

Medieval Arguments Over God

1. Welcome. In these next several video lectures I will be tracking the evolution of axial thought over God in Medieval Christianity from two complementary perspectives. Whereas oral thought is communal, characterized by dialogue and storytelling, literacy separates writer from reader, generating in the process two complementary ways of thinking: one analytical and objective, striving for clarity and precision, another emotive and subjective, evocative and symbolic. In this first video lecture we shall follow the movement from the rational yet mystical scribal hermeneutics of Origen and Dionysius to an increasingly objective, analytical scholasticism. In later lectures we shall track the parallel evolution of an ever more subjective, mystical spirituality.
2. By the end of the Middle Ages, objective scholastic theology and subjective mystical spirituality had split into two distinct, equally axial, disciplines. While they can complement one another, they would just as often oppose each other. For the scholar and the mystic came to embody distinct forms of life. Indeed the increasing opposition between the two would even be gendered: scholars had to be clerics and so were always men. However the more daring explorations of mystical thought were written in the vernacular, the spoken language of ordinary people, by religious women, specifically Beguines, a new religious order that wrested greater independence from clerical control, at least for a while.
3. Greek *theoria* had originally embraced both abstract objectivity and contemplative subjectivity. In these lectures I treat intelligence as pattern recognition. For Plato, *theoria* involved recognizing patterns in our experience as paradigms, ideal realities to which material things and human behaviors could only approximate. *Theoria* for Plato involved a mystical ascent from the flickering shadow world of material existence to ideal and eternal intelligible Forms. (1) For Aristotle however these patterns existed not apart from material reality but in the things themselves as their essences, accessible through systematic abstraction from sensory data. (2) For Aristotle then *theoria* became theory—an abstract explanatory system of causal principles. Mystical contemplation, while not denied, was not the focus of his attention. (3) Aristotle was more scientist than mystic.
4. We have seen in previous lectures that Origen and Dionysius followed the Platonic tradition of treating the objects of *theoria* as both ideal and mystical. Origen for example did not approach reason, as a radically objective, detached and analytical manner of thinking. Rather

for him *theoria* was a “divine *sense*” whose seat was not the brain, but the heart. Reason, *logos* also meant word. As the Word of God, reason (1) not only informs but *inspires*. (2) It is not “cold” and “calculating,” but a divine incandescence illuminating both subject and object.

5. So too Dionysius understands reason as divine illumination, accessed ultimately through angelic intermediaries. Indeed as we saw, in contemplating the divine, abstract, conceptual reason must be negated in order to be transcended by analogical thinking. Our knowledge of the divine then is an educated ignorance, not abstract but ecstatic, surpassing human intelligence altogether.
6. John Scotus Eriugena, a theologian at the Carolingian court just after Charlemagne in the early ninth century, drew upon Origen, and especially Dionysius to begin exploring the Christian faith in a more abstract and analytical manner, a direction that will reach its culmination in later medieval scholasticism. As we shall see, while still having a mystical dimension, Eriugena is more abstract, seeking more to inform than transform his reader. He offers not an evocative allegory for creation but an ontological classification table. 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. 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, that is relative to the effect of which he is their cause. 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 much of what we know of the artist is also due to our common humanity. With God on the other hand, there is no common ground. 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 with which God creates. These divine 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. Our world is dynamic, in that it is a world of ceaseless becoming and perishing, but it is ultimately cyclical, never creating anything radically new. God may transcend his creation, but as the expression of his creative activity every being is a hierophany, that is, a manifestation of the divine, and a 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 an 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. A "desire for God" draws not only humanity back to its creator, but all that exists, each in its own characteristic way. So too a desire for God is inherent in the world or nature as a whole, returning towards that ultimate unity from which it sprang.

Thus Eriugena argues that we know God in two ways: as the ultimate source of all things and as the ultimate end or perfection of all things. While more analytical than Origen's allegory of creation, God is still a character in a story, the cosmic story of creation. So too, God's existence is 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 it as far as we are able.

