

The Scholar

Thomas Aquinas

Now, among the inquiries that we must undertake concerning God in Himself, we must set down in the beginning that whereby His Existence is demonstrated, as the necessary foundation of the whole work. For, if we do not demonstrate that God exists, all consideration of divine things is necessarily suppressed.

— *Thomas Aquinas*

Learning Objectives

By the time you complete this chapter, you will be able to answer the following questions:

- What is theology?
- What is Scholasticism?
- What is the argument from motion?
- What is the cosmological argument?
- What is the argument from necessity?
- What is the principle of sufficient reason?
- What is the principle of plenitude?
- What is the argument from gradation?
- What is the teleological argument?



A person who says he has faith in God's goodness is speaking as if he had known God for a long time and during that time had never seen him do any serious evil. But we know that throughout history God has allowed numerous atrocities to occur. No one can have justifiable faith in the goodness of such a God.

— B. C. Johnson

Can there be a future good so great as to render acceptable, in retrospect, the whole human experience, with all its wickedness and suffering as well as all its sanctity and happiness? I think that perhaps there can, and indeed perhaps there is.

— John Hick

of reason. Reason was valued over faith because knowing was thought to be more useful than believing.

The Christian view presents a completely different picture. Human beings are seen as fallen and corrupt creatures, finite and ignorant. Christian theology teaches that we are incapable of avoiding sin and the punishment of hell through our own efforts. Only the undeserved grace and sacrifice of a loving God can save us. Obedience to the revealed word of God is also necessary for salvation. Faith is valued more highly than reason because salvation is more important than worldly success in a life that is relatively brief compared with the afterlife—where we will spend eternity in heaven (if we are saved) or hell (if we are not). As a result of its emphasis on the afterlife, Christian theology is sometimes characterized as *otherworldly*.

The God-Centered Universe

Whereas the classical mind was predominantly secular, the medieval mind was chiefly theological. **Theology**, from the Greek *theos* (God) and *logos* (study of), means “talking about God” or “the study or science of God.” The Middle Ages saw philosophers turn from the study of man and nature to “otherworldly” inquiries and the study of God.

Rather than *discover* the truth through reason and science, the medieval scholar studied church dogma and theology in order to *explain* what God chose to reveal. Philosophers struggled with such questions as these: Are faith and reason always at odds? Can the human mind know God through reason? Does being a “good Christian” prohibit questioning and trying to understand certain things? Why did God give us the ability to reason if we are asked to ignore what reason reveals? When conflicting religious beliefs all claim to rely on divine authority and revelation, how can we choose among them?

theology

From the Greek *theos* (God) and *logos* (study of); “talking about God” or “the study or science of God.”

The Seeds of Change

The Christian religion arose after the death of Jesus Christ, through the efforts of the early apostles and disciples, especially Paul. Christianity originally consisted of scattered groups of believers who anticipated the Second Coming of Christ, which would signal the end of the world. Thinking that they would soon be in heaven, early Christians saw no need to develop political interests. Similarly, they were uninterested in science and philosophy and remained indifferent to much of what went on around them. Their chief concern was salvation through faith. Expecting that the risen Christ would return at any moment, they were understandably impatient with the affairs of this world. Thus, the first Christians devoted themselves to converting non-Christians and to preparing their own souls for judgment. In a major contrast with the classical view of life, they saw no time or need to fashion philosophical, social, or moral theories.

I ONCE WATCHED A TELEVISION NEWS

reporter interview a weeping woman who sat on the pile of rubble that had been her small mobile home. Everything she owned had been destroyed by a tornado. Through her tears, the victim expressed her gratitude to God for saving her life. As she explained it, she was preparing supper when she mysteriously had the urge to go to the corner market for a loaf of bread. She was gone for only a few minutes, but in those minutes the tornado struck. “If I hadn’t gone for that bread,” she said into the camera, “I would be dead now. God told me to go get that bread in order to save my life.”



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When we thank God for deliberately saving us from some disaster, do we imply that God deliberately caused others to perish?

Does this mean that God *wanted* those people who were not warned to die? Suppose the woman’s neighbor had been planning to go to the store but got a phone call just as he started for the door. Should we conclude that God arranged the timing of the call to make sure he didn’t escape the tornado?

After all, if God is the cause of *everything* that happens, *everything* includes tornadoes and torture, as well as salvation and joy. If God knows *everything*, does He know your grade on your philosophy final right now? But if God knows things before they happen, how can *we* be held responsible for them? If God knew before you were born that you would get a C minus in philosophy, isn’t *He* the “cause” of your grade, not you? But if there is even one thing that He does not know, even one thing, how can He be all-wise?

These and related questions are of more than just academic interest. They are vitally important to anyone who attempts to reconcile faith with reason. One solution to such problems has been to hold a *dual-truth point of view*. This is the position that there is one small-t truth on the finite, human level and another, superior, capital-T Truth for God. Another strategy is to declare that these problems demonstrate that the ways of God are a “mystery” to human beings. In both cases, inconsistencies and ambiguities are not so much resolved as they are evaded.

Many believers and nonbelievers alike feel cheated when asked to accept inconsistent beliefs or simply to dismiss the most vital questions of faith. If you doubt this, wander through the sections of your college library’s stacks dealing with theology and religious philosophy. You will find a large number of books and articles attempting to reconcile faith with reason. If you have ever seriously wrestled with the problem of evil (How can a good, loving, wise, powerful God allow evil?) or the problem of moral responsibility (If God gave Adam and Eve a corrupt nature, how can they—and we—justly be held responsible?), you have entered a timeless struggle.

Our culture has been heavily influenced by an ongoing clash between Christian values and the values established in classical Greece. In the classical view, human beings, despite our many faults, represent the most important life-form. The classical philosopher believed that objective knowledge and logic could unlock the keys to the universe, improving our lives in the process. The good life was seen as being a product

As time passed and the world did not end, Christians found it increasingly difficult to avoid dealing with problems of the here and now. Principles and rules for interpreting the basic teachings of Christ, collected as the New Testament, became necessary when it grew clear that the Second Coming might not occur until well into the future.

Interpreting revealed sacred dogma is always dangerous, however, for once the inevitability of interpretation is accepted, the door is open to competing interpretations. If *every* claimed interpretation is reliable, God's revealed will is going to appear chaotic, inconsistent, contradictory, and capricious. There must be criteria for distinguishing revelation from delusion and dogma from error. And there must be criteria for choosing criteria. And criteria for choosing criteria for choosing criteria . . .

Some reinterpretation of Christian teachings was clearly called for, if the Second Coming might be generations away. Giving all our goods to the poor is one thing when we expect to be in heaven in the immediate future; practical considerations complicate matters if the final judgment may be years away. As the centuries passed and the Second Coming did not occur, Christianity continued to expand: As Christian doctrine increased in complexity theological issues added to practical complications.



Aurelius Augustine

Augustine: Between Two Worlds

Aurelius Augustine (354–430) has been described as “a colossus bestriding two worlds” for his efforts to synthesize early Christian theology with his own understanding of Platonic philosophy and Manichean dualism, the belief that God and Satan are nearly evenly matched in a cosmic struggle and that human beings must choose sides.

Augustine's struggle to “choose sides” began at home. He was born in the North African city of Tagaste in the province of Numidia. His mother, Monica, was a devout Christian while his father, Patricius, regularly strayed from the straight and narrow. For all of her life, Monica fought to bring Augustine into the Christian church. Meanwhile, Augustine lived it up. He had a son, Adeodatus (“gift of God”), with one mistress—he had others—and by his own account lived a wanton, worldly life until he was thirty-three years old.

I was so blind to the truth that among my companions I was ashamed to be less disolute than they were. For I heard them bragging of their depravity, and the greater the sin the more they gloried in it, so that I took pleasure in the same vices not only for the enjoyment of what I did, but also for the applause I won. . . . I gave in more and more to vice simply in order not to be despised. . . . I used to pretend that I had done things I had not done at all, because I was afraid that innocence would be taken for cowardice and chastity for weakness.¹

Augustine's influence, like his life and work, emanates from the fearless way he pursues “something missing,” looking for it in sex, glory (he was a fierce and effective debater), and companions, but also searching his heart and soul, his “interior teacher.”

