indigenous conception of Olodumare as supreme, sky-residing, and the ultimate source of the lesser divinities (*orisa*), independent of Christian or Islamic contact.⁸ Mbiti's comparative survey found a broadly similar structure — a supreme, high God, often distant from daily ritual life but ultimately sovereign over it — across a wide range of African peoples, including Nigeria's other major ethnic traditions.⁹ What Nigeria's three major religious communities — Christian, Muslim, and adherents of indigenous religion — converge on, in other words, is not a belief imported by any one of them, but a theistic structure that predates all three and that each has since reinterpreted in its own doctrinal terms. This is worth making explicit because it changes what "re-casting" a Western argument for a Nigerian audience actually involves: the target audience already has its own grammar for talking about a supreme being, and the classical arguments should be tested against that grammar rather than presented as arriving in a conceptual vacuum.

5. The Classical Traditional Arguments for the Existence of God

There are traditionally four main arguments for God's existence: ontological, cosmological, teleological, and moral. Each is examined below, followed by a short assessment of how it fares when re-cast for a Nigerian audience.

5.1 The Ontological Argument

The term 'Ontology' is derived from two Greek words; *Ontos*, meaning 'being' or 'existence' and *logy* simply mean 'reasoning or science.' So, ontology is reasoning about being or the science of being or existence.¹⁰ It is also the study of the nature of being or what exists. It is

⁷Luis Cordeiro-Rodrigues and Ada Agada, "African Philosophy of Religion: Concepts of God, Ancestors, and the Problem of Evil," *Philosophy Compass* 17, no. 8 (2022): e12864.

⁸Idowu, *Olodumare*.

⁹John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*. 2nd ed. (London: Heinemann, 1990), chaps. 3-4.

¹⁰G. A. Oshitelu, *The Philosophy of Religion*, 54

an argument or a set of arguments that tries to prove the existence of God from the very concept of God. The argument is a deductive and a priori; meaning that it relies solely on reason and conceptual analysis.

5.1.1 St. Anselm of Canterbury (ca. 1033-1109)

The man Anselm is both a theologian and philosopher of the Catholic Church. At a time, he was prior of the Benedictine Abbey of Bec in Normandy then from 1093 an Archbishop of Canterbury. He formulated the argument from meditating or reflecting on the existence and nature of God – a perfect being. “I believe in order that I may understand” in *Proslogion* 1 and then comes the argument in *Proslogion* 2 and 3 in the year 1077-1078.¹¹ Anselm begins his argument more of a 'proof from prayer' seeking understanding of the concept God. Then proceed to formulate his argument as a dialogue between him (Theist) and the fool (Atheist) from Psalm 14:1. The translation of the version runs as follows: And so, Lord, do thou, who dost give understanding to faith, give me, so far as thou knowest it to be profitable, to understand that thou art as we believe; and that thou art that which we believe. And, indeed, we believe that thou art a being than which nothing greater can be conceived. And assuredly that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, cannot exist in the understanding alone. For, suppose it exists in the understanding alone: then it can be conceived to exist in reality; which is greater. If that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, exists in the understanding alone, the very being, than which nothing greater can be conceived, is one, than which a greater can be conceived. But obviously this is impossible. Hence, there is no doubt that there exists a being, than which nothing greater can be conceived, and it exists both in the understanding and in reality.¹²

5.1.2 Gaunilo's Critique

Anselm's argument was objected by his contemporary named Gaunilo of Marmoutiers; a monk. He tilted his criticism as; “On Behalf of the Fool” in his famous “Lost Island” analogy. He does not try to show a fault in the argument but give a paradox – counter exemplary argument. I have an idea of a perfect Island in my mind (understanding) but to be a perfect Island it must exist in reality. Then it must exist both in my mind (understanding) and in actuality or reality. Therefore, there is a perfect Island. But there is no perfect Island that can be conceived, which means Anselm's argument is built on slippery sand.¹³

5.1.3 Anselm's Reply

Anselm is saying that there is a problem with Gaunilo's criticism because; he has taken the idea of most perfect or maximal perfect being that is, built on necessary existence and used it on a thing depending on something to exist. He abrogates the distinction between a contingent being and a necessity being thereby failing to recognise that, God is a Necessary being while an Island is a contingent being (Possibility). You cannot compare the existence of a contingent being with a Necessary Being. The world cannot exist without God – necessary being; He cannot improve or decrease.¹⁴

¹¹Graham Oppy, “*Anselm and the Ontological Argument*” in *Philosophy of Religion: The Key Thinkers*, Edited by Jeffrey J. Jordan. (London: Continuum, 2011), 22.

