

**RATIONALITY AND RELIGIOUS  
BELIEF**

**BY**

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## **CONTENTS**

|  | <b>PAGE</b> |
|--|-------------|
| <b>INTRODUCTION</b>                                | <b>1</b>    |
| <b>CHAPTER 1      IRRATIONALISM.</b>               | <b>7</b>    |
| <b>CHAPTER 2      AQUINAS ON FAITH AND REASON.</b> | <b>26</b>   |
| <b>CHAPTER 3      THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT.</b>    | <b>50</b>   |
| <b>CHAPTER 4      THE COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT.</b>   | <b>78</b>   |
| <b>CHAPTER 5      RATIONALITY WITHOUT PROOF.</b>   | <b>111</b>  |
| <b>CONCLUSION</b>                                  | <b>142</b>  |
| <b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>                                | <b>144</b>  |

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other higher degree or graduate diploma in any university, and to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person, except when due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

**ANDRZEJ TADEUSZ KOWALUK**

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this dissertation is to enquire into the rationality of religious belief and, in particular, into the rationality of the Christian belief-system.

The method employed is one of analysing what Christians have had to say about the rationality of what they believe rather than that of first arriving at a set of conditions severally necessary and jointly sufficient for the rationality of belief in general, and then determining whether or not the Christian belief-system would satisfy them.

Irrationalism is the first position that is examined, with particular reference to the work of Soren Kierkegaard. The Irrationalist holds both that there is a fundamental conflict between faith and reason, and that irrationality is an absolute condition of an adequate Christian Faith. Both tenets of the Irrationalist's position are considered and each is rejected as untenable.

The second position examined is that of St. Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas argues that there is a body of evidence which can settle the dispute between believer and sceptic. His position is examined with particular reference to his distinction between the preambles to faith and the articles of faith. A number of inconsistencies are pointed out.

Chapters 3 and 4 consider two of the more important arguments for the existence of God. Chapter 3 considers the Ontological Argument with particular reference to Saint Anselm's version of it. The argument is rejected as are modern attempts to resurrect it.

Chapter 4 considers the Cosmological Argument with particular reference to the first and most important three of Aquinas' five ways. These are also found wanting.

Chapter 5 focuses upon two contemporary attempts to defend Christianity against charges that it is irrational in the absence of a successful theistic proof. The positions considered are those of Norman Malcolm and Alvin Plantinga. Whilst there are significant differences between the two, both point out that evidence must end somewhere and argue that belief in the existence of God belongs to that set of beliefs which do not require evidence. Both positions are found wanting.

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this dissertation is to enquire into the rationality of religious belief: to determine whether or not there is some sense in which religious belief can be considered rational. It is a difficult task requiring clear definition from the start.

We must be certain that we understand the term "religious belief" and be clear on which method we are to employ in deciding whether or not religious belief is rational. The first issues that we must deal with, then, are conceptual and methodological ones.

To begin with, it is important to realise that the term "religious belief" is used to refer to one particular system of religious belief, that of Christianity, and not to religious belief as such. After all, there are a large number of religions, each with its own unique system of beliefs. Whilst there may be some over-lap between the beliefs of individual religions, we should not be surprised to find a great deal of variation. Both Jews and Moslems, for example, believe in the existence of a supreme being, but there are many fundamental beliefs which they do not hold in common. This area of disagreement would be even greater amongst Jews and Hindus, or Jews and Buddhists. Here there would not necessarily be agreement even about the existence of a supreme being. This being the case, it is not altogether clear how much sense it makes to talk of religious belief as such. It may be that there is no set of beliefs common to all religions, or if there is, that this set is a very small one. For this thesis to be

manageable, then, our concern must remain with one particular religion: Christianity. To this extent the title is misleading. Our main objective is to evaluate the rationality of the Christian belief-system.

In attempting to fulfil this objective, however, one is faced with rather large methodological problems. The most natural way to proceed, it would seem, would be to outline a set of conditions, severally necessary and jointly sufficient for the rationality of belief in general and then to determine whether or not the Christian belief-system would satisfy them. The problem with this method, however, is that it is notoriously difficult to arrive at any non-trivial conditions for the rationality of belief. Consider the following example to illustrate this point:

The concept of rationality, we would agree, is closely connected to that of evidence. Indeed, it is often claimed that the process of proportioning the degree of one's belief to the strength of the available evidence is paradigmatic of rationality. We might proceed, then, by including a proposition something along the following lines amongst our necessary conditions for rationality:-

- (1) A belief can only be rational if the strength with which it is held is in direct proportion to the strength of the available evidence supporting its truth.