Bodily desire, like a morass, and adolescent sex welling up within me exuded mists which clouded over and obscured my heart, so that I could not distinguish the clear light of true love from the murk of lust. Love and lust together seethed within me.

“The Need to Reconcile Faith and Reason”

The great paradoxes of faith are sometimes superficially dismissed by people who have never really grappled with them. Their religious training may have given them simple answers to problems such as free will, evil, predestination, and God’s nature. Or they may have been taught to “exalt faith” by condemning reason. It is easy to say that faith surpasses understanding until you fully grasp the complex depths and significance of these problems. Whatever our individual religious beliefs, most of us are also rational creatures for whom it is somehow unsatisfying to accept contradictions and serious inconsistencies concerning something as important as our religious faith. We are uncomfortable when we learn that we are violating rational principles.

The basic **principles of reason**—also called **rules of inference**—define the limits of rationality. That is, consistently violating them moves us to the realm of the irrational or illogical. They are true by their very structure (by definition). They cannot be rationally refuted, since we rely on them in order to reason. Contemporary logicians recognize several rules of inference. One of the most important is the law of contradiction.

The **law of contradiction** (sometimes known as the law of noncontradiction) means that no statement can be both true and false at the same time and under the

same conditions. Or to use symbols (as philosophers who study logic often do), p cannot be both p and $not-p$ at the same time. For example: Either this is a philosophy book or it is not a philosophy book. It cannot be both a philosophy book and not a philosophy book. It can, however, be a philosophy book and a doorstop at the same time. There is no contradiction involved in asserting that it is a philosophy book and more. The contradiction occurs in the mutually exclusive assertions: “This is a philosophy book” and “This is not a philosophy book.”

Take a moment to reflect on the law of contradiction. See if you can get a sense of just how basic it is to rationality. Because it is a fundamental principle of reasoning, we are usually disturbed to discover that our ideas are contradictory, for such awareness commits us to resolving the contradiction or holding seemingly irrational ideas.

In matters of faith, trying to avoid the possibility of contradiction by claiming that the human mind is finite and unable to understand God and God’s ways is ultimately unsatisfying, for it removes us from meaningful communication with God. If we can never fully comprehend God, if we must trust that things are not at all what they seem (for instance, that evil only appears to be evil from our level but is really good from God’s), then our “solution” may not be what it appears to be, either.

In my tender youth they swept me away over the precipice of my body’s appetites and plunged me into the whirlpool of sin.²

Eventually, under the prodding of his mother and at the bidding of Ambrose (c. 339–397), the Bishop of Milan, Augustine turned to the Bible. Sitting in a garden one day with his friend Alypius, Augustine heard the “sing-song voice of a child” saying over and over, “Take it and read, take it and read.” He did, and the first passage his eyes fell upon seemed written just for him:

Let us behave with decency as befits the day; no drunken orgies, no debauchery or vice, no quarrels or jealousies! Let Christ Jesus himself be the armour that you wear; give your unspiritual nature no opportunity to satisfy its desires.³

On Easter Sunday, 387, as Monica watched, Augustine, Adeodatus, and Alypius were baptized in Milan by Ambrose. Full of faith, the four left for Africa, where they planned to live ascetic lives, but Monica died before they reached Tagaste. In Tagaste, Augustine sold his inheritance, gave the money to the poor, and, with the help of friends, founded the Augustinian Order, the oldest Christian monastic order in the West. In 391, Augustine was ordained a priest by Valerius, the Bishop of Hippo, a Roman coastal city in North Africa. In 396, Augustine succeeded Valerius as Bishop of Hippo, a post he held for thirty-four years.

principles of reason (rules of inference)

Principles (such as the law of contradiction) that define the limits of rationality by their very structure and that cannot be rationally refuted since we rely on them in order to reason.

Augustine was a daring and active Christian bishop, just as he had been a daring and active anti-Christian Manichean. In both roles, he challenged doubters and nonbelievers to public debates, first defending Manicheanism against Christianity and then defending Christianity against Manicheanism.

After his conversion, Augustine produced more than 230 treatises, two of which, the *Confessions* (c. 400) and the *City of God* (413–426), remain important philosophical works for Christians and non-Christians alike.

In his writings, Augustine anticipates major philosophical and theological ideas concerning doubt and certainty, the divided self, consciousness, time, and free will and God's foreknowledge of history. The *City of God* details the fall of Rome in terms of a full-fledged philosophy of history, the first *philosophy* of history ever. By arguing that the fall of Rome was part of the Christian—not pagan—God's plan, the *City of God* signals the end of the ancient worldview.

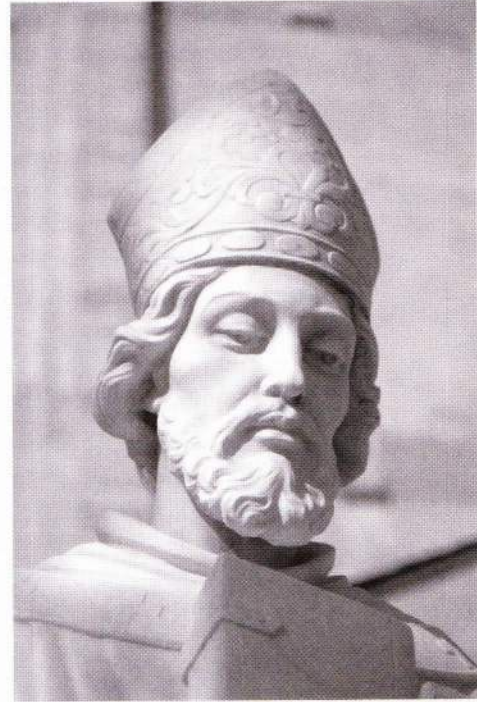
Augustine's *Confessions* is considered by some scholars to be the first true autobiography, a claim that is challenged by other scholars. Whether autobiography or something else, the *Confessions*, like the *Meditations* of the pagan emperor Marcus Aurelius, engages readers from divergent backgrounds. Like Marcus, Augustine takes the measure of his own soul in remarkably direct language and thereby speaks to almost anyone who has ever struggled to reconcile the longings of the heart with the demands of the mind, appetite with order, and resolve with repeated failures to live up to that resolve.

I was held fast, not in fetters clamped upon me by another, but by my own will, which had the strength of iron chains. . . . the new will which had come to life in me . . . was not yet strong enough to overcome the old [will], hardened as it was by the passage of time. So these two wills within me, one old, one new, one servant of the flesh, the other of the spirit, were in conflict and between them they tore my soul apart.⁴

Augustine died shortly after the Vandals, who were at war with Rome, reached Hippo. He left no will, having no property. He did, however, write his own epitaph: "What maketh the heart of the Christian heavy? The fact that he is a pilgrim, and longs for his own country."

Pride and Philosophy

Combined with his Christian faith, Augustine's training in rhetoric and philosophy led him to reject Platonism, Epicureanism, and Stoicism (Chapters 5 and 7) as ways of life. Of particular concern to Augustine was the emphasis the classical Greeks, from Socrates through the Stoics, placed on human reason and the pride of place given to the human will.



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"For the sake of a laugh, a little sport, I was glad to do harm and anxious to damage another. . . . And all because we are ashamed to hold back when others say, 'Come on! Let's do it!'" — Augustine

law of contradiction

Rule of inference that no statement can be both true and false at the same time and under the same conditions; sometimes known as the law of noncontradiction.

Typically, the Greek philosophers held that reason is capable of distinguishing between truth and error and between reality and illusion. Even the Epicureans, with their emphasis on human happiness, stressed the importance of reason as the key to happiness in the here and now. In spite of their individual differences, the classical philosophers believed that human understanding (wisdom and knowledge) could and naturally would lead to proper emotions and proper behavior—to happiness here and now.

By Christian standards, classical humanism was too human or, rather, merely human in its indifference to the need for God's grace and guidance in the application of reason and moderation of the will. Augustine argued that, by itself, reason is powerless—even perverse—without the right will, without a will grounded in grace, love, and proper longing. Faith must precede education, for faith alone makes true understanding possible. Thus it is that faith is a necessary condition for productive philosophical inquiry.

Without faith, reason—the ground of so much classical philosophy—is, by Christian standards, unreliable, even dangerous. Left to its own devices, reason does not guide the will, but is guided—pulled hither and yon—by the will, especially if the will itself is corrupt, fallen, unsaved. The will cannot redeem itself, nor can it think itself well. To believe otherwise is to lapse into pride and ignorance.

