

## Axial Arguments over God from Hellenistic through Medieval Christianity

1. Welcome to this next video lecture tracking the co-evolution of religion and technology. In this video we shall survey axial arguments over the existence of God in early and medieval Christian thought. In contrast to bronze age scribes whose calling was to preserve traditional oral myth and ritual, Christian scribes, still working within the church, but outside court and temple in the new axial scribal institution of the university, engaged in a metalevel, theoretical systematization and critique of Christian belief and practice.
2. As we saw in the first millennium translation of Christian belief into the axial categories of Hellenistic philosophy, Origen had offered a spiritual hermeneutics for the creation account in the book of Genesis. While his commentary on Genesis has not survived, we do have his commentary on the Prologue of John's Gospel. We can also draw upon his own systematic work on Christian ontology, *On First Principles (Peri Archōn)*.
  - a. Origen argued for a theoretically informed narrative of creation. To summarize the cosmogenesis presented in the last lecture, Origen argued that creation occurred in two stages. (1) The first creation was a purely spiritual cosmos, (2) a *plērōma* of pure spirits, as perfect an image of the divine as a created image could be. However as finite yet living forever, eventually these spirits would turn away from God. But how could pure spirits ever turn away from God? Because, as made in the divine image, they were also made in the image of God's creative freedom, with the ability to make their own choices.
  - b. And why would pure, perfect spirits freely choose to turn away from God? Origen suspected out of laziness or boredom. And to what could they then turn? The only other thing then existing, themselves. (3) But as they turned inward, they became self-absorbed, and their love of God began to cool. They thereby began to fall, away from the blinding white hot radiance of the divine being to becoming dimmer mirrors of the divine, ever foggier, dirtier, darker. God however in his compassion created a second (4) elemental world to (5) catch their fall. He would then send his son, his perfect, divine self-image, (6) to descend into the material world and inspire his darkened self-images to (7) re-ascend and re-unite with their creator. The Christian life was effectively a (8) divine pedagogy (9) that served to awaken, (10) revive and (11) re-kindle one's (12) original love for God, to restore the divine image at the heart

of each of us. Through Word and Sacrament, Christians were to dry out and warm up, moving from languid stupor to purified and liberated spirits aflame for God.

3. John Scotus Eriugena, a theologian at the Carolingian court just after Charlemagne, drew upon Origen, and especially Dionysius to argue in fully theoretical, conceptual categories for a rational ontology consistent with the Christian faith, but not logically dependent upon it. Eriugena rather abstracted from mythic narrative and literal personification. His *On Nature (Peri Physeon)* (1) categorizes reality along two fundamental axes: (2) created/uncreated and (3) creating/not creating to divide Being formally into four quadrants.
  - a. (4) The first quadrant, uncreated but creating refers to God as the ultimate source of all things. (Book 1) Following Dionysius he will insist that God can be symbolically and analogously known and understood from the fruits of his ongoing creative activity, but that in himself, God is literally unknowable, transcending any and all word and image. All divine attributes are ultimately negative attributes: infinite means “beyond finite; eternal, “beyond temporality” omnipotent, “beyond all concepts of power conceivable by us. Existence is no exception. Creation exists. God, as creator, transcends his creation, his being transcends any concept of existence conceivable by us, ultimately any concept of being conceivable by us. This does not mean God does not exist; it means our understanding of what it means to exist does not apply to God.
  - b. (5) The second quadrant, created and creating is ideal or archetypal reality, the divine ideas according to which God creates. These ideals too transcend creation, but they order it. Our concepts point to them . This corresponds to Origen’s “first creation”, the creation of light and the heavens in the first two days of creation in Genesis. (Book 2)
  - c. (6) The third quadrant, created but not creating is our actual natural world. The world is still dynamic, in that it is a world of ceaseless becoming and perishing, but it is ultimately cyclical, never creating anything radically new. It corresponds to days 3-6 of creation. God may transcend his creation, but as the expression of his creative activity every being is a hierophany, a miracle, that is a “wonder” that can draw our attention towards God, (Book 3: nature; book 4 human nature). All reality is sacred in that every reality is effectively an icon pointing towards its author.

