

- **Anselm and Aquinas: Some General Remarks**

Let us consider some of Bertrand Russell's remarks in "Why I am Not a Theist." Do they adequately respond to Anselm and Aquinas's claims? You may be thinking, "yes and no." Certainly, Russell's critiques of First-Cause, Natural Law, and Argument from Design, seem to respond directly to Aquinas: at least, to what we perceive as the *logical form and content* of Aquinas. But this raises other question(s): what *is* their form and content? This requires us to place Aquinas and Anselm in some historical context. (Certainly they weren't twentieth century analytic philosophers like Russell!) This will help us better understand what kind of thinkers they were, even Russell admits that proofs of the existence of God from Medieval philosophers/theologians were "intellectually rigorous."

Though it may not seem to bear directly on the integrity of their arguments, it's important to remember at the outset that Anselm's and Aquinas' writings served vastly different purposes than what we'd understand today from a typical philosophical essay. Though Aquinas is far more logically methodical and rigorous than Anselm, both Anselm and Aquinas saw reason as "the handmaiden of faith." Philosophical analysis was definitely *not* an end in itself in the high Middle Ages, but served chiefly as a *means* to clarify what was taken as the basis of transcending (i.e. going beyond) reason: namely, "revealed" knowledge.¹

- **Anselm**

For starters, it's important to understand that Anselm was a *Platonist*. The philosophy of Plato, during this period of the Middle Ages, was really the sole and dominant way of thinking: St. Augustine combined Christian thought with Platonism seven centuries earlier (ca. 5th century A.D.), and in Anselm's time, a time when Europe was beginning to emerge from the Dark Ages, Christian theology and whatever was left of philosophy was virtually *identified* with Augustine.

What interests us here is Plato's epistemology and metaphysics. According to Plato, material existence is the least 'real,' akin to a world of shadow and images as described in his Cave Allegory in the Republic. Moreover, what was most real was a world of perfect and changeless Forms, existing outside of space and time and matter. We come to 'know' objects in the (shadowy) material realm because our soul 'knew' those objects' perfect Forms. For instance, it is possible, to teach a slaveboy

¹ Though in our contemporary culture, materialism seems pretty much the dominant metaphysical position, of course in the Mediaeval the metaphysical picture was far different. Aside from a picture supporting the existence of divinity, ontologically superior to nature, the cosmos itself was viewed as fixed, and *organic*, i.e., like a vast organism. From this metaphysical position the epistemic notion that knowledge can be derived not only from sensory experience, but can also be revealed, seems to make good sense. Whereas of course today, from a generally materialistic position, where the cosmos is viewed as vast and dynamic, then the notion of revealed knowledge makes no sense. In other words, keep in mind how metaphysical assumptions will shape epistemological ones, and vice versa.

geometry because even without prior education the slaveboy instantly recognizes a geometric shape like a square or a circle, even if it's drawn roughly on the sand. According to Plato, the boy 'knows' these figures because his mind/soul is familiar with their perfect Forms.

For Plato, mathematics gives us access to this world of Forms. Mathematics and contemplation awaken the soul to the Forms, and thus constitute real knowledge (*nous*.) Opinion, (*doxa*), on the other hand doesn't give real knowledge: one is left in the shadows.

It hardly needs mentioning how strongly Platonism influenced Christian thought. The question becomes, in the case of Anselm, would his Platonism in any way help his ontological proof of the existence of God (as that-which-no-greater-can-be-conceived?²) Some problems with the Ontological argument include:

1. **(Logical)** "Great," "powerful," "good," etc., are ultimately comparative terms. In other words, we understand them primarily in the form: x is greater than y . To speak therefore of 'the most powerful,' the 'most great' becomes ambiguous, because we naturally ask: relative to what? (The Mediaeval theologians puzzled this one out in the form of the question: If God is omnipotent, then nothing would prevent God from creating a stone God couldn't lift. But then that wouldn't make God omnipotent, etc.)
2. **(Metaphysical-Epistemic)** As Anselm's contemporary Gaunilo already charged, would conceiving of perfect island, or perfect cow, secure their existence? Or as stated more precisely by Kant seven centuries following Anselm: "existence is not a property."