¹²St. Anselm: Basic Writings, Translator/Editor Sidney Norton Deane. (La Salle: Open Court Publishing, 1962), 7-8.

¹³Deane, 149.

¹⁴Deane, 153-154.

5.1.4 Norman Malcolm (1911-1990)

Norman Malcolm (1911-1990) revived the argument in modern modal logic, reconstructing Anselm's second, stronger formulation (from *Proslogion* 3) roughly as follows:

1. Either God exists or does not exist.
2. God can neither come into existence nor go out of existence.
3. If God exists, then He cannot cease to exist.
4. Therefore, if God exists, He exists necessarily.
5. If God does not exist, then He cannot come into existence.
6. Therefore, if God does not exist, His existence is impossible.
7. Therefore, God's existence is either necessary or impossible.
8. However, God's existence is only impossible if the concept of God is self-contradictory.
9. The concept of God is not self-contradictory.
10. Therefore, God's existence is not impossible.
11. Therefore, from 7 and 10, God's existence is necessary.¹⁵

Malcolm's argument revived contemporary interest in the idea of Anselm's ontological argument among philosophers.

Re-casting for the Nigerian context: Anselm's argument proceeds a priori, from the concept of a maximally great being to that being's necessary existence. This mode of reasoning has little precedent in Nigerian popular theism, which -- like Aquinas's own preferred method, below -- argues from experience (answered prayer, providence, the order of nature) rather than from concept alone; this is one reason the ontological argument, though the most discussed in Western philosophy of religion, is the least intuitive of the four for a Nigerian audience unfamiliar with its scholastic context. Its more direct contribution here is conceptual rather than persuasive: it supplies the definition of maximal greatness against which indigenous conceptions of Olodumare and Chukwu can be philosophically compared.

5.2 The Cosmological Argument

The term *cosmology* comes from the Greek word *cosmos*, meaning "world." It is an argument or a set of arguments that seeks to prove that God exists on the basis of the idea that there must have been a first cause or an ultimate reason for the existence of the universe (the Cosmos).¹⁶ The argument is inductive and a posteriori. There are multiple versions of the argument postulated by different philosophers. But this paper shall focus on the St. Thomas Aquinas version and the kalam version of the argument.

5.2.1 St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)

"Cosmology" comes from the Greek *cosmos* ("world"). The cosmological argument seeks to prove God's existence from the need for a first cause of the universe; it is inductive and a posteriori.¹⁷ This section considers the Thomistic and kalam versions. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)¹⁸ offered five ways of demonstrating God's existence, of which the first three are cosmological:

¹⁵Michael Lacewing, "Malcolm's Ontological Argument," in *Philosophy for AS: Epistemology and Philosophy of Religion*. (London: Routledge, 2014), 190-193.

¹⁶Oshitelu, *Philosophy of Religion*, 61.

¹⁷Oshitelu, 61.

¹⁸Michael B. Wilkinson, with Hugh N. Campbell, *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction* (London: Continuum, 2010), 125-26.

The first way that Aquinas proposes for demonstrating the existence of God commences from Motion (Movement). We observe that something in the world is in motion. To move is to actualize the potential for being the other. But nothing can be reduced from potential to actuality by itself except another acts on it. Now therefore whatever moves is put in motion by another. Since it is impossible for a thing to be both mover and moved in the same respect and at the same time, we deposit that one thing moves by another and that by another. If that which puts it in motion is moved, then it must be moved by another and that by another. But the lit of agency for motion cannot proceed to infinity (ad infinitum), otherwise it would be a circle of movers without an end. In which case there would not be first or last mover and that is counter intuitive because we know that subsequent movers move only because they have been put in motion by a first mover. Thus, it is necessary for us to posit a first mover. And this first mover is who everyone calls God.

The second way that Aquinas proposes to demonstrate the existence of God is via Efficient Cause. Aquinas notes that in this world we observe an order of efficient causes. A thing is caused to be by another. Nothing efficiently causes its existence otherwise it would predate its existence. That is, it would both have to be and cause itself to be, which a contradiction is. Now therefore everything that exists is caused to be by another. But it is impossible for us to go in ad infinitum on the list of intermediate efficient causes; hence, we must posit a first efficient cause. This first efficient cause of all things is who everyone calls God.