- d. (7) Finally, the fourth quadrant, neither created nor creating, is again God, this time as the culminating end towards which all things return. A “desire for God” is inherent not only in our human nature, but in the nature of all that exists, each in its own characteristic way, and in nature as a whole, evolving towards that ultimate unity from which it sprang. This corresponds to the seventh day, the day of God’s rest, as well as the Christian eighth, the day of the Resurrection in which Christ draws and transforms humanity and all creation back into God. (Book 5)

While a more analytical, conceptual architectonic than Origen’s rational allegorical hermeneutics, even John Scotus Eriugena still not rationally prove God’s existence any more than Origen did, but rather locates it within a vision of reality revealed by faith. Here too we find not a rational justification of the Christian faith, but a rational understanding of it.

4. Two hundred years later, in the eleventh century, the Christian monk, did raise the question of God’s very existence. However we shall see that even Anselm’s infamous “ontological argument” for the existence of God was not as purely rational a demonstration as modern philosophers would later assume. Even Anselm’s argument will not ultimately be a rational justification but a rational understanding of the Christian faith.

In fact so far from proving the existence of God from scratch, he begins his argument by praying to the very God whose existence he seeks to understand. (1) “Teach me to seek you, and reveal yourself to this seeker. For I cannot seek you unless you teach me how, nor can I find you unless you show yourself to me.” Again in Anselm’s words: (2) “I do not seek to understand so that I can believe, but rather I believe so that I can understand.” (3) “For I believe this too, that unless I believe I shall not understand”.

5. And so Anselm begins by asking just what do Christians mean by “God.” For whether or not one can rationally believe that there is a God will depend on what one means by “God”. For example, if by “God” we mean Santa Claus, someone who will give us whatever we ask of him, then as we grow and mature we will discover sooner or later that no such being exists. So too if by God we mean a superhero who will protect us from all suffering, again life will disillusion us. (1) Now Anselm argues that by “God” Christians mean “that than which nothing greater can be thought”. Given that understanding of God, does God exist?

Note first of all that this is essentially a negative definition of “God.”. It refers to God not by identifying him among everything else that exists, but by pointing our understanding

beyond anything that does or ever could exist, indeed beyond anything that we can even imagine existing. For regarding any thought or image, let alone any existing being, we can always conceive that there be something greater yet. “That than which nothing greater can be thought” does not then refer to any being at all. Rather it is an extrapolation, pointing beyond all beings, and beyond the limits of our understanding altogether to an unlimited, infinite perfection, even though we cannot concretely even imagine what that might mean.

But then, Anselm argues, given this understanding of “God”—that than which nothing greater can be thought--God must exist. (2) For existence itself is a perfection. It is better to be than not to be. And thus a God who exists is greater than one that does not. (3) In fact God’s existence cannot be merely possible, but necessary. For a God who must exist would be greater than one whose existence is contingent. If God’s existence were conditioned upon anything else, that is, if anything else, even everything else either caused God to exist, or caused God to no longer exist, then that would be greater than God.

The same applies to all other divine attributes. Goodness, Justice, Love, Power, each extrapolated to a perfection that nothing greater can be thought applies to God. Each of these too is beyond our limited comprehension, but our faith can point our imaginations in the right direction, like a vector towards a dimensionless point.

But if God exists by definition, does this not beg the question? The objection was already raised in Anselm’s own lifetime, by a fellow monk, Gaunillo.(4) He even begins his objection with a quote from sacred scripture itself, (5) “the fool says in his heart that there is no God” How could anyone deny the existence of God be if it is true by definition?

(6) We also have Anselm’s response to Gaunillo’s objection. (7) As we have already seen, God may not exist if one misunderstands what the Christian faith means by “God.” (8) Or if one lives a life of sin, that is live as if there were no God, then one might well be blind to God’s existence. After all, it is a fool who says in his heart that there is no God. But for the practicing Christian, one who believes in God as that than which nothing greater can be thought, the existence of such a God is not up for question.

