HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies
ISSN: (Online) 2072-8050, (Print) 0259-9422

Do the arguments for God cohere? An analysis of inter-argument relations and the application of Thagard's model of explanatory coherence

Check for updates

Author:
Zia Ul Haq[1]

Affiliation:
[1]Department of Foundations of Religions, College of Shair'ah and Islamic Studies, University of Sharjah, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates

Corresponding author:
Zia Ul Haq,
zulhaq@sharjah.ac.ae

Dates:
Received: 16 Sept. 2025
Accepted: 03 Nov. 2025
Published: 08 Dec. 2025

How to cite this article:
Haq, Z.U., 2025, 'Do the arguments for God cohere? An analysis of inter-argument relations and the application of Thagard's model of explanatory coherence', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 81(2), a11047. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v81i2.11047

Copyright:
© 2025. The Author. Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Read online:
Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

This article provides a theoretical analysis of classical arguments for the existence of God within a coherentist epistemological framework. Although classical foundationalists have treated these arguments as self-sufficient proofs, this study employs a dual analytical method to examine their rational plausibility as a mutually integrated system of justification. The conceptual examination of inter-argument consistency is assessed through a logical internal assessment, and the cumulative plausibility of the arguments is evaluated through Thagard's model of explanatory coherence. The first part investigates the internal coherence of the arguments, while the second part applies Paul Thagard's model of explanatory coherence to determine how the arguments collectively satisfy the explanatory conditions.

Contribution: The results substantiate that the arguments for the existence of God form a substantially coherent network, providing a logically robust justification.

Keywords: explanatory coherence; God's existence; foundationalism; Paul Thagard; epistemology.

Introduction

The coherence within a network of arguments for a belief system is one of the logical necessities for epistemic justification, as the internal harmony of arguments provides the proposition with logical plausibility, rational integrity, and internal consistency. According to Thagard, 'Philosophers concerned with normative judgments about the justification of belief systems naturally ask questions about the degree of coherence of a belief or set of beliefs' (Thagard 2000:37–38). Thagard's model operates as a general framework of justification. Even though the existing studies applied it only to the scientific syntheses, it could be applied to test the consistency of both metaphysical and religious beliefs. Thagard explicitly affirms the broader scope of his model and states (Thagard 2000):

> We can use the theory of coherence to address another major metaphysical question: does God exist? I can produce the best possible argument for the existence of God based on explanatory and analogical coherence. (p. 108)

This shows that Thagard views his model as a universal cognitive principle rather than a domain-specific mechanism. Therefore, the Theory of Explanatory Coherence (TEC) can be applied to any network of beliefs across scientific and theological domains without any hesitation.

This demanding standard for justifying a belief system is quite applicable to the classical arguments for the existence of God, which have often been treated by classical foundationalists as separate, with each one claiming to provide sufficient justification for God's existence on its own. However, this treatment approach overlooks an important question: Do these arguments, when combined, demonstrate a coherent system of reasoning rather than a set of isolated proofs?

This article attempts to answer this fundamental question by investigating the interrelations among classical arguments for the existence of God through the lens of coherentist epistemology. It aims to offer a more holistic justification for the existence of God. The first part of the study examines the internal coherence among these arguments. In the second part, it applies Paul Thagard's framework of explanatory coherence to the network of these arguments to assess their interrelation within a set of internally supportive propositions.

Note: Section: Comparative Theology Studies, sub-edited by Chen Yuehua and Ishraq Ali (Hangzhou City University, China).

Four well-debated classical arguments, the cosmological, the teleological, the ontological, and the argument from Fiṭrah, have been selected for this study. This selection is deliberate and not arbitrary, as these four arguments constitute the conceptually interrelated approach to the question of God's existence and provide a suitable framework for this investigation. These four arguments, when taken together, form a strong base for the application of Thagard's model of explanatory coherence as they cover the key domain of epistemology. For example, the cosmological argument is metaphysical, because it is associated with the most fundamental conditions of existence. In contrast, the teleological argument is empirical, deriving from our observation of the natural order. Similarly, the ontological argument is conceptual, as it relies solely on logic, whereas the argument from Fitrah is existential, focusing on the inner awareness and lived experiences of human beings.