However, a number of problems immediately spring to mind. To begin with, the term "available evidence" is far from crystal clear. To whom must this evidence be available? If I evaluate the truth of some proposition and reject it because of failure through carelessness, lack of time, or whatever, to find some crucial bit

of evidence that would otherwise be available to me, am I being rational or not? Secondly, even if I manage to uncover all the available evidence, how do I determine the strength of some set of evidence E for the truth of some proposition p? Are there any rules or procedures for this? It is often argued that this process is a matter for personal judgment and perhaps it is, but what if two or more individuals exercise their personal judgment and arrive at vastly different conclusions? This, after all, is a common thing in academic circles. It might be argued that some people are more rational than others and that we must follow the judgment of the most rational of the group, but even here how does one decide whether some person A is more rational than some other person B? Thirdly, how do we decide whether E really is evidence for p? Are there rules for this or do we once again rely upon personal judgment? I do not wish to suggest that these questions have no answer. Perhaps they do. Nevertheless, they do show that (1) is not as straight-forward as it would seem on first inspection.

The problems, however, do not end here. There is a far more serious consideration for anyone who puts (1) forward as a necessary condition for the rationality of belief. The problem is that we cannot demand that all of our beliefs have the support of the available evidence without committing ourselves to vicious circularity or to an infinite regress of justification.

Our evidence for any particular belief that we hold must consist of other beliefs that we hold. I cannot argue that some set of propositions E is evidence for some proposition p without holding that the propositions that make up E are themselves true.

These propositions, in other words, are themselves beliefs which I hold. But if p is to be rational, the beliefs which make up E must also be rational and, according to (1), these beliefs cannot be rational unless some new set of evidence E1 supports their truth. Now, the propositions that make up E1 must also be rational and thus require justification. In other words, we must have evidence for our evidence and new evidence for this evidence and so on ad infinitum, or else be committed to circularity. Either way, we have not provided an adequate justification for our beliefs. It must be rational, in other words, to hold that some of our beliefs are "basic"; that there are beliefs for which we require no evidence but to which we can appeal in order to justify other beliefs that we hold. Thus, we cannot hold that (1) is a necessary condition of rationality.

The problems faced by any individual attempting to outline a non-trivial set of conditions for the rationality of belief, it will be agreed, are enormous. The difficulty is not so much that the problems I have raised cannot be solved, perhaps they can, but that it seems likely that the solutions will vary according to particular instances. It seems unlikely, for example, that we will be able to determine the conditions under which some set of purported evidence E is relevant to the truth of p without being aware of the content of p. Any approach that requires a set of conditions for the rationality of belief in general will flounder from the start due to the enormity of the task involved.

A more fruitful approach might be to analyse what Christians themselves have had to say about the rationality of what they believe. Such an approach would involve a critical analysis both

of the positions that Christians have adopted concerning the status of their belief and of the criteria or conditions of rationality which they use, be they explicit or implicit. In this way we could avoid the type of problems which have been outlined above without shirking the issues involved.

At first glance it might appear that this approach is beset with as many difficulties as the first. Just as it would prove difficult to outline specific conditions for the rationality of belief in general, even a cursory glance at Christian Apologetics reveals a plethora of divergent views and positions. It is simply not true that there is a specific Christian response to the question of rationality. Contrast, for example, the views of a Kierkegaard to those of Aquinas. The former claims that there is a necessary antithesis between faith and reason, whereas the latter talks of a perfect harmony between the two. Thus, it would appear that there is not even agreement about the value of rationality let alone upon the substantive question of whether or not the Christian belief-system is a rational one.

Nevertheless, it seems to me, that for all the divergence and disagreement, we may talk of broad positions and accept that some thinkers have more of importance to say than others. Thus, although we could not possibly examine the positions of all those who have responded to our question, we can identify those which we consider to be the most important. It is my intention to do this.

This first chapter of this dissertation will deal with a position which I will call "Irrationalism". This is the view that there can be no such thing as a rational Christian Faith; that Faith and reason are necessarily opposed to one another. This view

is typified and finds its most influential exposition in the work of Kierkegaard and it is upon his work that we will concentrate. It is important because it challenges, a priori, our main aim. If Christianity is of its essence irrational then there is little point in proceeding with our task. We will find, however, that the basic tenets of Irrationalism are without substance.