6. As a monk, Anselm frames his reflections on the existence of the divine in the form of prayerful meditations. With the rise of the medieval university, that frame becomes more self-critical, shifting from prayerful meditation to academic debate. A hundred years before Aquinas, Abelard collected apparently conflicting passages from across the library of Jewish,

Christian and Greek philosophical texts on over a hundred philosophical and theological questions including that of God's existence. He entitled his compendium "Sic et Non" literally "Yes and No" or "Pro and Con." It served as a handbook for his lecture courses.

7. By the time of Aquinas, scholastic teaching had evolved to addressing such questions, (1) beginning by (2) listing the main arguments against, (3) then offering one or more passages from the sacred scriptures. (4) This would be followed by the teacher's own resolution of the question, (5) followed by his response to the arguments he had earlier listed, especially those most contrary to his.
  - a. If the resolution gained recognition among other scholastics, they might then add it to their own list of "authoritative" arguments over the question. Scholastic dialectics can thus be seen as a literate formalization of the oral dialogical form. (6) Particular resolutions did not so much "conclude" an argument, as further it. A given question would never be answered by a single proof, as a theorem would say, in Euclidean geometry. (7) Rather it would add to the scribal tradition of prayerful meditation over the meaning of the Christian faith.
8. Aquinas is best known for two "summa" of his treatment of such questions: the *Summa Theologica*, designed to train young students and future scribes in his own Dominican order and the *Summa Contra Gentiles* addressing non-Christians as well. Other collections of arguments were simply labelled "*Disputed Questions*" or even "*Random Questions*", each collection identified by the first question in the collection, for example, "*On Truth,*" or "*On Evil*". Aquinas also continued to write scribal commentaries on authoritative philosophical texts, especially those of Aristotle, recently made accessible in Latin translation.
9. With this background we are now prepared to consider what is perhaps Aquinas' most well known arguments over the question at hand, at the very heart of the Christian faith: "Does God Exist?" He pondered this question along five different lines of argument, all drawn not from faith directly but from our understanding of the empirical world. (1) Science, he begins, understands things by seeking to identify its cause. (2) A fuller understanding would involve also identifying the cause of that immediate cause, and that one in terms of its cause, and so on. (3) Now such a chain of causes, he argues, cannot continue on indefinitely but must end with (4) an ultimate cause, that to which the whole chain of causes is linked to, one might

say, that itself has no further cause that accounts for its own existence, i.e. that is not itself just another link.

(5) Furthermore, Aristotle had identified four distinct categories of causality: (6) efficient causality or the productive process responsible for something's existence, (7) teleological causality or the purpose animating that process, (8) material causality, or what the thing is made of, the locus one might say of its becoming, and (9) formal causality, "what" it is, that is, the form, ideal or "essence" the thing embodies or enacts.

10. Aquinas argues that for each of these categories of causality a full explanation entails that there cannot be an endless regression of causes (1,2,3,4,5) but that in each case the chain of causality points to the existence of an ultimate cause to account for the actual existence of the entire chain. that is,(6) an original source and (7) final end, (8) an ultimate locus or ground of existence and (9) an all-encompassing horizon of value in terms of which it is what it is. He adds a fifth as well: (10) the ultimate logic of change in our world, what Christians call divine providence, the Vedas, the rhythm of existence, or the Chinese, the Tao or "Way" of things. Aquinas claims that these ultimate causes for each category, (10) amount to "what Christians call God" and thus, the God Christians believe in must exist in this ultimately incomprehensible ideal of existence.
11. Again as with Origen, Eriugena and Anselm, Aquinas will apply similar reasoning to every divine attribute. So God is good for example, not in the sense that we attribute goodness to ourselves or others, but in the ultimate sense as the transcendent origin, end, ground, horizon and logic of all goodness. Or Power, to call God the almighty is to point our sense of power to its ultimate source and end, ground, horizon and logic.
12. Even Aquinas' causal arguments for the existence of God, although they use the scientific method of the day in some of their premises are not, strictly speaking, scientific proofs. (1) Rather they point to the limits of scientific reasoning and that is these limits that point beyond science itself to the existence of a God (2) who *transcends* the world altogether. That is his argument in each category of causality is precisely that the chains of causation that science identifies to explain reality cannot be endless but must point to an ultimate or "First" cause for science to fully explain anything. Such a claim is not itself a scientific hypothesis, but an in principle, necessary condition for any and all scientific explanations that would claim to be exhaustive or complete.