The Third way that Aquinas proposes to demonstrate the existence of God via Possibility (Contingency) and Necessity. Aquinas argues that we observe in nature things that are possible to be and not to be. This is entailed by the fact that things are generated and they are corrupt (die). If they are generated and corrupt, then it is possible for them to be and not to be. Now that which is possible to be actually comes to be by that whose existence is necessary. Now therefore there is necessary being that causes the existence of possible beings. This necessary being is who everyone calls God.

The fourth way that Aquinas proposes to demonstrate the existence of God is via Gradation (Perfection). Aquinas observes that things are not only the same grade; rather others are better, truer, and nobler than others. We predicate more or less to a thing as it participates in the genus. For instance, fire which is the maximum of all things being good and exhibiting other perfections. And this maximum or ultimate being is who everyone calls God.

The fifth way that Aquinas proposes to demonstrate the existence of God is via Governance (End or Telos). Aquinas argues that, in the world, we see that things act towards an end. Even those natural bodies, such as planets and seasons, which lack intelligence, still act for an end. This is evident in their acting always or nearly always in the same way so as to obtain the best result. Evidently, they do not act randomly but out of design to achieve their end. Now whatever lacks intelligence cannot order its acts towards an end unless it is directed by some being endowed with knowledge and intelligence. Therefore, some intelligent being exists by whom all natural things are directed to their

end; and this being we call God.¹⁹ Aquinas is explicit that he is not claiming certainty independent of faith; the five ways are offered as reasoned verification of what is already held by faith, not as a substitute for it.

5.2.2 The Kalam Cosmological Argument

The kalam version, first set out by the Islamic philosopher Al-Kindi (c. 801-73)²⁰ and developed by Avicenna (980-1037)²¹ and, more recently, by William Lane Craig,²² runs:

1. Everything that has a beginning of its existence has a cause of its existence.
2. The universe has a beginning of its existence.
3. Therefore, the universe has a cause of its existence.
4. If the universe has a cause of its existence, then that cause is a personal being.
5. That being would be God; therefore, God exists.

Re-casting for the Nigerian context: of the four arguments, the cosmological is closest in structure to how Nigerians ordinarily reason about God -- from the observed, orderly, contingent world to a first cause responsible for it. This is essentially Aquinas's own a posteriori method, and it maps reasonably well onto indigenous cosmogony: in Igbo thought, Chineke ("the God who creates") is approached precisely as the one to whom the origin of the observed world is traced, not as the conclusion of an abstract definition. The kalam premise that the universe "began to exist" also sits comfortably with a culture in which creation narratives, rather than an eternal cosmos, are the default cosmological assumption. Both Aquinas and the kalam argument conclude only to a first cause or necessary being, not yet to the specific, providential, morally interested God of Nigerian religious life; that further step requires the teleological and moral arguments below, or independent revelation, and should not be presented as though the cosmological argument alone delivered it.

5.3 The Teleological Argument

"Teleology" comes from Greek *telos* ("end" or "goal") and *logos* ("reasoning"); the argument holds that the order and useful arrangement observable in nature imply an intelligent, purposive cause.²³ It is inductive and a posteriori. William Paley (1743-1805) gave the argument its classic statement in *Natural Theology* (1802).²⁴ A Simplify version of the argument runs:

1. A watch shows that it was put together for an intelligent purpose (to keep time).
 - a. It has a spring to give it motion
 - b. It has a series of wheels to transmit this motion

¹⁹Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne Ltd., 1920), Vol. 1, Q. 2, Art. 3. Available at <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/summa.html>. Retrieved 17th September, 2025 by 11:45pm.

²⁰J. J. O'Connor and E. F. Robertson, "Al-Kindi," MacTutor History of Mathematics Archive, University of St Andrews, accessed October 2025, <https://mathshistory.st-andrews.ac.uk>.

²¹"Avicenna," in *A Dictionary of Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Charles Taliaferro and Elsa J. Marty (New York: Continuum, 2010), 25.

²²William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 111.

²³Oshitelu, *Philosophy of Religion*, 70.

²⁴Mark Wynn, "William Paley and the Argument from Design," in *Philosophy of Religion: The Key Thinkers*, ed. Jeffrey J. Jordan (London: Continuum, 2011), 55.