The second, third and fourth chapters will deal with the traditional response to the question of rationality; that Christianity is rational because philosophers, through the use of demonstrative argument, can provide the epistemological preambles for faith. Chapter two will examine the most influential proponent of this position St. Thomas Aquinas, whilst chapters three and four will consider examples for the Ontological and Cosmological Arguments for the existence of God. This traditional form of apologetic, whilst not as obviously fallacious as philosophers would sometimes have us believe, will also be found wanting.

The final chapter will examine two attempts to defend the rationality of religious belief in the absence of a successful demonstrative proof of the truth of theism. The philosophers considered will be Norman Malcolm and Alvin Plantinga. Whilst there are significant differences between their respective positions, both point out that evidence must end somewhere and that theistic belief belongs to that set of beliefs which do not require demonstration. Their arguments are interesting and valuable but, once again, fail to answer certain crucial points. Thus our general conclusion will be that no successful attempt to defend the rationality of religious belief has been found and that this casts doubt upon the possibility of successfully undertaking such a task.



## CHAPTER ONE

### IRRATIONALISM

The first position that I wish to consider is that which I will call "IRRATIONALISM". According to the Irrationalist there is a fundamental conflict between faith and reason. Religious belief, he argues, is positively irrational; to consider it from the standpoint of reason alone is to reject it. To this extent the Irrationalist concurs with the atheist. Where he differs is in his continued adherence to Christianity. Faith, he claims, allows him to rise above the dictates of reason. Indeed, he considers irrationality to be an absolute condition of an adequate Christian faith.

This position is an odd one to say the least. The Irrationalist requires that faith fly in the face of reason, that it affirm what our cognitive faculties tell us is wrong. The natural response of most, sceptic and believer alike, is to reject it out of hand but to do this would be unfortunate. The Irrationalist deserves serious consideration for at least two reasons. The first of these is historical, the second philosophical.

To begin with, his position is almost as old as Christianity itself. Tertullian (c.160-c.220), for example, drew attention to the paradoxical nature of Christianity in statements such as that asserting that the Doctrine of the Incarnation is "certain because

impossible". His work has been influential amongst educated and uneducated believers alike. More recently, existentialists such as the Dane, Kierkegaard and the Spaniard, Unamuno have espoused forms of Irrationalism, elements of which have influenced many contemporary theologians, particularly of a Protestant persuasion.

The history and influence of Irrationalism in itself constitutes sufficient reason for dealing with it seriously in this thesis, but there is a more important reason. The Irrationalist challenges an assumption made by most philosophers of religion, be they of a sceptical or apologetic bent. This assumption concerns the value of rationality. Although there may be disagreement about whether or not religious belief is rational, philosophers of religion usually agree that it ought to be rejected if it is found to be irrational. The Irrationalist does not. He refuses to accept that there are any rational constraints upon what we may or may not believe in the area of religion. In doing this he seeks to take religion once and for all out of the competence of philosophy.

## I

There are two basic tenets of Irrationalism that require our attention. The first is the claim that there is a fundamental conflict between faith and reason, that religious belief is

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1. Tertullian De Carne Christi, Ch 5, quoted in The Encyclopedia of Philosophy ed Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), S.V. "Tertullian, Quintus Septimus Florens", by Robert Grant p. 95.

positively irrational. The second is that this irrationality is an absolute condition of an adequate Christian faith. Let us consider each of these in turn.

Our first task is one of clarification. We must understand the Irrationalist's claim that Christianity is positively irrational before we can comment on it. As we shall see, he uses the term in the strongest sense possible.

It is sometimes claimed that belief in the absence of adequate evidence is irrational. W.K. Clifford, for example, is famous for his assertion that it is "wrong always, everywhere, and for everyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence".<sup>1</sup> There are many who have agreed with him. Antony Flew being the most influential amongst contemporary philosophers.<sup>2</sup> On their view it is irrational to hold any proposition without having good reason to believe that it is true. Where the evidence for some proposition is ambiguous or inconclusive, they claim, the only appropriate attitude towards it is suspension of belief. Thus, for Christianity to be irrational, in this sense of the word, it is sufficient to demonstrate the inadequacy of any positive evidence presented by the believer. Unless the Christian can show that his position is true he must accept, according to the disciples of

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1. W. K. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief", in God Man and Religion, ed. Keith E. Yandell (Sydney: McGraw Hill, 1973), p. 509.