In answer to 1., Plato's theory of Forms stated, among other things, that knowing beauty, goodness, etc meant that the soul was "participating" in the Form Beauty, and the Form Good. So there's nothing really inconsistent about talking about perfect goodness, or perfect justice, etc. They're no other than Platonic Forms, which some theologians asserted were actually 'ideas in God's mind.'

In answer to 2., again, in the cases of real knowledge, as opposed to opinion, it's perfectly legitimate to attribute the property "existence" to the thing thought about. For example, someone sees a drawing of a triangle, the person *knows* it's a triangle because its Form *exists*. So Anselm might reply to Gaunilo that examples like islands and cows aren't relevant, for they consist of objects in the world and are therefore subject to opinion. On the other hand, divinity is an object of contemplation, therefore, a' la Plato, giving true knowledge.

² Of course, in Ch XV, to perhaps further confuse, he states that God is also "something greater than can be conceived." Is this just a poetic maneuver, devoid of logical content? For if one accepts that God is also "greater than can be conceived" then it seems hard to say anything definite about God at all, as God would transcend all attributions

But there's a more serious problem in Anselm's thought: circularity. Consider the opening line: "I believe so [therefore] I can understand." The premise is Anselm's beliefs, the conclusion is "I can understand" (those beliefs.) This doesn't seem like reasoning, but more like rationalizing. So, for example, in the above replies to 1. and 2., they aren't so much strict arguments as they seem like question-begging maneuvers from a basis of Platonic beliefs.

Platonism, at least in the world of mathematics and logic, persists, albeit in a more sophisticated and certainly less poetical fashion. A Platonist mathematician (and there are plenty today), for example, would argue that mathematical 'objects' (numbers, functions, sets, etc) really do 'exist' in such a manner independent of the way we represent them. You have to be sort of a Platonist, for instance, if you're going to accept the *reductio ad absurdum* below concerning the proof of the existence of infinitely many primes. Why? Because the argument *refers to the whole set of primes, as though it were 'out there.'*

- P1. Assume that there are finitely many primes
 - P2. Let N be largest prime number from that set.
 - P3. It can be shown³ that there exists a prime number $M > N$
-

Conclusion: Therefore there is no greatest prime number N, so there are infinitely many prime numbers.

This proof, though alike in general form to Anselm's, differs in content because Anselm inserts a negation in one of the middle premises (assume that that-which-no-greater-can-be-conceived does not exist.) Negation is actually a tricky concept in logic (for instance, saying: "The chair is not blue" commits me to the notion that the chair has a property like color. On the other hand, saying: "I am not the creator of the universe" doesn't commit me to the notion that the universe *has* a creator.)

- **Aquinas**

Thomas Aquinas was one of the first Europeans (outside of Spain) to incorporate Aristotle into his theology. Aside from having basically invented logic, Aristotle, Plato's most brilliant student, developed a philosophy substantially different from that of Plato. For one thing, Aristotle didn't believe Forms exist *outside* of material objects, but rather, that the form resided *in* the object, giving it shape and definition.