The remaining arguments, while important, may logically overlap with these four arguments. For example, moral intuitions overlap with the argument from Fitrah. Also, they may not fundamentally lead to new explanatory dimensions. Therefore, it could be argued that the proposed network of arguments for God's existence enables both depth and diversity while maintaining a focused and philosophically integrated study. The theologians have recognised the significance of this set of arguments, as Swinburne (2004) observes:

> The existence of the universe, its law-governed nature and fine-tuning, human consciousness and moral awareness … provide good evidence for the existence of God. (p. 89)

In this passage, Swinburne underscores the significance of the cosmological and teleological arguments, along with the argument from Fitrah, as central elements in his cumulative case for the existence of God. However, he sets aside the ontological arguments as they overlap with the argument from morality.

The study is divided into two parts to demonstrate this dual focus. The first section examines the internal coherence among the classical arguments for the existence of God, exploring the aspects of their structural interdependence, cross-explanations, and interrelations. The second section applies Thagard's model of explanatory coherence to this set of arguments, systematically examining their justificatory soundness as a unified epistemic model. This proposed structure of the study will help us distinguish between intuitive or conceptual coherence, as perceived within the arguments, and formal coherence, as evaluated through Thagard's philosophical framework, allowing for both interpretive and analytic depth. Moreover, this study demonstrates that the integrated strength of these arguments is not conceived solely in their individual merits, but rather in their cumulative coherence as a logical justification for the existence of God.

Research question

This study aims to answer the following central question: *Do classical arguments for the existence of God form a coherent system of justification?*

To address the above inquiry, it also engages with the following interrelated subsidiary questions:

- *To what degree do the arguments for God's existence support one another within a sound epistemic framework?*
- *Do the arguments, when taken as a whole, satisfy Thagard's seven principles of explanatory coherence?*

The answers to these questions will significantly enhance the epistemic strength of belief in God and determine the importance of interpreting the classical arguments within a mutually supportive system.

Literature review

The conviction that rational belief must rest on indubitable premises was one of the earliest epistemological approaches to the issue of God's existence. The pre-modern thinkers have formulated numerous arguments and treated them as independent and self-sufficient proofs. Aristotle described God as the *unmoved mover*, 'something which moves while itself unmoved' (Aristotle 1953: Metaphysics XII, 1072b). This way of reasoning influenced medieval thinkers in both Western and Eastern traditions.

In Islamic theology, Ibn Sīnā advanced the debate by distinguishing between contingent and necessary beings in his renowned work *al-Shifāʾ*. He argued that every contingent being demands a cause, and that this chain of causes terminates in a Necessary Existent 'whose essence is identical with existence' (Morewedge 1973:69). Anselm of Canterbury put it in another way, employing *a priori* reasoning, and argued that 'God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived' (Anselm 1995:12). Therefore, his existence is necessary both in intellect and reality (Aristotle 1933, Metaphysics XII.6–10). Likewise, Thomas Aquinas grounded belief in God through metaphysical first principles in the *Summa Theologiae* and culminated it in a First Cause, 'to which everyone gives the name of God' (Aquinas 1947:14).

Within Islamic theology, *al-Ghazālī* recognised the importance of rational demonstrations with cautions and warned against limiting divine knowledge to syllogistic proofs: 'Whoever thinks that the unveiling of truth depends on precisely formulated proofs has indeed straitened the broad mercy of God' (*al-Ghazālī* 2000:57). In the same way, Ibn Taymiyyah emphasised the Fiṭrah, maintaining that 'affirmation of God is innate to human nature' (*Ibn Taymiyyah* 2005:276). It is evident from these approaches that even the pre-modern thinkers were not relying solely on cold logic. Instead, they drew insights from conscience and innate human disposition to consolidate their deductive reasoning. This was an apparent anticipation of a coherence approach, which emphasises that the propositions gain their plausibility when

they support and reinforce one another across different domains of reasoning.