2. See Anthony Flew, God and Philosophy (New York: Harcourt, Bruce and World, 1966) and The Presumption of Atheism (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1976).

Clifford and Flew, that it is irrational.

The position of the Irrationalist, however, is much stronger than this. His is not a wishy-washy acceptance of the inconclusive nature of any evidence in support of Christianity. His claim is that an objective consideration of the matter will lead to an outright rejection of Christian belief. It is his view that Christianity, when considered from the standpoint of reason alone, is complete nonsense. It is not just that we cannot establish the truth of Christianity but that all the available evidence suggests that it is false.

The Irrationalist characteristically points to an element of the paradoxical or absurd at the very heart of Christianity. We have already noted Tertullian's attitude towards the Doctrine of the Incarnation and it is interesting to note the similarities between his position and that of Kierkegaard.

"The absurd is - that the eternal truth has come into being in time, that God has come into being, has been born, has grown up, and so forth, precisely like any other individual human being, quite indistinguishable from other individuals".<sup>1</sup>

What can be more absurd, Kierkegaard asks, than the claim that God and man were united in the person of Jesus Christ? God, after all, is the eternal truth; an infinite being, without limit. Man, on the other hand, is finite, limited, a creature. How can it be

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1. Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript, translated by David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 188.

possible for Christ to be both human and divine? For Kierkegaard, it is not.

This is not to say that Kierkegaard, or other Irrationalists for that matter, held that all Christian beliefs were essentially paradoxical or absurd in the way that the Doctrine of the Incarnation was held to be.<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard seem to have held that some religious beliefs were not only intelligible but that reason could provide us with some probability concerning their truth. Various historical assertions found in the Bible seems to fall into this category. Similarly, the question of God's existence seems to have been a perfectly intelligible one for him. Here, however, reason cannot decide the issue either way.

"I contemplate the order of nature in the hope of finding God, and I see omnipotence and wisdom; but I also see much else that disturbs my mind and excites anxiety. The sum of all this is objective uncertainty."<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, for the Irrationalist, the paradoxical lies at the very heart of Christianity and it is this absurdity at the very centre of the structure which makes the whole belief-system unacceptable to the man of reason. The situation might be likened to that of a house built on weak foundations. Certain parts of the structure, the roof for example, may be sound when considered by

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1. Paul Edwards, "Kierkegaard and the "Truth" of Christianity", in A Modern Introduction to Philosophy, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., ed. Paul Edwards and Arthur Pap (New York: Macmillan, 1973), p. 507.
  2. Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p. 182.

themselves but will still collapse if the foundations give way. Thus, even though certain parts of the Christian belief system may have some credence when considered by themselves, the whole must be considered irrational because of absurdity at the very heart of the structure.

## I I

Let us consider this claim about the ultimate absurdity of Christianity a little more closely. It rests, as we have already seen, upon an observation of the paradoxical nature of certain doctrines of central importance to the Christian religion. Now, few religious thinkers would deny the paradoxical nature of Christianity, but they would wish to know what sense of the word the Irrationalist is using and argue that the words "paradoxical" and "absurd" are not necessarily interchangeable.

If we consider the word "paradoxical" we will see that it can be used in either one of two ways. To say of some statement that it is paradoxical might be to say that it is puzzling, difficult to understand, that it is in conflict with our own picture of the world. Scientific statements are often said by the uninitiated to be paradoxical in this sense. The important thing about this sense of the word "paradoxical" is that the statements in question are not considered to be unintelligible in themselves; they can be understood by those with enough ability and background knowledge to unravel their meaning. The apparent contradictions are capable of resolution by the expert even if they appear nonsensical to the layman. On the other hand, the term "paradoxical" can be used to

mean something like "logically inconsistent" or "self-contradictory". In this sense of the word the statements in question are unintelligible in themselves. It does not matter how much ability or what background knowledge a person has, the contradictions will remain unresolved.

For most religious thinkers, doctrines such as that of the Incarnation are paradoxical in the first sense of the word. The contradictions which they lead us into cannot be resolved by us, but this does not mean that they are unintelligible in themselves. To a perfect intellect, such as that possessed by God, they would be perfectly comprehensible. However, if we take the Irrationalist at face value his claim is that they are paradoxical in the second sense of the word, that they are unintelligible in themselves. To quote Kierkegaard:

"Instead of the objective uncertainty, there is here a certainty, namely, that objectively it is absurd; and this absurdity, held fast in the passion of inwardness, is faith."