When reading Aquinas' arguments, it's important to realize Aquinas was dealing with an Aristotelean notion of cause, which is much different from the way we think about causes today. For us, a 'cause' or 'effect' usually just denote events or occurrences.⁴ Not for Aristotle. The Aristotelean notion of cause presupposed the existence of a substantial (i.e. *independently existing*) agent bringing about the effect (by making a

³ Details suppressed here

⁴ Of course, contemporary physicists place other restrictions on the notion of 'cause,' dealing with concepts from special relativity and signal propagation. Nevertheless, this talk of cause will still reduce to just talk about events (described by points in space-time.)

potential property actual.) For example, the *agent* “fire” can cause fresh wood to burn, i.e. to bring about a property “burnt” from potential to actual. Diagrammatically:

$$Green \xrightarrow{Fire} Burnt$$

Where the causal agent $A = Fire$, causes the actual property $C = 'Green'$ to give way to its effect $E = Burnt$. Thus, in terms of agents A , causes C , and effects E , Aristotle’s causation can be understood by the following diagram:

$$C \xrightarrow{A} E$$

Aside from this notion of a cause requiring an agent, for Aristotle, there were four kinds of cause: efficient, material, formal, final. Efficient cause relates most how we understand the notion today, as it simply stands for the actual process creating the effect. Material, formal, final, on the other hand, relate to the body’s material and formal way of existing, and the final cause describes the ‘goal’ or purpose that is the object’s ‘aim.’ (For instance, the final cause of the acorn is the acorn tree.) Usually, all four causes can subsist in an entity. For example, consider a (female) person: 1) her efficient cause is her parents, 2) her material cause is her body, 3) her formal cause is her soul⁵, 4) and her final cause is fully mature adulthood.

Now having briefly gone over Aristotle’s notions of causation, we look at Aquinas’ five arguments in closer detail.

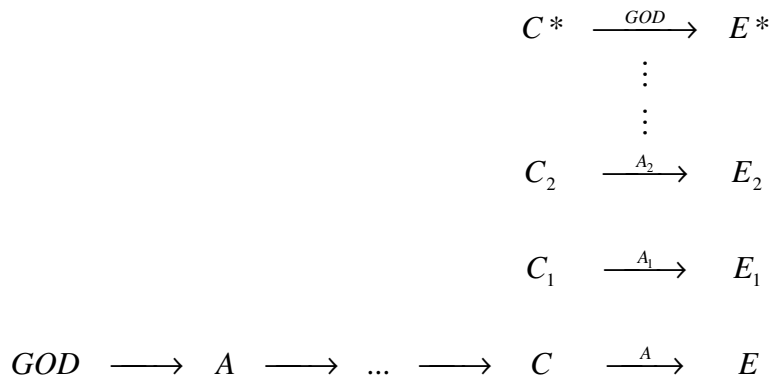
1st. Argument

Here, Aquinas is trying to break infinite regress in terms of the substantial causal *agents*. Since every causal process $C \xrightarrow{A} E$ requires an agent A , who itself might undergo a causal process brought about by another agent $A_1 : C_A \xrightarrow{A_1} E_A$. Likewise agent A_1 might undergo a causal process brought about by another agent $A_2 : C_{A_1} \xrightarrow{A_2} E_{A_1}$, etc. “The buck has to stop somewhere” so Aquinas stipulates that God is the final agent, of which there can be no other agent subjecting God to causal change.

2nd. Argument

This is the ‘unmoved mover’ argument. Everything must have an antecedent cause, except for God (to break the infinite regress.) Seen diagrammatically, the two arguments look like this:

⁵ For Aristotle, soul (form) resided *in* the body, giving the body its particular shape.



Where the horizontal chain is the second argument but the vertical is the first argument.

Of course, as discussed in class and in discussion section, these infinite regress arguments would appear self-contradictory, since on the one hand we're told that every event has an antecedent cause or a causal agent, and on the other hand we're told that God doesn't. Of course, Aquinas would counter by arguing that "God is not a being among beings," i.e., God has properties different from things in nature. (For example, infinity has properties different from finite numbers, by analogy.) But again, this just begs the question.