Empiricist sceptics in the 17th century exposed the weaknesses of classical foundationalism. David Hume challenged causal inference and argued (Hume 1975):

> All reasonings concerning matters of fact seem to be founded on the relation of cause and effect … But when we look about us towards external objects, and consider the operation of causes, we are never able, in a single instance, to discover any power or necessary connection; any quality, which binds the effect to the cause, and renders the one an infallible consequence of the other. (p. 74)

In the same context, Immanuel Kant critiqued the ontological argument. He maintained (Kant 1998):

> Being is evidently not a real predicate, that is, a conception of something which is added to the conception of some other thing. It is merely the positing of a thing, or of certain determinations, as existing in themselves. Logically, it is merely the copula of a judgment. (p. 567)

In the 18th and 19th centuries, natural theologians shifted to inductive empirical arguments to deduce analogies from nature, supporting belief in God probabilistically. In this era, William Paley developed his famous watchmaker analogy, along with his son, Liam Paley, who came up with his most cited watchmaker and argued that 'design implies a Designer' (Paley 1802/2006:1–3). In this regard, Swinburne revitalised this probabilistic approach, stating that 'the existence of order in the world confirms the existence of God' (Swinburne 2004:141). Swinburne's cumulative-case method was no longer a deductive proof, but indeed it was an appeal to explanatory force across evidence and an anticipation of a coherent model for justification.

Similarly, William Lane Craig took a step forward and reformulated the cosmological argument, arguing that 'everything that begins to exist has a cause of its existence and that the universe began to exist; therefore, the universe has a cause of its existence' (Craig 1979:63). Craig's insistence upon contemporary cosmology reflects an attempt to re-anchor foundational arguments in modern science.

The above traditional rationalist model sought to deduce the existence of God from natural order, metaphysical principles, or logical necessity. Although impressive, these proofs operate primarily within a classical foundationalist model of reasoning, which sees that belief must be justified by basic and self-evident premises.

However, modern epistemology further exposed classical foundationalist vulnerabilities. Analytic philosophers, such as Plantinga, critiqued the evidentialist assumption that belief in God requires inferential justification. He remarks: 'Why is it not permissible and quite satisfactory to believe in God without any evidence or proof or argument, or argument at all?' (Plantinga 1983:16). He further states that belief in God is *properly fundamental,* that it is 'not grounded in argument or evidence but arises from the *sensus divinitatis*' (Plantinga 1983:216). This marked a turning point towards epistemological frameworks that value internal coherence over external foundations. This opened space for coherentist models of justification, where the rationality of beliefs rests on how well they cohere with other beliefs in a chain of arguments, not on their derivation from indubitable premises. Plantinga shifted the debate from a classical foundationalists' discourse to his reformed epistemology, claiming that humans are born with a divine sense (sensus divinitatis) that naturally produces belief in God under proper conditions. He argued: 'God has created us with a sensus divinitatis, a sense of the divine. This sense produces in us belief in God' (Plantinga 2000:172).

The naturalistic explanations that attempt to interpret faith exclusively through cognitive or evolutionary mechanisms without God are epistemically incoherent when examined for their explanatory validity. Scholars such as Justin Barrett say that 'humans possess a "Hyperactive Agency Detection Device (HADD)", especially prone to detect agency in urgent situations' (Barrett 2004:41). These explanations may describe how the beliefs originate, but they fall short when it comes to testing the rationality of those beliefs. They cannot account for evidence and fail to provide any link to the aim of truth. According to Plantinga, naturalism undercuts its own epistemic credibility, viewing beliefs as a product of processes that are not truth-aimed (Plantinga 2011:224–226).

In contrast to the naturalist and foundationalist discourses, coherentist epistemology emphasises the mutual support among propositions rather than resting on self-evident proofs. Laurence BonJour formulates this discourse in *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* and states: 'Justification is a matter of the overall or global coherence of a system of beliefs' (BonJour 1985:8). In the same manner, Keith Lehrer concludes that 'a person is justified in accepting a proposition just in case that proposition coheres with the relevant part of her cognitive system' (Lehrer 1990:163). While both BonJour and Lehrer formulated comprehensive, coherentist theories, they have not directly applied them to any network of arguments. Layman took a step forward and suggested that the explanatory coherence raises the chance of rational acceptability of the theistic worldview. He insists that: 'If theism provides a better explanation of the total evidence than naturalism, then belief in God is epistemically warranted' (Layman 2007:61).