Although Augustine may have misinterpreted some of the teachings of the Stoics and Epicureans, his uneasiness with their emphasis on the natural world and on self-willed self-control is understandable. Because Epicurus taught that the soul is physical and cannot survive in immaterial form, Augustine accuses the Epicureans of advocating the pursuit of physical pleasure to the exclusion of all else: “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we may die.”

According to Augustine, Epicureanism is fit only for swine, not for human beings. Besides debasing human beings, the Epicureans, in Augustine's view, make what God intended only as a means (appetites) into the be-all and end-all of life (satisfaction, pleasure). In so doing, Epicureans, in their retreat into the earthly Garden, satisfy themselves at the expense of the poor. In their rejection of an afterlife, they ignore their own souls.

Augustine had more respect for the Stoics. He admired their emphasis on virtues, particularly courage and integrity, but mocked the way they made serenity and detachment their chief goals, asking sarcastically, “Now is this man happy, just because he is patient in his misery? Of course not!” A steady state of serenity, regardless of what condition the world is in, strikes Augustine as an insubstantial goal. Worse yet, the Stoic's faith, like the Epicurean's, is in himself, not in God.

By which thing it seems to me to be sufficiently proved that the errors of the Gentiles in ethics, physics, and the mode of seeking truth, errors many and manifold, but conspicuously represented in these two schools of philosophy [Epicureanism and Stoicism], continued even down to the Christian era, notwithstanding the fact that the learned assailed them most vehemently, and employed both remarkable skill and abundant labour in subverting them. Yet these errors . . . have been already so completely silenced, that now in our schools of rhetoric the question of what their opinions were is scarcely ever mentioned; and these controversies have been now so completely eradicated or suppressed . . . that whenever now any school

We see then that . . . the earthly city was created by self-love reaching the point of contempt for God . . . the earthly city glories in itself.
— Augustine

of error lifts up its head against the truth, i.e., against the Church of Christ, it does not venture to leap into the arena except under the shield of the Christian name.⁵

Augustine took note of the description of Paul's encounter with the Stoics and Epicureans described in the Acts of the Apostles.

While Paul was . . . at Athens . . . some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers joined issue with him. Some said, "What can this charlatan be trying to say?" . . . And when they had heard of the raising of the dead, some scoffed; others said, "We will hear you on this subject some other time." So Paul left the assembly.⁶

I maintain that all attempts to employ reason in theology in any merely speculative manner are altogether fruitless.

— Immanuel Kant

Augustine's misgivings notwithstanding, late Stoicism, especially in the *Meditations* and *Letters* of Marcus Aurelius, marks the beginning of the shift from purely pagan to Christian philosophy. Though pagan himself, Marcus in the *Meditations* expresses values and interests that become hallmarks of Christian philosophy: devaluing of this life and its temporary nature, a strong sense of duty, and the idea that human beings are related to the *Logos* (see Chapter 7).

But Marcus, like Plato and Epicurus, differed from his Christian successors, in his emphasis on human reason and his focus on this world. Augustine understood this and took up Paul's crusade against the errors of Greek philosophy. In so doing, he set in motion a major shift from the human-centric classical worldview to the God-centered medieval worldview.

The Life of Thomas Aquinas

Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1274) was born near Naples.⁷ His father, who was related to the count of Aquino, planned for Thomas to achieve a position of importance in the Catholic Church. To this end he enrolled Thomas in the Benedictine abbey school at Montecassino when Thomas was about five. The Benedictines are Roman Catholic monks famed for their modest lifestyle, which involves physical labor as well as spiritual discipline. As a general rule, Benedictines remain in one monastery for life. The monks of Montecassino taught close scrutiny of Scripture, careful reading and writing, and rote memory of long and complicated passages. While under their care, Thomas acquired basic religious knowledge, academic skills, and good study habits.



Thomas Aquinas

The Dominican

In 1239, Thomas was sent to study at the Imperial University of Naples, where he befriended some Dominican monks. Dominicans were dedicated to education and to preaching to common people. They took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Unlike the Benedictines, who tended to establish their monasteries in the country, the Dominicans established themselves in the towns. As the spiritual authority of the Benedictine monasteries was declining, in part due to their wealth and prosperity, the Dominicans were emerging as the intellectual elite of the thirteenth century.⁸

You can say that you trust God anyway—that no arguments can undermine your faith. But that is just a statement describing how stubborn you are; it has no bearing whatsoever on the question of God's goodness.
— B. C. Johnson

Thomas was so attracted to the Dominican way of life that he decided to join the order. This decision disturbed his family, who had been looking forward to enjoying the advantages of being related to a powerful priest or bishop. That Thomas would become a poor monk was not in their plans.

Nonetheless, in 1243 or 1244, Thomas entered the Order of Preachers, as the Dominicans are known. His mother was so unhappy about it that she sent a distress message to his older brothers, who were soldiers. Thomas was traveling with other Dominicans when his brothers tracked him down and ordered him to remove his Dominican habit. When he refused, they kidnapped him. His family held Thomas captive for several months. They applied various arguments and pressures but did allow him to wear his Dominican habit and to study—though they kept him confined to his room.

One biographer reports the interesting but unlikely story that his family sent a provocatively dressed girl into his room one night while Thomas slept: “She tempted him to sin, using all the devices at her disposal, glances, caresses and gestures.”⁹ The saint in Thomas proved stronger than temptation, and he prayed until the girl left. In any event, Thomas managed to write a treatise

On Fallacies while in family captivity. Finally, convinced of Thomas’s sincerity and strength, his family released him. Soon after, the Dominicans sent him first to Cologne to continue his studies with the acclaimed teacher Albertus Magnus and then to the University of Paris.

Albertus Magnus: The Universal Teacher

While at Cologne, Thomas was encouraged in the search for philosophical unity by his teacher Albertus Magnus (Albert the Great) (c. 1200–1280), who was among the first scholars to realize the need to ground Christian faith in philosophy and science. If this were not done, the church would lose influence in the face of great advances in secular and pagan knowledge. Rather than ignore the huge quantity of learning made available by the Crusades, Albert chose to master it. He read most of the Christian, Muslim, and Jewish writers and wrote continuously about what he read. Albert was called the “Universal Teacher” because of the breadth of his knowledge and because he tried to make Aristotle accessible by paraphrasing many of his works.



Church of San Marco, Florence, Italy/The Bridgeman Art Library

Pietro Annigoni's drawing depicts Thomas Aquinas as both scholar and man of God.

A philosopher is a blind man in a dark room looking for a black cat that isn't there. A theologian is the man who finds it.
— H. L. Mencken

Although Albert has been criticized for not being creative and consistent, his efforts at synthesis laid a foundation for Thomas Aquinas. Albert quoted extensively and without alteration, and from this Thomas learned the value of broad knowledge and extensive documentation.

In his own work, however, Thomas went beyond his teacher by using his sources to construct a coherent philosophy of his own. Still, his scholarly skills owe a great deal to Albert, who recognized his ability while Thomas was still a young man, as a famous anecdote reveals: When Thomas first arrived in Paris, his rural manners, his heavysset, farm-boy physique, and slow, quiet ways earned him the nickname “the Dumb Ox,” and his handwriting was so bad that others could barely read it. Yet he studied hard and remained good-natured as the other students laughed at him—until the day he answered one of Albert the Great’s questions with such stunning brilliance that the master said to the others: “We call this man the Dumb Ox, but someday his bellow will be heard throughout the whole world.”

The Task of the Scholar

Shortly before Thomas was born, the church had forbidden the teaching of Aristotle’s natural science and *Metaphysics*. His Unmoved Mover was an impersonal, natural force—not a loving, personal God. *Entelechy* (soul) was part of nature, inseparable from the body that housed it, and so it seemed that Aristotle’s naturalism denied the possibility of personal immortality. (See Chapter 6.)

Yet the thorough, systematic quality of Aristotle’s work on scientific thinking, logic, and nature gradually won more and more medieval converts. As Aristotle’s influence spread throughout the University of Paris, questions arose regarding both the relationship of Aristotle’s classical naturalism to orthodox Christianity and the accuracy of newly arrived Arabian commentaries on Aristotle. The faculty realized that Aristotle would have to be integrated into Christian theology. This task became the great, courageous accomplishment of Tommaso d’Aquino, “the Dumb Ox of Sicily.”