The Irrationalist's assertion of the absurdity of religious belief, it would seem, amounts to a claim that certain doctrines at the very heart of Christianity are self-contradictory. But if a proposition is self-contradictory, then by our normal understanding of the term, its truth is logically impossible. Thus, if we are to take the Irrationalist at his word, he is exhorting belief in the logically impossible. Indeed, he is claiming that logical

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1. Ibid., p. 188.

impossibility is an absolute condition of an adequate Christian faith.

This position is a strange one to say the least. Can I really believe the logically impossible, let alone claim that logical impossibility is a condition of belief? Can I, for example, really believe that square circles exist? Perhaps I can if I do not fully understand the words "square" and "circle", but if I do understand them and use the terms in the normal way then it would be an ultimate act of folly to attempt a drawing of one.

The problem is that, in our normal usage, the terms "believe" and "self-contradictory" preclude one another. In our usual understanding of the word, to believe something is to believe that it is true. I can hardly claim to believe some proposition unless I hold that the proposition in question is true. But, our normal understanding of the term "self-contradictory" implies that a statement involving self-contradiction is necessarily false. Thus, if I am asked to believe something that is self-contradictory, I am asked to believe something that is necessarily false and, since believing something is believing that it is true, I am being asked to believe that the necessarily false is true. But this is complete nonsense. I simply cannot do it.

Thus, either we use the word "believe" in a very foreign way so that the statement "I believe p" does not necessarily imply "I hold that p is true" or we must deny the Law of Non-Contradiction and accept that self-contradictory statements may be true. I can make no headway with the first possibility, so let us turn to the second. After all, there have been a number of philosophers, of



whom Hegel is the most widely known, who have done precisely this. But this too leads us into trouble.

The Law of Non-Contradiction states that the truth of some proposition necessarily excludes the truth of its denial. To accept the Law of Non-Contradiction, then, is to accept that an assertion of the truth of some proposition,  $p$ , automatically involves a denial of the truth of its contradictory,  $\neg p$  and to reject this law is to allow that both  $p$  and  $\neg p$  may be true. But if we are to do this then we must be aware of the consequences of our action. To deny the Law of Non-Contradiction, I would suggest, is to deny the possibility of successful assertion altogether. If, for example, I do not automatically rule out the possibility that it is not raining outside when I assert that it is, am I really asserting anything at all? I do not see how. The point is that successful assertion presupposes the Law of Non-Contradiction, without it all assertion would be meaningless.

It may be argued that the Irrationalist does not wish to reject the Law of Non-contradiction altogether. After all, he does not deny the importance of rationality in spheres other than the religious and perhaps his denial of the Law of Non-Contradiction applies only to religion as well. Such a claim, however, misses the point. The fact of the matter is that Irrationalists such as Kierkegaard do wish to assert the truth of doctrines such as that of the Incarnation. They could hardly fail to do so. But, if successful assertion presupposes the Law of Non-Contradiction, as we have argued, their position must surely be untenable. As Blanshard has put it:

"He can hardly have it both ways. If the logic he assumes in his philosophy is valid, then the faith which stands at the summit of 'the stages on life's way' is meaningless. If the irrational faith is accepted, the principles on which reflection conducts itself are everywhere impugned. In that case, Kierkegaard should merely smile like Buddha and remain silent."

### I I I

The Irrationalist would not rest easy with this rejection of his position. Let us consider Kierkegaard as an example. His reply to our objections would, no doubt, consist of an affirmation of his famous claim that truth is subjectivity. "It is subjectivity that Christianity is concerned with", he tells us, "and it is only in subjectivity that its truth exists, if it exists at all; objectively, Christianity has absolutely no existence at all".<sup>2</sup> But what does this all mean? What is involved in this claim that truth is subjectivity? Kierkegaard elucidates it in the following manner:

"When the question of truth is raised in an objective manner, reflection is directed objectively to the truth, as an object to which the knower is

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1. Brand Blanshard, Reason and Belief, (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1974), p. 242.
  2. Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p. 116.

related. Reflection is not focused upon the relationship, however, but upon the question of whether it is the truth to which the knower is related. If only the object to which he is related is the truth, the subject is accounted to be in the truth. When the question of the truth is raised subjectively, reflection is directed subjectively to the nature of the individual's relationship; if only the mode of this relationship is in the truth, the individual is in the truth even if he should happen to be thus related to what is not true."<sup>1</sup>