It is important to acknowledge that, just like any theory of knowledge, coherentism has both its strengths and limitations. One of the most frequently cited challenges is the problem of circular justification, which, according to critics, renders coherentist models potentially self-referential. However, this should not be a problem here, as the purpose of this study is not to address the individual validity or foundational credibility of the arguments for God because these arguments are already externally justified through

empirical observation, logical reasoning, and other established means of justification. As these arguments enjoy the external epistemic warrant individually, the objection of circularity does not remain relevant in this context. Circularity could be a problem for a small referential model; however, in a large network of arguments like those of the existence of God, the circularity does not cause a logical flaw, rather it adds depth and plausibility.

Theoretical framework

Despite all the paradigm-shifting developments in theological discourses from foundationalist models to coherentist frameworks, classical arguments for the existence of God have not been adequately studied using systematic models that evaluate their explanatory coherence and rational plausibility. Although Swinburne has examined the coherence of theism, his analysis primarily concentrated on linguistic clarification and conceptual consistency of divine attributes. However, he did not address the internal coherence among classical arguments for God's existence or employ established coherentist models such as Paul Thagard's framework of explanatory coherence. This study's contribution lies in applying Thagard's coherence principles to evaluate whether these classical arguments form a mutually reinforcing system of justification.

Research methods and design

This study applies a mixed analytical method to investigate the coherence among the classical arguments for the existence of God. In the first part, it evaluates the internal coherence among the various forms of arguments by exploring their interrelation and mutual consistency. In contrast, the second part applies Paul Thagard's seven principles of explanatory coherence to this network of arguments to determine whether and how the arguments, when taken together, satisfy the explanatory conditions of coherence. This dual method combines logical internal assessment with a model of explanatory evaluation, ensuring both a conceptual examination of inter-argument consistency and a theoretical analysis grounded in Thagard's model of explanatory coherence.

Section 1

Inter-argument relations

In this part of the study, we will explore how the cosmological, teleological, ontological, and fitrah arguments cohere internally with each other.

Note: These arguments will hereafter be referred to as (C), (T), (O), and (F), corresponding respectively to the cosmological, teleological, ontological, and argument from fitrah (natural disposition).

It is quite observable from the religious literature that although the pre-modern thinkers have not made any direct reference to the coherence among the arguments for God's existence in their formulations, it has remained a latent idea of their argumentation. We can begin with Aquinas, who presents both the cosmological and teleological arguments in his Five Ways. His first three ways are cosmological, while the fifth way is teleological (Aquinas 1947:13–14). This clearly shows the background assumption of Aquinas as he considers both of them mutually coherent as (C) grounds God as the First Cause, while (T) identifies him as an intelligent Designer. It stands to reason that (C) is limited and has only shown the necessity of a possible Creator without indicating much about his nature. To build a clearer conception of God, one may need a combination of other insights. This is the point where (T) comes in. The philosophers argue that it is logically coherent to believe that if there is a Creator, this Creator might also be the source of the sustenance and balance in the universe. This will lead us to (T), which substantiates (C) by not only asserting the necessity of a first cause but also attributing purpose and design to that cause. While (C) addresses the existence of the universe, (T) focuses on its specific features that suggest purposive orientation. Together, they provide a cohesive discourse for understanding the existence and nature of a divine Creator. This means that the change and order in the universe lead to the existence of an intelligent designer. At this point, Gale contends that: 'It is reasonable to conclude that "there exists a necessary supernatural being who is very powerful, intelligent, and good and freely creates the actual world's universe"' (Gale & Pruss 1999:463). Thus (T) directly coheres with (C) as the former establishes *that* a cause exists, and the latter helps show *what kind* of cause it is. This makes the proposition more plausible, as the Creator revealed in (C) is also the Designer identified in (T), rather than positing two separate beings, which would be pointless, as it is pointless to do more than what can be done with fewer.

Along similar lines, (O) supplements both (C) and (T) by addressing different dimensions of the question of God's existence, as (C) focuses on the necessity of a first cause and (T) emphasises the design and purpose in the universe. In more concrete terms, (C) naturally leads to the idea of a necessary being, and it is also evident that the first cause is self-existent. Now, by incorporating the necessity of the Creator's existence, it strengthens the epistemic cause for the proposition under discussion, as the reasoning is not about an arbitrary cause that itself inexplicably hangs. Still, it concerns a fundamentally self-sufficient entity that must be there to explain why some other things exist. In the same way, (O) also strongly coheres with (T), as the designer must necessarily exist. If the designer were contingent and not a necessary being, we can again ask why such an intelligent being exists. If the first and second arguments are valid, then God should exist in all possible circumstances and should not fail to exist. This provides a substantial ontological justification for the existence of God.