In 1252, Thomas received his master’s degree from the University of Paris, where he was also lecturing. He taught theology at the papal court in Rome in 1259, and from 1268 to 1272 lectured in Paris once more. During the twenty years that he was an active teacher, Thomas wrote disputations on various theological questions, commentaries on books of the Bible, commentaries on twelve works of Aristotle and others, and nearly forty other miscellaneous notes, sermons, lectures, poems, and treatises. His crowning achievements are the multivolume summaries of arguments and theology known as the *Summa Theologica* and *Summa contra Gentiles*.

Thomas was sent to Naples to establish a Dominican school in 1272, and in 1274 he was commanded by Pope Gregory X to attend the Council of Lyons. He died on the trip to Lyons on March 7, 1274. As reported by Brother Peter of Monte San Giovanni, his last hours reflected his submission to the authority of the church.

The Wisdom of the Scholar

The term **Scholasticism** refers to mainstream Christian philosophy in medieval Europe from about 1000 to about 1300, just after the death of Aquinas. It comes from the Greek *scholastikos*, meaning “to enjoy leisure” or “to devote one’s free time to learning.”

Scholastic philosophy rested on a strong interest in logical and linguistic analysis of texts and on arguments producing a systematic statement and defense of Christian beliefs. As the revealed word of God, the Bible was central to this project, but always was interpreted in accord with the authority of the church and the wisdom of selected earlier Christian writers.

A central effort of Scholastic philosophers was the attempt to reconstruct Greek philosophy in a form that not only was consistent with but also supported and strengthened Christian doctrine. An important aspect of this effort was the imposition of a hierarchy of knowledge, in which the highest place was held by revelation, as interpreted by the church; next were faith and theology; philosophy came last, subordinated to both faith and revelation.¹⁰

Medieval scholars were the first *professors of philosophy*; their task was to teach, to expound on texts, to write about them, to debate in class and in public, and to publish great educational summations of official doctrine.¹¹ Generally viewed as the most complete realization of medieval Scholasticism, Thomas Aquinas is the archetype of the scholar. Unlike modern professional philosophers, Thomas was not free to *pursue* the truth wherever it led; he *started from the truth*—always ultimately supporting Christian doctrine.

In Scholastic philosophy, the *way* a case was made and analyzed became an integral part of what was being claimed, and method remains an important concern to today’s scholars. Logic and linguistic analysis were vital elements in proving a case—as they are today. Scholarly, intellectual standards were developed for documenting an argument with citations from approved sources—standards that any student who has ever written a research paper will recognize. In fact, in the first twelve questions of the *Summa Theologica*, Thomas refers to other authors 160 times.

Scholastic philosophers had to present their arguments publicly and defend them against all comers—a precursor to the modern professor’s obligation to publish, present, and defend papers. Subject matter became specialized, and a universal impersonal, technical, scholarly style of writing was developed to communicate with a select audience of students and teachers devoted to mastering an elaborate professional technique.¹²

The emergence of the Scholastic *professor of philosophy* reflects a move away from the importance of a particular philosopher, away from the *sophos* whose work closely reflected his life, to a less personal view of the individual thinker as a part of a scholarly community. Thus, although Thomas’s work reflected his life, the product of his work is scholarly and technical in ways unlike anything produced before. He says:

That which a single man can bring, through his work and his genius, to the promotion of truth is little in comparison with the total of knowledge.

Science has not killed God—quite the contrary. It is clearer now than ever that what we can learn from science is limited to what is abstract and quantifiable. Because of what science has achieved . . . God is needed now more than ever.
— René J. Muller

Scholasticism

Christian philosophy dominating medieval Europe from about 1000 to 1300 that stressed logical and linguistic analysis of texts and arguments in order to produce a systematic statement and defense of Christian beliefs.

The creationist, whether naive Bible-thumper or an educated bishop, simply postulates an already existing being of prodigious complexity. If we are going to allow ourselves the luxury of postulating organized complexity without offering an explanation, we might as well make a job of it and simply postulate the existence of life as we know it!
— Richard Dawkins

However, from all these elements, *selected and coordinated and brought together*, there arises a marvelous thing, as is shown by the various departments of learning, which by the work and sagacity of many have come to a wonderful augmentation.¹³ [emphasis added]

Why Do People Argue About Spiritual Matters?

Absent some sort of objective proof or rational argumentation, all we have to offer those who disagree with us about spiritual and religious matters are appeals to bald assertions of our sincerity, insistent claims that we are “saved” or happier than they are, and other “bits of autobiography.” Although we may believe that we are discussing the content of our beliefs, we are actually reporting information about ourselves (hence, “autobiography”). As a result, those who already believe what we do continue to believe what we do. And while those who do not believe what we do may have learned something about *us*, we have provided them with no evidence demonstrating the actual merits of the beliefs themselves.

But, clearly, our great and persistent disagreements over matters of faith are not meant to be reduced to assertions of personal feelings (subjective states) but, rather, are intended to be about claimed realities, about *what is true*, about whether or not God actually exists—objectively, really. Otherwise, there is nothing to dispute.

Consider the hypothetical case of Ross, who believes that only God X exists; Dean, who believes that only God Y exists; and Joe, who believes that no god whatsoever exists. If Ross, Dean, and Joe were simply reporting subjective states, they would not need argumentation, because they would each be right. “Right” would be equivalent to “reporting present beliefs accurately.” But Ross, Dean, and Joe think that they are doing more than reporting products of thinking. And, hence, as reasoning creatures, as rational agents, they are compelled to apply “laws of reason” to their beliefs. If the phrase “laws of reason” seems too authoritarian or dated to you, try the more expansive and less-imposing term “standards of evidence.” The main point here is to note that, for the most part, we agree with Ross, Dean, and Joe: Our religious questions are about what is real, what exists, what is true. They are not just about what people feel or think is true.

In Thomas’s time, as in our own, there were conflicting claims about what constituted proper standards of evidence for evaluating matters of theology, church authority, and religious faith in general. One view held that all truth claims must be tested against *revealed* truths. From this perspective, *revelation* was the chief and only reliable source of knowledge of God and God’s ways. At the opposite extreme were those philosophers and scientists who argued that truth could only be *discovered through concrete experience and deductive reasoning*.

God and Natural Reason

Thomas approached this problem from an Aristotelian, “naturalistic” position. This is sometimes referred to as *natural theology* because it appeals to what Thomas calls

natural reason or *natural intelligence*. By “natural” here, Thomas means “of this world”—not sloppy or undisciplined. Natural reason is, thus, reason unaided by divine revelation, and natural theology is theology based on appeals to natural reason. Although Thomas had great respect for, and submitted to, church authority, his efforts to prove God’s existence begin with appeals to concrete experience and empirical evidence, rather than with revelations or dogma—an argument style favored by Aristotle. (You may wish to review the material concerning Aristotle’s ideas regarding form, matter, change, and cause in Chapter 6.)

As we review selected passages from Thomas, keep in mind that no introductory survey can do justice to the complexity of Thomas’s thought. So although what follows is a plausible interpretation of some of the most studied and disputed arguments in the history of philosophy, it cannot serve as a definitive account.

Thomas’s Five Ways are so influential and persuasive that I am sure you’ve already thought about some of them, at least in simplified form. You may even think of them as your own since popularized versions of them have become staples of Christian “apologetics,” the offering of reasons to justify the divine origin of faith. To get the most out of your efforts, I recommend approaching the Five Ways as a whole, focusing on what Thomas is arguing and why it matters, before accepting or rejecting the individual arguments. That being accomplished, you’ll be in a good position to assess not only this particular version of Thomas’s arguments, but also more general issues of faith and evidence.

Proving the Existence of God

Although Thomas believed in God, he also thought God’s existence could be demonstrated by natural reason. To this end, he offered his famous five proofs for the existence of God. Each proof follows a basic pattern, beginning with some natural effect with which we are all familiar, such as movement or growth. Thomas then tries to show that the only possible explanation for this effect is God. *The Five Ways are cause-effect arguments, beginning with our experience of effects and moving toward their cause, God.*

The Five Ways are most effective if viewed as parts of a single argument. The first three ways deal with avoiding an infinite chain of causes in nature. Their conclusion is that an Unmoved Mover/Uncaused Cause must exist—that is, a being whose existence depends only on its own essence and not on anything external to itself. But Aristotle said much the same thing without concluding that a personal god exists; such an impersonal cause could just as easily be basic matter and energy. The fourth and fifth ways are thus crucial. They are needed to introduce some hierarchical quality into the overall description of causes and effects that can transform them into a personal god.

