

## Lecture: Existence of God

Preliminaries: We're not debating the full range of the ways in which people claim to know the existence of god. We are using reasons and constructing arguments for and against belief in god. We're not using direct religious experience or faith, but are rather looking for explanations that any rational person can buy. We are looking for public, as opposed to private, reasons for believing in god.

### *Thomas Aquinas*

Aquinas was a Catholic monk interested in the separation of faith and reason. He constructed arguments for the existence of god that appealed to reason, not faith or biblical authority. He proposed "5 Ways" to prove the existence of god.

Aquinas was heavily influenced by Aristotle; his intellectual mission was to reconcile Aristotle with Catholic doctrine. Aristotle's ethics were secular, and Aquinas liked him for just this reason. Aristotle used reason to justify his ethics and metaphysical claims. Aquinas wanted to do this for Catholic ethical and metaphysical claims, thinking that reason ought to confirm what faith tells us.

### The Five Ways

- 1.) *Argument from change.* Things that exist change. Things that change are changed by something else. Things have the potential to change, even if they haven't changed yet (a saucepan is potentially hot). In order to change something, a thing has to actually be in change (a burner is actually hot). A thing can't be both actually changing and potentially changing at the same time (the saucepan can't be potentially hot and actually hot at the same time). Thus, things can't cause themselves to change. Because every change is caused by something else before it, there is a chain of causes. But this chain cannot go backwards infinitely; there has to be a first cause. That cause is god.

This argument might show the existence of god, but it is of a certain type of god. The philosophy of religion distinguishes two types of god. There is *theism*, which holds that there is a god that thinks, is interested in human affairs, and is omnipotent and can intervene in the world. This is the god of the bible. There is also *deism*, which sees god as the first cause, a being or phenomena that explains the origin of the universe but that hasn't had anything to do with the ensuing physical processes that shaped it. Aquinas at best proves a deist god with his first two arguments.

- 2.) *Argument from Causation.* Identical to the argument from change.

- 3.) *Argument from contingency.* Some things are necessary – could not be otherwise (like  $2+2=4$ ) – and some things are contingent, or could be otherwise (you don't have to be reading these notes). Anything that is contingent, doesn't have to be, and thus at one point didn't exist. If all things were contingent, then there would have been a time when there was nothing at all, because everything requires something that exists to cause it to be. But if there was a point at which nothing existed, how could anything come into existence? Thus, there must be (or have been) something that's not contingent, which started the chain of contingent things. This is god – the one necessary thing.

This argument still only gets us a deist god, not a theist one.

- 4.) *Argument from degrees of excellence.*

- 5.) *Argument from harmony.* Some things that don't have knowledge, like a butterfly's wings, work towards an end, or a purpose. These things are not this way because of chance – the butterfly's wings don't work by chance, but because they have a purpose. Things that have no knowledge cannot work towards a purpose unless they are guided by something that possesses knowledge or intelligence. That thing is god.

This argument takes us closer to a theistic god. God has to have a mind, intelligence, in order to plan something to work for a purpose. Also, the features that Aquinas is referring to all help animals and humans live well; this is evidence for a benevolent god that cares about humans and animals. God wouldn't create such good features unless he wanted to see organisms thrive in life.

### *Swinburne*

Swinburne puts forth several arguments for the existence of god.

He points to the existence of uniform physical laws as evidence that god exists. God created physical laws that are in effect throughout the entire universe because he wanted it to be the way that it is. If the gravity constant or speed of light were different, life may never have emerged. Swinburne is taking an argument traditionally used to deny the existence of god – if everything obeys physical laws, god isn't necessary - to argue for god's existence.

This view is anthropocentric, meaning that it relies on the assumption that human beings are the center of the universe. To think that the thing responsible for the universe's physical laws is like us, has thoughts, emotions, and desires, is making the mistake that Xenophanes described.

One response to this is the *anthropic principle*. The universe isn't special because humans exist, against all probability. It just seems special to us, because we exist, against all probability. Swinburne responds with a thought experiment: Imagine a machine that will kill you unless you get a king of hearts on every single one of ten deals. You get all ten kings of hearts; you would think that the machine is rigged. The fact that the universe produced life, against such huge odds, shows that it must have been rigged, by god.

An attempt to get around Swinburne's objection is the *many worlds argument*. If there are a billion billion planets, it's not all that surprising that life evolved on one of them. And if there were a billion billion *universes*, then it's even less odd for there to be one, and for us to be in one, that facilitates life. In reply, Swinburne agrees that this could be possible if there were in fact billions of universes, but says that we actually have no reason to believe that there are any other universes. It's much simpler and more economical to postulate the existence of just one god that created one universe, well suited for life. But is the existence of god really a simple theory?

Swinburne also says that the fact that the universe is constructed so that human life emerged via evolution is evidence for god; there could have been a universe that didn't produce human life. But there wasn't, and that shows that there is a god that wants us to be here. Humans think and make choices. This is good, and god wanted to see this happen, so he created the universe. The entire universe was created so that humans could be here and exercise moral choice.

This view is identical to that of Socrates, who thought that all that mattered was being good. On his view, morality is the most important thing in the universe. Again, this is very anthropocentric.

The contrary view is that it is absurd to think that the whole universe was created for human beings. Humans have emerged relatively recently in a tiny part of a vast universe; why should they be the most important? That's like a single individual saying that all other people exist for him, to see if he will be good or bad towards them.

He also uses an aesthetic argument. The universe is beautiful; just look at the stars, the changing of seasons, movement of planets, etc. God wants it to be this way. If everything came about randomly, there is little chance that it would be beautiful. Thus, there must have been a creator, like a painting has a painter. But beauty is subjective. We might find the stars beautiful, but some people or other organisms might think they're hideous.

Swinburne lays out the *argument from design*, which was most famously articulated by William Paley in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It goes like this:

If you came across a stone in the woods, you would think it had been there forever, or at least you wouldn't ask any questions about where it came from. If you came across a watch, however, you would assume that it had a maker. The watch is complex, has a purpose, and if you remove any part of it, it wouldn't work. Someone must have designed it.

Existence itself, especially biological existence, is so complex that it must require a designer: god.

Darwin's evolutionary theory explained how biological complexity can emerge without a designer. Swinburne updates Paley's argument to get around evolutionary theory. He accepts evolution, but says that god set things up in such a way as to ensure that people would come about.

This position has problems too. If god wanted humans to exist, why did he choose evolution as his means of creating us? If god was all powerful, he could just create humans without evolution. Traditionally, whenever humans couldn't explain how something came about, they would say that god did it. But now we've figured out how humans and animals came about. Why should we still believe in god? It's like Santa Claus. Kids believe that Santa brings presents. When a kid discovers that their parents are the ones putting presents under the tree, it doesn't make sense for the kid to then think that Santa is working through his parents.