As far as (F) is concerned, although it relies on intuition rather than discursive reasoning, it does not exist in conflict; rather, it coheres with (C), (T), and (O) as it provides them

with psychological and phenomenological grounding. For example, (C) affirms that the existence of dependent beings requires a self-existent cause. (F) goes with this and suggests that humans are naturally prone to seek causal explanations that eventually terminate in a self-subsisting source. This coherence is recognised by scholars such as El-Tobgui (2020), who observes that Ibn Taymiyyah viewed belief in God as both rationally demonstrable and innately intuited in the soul (El-Tobgui 2020:275–278). In like fashion, Kant (2002:203) argues that 'Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration … the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me'.

Similarly, (T), which draws from the apparent order and purpose in nature, gains intuitive strength from the cognitive predisposition to perceive intentionality – what Justin Barrett (2004) terms the HADD. He explains that 'the (HADD) is a mental tool that may be hypersensitive, tending to err on the side of detecting agency even when none is present' (Barrett 2004:3). This cognitive feature, Barrett argues, makes belief in a designer an almost inevitable consequence of the kind of minds we have. In this way, (T) does not replace (C), but explains why such reasoning appeals to the human mind. (O), particularly in its modal form, begins with the concept of a maximally great being whose existence is necessary. (T) helps make sense of the universal intuitive appeal of such a concept. Calvin (1960), in his doctrine of the *sensus divinitatis*, states: 'there is within the human mind … an awareness of divinity which parallels the Islamic concept of fiṭrah' (Calvin 1960:I.3.1:43). This suggests that the concept of God is not a product of speculative reasoning, but rather a refinement of a basic, pre-existing mental structure.

Section II

Application of Thagard's model

Paul Thagard developed seven explanatory principles, designated as E1 through E7, to assess the coherence of any belief model systematically. This part of the study is designed to evaluate the arguments for the existence of God to the extent to which it satisfies the proposed criterion of the Thagardian model of coherence.

E1: Symmetric coherence

In terms of coherent epistemology, the acceptability of a proposition depends upon symmetry, which means that if A and B cohere, they cohere equally. Thagard expresses it thus: 'Explanatory coherence is a symmetric relation, unlike, say, conditional probability. That is, two propositions p and q cohere with each other equally' (Thagard 2000:37). The arguments for God satisfy this condition as they reinforce one another mutually, not hierarchically.

However, this mutual interrelation does not mean that all arguments enjoy an equal epistemic warranty. Each of these arguments lends weight to the network in its own capacity. For example, while the (C) and (T) offer empirical grounding, (O) and (F) provide existential depth to the whole explanatory system. In this way, the model remains coherent, no matter which argument relatively carries how much explanatory power. This also brings a logical balance between the ordo cognoscendi and ordo essendi as the epistemic interrelation of these arguments points towards the metaphysical reality of God's existence rather than closing within a purely internal belief system.

Swinburne explicitly affirms E1, as he observes: 'A statement p entails a statement q if and only if p and not-q are inconsistent, that is, "p and not-q" is an incoherent statement' (Swinburne 1993:39).

In the light of this principle, (C) and (T) equally support one another: the existence of a contingent universe (C) is made more meaningful when shown to be orderly and purposeful, and vice versa.

Likewise, (O), which necessitates the existence of a self-subsisting being, coheres symmetrically with both (C) and (T) as both establish that the universe requires an external and purposive cause for its existence. (O) strengthens this, affirming that such a Creator must exist necessarily. According to the coherence principles, (C) and (T) require a metaphysical foundation, which (O) provides, and in turn (O) becomes epistemically justified through the rational justification grounded in (C) and (T). This web of arguments forms a mutually coherent framework for the existence of God.