The First Way: Motion

The Five Ways begin with the argument Thomas thought was the easiest to understand, the **argument from motion**. Starting with the indisputable

argument from motion

Attempt to prove the existence of God based on the reasoning that to avoid an infinite regress, there must be an Unmoved Mover capable of imparting motion to all other things; Aristotelian argument that forms the basis for the first of Thomas Aquinas’s Five Ways.



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"Therefore, whatever is moved must be moved by another. If that by which it is moved be itself moved, then this also must needs be moved by another, and that by another again. But this cannot go on to infinity. . . ."

already moving (alive) parents, who had to be given life by their *already moving* parents, who . . .

It *might* be possible to keep imagining an infinite chain of things *already in motion* moving other things. But no such infinite regress can account for the fact that things are *actually in motion*. Given that things are moving, we know that some *first already-moving thing* had to move other not-yet-moving things. Thomas reasoned that some "first mover" had to exist outside the series of *becoming*—some force or being with the ability to move other things without itself needing to be moved by any outside force. God is just such an Unmoved Mover. Here is Thomas's argument:

Therefore, whatever is moved must be moved by another. If that by which it is moved be itself moved, then this also must needs be moved 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 moved by the first mover; as the staff moves only because it is moved by the hand. Therefore it is necessary to arrive at a first mover, moved by no other; and this everyone understands to be God.¹⁴

PHILOSOPHICAL QUERY

Is there any other explanation for motion besides an "unmoved mover"? If so, what is it? If not, is Thomas's conclusion sound? Convincing?

The Second Way: Cause

The explanation just given for the movement of billiard balls and children is incomplete. We can still ask what accounts for the very existence of billiard balls, cue sticks,

observation that things are moving, the argument points out that motion must be given to each object by some other object that is *already moving*. (By "motion," Thomas means both linear motion and more complex "life-motion," animating motion.) For instance, a rack of balls at rest on a billiard table is set in motion only after being struck by the *already moving* cue ball. In turn, the cue ball is set in motion after being struck by the tip of the *already moving* cue stick. But the cue stick cannot move unless something *already moving* moves it: a gust of wind, an earthquake, a cat, or the billiards champion Minnesota Fats. Similarly, I am given life (ani-motion) by my

Minnesota Fats, and parents. Thomas answered with a second argument, similar in pattern to his first, but based on the Aristotelian concept of cause. Because the second argument concerns the initiating cause of the existence of the universe, it is called the **cosmological argument**, from the Greek word *kosmos*, meaning “world,” “universe,” or “orderly structure.”

In a nutshell, the cosmological argument asserts that it is impossible for any natural thing to be the complete and sufficient source of its own existence. In order to cause itself, a thing would have to precede itself. Put another way, in order for me to be the source of my own existence, I would have to exist before I existed. This is as absurd as it is impossible.

In broad strokes, my existence is explained by my parents’ existence, and theirs by my grandparents’ existence, and so on. But if *every* set of parents had to have parents, there could never be any parents at all. At least one set of parents must not have had parents. In the Bible, this is Adam and Eve. But even Adam and Eve did not cause their own existence. They were created by God, who creates but is uncreated. This is why it is said that “God always was, is, and will be.”

In Thomas’s understanding of things, any series or system of causes and effects requires an originating cause. In order to avoid an infinite regress of causes, which he thought was impossible, there had to be an Uncaused Cause.

The cosmological argument is based on Aristotle’s concept of *Efficient Cause*. (See Chapter 6.) Efficient cause is the force that initiates change or brings about some activity. The efficient cause in the development of a human fetus, for example, is the entire biochemical process of changes in the mother’s womb that nurtures the growing fetus. In the case of an acorn, the efficient cause that produces an oak tree consists of rain, sun, soil, and temperature interacting to initiate growth and development. Thomas argues:

In the world of sensible things we find there is an order of efficient causes. . . . 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 one only. 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. . . . Therefore it is necessary to admit a first efficient cause, to which everyone gives the name God.¹⁵

cosmological argument

From the Greek word *kosmos*, meaning “world,” “universe,” or “orderly structure”; argument for the existence of God that because it is impossible for any natural thing to be the complete and sufficient source of its own existence, there must be an Uncaused Cause capable of imparting existence to all other things; Aristotelian argument that forms the basis for the second of Aquinas’s Five Ways.

PHILOSOPHICAL QUERY

Discuss the cosmological argument. Is Thomas’s reasoning sound or not? Are you comfortable with the possibility that there is no “first cause”? If there isn’t, can we explain the existence of the universe at all? Discuss.

The Third Way: Necessity

Thomas's third proof, the **argument from necessity**, may seem odd to you. It is based on the difference between two classes of things: those whose existence is only contingent or *possible* and those whose existence is *necessary*. Contingent things might or might not exist, but they do not have to exist, and they all eventually cease to exist. You and I do not exist of necessity: We just happen to exist given the particular history of the world. Our existence is contingent, dependent on something else. This is true, in fact, of every created thing in the universe. It is even possible and imaginable that the universe itself never existed or that someday it will cease to exist. In other words, the universe is also contingent.

But, Thomas pointed out, it is not possible to conceive of a time in which nothing whatsoever existed. There would be no space; time itself would not exist. There would be no place for something to come into existence from or move to. There would be nowhere for anything to move, if there were anything to move, which there would not be. Without movement, there would be no passage of time. If no time passes, nothing happens. *Thus, if nothing had ever existed, nothing would always exist.* But all around us we see things in existence. Therefore, there was never no-thing. Getting rid of the double negatives, this becomes: There was always something—or there is something that always existed and always will. (See Democritus, Chapter 3.)

The logic of Thomas's Third Way relies on the principle of sufficient reason and the principle of plenitude. According to the **principle of sufficient reason**, nothing happens without a reason. Consequently, no *adequate* theory or explanation can contain any brute, crude, unexplained facts. The **principle of plenitude** is the metaphysical principle that given infinity and the richness of the universe, any real possibility must occur—at least once. Based on these two principles, Thomas concluded that there must be something whose existence is necessary and not just possible. There needs to be some reason that what is possible actually happens. In short, God's existence is necessary. As Thomas puts it,

We find in nature things that are possible to be and not to be, since they are found to be generated, and to be corrupted, and consequently, it is possible for them to be and not to be. But it is impossible for them always to exist, for that which can not-be at some time is not. Therefore, if everything can not-be, then at one time there was nothing in existence. Now if this were true, even now there would be nothing in existence, because that which does not exist begins to exist only through something already existing. . . . Therefore, we cannot but admit 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.¹⁶

argument from necessity

Argument for the existence of God based on the idea that if nothing had ever existed, nothing would always exist; therefore, there is something whose existence is necessary (an eternal something); Aristotelian argument that forms the basis for the third of Aquinas's Five Ways.

principle of sufficient reason

The principle that nothing happens without a reason; consequently, no adequate theory or explanation can contain any brute, crude, unexplained facts. First specifically encountered in the work of the medieval philosopher Peter Abelard (1079–1142), it is usually associated with the rationalist philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), who used it in his famous "best of all possible worlds" argument.

PHILOSOPHICAL QUERY

Scholastic arguments often hinged on whether or not something was conceivable (clearly imaginable). One cardinal principle held that no one could even conceive of absolute nothingness. Do you agree? Explain. Whether or not you agree, do you find the argument from necessity convincing? Discuss.

The Fourth Way: Degree

The first three arguments for the existence of God fail to establish the existence of a good and loving being. They only deny the possibility of an infinite series of causes and effects, an infinity of *becomings*. Even if some element or entity functions as an ever-existing Prime Mover or Uncaused Cause, these characteristics alone do not describe God. In the fourth and fifth arguments, Thomas makes a qualitative shift in his proofs.

The Fourth Way rests on the idea of qualitative differences among kinds of beings. Known as the **argument from gradation**, it is based on a metaphysical concept of a hierarchy of souls. (See Chapter 6.) In ascending order, being progresses from inanimate objects to increasingly complex animated creatures. (For instance, a dog has more being than a worm, and a person more than a dog.) Thomas believed that what contemporary philosopher Arthur O. Lovejoy called “the great chain of being” continued upward through angels to God.

