

Medieval Axial Arguments over God

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 medieval Christianity
2. We have seen how bronze age scribes sought to preserve traditional oral myth and ritual by transcribing and memorizing them for later recitation and ritual enactment. In this lecture we shall track how Christian scribes, still working within the church, (1) but outside court and temple in the new axial scribal institution of the university, engaged in an increasingly objective, analytical systematization and theoretical justification of metalevel church teachings, or dogma, abstracted from lived Christian faith and practice.
3. Even Plato's axial critique of oral culture, while literate, still preserved the fiction of being the transcription of a live dialogue. Readers effectively (1) "overheard" Socrates lead a group of characters through an exploration of a given topic. Now, not everything Plato sought to communicate was put in the mouth of Socrates, nor is what Socrates says necessarily what Plato is teaching. Indeed all the early lectures famously end (2) without a resolution to the question at hand. As we saw in an earlier video such "Socratic irony" was itself a literary device designed by Plato to (3) provoke readers to enter into the dialogue themselves, picking up the argument where the text ends. Thus, Plato's written dialogues were ultimately designed to be a catalyst for oral dialogue and debate amongst its student readers. This helps make sense of Socrates' own otherwise puzzling disparagement of reading as illusory learning if it is not accompanied by the lively back and forth of oral argument. (4) Mere scribal memorization does not count as knowledge for Socrates. (5) You have to be able to defend and justify what you believe for yourself, against all critics, for your belief to count as knowledge.
4. In the medieval period, the Christian monk, Anselm of Canterbury, would raise the question of God's very existence. Yet we shall see that Anselm's infamous "argument" for the existence of God is not yet a rational but rather a prayerful meditation seeking to better understand what Christians already believe by faith.

In fact so far from proving the existence of God from scratch, Anselm 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 we can rationally believe that there is a God, will depend largely on what we mean by “God” in the first place. 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 argued 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 particular 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.

Now given this Christian understanding of “God”—that than which nothing greater can be thought—Anselm argues that God must exist. (2) For existence itself is a perfection. It is better to be than not to be. For example we judge someone contemplating suicide, someone thinking it better not to be, to not be thinking rationally but to be overwhelmed by their emotions. But if it better to exist than not to exist, then a God who exists would be greater than a God who does not. (3) In fact God’s existence is not simply a fact, that may or may not be true, God ‘s existence is necessarily true by definition, like a truth of geometry. For anything less would not be that than which nothing greater can be thought. For example, if God’s existence were to be conditioned upon the existence of 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. As God’s creator, or destroyer it would be God’s God so to speak. Such a God would not really be God at all.

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 an ideal, 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 if it is true by definition?

(6) We also have Anselm's response to Gaunillo's objection. (7) As we have already seen, (8) God may not exist if one misunderstands what the Christian faith means by "God." (9) 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. By the time of Thomas Aquinas a century later, theology was no longer a prayerful practice of monks and mystics but an analytical discipline of university professors or "scholastics." Scholastic dialectics, were framed as scholarly dialogues in the tradition of Plato, but often enough they devolved into heated and increasingly technical debates over definitions, principles and abstract theories far removed from the life of prayer.
7. In his *Summa Theologicae*, Aquinas offers a series of arguments for the existence of God not drawn from Christian belief directly but from our scientific 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) Now, 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.

8. 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.
9. As with 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 of that than which nothing better, or more good can be thought. That is God must also be the transcendent origin, end, ground, horizon and logic of all goodness. Or Power, to call God the almighty is to claim that God is the ultimate, transcendent source and end, ground, horizon and logic of all power.
10. But what we mean by such infinite perfections is beyond the limits of our finite, limited understanding. However we *can* get a better understanding of what we are saying about God by triangulating them. In fact all properties extrapolated to infinity can be said to mutually define each other, establishing if not a clear and distinct, theoretical understanding of the divine nature, at least bounding a semantic field. Thus (1) infinite divine goodness is a form of goodness that is also (2) infinitely powerful, both (3) infinitely wise (4) and infinitely loving, (5) infinitely just (6) and infinitely merciful. So too it must be a goodness that is (7) eternal (8) and immutable, accessible anywhere at any time by anyone. Such apophatic and analogous predications thus direct our understanding's extrapolation of human goodness along a determinate direction. While never ending, seeking to understand God is not futile.

Its rather itself a way to reconnect to God, the cultivation of an ever richer relationship with what ultimately ever remains an incomprehensible, ineffable abyss.

11. In fact 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) Indeed, rather than a scientific claim it is a religious one. (4) That is, it rests on an act of faith—in science itself, that is in the faith that reality *is* itself ultimately rational.

For Aquinas this means not just that reality is not only theoretically explicable universe, but also an understandable, that is meaningful, cosmos.

- 1) 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 all we hold sacred. 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

12. Finally, Meister Eckhart, a generation after Aquinas, would approach the question of God's existence not from rational objectivity but from an experiential analysis of mystical subjectivity. This too will be an axial move, for axial religion not only held critical reason sacred but also the subjective consciousness of the solitary individual. The axial turn within was not only an appeal to reason but an appeal to the interior life of the mystic at prayer. Meister Eckhart provided an interior, mystical approach to Anselm's "that than which nothing greater can be thought". He invites the monk at prayer to turn his attention to the ground in consciousness beneath (1) all its activity, (2) beneath all desire that his activity expresses, (3) even beneath all conscious thought that his desires express to (4) their "empty" "pure" "naked" ground.
- a. Eckhart argues this ultimate ground of our soul (5) 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 divine life (6) wells up as from an inexhaustible font. To use yet another metaphor, as Origen had argued a millennium earlier, (7) 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."
13. The closest we can come to the thought of God is not a rational analysis of our concept of God, but an actual *experience* of God in a moment of awareness, detached of all desire, empty of *any* particular object. (1) It is in a contemplative moment of what the Buddha refers to as "pure awareness," or "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. Eckhart will refer to it metaphorically (2) as a divine wilderness, the ground on which anything at all sits. It is a foregrounding of what is ordinarily in the background of our awareness, beneath the objects that are usually the focus of our attention. Eckhart's contemplative way to God may not be an objective proof but it is still a demonstration, a demonstration in the literal sense of a display, an awakening to the very be-ing of all beings.
14. Medieval Axial theology thus leads to a radical differentiation of "that than which nothing greater can be thought" into an absolute infinite objectivity and a no less absolute infinite subjectivity. We shall see this dichotomy of objectivity and subjectivity play out more fully with the further dissemination of literacy enabled by the printing press the next technological innovation to which we shall turn in the video lectures to follow.