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The Limits of Formalism: A Critical Examination of Mathematical Arguments Against Atheism

Ismail A Mageed*

PhD, IEEE, IAENG & UK President of the ISFSEA Society, UK; visionarymathematics@mail2world.com.

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Abstract

Historically, scripture, revelation, and metaphysics have been used to argue against the persistent philosophical division between theism and atheism. A unique strategy has developed in the present by which one seeks to use the supposed objectivity and certainty of mathematics to challenge atheism. This paper critically examines the most prominent of these arguments, including probabilistic arguments from fine-tuning and formal logical proofs like Gödel's Ontological Proof. It argues that while these frameworks are intellectually sophisticated, they do not constitute mathematical proofs in the rigorous sense. Instead, they are philosophical arguments cloaked in mathematical formalism. Their ultimate failure to be decisive lies in their reliance on unproven metaphysical axioms, questionable applications of probability theory, and an overreach of the epistemological capacity of mathematics. Consequently, they fail to provide a definitive refutation of the atheistic position.

Keywords: Formalism, Atheism, Metaphysics, Gödel's ontological proof, Logical necessity, Probabilistic teleological arguments.

1 | Introduction

The search for certainty in matters of ultimate reality is a profound feature of the human intellectual tradition. Mathematics, with its axiomatic structure and deductive rigour, stands as the paradigm of certainty and objective truth [1]. It is therefore unsurprising that thinkers have attempted to apply its power to one of humanity's most intractable questions: the existence of God. The ambition is to elevate the debate beyond faith or subjective experience and into the realm of logical necessity, thereby providing a formal refutation of atheism [2].

This paper will analyse the structure, claims, and critical reception of such attempts. It posits that the "mathematical proof to refute atheism" remains an elusive, if not chimerical, goal. The core thesis is that these

Corresponding Author: visionarymathematics@mail2world.com

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arguments, while appearing mathematical, are fundamentally dependent on philosophical presuppositions that are not themselves mathematically derivable. They import metaphysical assumptions as axioms and then use logic or probability to deduce conclusions that were, in essence, embedded in the premises from the outset [3]. By examining two major classes of these arguments probabilistic teleological arguments and formal ontological proofs this paper will demonstrate the inherent limitations of using mathematics to resolve what is ultimately a metaphysical, not a mathematical, problem.

2|The Probabilistic Universe: Fine-Tuning and its Flaws

One of the most popular contemporary arguments for theism, often framed as a refutation of atheism, is the fine-tuning argument, also known as the teleological argument from the physical constants of the universe. The argument's structure is overtly probabilistic. It notes that for life specifically, intelligent, embodied life to exist, several basic physical constants the gravitational constant, the strong nuclear force, and the cosmological constant must fall within an exceptionally small range of values. Proponents such as William Lane Craig and John Lennox contend that the odds of these constants happening by random chance are so tiny so small as to be practically zero that they conclude, via an inference to the best explanation, that it is vastly more probable that an intelligent designer God deliberately "tuned" these constants to permit life. Atheism, representing the "chance hypothesis," is thus deemed mathematically improbable [4].

While compelling on a superficial level, this argument suffers from several profound mathematical and philosophical flaws. The most significant is the misapplication of probability theory [5]. To calculate the probability of an event, one must know the space of all possible outcomes. In the case of the universe's constants [6–11], we do not know the "possibility space." We have no way of knowing if other values for these constants were possible, or what the distribution of those possibilities might look like [12]. We are calculating a probability based on a sample size of one our own universe which is a statistically meaningless exercise [13]. Moreover, the case depends on a faulty Bayesian basis. Bayesian thinking calls for the ascription of "prior probabilities" to the tested hypotheses [14]. First, we must assign prior probabilities to the existence of a designer (P(D)) and the chance hypothesis (P(C)) to evaluate the probability of fine-tuning given a designer (P(F|D)) versus the probability of fine-tuning given chance (P(F|C)). There is no objective, non-question-begging means, however, to give a former probability to God's existence [15]. Any value assigned is an expression of pre-existing belief, not a mathematical datum.