This chain of being, Thomas thought, is reflected in the properties of individual things, as well as in the kinds of things that exist. For example, there are grades of goodness, going from the complete lack of goodness (evil) to pure goodness (God), from the complete lack of honesty to complete honesty, from utter ugliness to sublime beauty, and so forth. In very general terms, existence flows downward from perfection and completeness to varying lower stages, each descending level possessing less being.

Of the Five Ways, the significance of this argument can be especially difficult for contemporary thinkers to grasp because it rests on a metaphysical worldview that is alien to many of us today. Yet we cannot just dismiss it as a quirk of the medieval mind-set. The Five Ways form a cumulative argument. The first three arguments cannot establish the existence of a *qualitatively different kind of being*. The fifth argument, as we shall see, only establishes that the universe is ordered. Without the argument from gradation, Thomas can make a case only for an eternal something that follows orderly patterns. But this “something” is almost a contemporary scientist’s description of the universe; it is certainly not a description of God. Without the introduction of qualitatively different kinds of entities, Thomas cannot establish the existence of God by rational argument. Here is Thomas’s argument from gradation:

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

principle of plenitude

The name given by American historian of ideas Arthur O. Lovejoy (1873–1962) to the metaphysical principle that, given infinity, any real possibility must occur (at least once).

argument from gradation

Argument for the existence of God based on the idea that being progresses from inanimate objects to increasingly complex animated creatures, culminating in a qualitatively unique God; Aristotelian argument that forms the basis for the fourth of Aquinas’s Five Ways.

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 most being, for those things that are greatest in truth are greatest in being. . . . 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.¹⁷

PHILOSOPHICAL QUERY

Do you have any sense of grades of being? Is there anything in your own experience that supports Thomas's argument? Discuss the argument from gradation.

The Fifth Way: Design

Thomas's **teleological argument**, also called the argument from design, is one of the most widely known and used arguments for the existence of God. Teleological thinking, as we learned in Chapter 6, is a way of understanding things in terms of their *telos*, or end. For example, infancy is understood in relationship to adulthood: The adult



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According to the principle of gradation, the little girl and her grandfather in this photo have more “being” than the dogs, which have more than the trees. Does such a view reflect reality or does it foster a kind of arrogance in which we see ourselves as superior to—rather than a part of—the natural world? Does the way the dogs and humans are engaged with one another tell us anything significant about the principle of gradation?

is the *telos* of the infant; the oak tree is the *telos* of the acorn. When archaeologists uncover some ancient artifact unlike anything ever seen before, they often recognize that it was made for a purpose, a *telos*, even if they do not know what specific purpose. In other words, they infer the existence of a designer who shaped the mysterious object.

Thomas asserts that the entire natural world exhibits order and design. Water behaves in orderly ways, as do rocks, crabs, clouds, reindeer, and people. Today, we are even more aware of the complex interrelatedness of the natural world than Thomas was: Rain forests in the Amazon basin scrub the atmosphere in ways that affect the whole earth; this is their *telos*. Cells and chromosomes, molecules, atoms, and subatomic particles exhibit order, with each performing a specific function, a *telos*. On inspection, the universe reveals order; otherwise, we could not quantify scientific laws.

Order, Thomas argued, implies intelligence, purpose, a plan. Here again he follows the pattern of starting with common observations and searching for principles to explain them. In this case, Thomas held that the order we observe in inanimate nature cannot come from matter itself, since matter lacks consciousness and intelligence. Design, by its nature, implies conscious intent. Thus, if the world exhibits evidence of design, it follows logically that there must be a designer:

We see that things which lack knowledge, such as natural bodies [matter and inanimate objects], 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 they achieve their end, not fortuitously, but designedly. Now whatever lacks knowledge cannot move towards an end, unless it is directed by some being endowed with knowledge and intelligence; as the arrow is directed by the archer. Therefore some intelligent being exists by whom all natural things are directed to their end; and this being we call God.¹⁸

teleological argument

Also called the argument from design, this widely known argument for the existence of God claims that the universe manifests order and purpose that can only be the result of a conscious intelligence (God); Aristotelian argument that forms the basis for the fifth of Aquinas's Five Ways and the basis of William Paley's watchmaker argument.

PHILOSOPHICAL QUERY

Is order the same thing as design? Does the universe seem to be ordered and "intelligently" designed? Discuss. (For more on this intriguing topic, see Chapter 10.)

Commentary on the Five Ways

Thomas's arguments begin with empirical observations and then attempt to show that the only logically consistent, adequate explanation for them requires the existence of God. If other equally plausible arguments can account for these observations, then Thomas has not conclusively proved the existence of God; he has at best shown that God's existence is possible or probable.

Underlying Thomas's first three arguments is his conviction that an infinite series of events (motions or causes) is impossible, even inconceivable. But is it? Not according to modern science and mathematics. The simplest example of an infinite series is the positive numbers. No matter what number you reach, you can always add 1. If



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Thomas's teleological argument posits both order and design. Does the ability to identify a causal sequence imply "order"? Consider global warming: Who, or what, is the designer (orderer) of climate change, if, indeed, it has been correctly and thoroughly explained?

one infinite series is possible—and it is—then another is possible. So to the extent that Thomas's arguments rely on the impossibility of any infinite series, they fail.

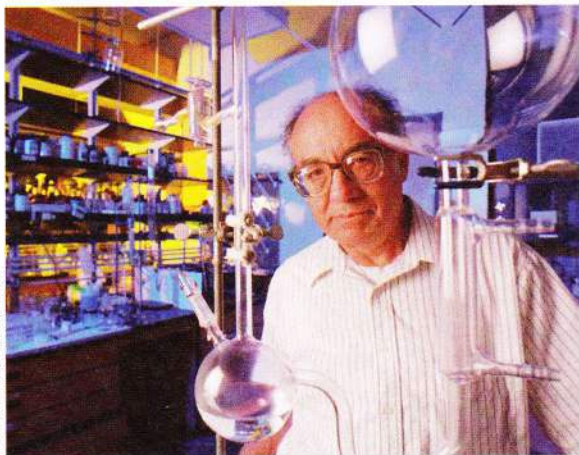
But *is* Thomas merely denying the impossibility of *any* infinite series? Probably not; it is more likely that he is denying the possibility of an infinite series of *qualitatively identical* finite series. Recall, Thomas is attempting to establish the metaphysical grounding for all natural existence, all contingent or dependent existence. Simply adding to the *same kind* does not account for the very existence of the kind.

It is certainly possible to argue that nature exhibits as much ugliness and disorder as it does design and purpose. What's the *telos* of starving children or freak accidents? Where is the hand of the most good, most noble designer in poverty and inequity? Perhaps Thomas only *projected* his own sense of order onto the world, rather than *observing* order in it. Many observers simply deny the presence of design; they fail to see the world as consciously and deliberately ordered.

But don't be too quick to reject Thomas's proofs. The historian of philosophy W. T. Jones points out that the force of Thomas's arguments rests on whether or not they "account for" motion, cause, goodness, and design. Jones distinguishes between explanations *inside* a system and explanations that account for the system *as a whole*.¹⁹ Ignorance of this difference is a chief source of conflict between science and religion. Scientific explanations are explanations within systems; Thomas, on the other hand, was attempting to account for the universe as a whole. Let's examine this difference.

Supposing science ever became complete so that it knew every single thing in the whole universe. Is it not plain that the questions, "Why is there a universe?" "Why does it go on as it does?" "Has it any meaning?" would remain just as they are?

— C. S. Lewis



DAVID MCNEW/Reuters/Landov

In 1953, Stanley Miller provided the first empirical evidence for the possibility that organic life could evolve from inorganic matter.

In 1953, Stanley Miller, a biochemist at the University of Chicago, provided the first empirical evidence for the possibility that organic life could evolve from inorganic matter. Miller tried to replicate conditions as they could have been soon after the earth formed. He put methane, ammonia, and hydrogen—elements believed to have been present in the early atmosphere—into a glass container. As the chemicals were mixed with steam from boiling water, they passed through glass tubes and flowed across electrodes that were constantly emitting a spark. At the end of a week, a soupy liquid had formed in the container. This liquid contained organic compounds and amino acids—building blocks for organic matter and life-forms. In the

decades since Miller's experiment, many of these building-block chemicals have been produced in laboratory conditions thought to mimic conditions during various stages of the earth's history.