- (3) In fact, rather than a scientific claim it is a religious one. (4) That is, it rests on an act of faith--faith that reality *is* itself ultimately rational. For Aquinas this means not just that reality is a scientifically explicable universe, but an understandable, that is meaningful cosmos.
- (5) In English the word “cosmos” has the same root as “cosmetics.” A cosmos is a *beautiful* world. And a beautiful world is a world of meaning and value, a world with a point or purpose. (6) Unity, (7) Truth, (8) Goodness, (9) Beauty-- these are for the axial, scholastic (20) transcendental properties, because they must be applicable to any and all reality whatsoever, to some degree or another, for reality as a whole to be true, good and beautiful, or in other words, fully rational, fully understandable, ultimately meaningful. Aquinas further argues as transcendental attributes of a cosmos that points beyond itself, they must also point to analogous transcendent attributes of its ultimate cause, God. In other words, as an understandable, meaningful cosmos reality must ultimately point beyond itself to a transcendent ultimate source and final end, existential ground and ideal horizon governed by a providential order, or intelligence, beyond human comprehension. The axial scribal world thus opens onto a reality in which Beauty is Truth, and Truth is Beauty; and both are coincident with Goodness. The reality of the Christian axial scribe is, in short, a reality one can place one’s faith in, a wondrous, awe-inspiring reality, a reality that ultimately points beyond itself to that which all hold sacred.

13. Now axial thought did not simply value critical reasoning about objective reality but also held sacred subjective individuality. Both Jesus and Socrates, along with the Upanishads, the Buddha and all other axial prophets would proclaim, the sacred is also to be found by turning within. Another Dominican scribe, who would actually succeed Aquinas a generation later at the University of Paris, (1) Meister Eckhart provides an interior, mystical approach to “that than which nothing greater can be thought”. He invites the monk at prayer to turn his attention to the ground in consciousness beneath (2) all activity, (3) beneath all desire that his activity expresses, (4) beneath all thought that his desires embody to (5) their “empty” “pure” “naked” ground.
14. Eckhart argues this ultimate ground of our soul (6) taps into the ongoing creative activity (energeia) of God himself. In other words, the ground of our soul is a porous membrane

through which the (6) divine life wells up as from an inexhaustible font. To use yet another metaphor, as Origen had argued a millennium earlier, it is a spark of the divine itself, a sacred still point from out of which all speech and activity should radiate from us of itself, “without a why.”

15. Eckhart approaches divine attributes from a more experiential, less conceptual angle as well. As the creative font of all beings, existence in any sense attributable to them, is not attributable to God. Thus insofar as “existence” applies to beings, God does not literally exist. The closest we can come to what Christians hold sacred is an experience God in a moment of awareness, detached of all desire, empty of any particular object. It is in a contemplative moment of what the Buddha refers to as “pure awareness,” nirvana, where all has been burned to ash in a purifying fire of meditation, and then the ash itself burned away, to a pure nothingness that is infinite fullness. Eckhart’s contemplative way to God is indeed a demonstration, but not a conceptual one, but an experiential one, a demonstration in the sense of a display, an existential awakening to the very being of all things.
16. Thus axial medieval theology culminates in mystical subjective ecstasy. It’s a reasoning over God that holds sacred that which is both the fullness of Being, and yet is empty of any particular being; distinct only as ultimately indistinct from all things, whose boundless power can only be expressed in empowering all to become themselves, thereby rendering the All. One; the universe, a cosmos unsurpassingly and incomprehensively true, good and beautiful.