

THE CHRISTIAN
UNDERSTANDING
OF GOD

THEO 331 – week 2

OPPOSITION TO GOD

- **STRONG-FORM ATHEISM: GOD DOES NOT EXIST**
 - This form of atheism is usually based on the problem of evil, which can be stated as follows: “If God exists, he is infinite goodness. An infinity cannot admit its opposite. Since evil exists, God cannot exist.”

OPPOSITION TO GOD

- **WEAK-FORM ATHEISM: GOD IS AN UNNECESSARY HYPOTHESIS**
 - This form of atheism is usually based on Occam's razor, the principle that if a simpler, more mundane explanation suffices for a phenomenon, it is to be preferred over a more complex or exotic explanation.
 - Since all phenomena observed by humans occur in nature, they should all be explainable by natural forces.
 - Auguste Comte (d. 1857) saw religion as an attempt to explain things by attributing them to God – an attempt now replaced by science.

OPPOSITION TO GOD

- **AGNOSTICISM: GOD CANNOT BE KNOWN**
 - **Form #1: God cannot be known because he is beyond all natural experience (by which knowledge comes).**
 - **Form #2: God cannot be known because human reason is weak and/or corrupted.**
 - **Agnosticism is often closely related to scepticism, which states that NOTHING can be known with certainty.**

RESPONSES TO ATHEISM

- **To the strong form: If God is able to draw good out of evil, then the existence of evil does not contradict the infinite goodness of God.**
- **To the weak form: While all individual phenomena in nature may have natural explanations, their existence itself does not: it requires an extra-natural explanation.**

THE ONTOLOGICAL PROOF OF THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

This is an attempt to make an *a priori* logical (hence, irrefutable) proof for the existence of God. Its classic form was outlined by Saint Anselm of Canterbury (d. 1109):

- 1. God is that entity than which nothing greater can be conceived.**
- 2. It is greater to be necessary than not.**
- 3. God must be necessary.**
- 4. God necessarily exists.**

RESPONSES TO AGNOSTICISM

- The general solution to the problems of agnosticism is the **PRINCIPLE OF CONDECENSION**: the idea that God takes the initiative to bridge the gap by coming to us in a way we can understand.
- **God is an ever-knowable mystery: FAITH**
 - The data of nature is harmonious with supernatural revelation.
 - Reason is capable of making explicit the implicit truths found within the data (natural or supernatural).
- **God is an unknowable mystery: FIDEISM**
 - Only supernatural revelation is a valid source of knowledge of God, and reason cannot develop it beyond the source material. (Note Pascal's Wager.)

“WAYS/PATHS” TO DEMONSTRATE GOD’S EXISTENCE

- **These are not proofs per se, but attempts to demonstrate that belief in God’s existence is a reasonable conclusion at the end of a process of reflection. The classic formulation of these five “paths of reflection” comes from Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274).**

PATH 1: MOTION (i.e. CHANGE)

“The first and more manifest way is the argument from motion. It is certain, and evident to our senses, that in the world some things are in motion. Now whatever is in motion is put in motion by another, for nothing can be in motion except it is in potentiality to that towards which it is in motion; whereas a thing moves inasmuch as it is in act. For motion is nothing else than the reduction of something from potentiality to actuality. But nothing can be reduced from potentiality to actuality, except by something in a state of actuality. Thus that which is actually hot, as fire, makes wood, which is potentially hot, to be actually hot, and thereby moves and changes it. Now it is not possible that the same thing should be at once in actuality and potentiality in the same respect, but only in different respects. For what is actually hot cannot simultaneously be potentially hot; but it is simultaneously potentially cold. It is therefore impossible that in the same respect and in the same way a thing should be both mover and moved, i.e. that it should move itself. Therefore, whatever is in motion must be put in motion by another. If that by which it is put in motion be itself put in motion, then this also must needs be put in motion by another, and that by another again. But this cannot go on to infinity, because then there would be no first mover, and, consequently, no other mover; seeing that subsequent movers move only inasmuch as they are put in motion by the first mover; as the staff moves only because it is put in motion by the hand. Therefore it is necessary to arrive at a first mover, put in motion by no other; and this everyone understands to be God.”