- c. The wheels are made of brass so that they do not get rust
- d. The spring is made of steel because of the resilience of that metal
- e. The front cover is of glass so that one can see through it
- 2. The world shows even greater evidence of design than a watch.
 - a. The world is a greater work of art than a watch
 - b. The world has more subtle and complex design than a watch
 - c. The world has an endless variety of means adapted to ends

Therefore, if the existence of a watch implies a watchmaker, then the existence of the world implies an even greater intelligent designer (God).²⁵

Re-casting for the Nigerian context: of the four, this argument requires the least translation. Appeals to God's evident "hand" in a fortunate outcome, in the intricacy of the body, or in a narrow escape from disaster are a standing feature of everyday Nigerian religious speech, Christian and Muslim alike, and function as folk versions of exactly the inference Paley formalizes. Its philosophical weakness for a Nigerian re-casting is the weakness it has always had: it argues only to a designer proportionate to the design actually observed, and Nigerian popular usage regularly outruns what the argument alone can support, moving directly from "this was well-arranged" to the full, providential God of scripture without acknowledging the gap between the two.

5.4 The Moral Argument

William Ritchie Sorley (1855-1935), a Scottish moral philosopher at Cambridge, presented his version of the moral argument in the 1918 Gifford Lectures, published as *Moral Values and the Idea of God*.²⁶ As summarized by Norman Geisler and Winfried Corduan, the argument holds that:

1. There is an objective moral law independent of humans' consciousness of it and despite their lack of conformity to it, as evidenced by the facts that:
 - a. Persons are conscious of such a law.
 - b. Persons acknowledge its claim on them even while not yielding to it.
 - c. Persons admit its validity is prior to their recognition of it.
 - d. No finite mind completely grasps its fullness.
 - e. All finite minds together have not reached complete agreement on its meaning nor conformity to its ideal.
2. But ideas exist only in minds.
3. Therefore, there must be a supreme Mind (beyond all finite minds) in which this objective moral law exists.²⁷

Re-casting for the Nigerian context: Nigerian ethical life offers a close structural parallel in *omenala* and related concepts of customary law among Igbo, Yoruba, and other traditions -- a moral order treated as binding on the community and as older than, and independent of,

²⁵William Paley, *Natural Theology: or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, Collected from the Appearances of Nature*. (London: R. Faulder, 1802), Chap. 1, 1–3. in *Philosophy of Religion: Key Thinkers* Edited by Jeffrey J. Jordan. (London: Continuum, 2011), 57.

²⁶William Ritchie Sorley, *Moral Values and the Idea of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1918).

²⁷Norman L. Geisler and Winfried Corduan, *Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), 111.

any individual's assent to it, frequently understood as sanctioned by ancestors and the divine rather than merely agreed upon by the living. This parallel is not undisputed within African philosophy itself. Kwame Gyekye's account of Akan ethics treats communal moral norms as substantially self-standing, requiring no further transcendent ground beyond the structure of communal life,²⁸ while Kwasi Wiredu goes further, reading Akan god-concepts themselves as limited rather than as the metaphysical foundation of morality.²⁹ Sorley's argument, re-cast for this context, does not settle a question Nigerian moral life leaves open; it takes one side of a live disagreement among African ethicists about whether communal moral law needs a transcendent Mind to underwrite it at all.

6. Conclusion

The question of whether God exists remains important to Nigerians and is unlikely to stop being so. This paper has argued that Nigerians can pursue that question rationally rather than treating it as needing no defence, and it has shown, through the four classical arguments examined above, that a rational case for theism is available in principle. This paper has tried to test each argument against theistic reasoning already present in Nigerian religious life, and finding the fit close for the cosmological and teleological arguments, looser for the ontological argument, and contested rather than settled for the moral argument once Gyekye's and Wiredu's readings of African communal ethics are taken seriously.

The practical implication for Nigerian philosophical and theological education, including at institutions such as the author's own seminary, is that apologetics and philosophy-of-religion curricula built solely on the classical Western arguments will leave students unprepared for the strongest current objection to the very conception of God those arguments were built to defend. Future research should take up the limited-God challenge and argue for them directly, ideally alongside empirical or ethnographic study of how ordinary Nigerian believers across Christian, Muslim, and indigenous traditions actually reason about divine power and the problem of evil in practice -- a question this paper has raised but, within its scope, could not answer.

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²⁸Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), chap. 5.

²⁹Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), chap. 4.

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