In the same manner, (F) coheres symmetrically with (C), (T), and (O) and offers an internal justification for the proposition, which reaffirms the conclusion made through the external rational inquiry. While the arguments (C), (T), and (O) were established through empirical reasoning for the existence of a supreme Creator, (F) made an innate cognitive justification for that proposition. Here it becomes quite rational to assume, in the light of the coherence principle – if two propositions cohere, they cohere equally – that (F) is not a secondary affirmation, but rather an equal epistemic counterpart to (C), (T), and (O). Each contributes to the plausibility of the arguments' network and makes them mutually integrated and unified, satisfying the condition of symmetric coherence.

E2: Explanatory coherence

In his theory of explanatory coherence, Paul Thagard articulates that hypotheses that jointly explain a proposition are mutually coherent. This concept is articulated in his Principle E2, which states that: 'Hypotheses that together explain some other propositions cohere with each other' (Thagard 1989:437).

In the light of E2, the arguments (C), (T), (O), and (F) establish a powerful explanatory system. Each contributes to a unique explanatory aspect and explains the central proposition, which is, by the way, 'God exists': (C) explains why there is something rather than nothing, and (T) explains why the universe is purposive, necessitating the presence of an intelligent designer. At the same time, (O) supports the

framework and insists that (C) the cause and (T) the designer must be a Necessary Being to avoid infinite contingency. In the same way, (F) explains the existential accessibility of God, highlighting the universal human recognition, as it would be impossible if such a reality did not exist.

These four arguments, taken as interrelated hypotheses, converge to prove the central proposition as a unified worldview: the existence of a necessary, intelligent, purposive, and knowable God, and do so in a manner that reinforces their consistent interrelation. Therefore, they cohere with one another and clearly satisfy E2.

E3: Analogical coherence

Another principle, as proposed by Thagard, is analogical coherence, which maintains that 'similar hypotheses that explain similar pieces of evidence cohere' (Thagard 2000:37).

According to the principle, the arguments (C), (T), (O), and (F), though each of them is distinct, support a similar hypothesis, which is the existence of a transcendent, necessary, intelligent being who is the cause of the universe. Additionally, each argument addresses similar aspects of reality. These are contingency, purpose, necessity, and intuitive recognition. Stating more precisely, (C) postulates a cause for the universe beyond it, while (T) invokes intentional design. In the same way, (O) strengthens both (C) and (T) and asserts that the cause must be necessary, and (F) explains why belief in such a being comes within the human natural disposition. The arguments (C) and (T) are analogical in their appeal to aspects of the external world (existence and order), while the arguments (O) and (F) strengthen that appeal in the domain of logical necessity and inner awareness. This clearly illustrates the interrelation of these arguments within an analogical pattern, although they are merely presented side by side.

E4: Empirical coherence

In outlining E4, Thagard observes that 'Propositions that describe the results of observation have a degree of acceptability on their own' (Thagard 2000:37). This type of coherence might be referred to as empirical coherence.

In accordance with this principle, it is obvious that there should be no question about the initial plausibility of the arguments (C), (T), and (O) as all three are grounded in observationally evident features of the natural world, and (F) is grounded in observational human experience. (C) is based on the apparent observable fact that the universe exists and is composed of objects that begin to exist and are dependent on prior causes in their existence. Likewise, (T) arises from the empirical recognition of order and purpose in the universe. The order in the universe is not an estimation, but it is rooted in everyday experience and scientific observation, which grants it independent epistemic soundness. (O) though seems more metaphysical in form, it explains the totality of ordered existence and reinforces the entire explanatory chain. Therefore, it is quite rational to believe that (O) also coheres with (C) and (T) even though it is not coming from empirical observation.

(F), although not grounded in observation, is itself a phenomenological datum and comes from direct, first-person experience. In this sense, it also lends equally in the observable domain, gaining a first degree of plausibility. This is not because it has been proven empirically, but rather it explains a reality of human experience, aligning naturally with the theory established by (C), (T), and (O).

E5: Internal consistency

According to Thagard, 'Contradictory propositions are incoherent' (Thagard 2000:37).

The arguments for the existence of God meet this condition with notable clarity, as the presence of opposite notions of atheism and polytheism is contradictory to the theistic idea of God. The scriptures explicitly reject polytheism and naturalistic self-causation and consider them incoherent with observable reality. For example, in Chapter 21, the Qur'an maintains: 'Had there been gods besides Allah … they would have been ruined' (al-Anbiyāʾ 21:22). Studies show that systems of beliefs that accommodate mutually contradictory propositions fail to maintain epistemic integrity (Haq 2022:5).

