

## Medieval Axial Arguments over God: Philosophy of Religion

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, 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 church teachings, or dogma, abstracted from lived Christian faith and practice.
3. Even Plato's axial critique of scribal/oral hybridity, while literate, still preserved the fiction of being a transcription of a live dialogue. Readers effectively (1) "overhear" 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 knowledge 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 it and justify it for yourself.
4. So too Origen adopted (1) a conversational tone with the reader in his commentaries on scriptural texts. For example his commentary on the Gospel of John begins with over 100 pages of reflection (2) over the various divine names and titles in Scripture. For each he gathers together all their usages to glean their deeper, spiritual mystical import. For muses and plays with (3) personal titles for Christ such as "King," "Lord" and "Shepherd," (4) theological concepts such as "Resurrection," "Way," "Truth," and "Life" and (5) even more concrete metaphors such as "Light" "Door," "Gate," "Bread," and "Vine."
5. Even Origen's one systematic work, "On First Principles," is still an anthology of hermeneutical exegeses of brief scriptural passages, organized topically. Its conversational

tone may in part be a function of its production. For Origen did not directly write his commentaries but rather dictated them to scribes of his own. With his words inscribed on papyrus, he could of course have his scribe read back to him what he had dictated to him, and he himself would have proofread what was transcribed before a “fair copy” was produced likely by yet another scribe, but its origin remains oral comments on a written text.

Furthermore, Origen typically closes his treatment of a given topic not with a claim to have concluded its consideration with certitude, as Descartes will later do, (1) but rather with the admission that what he had written was the best he could make of the topic up to now, and an invitation to the reader to contribute their own thoughts and scripture passages to it.

- a. For example, he closes his treatment of Christology with the words, (2) “These are the thoughts that have occurred to us at this moment, regarding subjects of such difficulty as the incarnation and divinity of Christ. If there is anyone who is able to discover something better and to confirm what he says by clearer statements from the Holy Scriptures, let those accounts be received rather than mine.”
6. Nor did Origen approach intelligence, or reason, as a radically objective, detached and analytical manner of thinking. Rather it was a “divine *sense*” whose seat was not the brain, but the heart. As the Word of God, Reason, the Logos, (1) not only informs but *inspires*. (2) It is not “cold” and “calculating,” but a white hot incandescence illuminating both subject and object.
  7. John Scotus Eriugena, a theologian at the Carolingian court just after Charlemagne in the early ninth century, drew upon students of Origen, and especially Dionysius to argue in a more analytical manner for a systematic classification of reality consistent with the Christian faith. Eriugena, far more than Origen, let alone Valentinus, 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 reality formally into four quadrants:
    - a. (4) The first quadrant, uncreated but creating refers to God as the ultimate source of all things. Following Dionysius he will insist that while God can be known indirectly through his works, in so far as God is “more than” his works he is literally unknowable. Thus while anything and everything is a revelation of God its ultimate

- cause, all such revelations are partial and limited. In one respect then our knowledge of God is like our knowledge of an artist through his art. We can learn something of the artist through his work. But on the other hand much of what we know of the artist is also due to our common humanity with the artist. With God however, there is no common ground with us. We cannot even say we share existence with God. *Creation* exists. As the source of existence, God “more than” exists. We do not know what that means, but we do know what it does not mean—anything like what existence means for us.
- b. (5) The second quadrant, created and creating refers to the ideas by which God creates. These ideas are then the paradigms or ideals which created things embody in their own material and so limited way. As ideals, they too transcend material creation. They reside in God’s mind, but we can learn of them from studying their embodiments.
  - 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 a continual re-enactment of the cycle of nature, never creating anything radically new. God may transcend his creation, but as the expression of his creative activity every being is a manifestation of the divine , a hierophany or miracle, that is a “wonder” that can draw our attention towards God, Thus, all reality is sacred to the extent that every reality can serve as a symbol or icon pointing towards its creator.
  - d. (7) Finally, the fourth quadrant, neither created nor creating, is again God, this time as the culminating end towards which all things return and find their rest. 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. So too a desire for God is inherent in nature as a whole, returning towards that ultimate divine unity from which it sprang.
  - e. Thus Eriugena argues that we know God in two ways: (8) as the ultimate source of all things and (9) as the ultimate end or perfection of all things. While more analytical than Origen’s story of creation, God is still a character in a story, the cosmic story of creation. God’s existence is also still a given, rather than the result of any argument.