Such experiments might explain the origins of life *within* the universe, understood as a system composed of basic matter and energy. But they cannot address certain kinds of questions regarding the universe *as a whole*. Where did the matter and energy come from? In his experiment, Miller *acquired* matter and energy; he did not *create* them from nothing. He "created" only in the sense that an artist creates—by transforming what is already there. Interestingly, experiments like Miller's can be used to support Thomas's arguments. Miller had to design his experiment, being careful in his selection of gases. Then he had to provide a fitting environment and introduce motion/cause in the form of electrical impulses. The existence of the experimenter and the need for carefully controlled conditions can be interpreted as demonstrating the need for the intervention of the Designer. If the analogy is carried further, the scientist represents the need for God to get the whole thing going.

Which interpretation is correct—the Thomistic or the scientific? The question cannot be answered without qualification. Scientific explanations enable us to understand and control events within the natural order. Even if all scientists were to agree on the steps that produced the universe, such explanations cannot account for the existence of matter and energy themselves. All they can account for is the behavior of matter and energy, *given their existence and given how they exist*.

PHILOSOPHICAL QUERY

In 1999, the Kansas Board of Education attracted national attention when it ruled against mandating the teaching of evolution in science classes. This sparked an ongoing national debate concerning, among other things, the adequacy of explanations of the origins of life. Do you think distinguishing between explanations inside a system and explanations that account for the system as a whole could help avoid controversies regarding science versus religion in our schools? Why?

Complications for Natural Theology

If Thomas's arguments are unconvincing to you, keep in mind that he was applying what he called "natural reason" to a complex theology. Part of the difficulty he faced, as does any philosopher who attempts such a task, is that various articles of faith seem to contradict each other and appear inconsistent with common experience. Had Thomas been able to follow *either* faith *or* reason, he could have avoided certain inconsistencies and confusions more easily. Instead, he struggled with the most difficult questions facing a Christian philosopher. (Similar difficulties face Jewish and Muslim philosophers as well.)

If God is the wise and good First Cause, it follows that God wills everything that happens, including the existence of each individual. Nothing occurs by chance. Chance is merely the name we give to events that occur in a causal sequence unclear or unknown to us. Since *all* causal sequences lead back to the First Cause, everything happens "for a reason," or, more accurately, "nothing happens unless God causes it." It would seem to follow, then, that because of God's foreknowledge and the fact that He causes everything to happen, every event *must* occur exactly as it does.

In Thomas's language, every event that occurs does so out of *necessity*—nothing that happens can be merely *possible*. If everything that happens must happen exactly as it does, how can humans be free? Yet free will—the freedom to choose our own actions—is a necessary condition for moral responsibility. We cannot *justly* be held responsible for events over which we have no control.

The Problem of Evil

I think the **problem of evil** is the most important theological question for any religion or philosophy that asserts the existence of an all-powerful, all-wise, all-good God. It is a question that confronts nearly every thinking person sooner or later and is often cited by agnostics and atheists as a barrier to faith in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic God. Here's the problem: *If God can prevent the destructive suffering of the innocent, yet chooses not to, God is not good. If God chooses to prevent the suffering, but cannot, He is not omnipotent. If God cannot recognize the suffering of the innocent, He is not wise.*

Quick answers to the problem of evil are usually worse than no answers because they involve obvious absurdities or suggest a callousness that's inconsistent with charity. If someone answers that suffering builds character, I offer you the starvation, molestation, or torture of children. Modern psychology has clearly shown that the damage caused by childhood suffering is often severe enough to last a lifetime. If someone answers that we are unable to understand the ways of God, I remind you that this gap of comprehension must apply to *everything else* about God if we are to be consistent. But these are distractions.

The real force of the problem of evil always comes back to justifying preventable evil and suffering. Given the qualities attributed to the Judeo-Christian God, how can He not be responsible for evil? Thomas himself deplored contradictions. Is it not contradictory to assert that God is the cause of everything and then to say that He is not responsible for the existence of evil (just everything else)?

problem of evil

If God can prevent the suffering of the innocent, yet chooses not to, He is not good. If God chooses to prevent the suffering, but cannot, He is not omnipotent. If God cannot recognize the suffering of the innocent, He is not wise.



Andrew Holbrook/Corbis

Perhaps the greatest theological question of all is the problem of evil. Is there any way to reconcile the suffering of the innocent (such as this child begging for food) with the existence of an all-wise, all-good, all-powerful God?

Has all this suffering, this dying around us, a meaning? For, if not, then ultimately there is no meaning to survival; for a life whose meaning depends upon such a happenstance—whether one escapes [suffering] or not—ultimately would not be worth living at all.

— Viktor E. Frankl

Thomas reasoned that God willed the universe in order to communicate His love of His own essence, in order to “multiply Himself.” Now of course, this does not mean that God created other gods, for as we have seen, God must be a unique essence. It means that God created the universe as a reflection of His love.

Evil, in Thomas’s view, is not a positive, created entity, however. Rather, it is a lack of goodness, which he calls a “privation,” and as such, it is not “creatable.” Instead, evil is a kind of *necessary by-product* of free will. But it is not a product of the informed human will: *No one can deliberately will evil who fully recognizes it as evil.* For example, Thomas points out that an adulterer is not *consciously willing a sin*, but is willing something that appears to be good—say, sensual pleasure. In this case, however, the pleasure is sought in a way that lacks goodness. To lack goodness is to be evil.

Even the most deliberate, diabolical willing of evil—the most blatant defiance of God—is not really *chosen as evil*. Even if the person uses the word *evil* to describe an action, it is misperceived as being something desirable, something good. Satan himself thought it was bad to be second to God and viewed his rebellion as *good for himself*. No one can knowingly choose evil as evil. (Compare this to Socrates’ similar belief, discussed in Chapter 4.)

But God surely foresaw the evil that would occur in His creation. Evil is not all that God foresaw, however. Augustine noted that it would be contradictory and pointless for God to *command* us to do anything if we lack

the power to obey or to disobey. Yet we are commanded to love one another, to do good. As for the issue of God's foreknowledge, Augustine said that there is a difference between being *fated*, preordained to live out an unchangeable future that is independent of our willing, and *foreknowledge*, God's foreseeing of the future that we make for ourselves through our own free choices. Among the things that God foresees is the fact that we exercise free will:

God knows all things before they come to pass, and . . . we do by our free will whatsoever we know and feel to be done by us only because we will it. But that all things come to pass by fate, we do not say; nay, we affirm that nothing comes to pass by fate. . . . for our wills themselves are included in that order of causes which is certain (known) to God, and is embraced by his foreknowledge, for human wills are also causes of human actions; and He who foreknew all the causes of things would certainly among those causes not have been ignorant of our wills. . . . for He whose foreknowledge is infallible foreknew that they would have the power (free will and ability) to do it, and would do it. . . .

. . . For a man does not therefore sin because God foreknew that he would sin. . . . But if he shall not will to sin, even this did God foreknow.²⁰

Thomas argued that God willed the creation of a universe in which His love could be multiplied. In His wisdom, He chose to do this through a rich natural order that allowed for the possibility of physical defect and suffering. Physical suffering is not the same as moral evil. God did not directly will suffering, He willed sensitive, rational creatures. In *Summa contra Gentiles*, Thomas says:

Now it is necessary that God's goodness, which in itself is one and simple, should be manifested in many ways in His creation; because creatures in themselves cannot attain the simplicity of God. Thus it is that for the completion of the universe there are required diverse grades of being, of which some hold a high and some a low place in the universe. That this multiformity of grades may be preserved in things, God allows some evils, lest many good things should be hindered.²¹

This is an interesting point. It means that the inescapable price for awareness and feeling is the possibility of pain. The eye that is exquisitely sensitive to beauty, for

“Would You Consent?”

The morality of torture is a topic in current discussions of the “war on terror.” Here the question is raised on a more basic level:

“Tell me yourself, I challenge you—answer. Imagine that you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men happy in the end, giving them peace and rest at last, but that it was essential and inevitable to torture to death only

one tiny creature—the baby beating its breast with its fist, for instance—and to found that edifice on its unavenged tears, would you consent to be the architect of those conditions? Tell me, and tell me the truth.”