When this principle is applied to (C), (T), (O), and (F), the result is a chain of arguments that demonstrates not only mutual support but also logical compatibility without any contradictions.

For instance, (C) asserts that the universe has a cause, while (O) necessitates that the reason must be a necessary being. (T) maintains that the universe holds precise order, and (F) holds that human nature is oriented towards recognising this cause. These propositions are compatible, and there is nothing within (C) through (F) that stands in contrast to another. (C) and (T) mutually support one another as the proposition of a cause for the universe becomes more plausible when followed by purposeful order.

(O) reinforces both (C) and (T) and grounds that cause in metaphysical necessity, which aligns with the claim of contingency in (C). (F) complements all three arguments and shows that belief in such a being is not only rationally sound but existentially accessible through human first-hand experience. It is clear that this chain of arguments fulfils the coherence criterion of non-contradiction, and the unity of these arguments lies in the absence of a propositional conflict and their coordinated direction towards a standard explanatory theory. Therefore, (C), (T), (O), and (F) form a logically coherent web of justification for the existence of God.

Like Thagard, Swinburne insists on the linguistic and conceptual coherence of the propositions. According to him,

for words and concepts to be meaningful, they must not be contradictory. He maintains (Swinburne 1977):

> If syntactic and semantic rules for the use of a word do not lead to men agreeing when the word is correctly used, they have failed to give meaning to the word. This may be … because there is conflict between rules (i.e. because it is not coherent to suppose that a man follows both rules). (p. 34)

This aligns with Thagard's principle that 'contradictory propositions are incoherent', because, like words and concepts, propositional coherence is also essential for the justification of a belief system. If a set of propositions leads to a contradiction, they cannot be considered coherent.

E6: Coherence through hypothesis competition

In Thagard's account of explanatory coherence, 'If p and q both explain a proposition, and if p and q are not explanatorily connected, then p and q are incoherent with each other' (Thagard 2000:37). This means that the arguments should fit together, like different components of the same puzzle. Therefore, supporting the same theory separately without interrelation would not be enough epistemically. The arguments (C), (T), (O), and (F) are interconnected explanatorily under E6, the principle under discussion. (C) proposes a cause for the universe without providing any qualifications for the cause. (T) qualifies the cause, positing that it must be intelligent because the order and purpose in the universe require it. (O) identifies the cause proposed in (C) and qualified in (T) as it should not be contingent, but rather a necessary self-subsisting being. (F) provides a phenomenological account asserting that such a cause is not merely speculative but rather it is an intuitive reality and rationally knowable. When two propositions are incoherent because they are contradictory or in an explanatory competition, there is a negative constraint between them that will tend to make one of them accepted and the other rejected (Thagard 2000:44).

Each of the above arguments is not only explanatorily connected, but at the same time, they explain the central proposition and contribute to the illumination of the different aspects of the reasoning employed by others.

This system of arguments meets the mentioned coherence criterion and forms a sound system of epistemic justification. The soundness lies in the internal connectivity of the arguments and their convergence on an integrated rational conclusion.

E7: Systematic coherence

Within the principles of Thagard, 'the acceptability of a proposition in a system of propositions depends on its coherence with them' (Thagard 2000:37). Belief in God also satisfies this principle. It is rationally plausible because of its systemic coherence and not contingent on any single argument, but rather because it fits into a coherent web of reasoning. The rationality of each argument – whether it is the necessity of the cause as described in (O), its immediate awareness as mentioned in (F), or the causal assumption in (C) and (T) – is increased as they support each other in a strong, coherent manner. If (C) suggests a cause that is not in line with the nature of being proposed in (O), or if (F) led to an immediate awareness that clashed with the nature of the cause described in (T), the system of the entire reasoning would collapse logically. However, the strength of the arguments for God's existence lies in their systemic harmony, as each argument is not only internally plausible but also mutually reinforcing within the broader, coherent structure. It is this integrated rational harmony that makes the proposition of God's existence more plausible within a coherentist framework.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the arguments for the existence of God, when examined by looking into inter-argument relations and through Paul Thagard's model of explanatory coherence, exhibit rational consistency and systematic unity, converging in mutual support and collectively satisfying Thagard's seven principles of explanatory coherence.