- 7. In the medieval period, the Christian monk, Anselm, did raise the question of God's very existence. However we shall see that even Anselm's famous "ontological argument" for the existence of God was not as purely rational a demonstration, or "proof" as modern philosophers would later assume. Even Anselm's argument will not ultimately be a rational justification but a hermeneutical effort to rationally 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 demonstrate. (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 he writes: (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”.

8. And so Anselm begins by asking just what do Christians mean by “God.” He reasons that whether or not one can rationally believe that there is a God, will depend largely on what one means 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) 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 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 could be something greater yet. “That than which nothing greater can be thought” is not an abstract definition but an extrapolation, pointing beyond all beings, indeed pointing beyond the limits of our understanding altogether to an unlimited, infinite perfection, even though we cannot concretely even imagine what that might be.

Now, 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 conceived of as existing is greater than one conceived of as only a possibility. 3) In fact God’s existence cannot be merely possible, or contingent; God exists necessarily. Anything less would not be that than which nothing greater can be thought. For 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 destroyed God’s existence, then that would be greater than God. As God’s creator, or destroyer it would be God’s God so to speak. God would not really be God at all.

Now not only (4) God’s existence, but also God’s (5) Goodness, (6) Justice, (7) Love, (7) Power, indeed any and all perfections, each extrapolated to an optimum, than which nothing greater can be thought, each will apply to God and only to God. Each of these divine

attributes is beyond our limited comprehension, but our faith can point our imaginations in the right direction, like a vector towards an ideal, dimensionless point. Divine attributes then are not abstract properties of God but rather symbols, mystical icons directing our understanding beyond themselves towards their source.

9. But an objection immediately springs to mind. If God exists by definition, does this not beg the question? This criticism was already raised in Anselm's own lifetime, by a fellow monk, Gaunillo. Gaunillo too will begin his objection with a quote from sacred scripture: (1) "the fool says in his heart that there is no God" But how could anyone deny the existence of God, if it is true by definition?

(2) We also have Anselm's rejoinder. (3) As we have already seen, (4) God may not exist if one misunderstands what the Christian tradition means by "God." (5) 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, like his fellow monk Gaunillo, who believes in God as that than which nothing greater can be thought, the existence of such a God should not be open to doubt.

10. As a devout monk, Anselm frames his reflections on the existence of the divine in the form of prayerful meditations addressed to the God he seeks. With the rise of the medieval university, the genre of reflection becomes more self-critical, shifting from prayerful meditation to academic debate.
11. Origen had created as a tool for his exegetical work, the *Hexapla*, a compendium of six different versions of Sacred Scripture, both in Hebrew and in Greek translation, arranged side by side, line by line, in columns, where he could compare the wording of a given verse in each version to assist him in his interpretation of any given passage. (1) The early scholastic Abelard on the other hand, would explore tensions, even contradictions in the Christian tradition, compiling an exhaustive compendium of apparently contradictory passages from Sacred Scripture and the writings of earlier Christian thinkers. He aptly entitled his compendium of over 150 such "questions" or "places" of controversy (2) "*Sic et Non*," "Yes and No". Abelard used his compendium of opposed quotations similarly to how Origen had used his compendium of scriptural translations, as a literate research tool for oral teaching and debates.