-- Summa theologia, part 1, question 2, article 3

PATH 2: EFFICIENT CAUSES

“The second way is from the nature of the efficient cause. In the world of sense we find there is an order of efficient causes. There is no case known (neither is it, indeed, possible) in which a thing is found to be the efficient cause of itself; for so it would be prior to itself, which is impossible. Now in efficient causes it is not possible to go on to infinity, because in all efficient causes following in order, the first is the cause of the intermediate cause, and the intermediate is the cause of the ultimate cause, whether the intermediate cause be several, or only one. Now to take away the cause is to take away the effect. Therefore, if there be no first cause among efficient causes, there will be no ultimate, nor any intermediate cause. But if in efficient causes it is possible to go on to infinity, there will be no first efficient cause, neither will there be an ultimate effect, nor any intermediate efficient causes; all of which is plainly false. Therefore it is necessary to admit a first efficient cause, to which everyone gives the name of God.”

-- Ibid.

PATH 3: NECESSITY

“The third way is taken from possibility and necessity, and runs thus. We find in nature things that are possible to be and not to be, since they are found to be generated, and to corrupt, and consequently, they are possible to be and not to be. But it is impossible for these always to exist, for that which is possible not to be at some time is not. Therefore, if everything is possible not to be, then at one time there could have been nothing in existence. Now if this were true, even now there would be nothing in existence, because that which does not exist only begins to exist by something already existing. Therefore, if at one time nothing was in existence, it would have been impossible for anything to have begun to exist; and thus even now nothing would be in existence — which is absurd. Therefore, not all beings are merely possible, but there must exist something the existence of which is necessary. But every necessary thing either has its necessity caused by another, or not. Now it is impossible to go on to infinity in necessary things which have their necessity caused by another, as has been already proved in regard to efficient causes. Therefore we cannot but postulate the existence of some being having of itself its own necessity, and not receiving it from another, but rather causing in others their necessity. This all men speak of as God.”

PATH 4: ORDER OF PERFECTIONS

The fourth way is taken from the gradation to be found in things. Among beings there are some more and some less good, true, noble and the like. But "more" and "less" are predicated of different things, according as they resemble in their different ways something which is the maximum, as a thing is said to be hotter according as it more nearly resembles that which is hottest; so that there is something which is truest, something best, something noblest and, consequently, something which is uttermost being; for those things that are greatest in truth are greatest in being, as it is written in *Metaph. ii*. Now the maximum in any genus is the cause of all in that genus; as fire, which is the maximum heat, is the cause of all hot things. Therefore there must also be something which is to all beings the cause of their being, goodness, and every other perfection; and this we call God.

PATH 5: DESIGN

The fifth way is taken from the governance of the world. We see that things which lack intelligence, such as natural bodies, act for an end, and this is evident from their acting always, or nearly always, in the same way, so as to obtain the best result. Hence it is plain that not fortuitously, but designedly, do they achieve their end. Now whatever lacks intelligence cannot move towards an end, unless it be directed by some being endowed with knowledge and intelligence; as the arrow is shot to its mark by the archer. Therefore some intelligent being exists by whom all natural things are directed to their end; and this being we call God.

ATTRIBUTES OF GOD KNOWABLE TO REASON ALONE

- **God exists (the unmoved mover).**
- **God is immobile (does not change).**
- **God is eternal (outside of time).**
- **God is necessary (cannot not be).**
- **God is everlasting (was never not, nor ever will be not).**
- **There is no succession in God.**
- **God is simple.**

ATTRIBUTES OF GOD KNOWABLE TO REASON ALONE

- **God is his essence.**
- **God's essence is his existence.**
- **God not contained under a genus.**
- **God not a genus.**
- **God not a species predicated of individuals.**
- **There is only one God.**
- **God is not a body.**

ATTRIBUTES OF GOD KNOWABLE TO REASON ALONE

- **God is not the form of a body.**
- **God is not a force in a body.**
- **God is infinite according to essence.**
- **God is infinitely powerful.**
- **God's infinity is perfect.**
- **All creaturely perfections are found in God.**
- **All perfections are united in God.**

ATTRIBUTES OF GOD KNOWABLE TO REASON ALONE

- **God has no “accidents” (secondary characteristics).**
- **God may have multiple names but remains fundamentally simple.**
 - **The names of God are not synonymous.**
 - **God cannot be defined.**
 - **All terms predicated of God are analogous.**

ATTRIBUTES OF GOD KNOWABLE TO REASON ALONE

- **God is intelligent.**
- **God's intelligence is actual, not potential or habitual (i.e. it is immediate)**
- **God's essence is the only species in his understanding (i.e. he perfectly understands himself).**
- **God IS his intelligence.**

ATTRIBUTES OF GOD KNOWABLE TO REASON ALONE

- **God possesses volition (i.e. free will).**
- **Identity of God's will and intellect.**
- **Identity between God's will and his willing.**