The study suggests that the justification of theistic beliefs ought not depend solely on a singular argument but rather on an interconnected network of arguments that mutually strengthen one another. It also explores the significance of *Fitrah* in integrating innate human disposition with rational metaphysical reasoning. Finally, it is recommended that future research expand this approach by applying coherence theory to more theistic beliefs and testing the plausibility of theistic arguments against sceptical critiques.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

CRediT authorship contribution

Zia U. Haq: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data availability

The author declares that all data that support this research article and findings are available in the article and its references.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings, and content.

References

Anselm of Canterbury, 1995, *The major works*, B. Davies & G.R. Evans (eds.), Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Aquinas, T., 1947, *Summa theologiae,* Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Part I, trans. Benziger Brothers, New York, NY.

Aristotle, 1933, *Metaphysics*, H. Tredennick (transl.), Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA. (Original work published ca. 350 B.C.E.).

Aristotle, 1953, *Metaphysics*, trans. W.D. Ross, Clarendon Press, Oxford.

Barrett, J.L., 2004, *Why would anyone believe in God?*, AltaMira Press, Walnut Creek, CA.

BonJour, L., 1985, *The structure of empirical knowledge*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

Calvin, J., 1960, *Institutes of the Christian religion*, transl. F.L. Battles, J.T. McNeill (ed.), vol. 1, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY. (Original work published 1559)

Craig, W.L., 1979, *The Kalam cosmological argument*, Macmillan, London.

El-Tobgui, C.S., 2020, *Ibn Taymiyya on reason and revelation: A study of Ibn Taymiyya's "Darʾ taʿāruḍ al-ʿaql wa-l-naql"* [Averting the conflict between reason and revelation], pp. 275–278, Brill, Leiden.

Gale, R.M. & Pruss, A.R., 1999, 'A new cosmological argument', *Religious Studies* 35(4), 461–476. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412500018973

Ghazālī, A.H., 2000, *Deliverance from error: An annotated translation of al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*, transl. R.J. McCarthy, Fons Vitae, Louisville, KY.

Haq, Z.U., 2022, 'Much ado about nothing: Problems with logical reasoning in theism–atheism debate', *Religions* 13(11), 2–12. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13111092

Hume, D., 1975, *An enquiry concerning human understanding*, T.L. Beauchamp (ed.), Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Ibn Taymiyyah, T., 2005, *Darʾ taʿāruḍ al-ʿaql wa-l-naql* [Averting the Conflict between Reason and Revelation], vol. 1, Mu'assasat al-Risālah, Riyadh.

Kant, I., 1998, *Critique of pure reason*, transl. P. Guyer & A.W. Wood (eds.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Kant, I., 2002, *Critique of practical reason*, transl. W.S. Pluhar, Hackett Publishing, Indianapolis, IN. (Original work published 1788)

Layman, C.S., 2007, *Letters to doubting Thomas: A case for the existence of God*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Lehrer, K., 1990, *Theory of knowledge*, Westview Press, Boulder, CO.

Morewedge, P., 1973, *The metaphysica of Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā): A critical translation-commentary and analysis of the fundamental arguments in Avicenna's metaphysica in the Dānish Nāma-i ʿalāʾī*, Columbia University Press, New York, NY.

Paley, W., 2006, *Natural theology: Or, evidence of the existence and attributes of the Deity, collected from the appearances of nature*, reprint of 1802 ed., Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Plantinga, A., 1983, 'Reason and belief in God', in A. Plantinga & N. Wolterstorff (eds.), *Faith and rationality: Reason and belief in God*, p. 16, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN.

Plantinga, A., 2000, *Warranted Christian belief*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY.

Plantinga, A., 2011, *Where the conflict really lies: Science, religion, and naturalism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Swinburne, R., 1993, *The coherence of theism,* rev. edn., Clarendon Press, Oxford.

Swinburne, R., 1977, *The coherence of theism,* Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Swinburne, R., 2004, *The existence of God*, 2nd edn., Clarendon Press, Oxford.

Thagard, P., 1989, 'Explanatory coherence', *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 12(3), 435–467. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X00057046

Thagard, P., 2000, *Coherence in thought and action*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.