12. Abelard's new, more analytical or "academic" approach to theology was vehemently opposed by a gifted mystical allegorist in the tradition of Origen, Bernard of Clairvaux. Bernard, took Abelard's argumentative approach to theology as a mortal threat to the mystical character of scribal hermeneutics. He mounted a campaign against Abelard, ultimately getting him condemned as a heretic by a council of bishops called expressly for the purpose of examining his work.
13. But while Bernard may have won the battle, he lost the war. By the time of Thomas Aquinas a century later, theology was no longer a prayerful practice of monks and mystics but an argumentative discipline of university professors or "scholastics." Scholastic dialectics, consisted ostensibly in scholarly dialogues, but often enough devolved into heated and increasingly technical debates over definitions, principles and abstract theories far removed from the life of prayer. Like Abelard, theological questions would be addressed one by one in a logical sequence rather than Bernard's running allegorical commentary on the Scriptures.
14. For example Aquinas' most well known work, his *Summa Theologica* comprised over six hundred questions, broken down into 3,000 sub-questions or "articles" ranging over the whole expanse not only of Christian belief and practice but also of contemporary philosophy and science. Aquinas' approached each question analytically and systematically. (1) He would address a given question first, then give a brief (2) summary of the main traditional arguments on the question at hand. Usually, likely in order to streamline his presentation, he would focus solely on those arguments which would run counter to his own resolution of the issue raised. Following these arguments, Aquinas would (3) then provide a quotation usually from the Scriptures in support of his own eventual position (4) followed by his own response to the issue. He would then close his consideration of the matter by (5) responding succinctly to each of the contrary arguments he had listed earlier.
 - a. Scholastic dialectics, while abstract, analytical and systematic rather than a prayerful oral commentary on Scripture such as that championed by Bernard a century earlier, could still be seen as a literate/oral hybrid, however, framing a given question in light of ongoing debates or "disputations" amongst both traditional authorities and contemporary professors. Indeed live debates were a regular and expected feature of university life. (6) The point was less to conclude than to contribute to the ongoing argument, indeed to further the argument such that a given scholastic's resolution

might become yet another voice for subsequent scholastics to take into account in their own thought.

15. Aquinas wrote his *Summa Theologica* as a handbook for teaching theology to young seminarians in his own Dominican order. He also wrote a second *Summa*, the *Summa Contra Gentiles* to respond to Jewish, Muslim and Greek philosophers and theologians over many of the same theological questions. He also composed other collections of arguments, simply labelled “Disputed Questions” (*Questiones Disputatae*) or even “Random Questions”, (*Quodlibeta*) each collection identified by the first question in the collection, for example, “*On Truth*,” or “*On Evil*”. Aquinas continued to write running commentaries on authoritative philosophical texts as well, especially those of Aristotle, recently made accessible in Latin translation. And as if that were not already superhuman, he also composed songs, and authored the liturgy for a new Medieval feast: that of Corpus Christi—the feast of the Body of Christ, over whose interpretation arguments raged throughout the Medieval period.
16. With this background, let us now turn to what is perhaps Aquinas’ most well known argument over the question at hand, at the very heart of the Christian faith—does God even exist?” Aquinas pondered this question along five different lines of argument, all drawn not from faith 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 cause, that to which the whole chain of causes depends that itself has no further cause that accounts for its own existence, i.e. that is not itself just another link in the chain.
- (5) Now Aristotle had identified four distinct categories of causality: (6) efficient causality or the productive source responsible for something’s existence, (7) teleological causality or the purpose animating that process, (8) material causality, or what the process uses, or the thing is made of, the locus one might say of its becoming, and (9) formal causality, just “what” the process or thing is, that is, the pattern, ideal or “essence” constituting it.
17. 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, there must exist, (6) an original source and (7) final end, (8) an ultimate ground of existence and (9) an ultimate ideal horizon in terms of which anything, or even the world as a whole, is what it is. He adds a fifth as well: (10) the ultimate order governing it all, or what Christians call divine providence, the Upanishads, the rhythm of existence, or the Chinese, the Tao or “Way” of things. Aquinas claims that the ultimate causes for each category, (11) coincide in “what Christians call God” and thus, the God Christians believe in must exist--though exist not as a distinct being or process but as Being itself-- not as a noun but a verb, or, more precisely, the imperfect participle of the verb to be, designating not a specific action but an ongoing activity. God then is the ultimate *be-ing* of all beings.

18. Again as with Origen, Eriugena and Anselm, Aquinas will apply similar reasoning to every divine attribute. (1) 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, ultimate end, necessary ground, ideal horizon and providential logic of all goodness. Or to call God the almighty is to claim that God is the ultimate, transcendent source and end, ground, horizon and logic of all power.