As with Origen, we find here not a rational proof of the Christian faith, but rather an effort to rationally understand our faith, as far as we are able.

8. Two hundred years later, in the eleventh century, the Christian monk, Anselm, would raise the question of God's very existence. However we shall see that even Anselm's "argument" for the existence of God is not a rational proof, but rather a prayerful meditation on what Christians mean by "God" in their religious beliefs and rituals.

In fact so far from proving the existence of God from scratch, Anselm begins his argument by praying himself 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".

9. 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, 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 *that* 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.

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. He argues, 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 is necessary. For a God who must

exist would be greater than one whose existence is contingent upon something else. If God's existence were conditioned upon anything else, that is, if anything else, even everything else either caused God to exist, or could undercut God's existence, 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. For 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, Gaunilo.(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 the very meaning of the term God?

(6) We also have Anselm's response to Gaunilo's objection. (7) As we have already seen, one may doubt the existence of God if one misunderstands what the Christian faith means by "God." (8) So too, 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.

10. As a monk, Anselm frames his reflections on the existence of the divine in the form of a prayerful meditation. 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, was framed as a rational dialogue 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.
11. In his *Summa Theologiae*, 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 their 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 first cause, upon which the whole chain of causes depend, a cause that itself has no further cause that accounts for its own existence, i.e. that is not itself just another link in the chain.

- a. (5) Now, Aristotle had identified four distinct categories of causality: (6) efficient causality, the productive process or source of something's existence, (7) teleological causality, the purpose animating that process, its goal or end, (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 ideal or perfection the thing embodies or enacts.

12. Now as we saw, Eriugena sought to understand God as both the source and end of all things, and Anselm has sought to understand God through an ascent towards ideal perfection. To these three "ways" to God, Aquinas will add a fourth "way" not a material but an existential, necessary ground for contingent existence. With regards to each Aristotelian category of causality, he argues, a full explanation entails that there cannot be an endless chain 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) a necessary ground and (9) an ideal horizon. He adds a fifth as well: (10) the ultimate logic of the natural cycle of becoming and perishing, birth and death, what Christians identify as divine providence, the Vedas, the rhythm of existence, or the Chinese, the Tao or "Way" of things. Aquinas claims that these ultimate causes (10) amount to "what Christians call God" and thus, the God Christians believe in, must exist to create the world we live in.

13. Again as with Dionysius, Eriugena and Anselm, Aquinas will apply similar reasoning to every other divine attribute as well. Just as God exists in this transcendent sense, so God is good for example, not in the sense that we attribute goodness to ourselves or others, but in the ultimate sense of goodness, as 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.

14. Now, even though Aquinas' causal arguments for the existence of God use the scientific method of his day, his five ways to God are still not strictly speaking, scientific proofs. (1) Rather they point to the limits of scientific reasoning and that these limits in turn point

beyond science itself to the existence of a creator (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 fully 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 (10) transcendental properties, because they must be applicable to any and all reality whatsoever, (11) 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 (12) 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, and all three with divine providence. 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.

15. 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 individual in solitude. 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 thoughts that his desires express to (4) their "empty" "pure" and "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 Valentinus and 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 radiate.
- b. The closest we can come to the thought of God is thus 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 empty ground on which anything stands at all. It is effectively a foregrounding of what is ordinarily in the background of our awareness, behind and 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.

16. 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.