3rd Argument

Here, Aquinas is arguing that a necessary being must have existed all along, to allow for the perpetual appearance of contingent beings that can come and go (in and out of existence.) The logical fallacy occurs in the sentence: "If something *can* fail to exist, there must have been a time in which it *has* failed to exist." Consider the following counterexample, *in which time is restricted to the person's lifetime, and that the person is still alive.*⁶ Suppose this person is French and never lived outside of France. Obviously, such a person *can* fail to live in France (he or she could work or study abroad), but in this case this does *not* mean that s/he *has* failed to live outside of France, since s/he never left the country. In other words, though necessity implies possibility, possibility does *not* imply necessity.

4th Argument

This one may seem a lot like Anselm's, since Aquinas talks about the "maximally true, good, and noble." However, in this case, "the greatest thing of a kind is the cause of everything of that kind" so there is the extra notion of causation. Also, Aquinas is not using a reduction ad absurdum, so this isn't really analogous to Anselm's proof. It has the most in common with the 1st Argument, as it deals

⁶ We can restrict time in this manner to ensure that this person exists. But in this case it's 'exists in France'

with the supreme substantial agent presiding over all causal occurrences of a particular kind.

5th Argument

This is an argument by design, but what supports its core is Aristotle's notion of final cause: "We see that even things that lack consciousness, such as physical objects, act for a purpose...and they tend towards what is best." Of course (see Monday Oct 03 handout from class) design arguments are subject to the false analogy charge.

- **Bertrand Russell**

So we're back at the first question, whether Russell's charges apply to Aquinas, especially. We could qualify that the subtlety in Aquinas' and Anselm's arguments lay in the Platonic and Aristotelean philosophies (though, as discussed above, this doesn't make their arguments *valid*, necessarily.)

Russell does talk about the role played by chance in his First Cause rebuttal, however interesting it may be, it's irrelevant in the face of Aquinas and Anselm's arguments simply because in the Medieval, there *was* no sophisticated idea of statistical averages (probability and statistics emerged centuries later.)

Against the argument of design, Russell invokes cultural horrors like Fascism to argue against intelligent design, which is a poorly chosen example. For anyone believing in intelligent design could always counter that humans possess free will. (The problem of evil) A far better rebuttal against intelligent design is to point out all the 'stupidity' that occurs in biological systems. Aside from obvious evolutionary adaptation phenomena occurring all the time (consider a simple example: you don't finish your antibiotics, and by natural selection you breed antibiotic resistant bacteria) the larger point is the world isn't 'random' but has multiple constraints which present niches for species to adapt to. And the adaptation mechanism is never 'intelligent,' for species adapt according to selective pressures in ways that are 'good enough'—which is far from optimal. Consider the human eye: As Richard Dawkins wrote in the *Blind Watchmaker*, the eye's very complexity has caused some to believe a modular system like the eye, so "perfect" could *never* have developed through natural selection and mutations. *But the point is, the eye is very far from 'perfect!'* (Consider the significant number of near-sighted people.) The prevalence of nearsightedness, or myopia, indicates that subtle genetic variations with this trait are still within the 'good enough' range.

As a coda, there are more 'intelligent' theories of 'intelligent design' that are being advanced, not in the field of biology, but in the field of cosmology. Lee Smolin reviews them and argues against some of the claims in his book *The Life*

of the Cosmos (1997). The claim stems from the Anthropic Principle: that the fundamental constants of the universe (the electron charge, Planck's constant, the proton mass, the speed of light) are 'fine tuned' for life to be possible, requiring as it does a very specific set of conditions to allow its complex interactions to flourish.

In many ways, this contemporary debate in cosmology, against the intelligent design and the Darwinians (i.e, those who believe there are *many* universes, with different fundamental constants, we just happen to live in a 'successful' one!) is reminiscent in form to the 19th century debates concerning natural selection. Keep in mind there were evolutionary notions going as far back as the Medieval. However, they always ascribed 'purpose' to this process (using Aristotle's notion of final cause). What made Darwin controversial in his time was he, like Newton, took 'purpose' out of natural explanations by showing the natural selection can do the job. A similar debate concerning 'cosmological natural selection' goes on today.