19. But even Aquinas’ causal arguments for the existence of God, although they use the scientific reasoning of their day, Aristotelian science,(1) their premises are not, strictly speaking, scientific proofs. (2) Rather they point to the limits of scientific reasoning and argue that these limits ultimate point beyond science itself to the existence of a God 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 and appropriately so. For, as Kant will later point out, (4) it rests not on any matter of fact but rather on an act of faith--faith in the ultimately rational character of reality itself. (5) For Aquinas this means not just that reality is a scientifically explicable universe, but that it is understandable, that is, that it is a meaningful cosmos.

In English the word “cosmos” has the same root as “cosmetics.” A cosmos then 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, 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. (11) Aquinas further argues that as transcendental attributes of a cosmos that points beyond itself, (12) 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 logic or intelligence, beyond human comprehension. 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. Thus while directly an abstract, theoretical exercise, Aquinas’ proofs ultimately evoke mystical contemplation as well. They are intended not only to inform but also to inspire their reader.

20. The final thinker I shall cover in this progression from (1) hermeneutics to fully theoretical (2) abstract conceptual analysis is John Duns Scotus. He was a Franciscan scholastic who lived a generation after Aquinas and taught at the new University of Oxford. Scotus reformulated Anselm’s interpretation (3) of “what Christians mean by God” “as that than which nothing greater can be thought” to a clear and distinct conceptual definition, (4) “infinite being,” a definition he argued was true universally for all rational persons, whether Christian or not. Scotus argued that “infinite” was (5) not merely or even primarily a negative term meaning only “not finite” but could be positively understood as the present existence of all members of an endless series. “Infinite being” then was not a mystical, apophatic term pointing beyond itself, as in Anselm and Aquinas, but a well understood property, for which one could then ask whether it is possessed by any being whatsoever. He would also reject Anselm’s assertion that “existence” was itself a perfection predicated of a being. (6) Rather to say something exists is merely to affirm that a given possible being is actual.

- a. (7) Turning now to God, we know such an infinite being is *possible* because we can positively conceive of such a being without logical contradiction. The question (8) is whether any such being actually exists. There is nothing mysterious, or mystical about such a question. While not a question for science, Scotus argues it is a question of logic.

21. Scotus admits that Aquinas had already proven that such an infinite being actually does exist.

(1) But Aquinas' argument starts from an assumption—that the world exists. Scotus wanted an even stronger argument, a purely logical proof such as found in mathematics and geometry. For example, Euclid had demonstrated that the angles of a triangle equaled 180 degrees, whether or not any triangle actually exists. (2) Scotus sought the same logical certainty about the existence of God: that God must exist whether or not the world does. (3) Thus he begins his argument, not with the existence of the world but rather with a conditional premise, that (4) “*if* the world exists, then God must exist.” (5) His second premise was to claim that the world's existence was *at least* possible. It was not self-contradictory, like a square circle. (6) Thus, God's existence must also at least be *possible*. From the possibility of God's existence, Scotus then argues, (7) that only an infinite being could cause an infinite being to exist. (8) But “infinite being” is the very definition of God. (9) Thus God's existence is only even possible if God actually does exist. But we have already proven that the existence of God is possible. (10) Thus God *must* exist.

(11) Scotus thus demonstrates the actual existence of God from a purely conceptual analysis of the concept of God as an infinite being. Got that?

21. Scotus' demonstration does not depend on whether or not one is a Christian or even whether or not one believes *in* God at all. If you do conceive of God as an infinite being, its not God that you are conceiving or denying. Furthermore, as we have just seen, God's existence can be proven whether or not the world exists. Thus God does not simply exist as a matter of fact, but exists as a logical necessity, like a theorem in Euclidean geometry. (1) Thus contrary to Anselm, the existence of God does not transcend our understanding, we can prove it *from* our understanding. Belief that God exists is not simply an act of faith; but a matter of logic and conceptual analysis.

22. In subsequent video lectures we shall look at approaches to the existence of God in Medieval thought from the opposite direction, not from that of rational objectivity, but from individual subjectivity. Medieval mystics will develop *theoria* in the subjective sense of contemplation, demonstrating, in the sense of making manifest, the existence of God not logically or hermeneutically but experientially, as our beloved, or even as the ground of consciousness itself.