Finally, the fine-tuning argument is vulnerable to the Anthropic Principle critique. According to the Weak Anthropic Principle [16], our observations of the universe are inevitably skewed by the conditions needed for our own survival as observers. We see a universe suitable for life since else we would not be here to observe it; hence, it is a tautology. This does not mean a life-permitting universe is improbable; it simply means that non-life-permitting universes are, by definition, unobserved by living beings [17]. The argument from fine-tuning mistakes a condition of our observation for evidence of design, a fundamental logical leap [18].

3|The Formalist's God: Gödel's Ontological Proof

A different, more abstract line of attack comes not from cosmology but from pure logic. Originally developed by Anselm of Canterbury, the Ontological Argument seeks to prove God's existence from the very definition of God [19]. Although historically a philosophical idea, it was mathematically formalized in the 20th century by one of the finest logicians in history, Kurt Gödel. Gödel's Ontological Proof uses modal logic the logic of possibility and necessity to construct a formal proof for the necessary existence of a God-like being [20]. The proof defines God as a being possessing all "positive properties." It then lays out a series of axioms: that the property of having all positive properties is itself a positive property; that necessary existence is a positive property; and that if a property is positive, its negation is not. From these axioms, Gödel's proof demonstrates with deductive certainty that a being with all positive properties (God) necessarily exists [3]. Because the conclusion follows logically from the axioms, it appears to be a mathematical refutation of the contingent nature of existence proposed by atheism.

However, like the fine-tuning argument, Gödel's proof is not a refutation but a translation of philosophical assumptions into symbolic language [21], [22]. The entire deductive chain is sound, but its conclusion is only as strong as its unproven axioms. The atheist can simply reject the axioms. Why should one accept that "necessary existence" is a "positive property" in any meaningful sense? This is a restatement of the core claim, not evidence for it. This critique echoes Immanuel Kant's famous objection that "existence is not a predicate" [23]. One cannot simply add "existence" to the list of a concept's properties to define it into reality. A hundred real thalers do not contain a single coin more than a hundred possible thalers [23].

Moreover, formal analyses of Gödel's specific axiomatic system have revealed potentially problematic consequences, such as "modal collapse," where the system implies that every true statement is necessarily true, a result that few philosophers would accept [3]. The proof's power is entirely internal to its formal system. It demonstrates what follows if one accepts its initial, metaphysically loaded definitions. It does not, and cannot, compel one to accept those definitions in the first place [24]. The atheist is not being illogical in rejecting the conclusion; they are simply rejecting the philosophical premises upon which it is built [25].

4 | Conclusion

The attempt to formulate a mathematical proof to refute atheism is an intellectually fascinating project that highlights the human desire for certainty. However, the arguments presented—from the probabilistic claims of fine-tuning to the deductive formalism of Gödel's proof ultimately fail in their objective. They are not independent, objective proofs in the mould of a mathematical theorem. Instead, they are sophisticated articulations of pre-existing philosophical commitments. The fine-tuning argument founders on its inability to justifiably apply probability theory to a unique event and its dependence on unprovable prior beliefs. Gödel's Ontological Proof, while logically valid, builds its entire edifice upon a set of axioms that are themselves the very heart of the philosophical dispute. In both cases, mathematics is used not as a tool of discovery, but as a language of formalisation for metaphysical positions.

As a philosophical perspective, atheism holds that there is inadequate evidence or justification to believe in a god [26]. These mathematical justifications offer no kind of proof that would drive a reasonable dismissal of that position. They show that a theistic conclusion may logically follow from certain assumptions about probability, purpose, or the nature of positive qualities. Still, they do not show that those premises are correct or that they should be taken up. Mathematics cannot answer the basic concerns remaining in metaphysical and epistemological. The mathematical proof to refute atheism remains, and will likely always remain, an unrealised ambition.

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