“No, I wouldn't consent,” said Alyosha softly.

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (London: Heinemann, 1912).

The claim could be made that God has a "higher morality" by which his actions are to be judged. But it is a strange "higher morality" which claims that what we call "bad" is good and what we call "good" is bad. Such a morality can have no meaning to us. . . . God's "higher morality" being the opposite of ours, cannot offer any grounds for deciding that he is somehow good.

— B. C. Johnson

example, will be equally sensitive to ugliness. The only way we could suffer less is if we loved less. It is the nature of love to experience both happiness and sadness. To use Thomas's logic, love without concern for our loved ones is contradictory. Is it possible to love others and not suffer when they suffer? No, love without suffering is impossible. Feeling and awareness, Thomas argued, involve both pleasure and pain, which are inseparable.

According to Thomas, God could not have fully manifested His nature if He had created a universe of limited choices in which we were forced to love Him and do His will. God, Thomas says, is worthy of love freely given. If we had no choice but to love God, it would no longer be love. It would not be worthy of God. Besides, love under coercion is one of those contradictions Thomas said could not exist. Therefore, since God chose to create a universe in which we could love, He *had* to give us the freedom necessary for love. "Freedom" that prohibits certain choices is not freedom; it is another contradiction.

This, then, is Thomas's solution to the problem of evil: *Though God did not deliberately will evil, He willed the real possibility of evil: Evil must always be possible when love and goodness are free choices.* God wills the good of the whole universe. From the standpoint of the whole, a universe containing free moral choices is better than a restricted universe without love and responsibility. We are more like God with freedom than without it.

According to Thomas, the overall perfection of the universe requires a range of beings, some of which get sick, decay, die, and so on. By virtue of being human, as a union of body and soul, we are subject to physical pain and suffering. God could have created beings that do not suffer physical death and pain (like angels), but they would not be human. He could not create *humans* who do not suffer.

God willed us freedom that we might love Him in this world, not so we could use it for moral evil. But He could not give us the freedom to choose good without also letting us choose evil. God wills our free choice of good by allowing us the free choice of good or evil. Mature parents understand this. At some point, the child's greatest good must be purchased at the risk of letting him or her make bad decisions. Some of these can have terrible consequences. But love of the child requires the risk.

For Deeper Consideration

Reflect on the idea that God chose to allow evil in order to allow free will and love. Do you think freedom with the real possibility of abuse is better than forced limitation, no matter how good the reasons for limitations? What might this imply about forms of government? About censorship? About banning books or music or drugs? Which is more godlike, protecting people for their own sakes or letting them risk harm in the name of freedom? Has Thomas provided a satisfactory solution to the problem of evil?

These are intriguing and complex arguments (and there is much more to both Augustine's and Aquinas's positions than can be addressed here), and it is not clear that they "solve" the problem of evil. Isn't God still responsible for creating a universe in which so much evil is chosen, in which so much suffering occurs? Is it not still reasonable, even necessary, to ask whether we would not be better off with less "freedom" if that means less overall suffering? But what if, in exchange for less freedom and less suffering, we must do without love?

Commentary

Perhaps you find Thomas's arguments not quite convincing. Why doesn't God make His existence clearly indisputable to everyone? Why require proofs anyway? Why didn't God use His wisdom and omnipotence to create us so that we do not suffer or do wrong? These are always unanswerable questions, for they amount to asking why did God create *this* universe?

As a Christian philosopher, Thomas pursued his natural theology as far as he could, but he refused to speculate on God's ultimate motives. In the end, he accepted the limits of the human mind when it confronts the infinite. There's even a tradition that Thomas turned toward mysticism late in his life. He is supposed to have said that everything he had written was "as straw"—but he wouldn't say what he "saw" that taught him that.

Thomas's philosophy is alive today as a vital component of Roman Catholicism, but the impact of his great efforts extends beyond the church. He is the first philosopher to have actually produced a comprehensive, logically ordered synoptic (holistic) science, when science is understood as *organized knowledge*. That is, he fulfilled the promise of Aristotle and actually produced a cohesive *system* that included all the known sciences of his time.

Of course, the fragmentation and specialization of knowledge today make such an achievement virtually impossible. That does not reduce the desirability, and perhaps the need, for a cohesive, consistent, all-encompassing philosophy, even if it must be less grand. From Thomas we can learn more than the Scholastic method. In his great effort we see that faith need not be a substitute for philosophical rigor. We see that in spite of the confusions and problems in his arguments, it is still preferable to balance faith with reason rather than to believe, not in humility, but in ignorance.

Religions are the great fairy-tales of the conscience.
— George Santayana

The logical and theoretical questions Thomas faced still confront basic Christian doctrine. Questions about ultimate causes remain beyond the scope of science, but they do not disappear just because scientists cannot answer them. In Thomas Aquinas we encounter a rare, magnificent attempt to blend faith, reason, and experience into wisdom. If so comprehensive a system is no longer possible, it does not follow that no comprehensive vision is possible. The very effort to construct a consistent, coherent philosophy may be worth more than any risk to our faith in science or religion.

Thomas squarely faced the tension between reason and faith and, without abandoning either, gave faith his ultimate allegiance. The next major figure in the history of philosophy, René Descartes, faced the same tension, but gave himself to reason. In so doing, he ushered in the modern era.

Summary of Main Points

- Augustine's efforts to synthesize early Christian theology with his own understanding of Greek philosophy and Manichean dualism anticipate major philosophical and theological ideas concerning doubt and certainty, the divided self, consciousness, time, free will and God's foreknowledge of history, and the philosophy of history.
- Augustine rejected Epicureanism and Stoicism for placing too much value on human reason and will. According to Augustine, reason is powerless and perverse without a will grounded in grace, love, and proper longing. For Augustine, faith alone makes understanding possible; faith is a necessary condition for productive philosophical inquiry.
- Scholastic philosophy was a product of a hierarchical society based on a God-centered view of the universe. Scholastic philosophy developed out of efforts to reconcile Aristotle's naturalism with the increasingly complex theological problems that developed when it became clear the Second Coming of Christ might not occur for generations.
- Scholastic philosophy rested on logical and linguistic analysis of texts and arguments for the ultimate purpose of producing a systematic statement and defense of Christian beliefs. The reconciliation of faith and reason was based, in part, on the law of contradiction: No statement can be both true and false at the same time and under the same conditions.
- Thomas Aquinas introduced new levels of thoroughness, scholarship, and methodical rigor to philosophy in the form of his massive summaries known as *summae*. Thomas's efforts to prove the existence of God using the Five Ways are among the most widely studied examples of Scholastic thinking. The Five Ways are the argument from motion, the cosmological argument, the argument from necessity, the argument from gradation, and the argument from design.
- Thomas's logic relies on two principles: The principle of sufficient reason is the idea that nothing happens without a reason, that no *adequate* theory or explanation can contain any brute, crude, unexplained facts. The principle of plenitude is the metaphysical principle that given infinity and the richness of the universe, any real possibility must occur—at least once.
- The problem of evil derives from the apparently inescapable conclusion either that God cannot prevent evil, and is therefore not all-powerful, or that God will not prevent evil, and is therefore not all-good. Thomas answers the problem of evil from two directions: First, he argues that evil is not a positive thing, but a lack of goodness. Hence, it cannot come from God. Second, Thomas returns to the importance of love, asserting that God created the universe in order to multiply His love. Because love cannot be forced, it always requires freedom of choice. Genuine freedom of choice includes the real possibility of evil. God does not will evil; He wills freedom and love.

Post-Reading Reflections

Now that you've had a chance to learn about the Scholar, use your new knowledge to answer these questions.

1. Compare and contrast the classical worldview with the medieval.
2. What basic conditions led to the development of Christian philosophy? Where did the need for interpretation come from?
3. In your own words, describe the chief characteristics of Scholastic scholarship.
4. In what ways is the medieval scholar the forerunner of the modern professor?
5. Which of the Five Ways do you think is the weakest? Explain why.
6. Which of the Five Ways do you think is the most convincing? Explain why.
7. In general terms, compare and contrast scientific attempts to explain the origin of the universe with theological or philosophical ones.
8. What is evil, according to Thomas?
9. According to Thomas, what is the relationship of free will to love?