Kierkegaard is drawing our attention to a distinction between the objective content of our beliefs and our subjective attitude towards them; between that which we believe and the manner of our belief. Elsewhere he tells us that the "objective accent falls on WHAT is said, the subjective accent on How it is said".<sup>2</sup> I am in the truth objectively, then, if what I believe is actually true and I am in the truth subjectively if I believe it in an appropriate manner. The appropriate manner, moreover, is one of passionate commitment. Passion, he tells us, is the "culmination of existence to an existing individual - and we are all of us existing individuals".<sup>3</sup> To be in the truth subjectively, then, is to hold one's beliefs with all the passion of one's soul.

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1. Ibid., p. 178.

2. Ibid., p. 181.

3. Ibid., p. 176.

The essence of Kierkegaard's position, then, is that we need not worry about the objective truth of Christianity since its nature is subjectivity. The content of Christianity, in other words, is of no importance, what matters is the manner of belief and this must be one of passionate commitment.

Now, Kierkegaard is certainly correct in his assertion that Christianity demands more than just a passive acceptance of its teaching. Theologians never seem to tire of drawing a distinction between mere belief that God exists and belief in God. One can believe that God exists without making a commitment to a Christian way of life and it is precisely this commitment which characterises belief in God. The Christian, it is argued, is not only required to believe that God exist but also to believe in God.

Even so, he is still required to believe that He exists. The objective content of his beliefs cannot be irrelevant to the Christian, as Kierkegaard seems to imply in his statement that truth is subjectivity. If it is, then how are we to distinguish between the Christian and the non-Christian? It cannot simply be the manner of his belief since it is possible to believe any number of things in a passionate manner. I may, for example, believe passionately that there is no God. Does this make me a Christian? Of course it does not. Kierkegaard may be correct in his assertion that the manner of belief is crucial to Christianity, but he must be wrong in his claim that the objective content is not.

#### IV

Up to this point our argument has been concerned with the first tenet of the Irrationalist's position; that there is a fundamental conflict between faith and reason. This, as we have seen, rested upon an assertion of the paradoxical nature of fundamental Christian doctrines and was found to be wanting. I now wish to turn my attention to the second tenet of his position; that irrationality is an absolute condition of an adequate or proper Christian faith. Here too I will draw mainly upon the works of Kierkegaard.

Kierkegaard, as we have already noted, was at pains to stress the importance to Christianity not only of belief, but of belief in an appropriate manner. A Christian faith, he suggested, that does not involve passionate commitment is not an adequate one at all. This much I think we can accept, but he goes on to argue that the passion required is not possible without objective uncertainty.

"The sum of all this is objective uncertainty.

But it is for this very reason that the inwardness becomes as intense as it is, for it embraces this objective uncertainty with the entire person of the infinite. In the case of a mathematical proposition the objectivity is given, but for this reason the truth of such a proposition is also an indifferent truth."<sup>1</sup>

The essence of Kierkegaard's argument is that faith cannot exist without passion and that passion cannot exist without

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1. Ibid., p. 182.

objective uncertainty. Where there is objective certainty concerning the truth of some proposition, as is the case with mathematics, he suggests, our acceptance of that proposition is characterised by its passivity. Objective certainty, according to him, would destroy faith.

"If I am capable of grasping God objectively, I do not believe, but precisely because I cannot do this I must believe. If I wish to preserve myself in faith I must constantly be intent upon holding fast the objective uncertainty, so as to remain out upon the deep, over seventy thousand fathoms of water, still preserving my faith."<sup>1</sup>

That Christianity requires passionate commitment I have already accepted, but the proposition that passionate commitment is only possible where there is objective uncertainty is an entirely different matter. Kierkegaard's argument in favour of this position proceeds as follows:

"...without risk there is no faith, and the greater the risk the greater the faith; the more objective security the less inwardness... and the less objective security the more profound the possible inwardness."<sup>2</sup>

Thus, Kierkegaard correlates the passion of one's commitment to a particular belief with the degree of risk involved in the acceptance of it. He holds that passionate commitment is only

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1. Ibid.

2. Ibid., p. 188.

possible where there is risk and the amount of passion will be in direct proportion to the amount of risk involved. The greater the risk of error, the more intense will be the passion involved. Thus, it follows that the more irrational religious belief is, the more religiously adequate it is.

## V

This is a startling conclusion, but are we under any compulsion to accept it? I think not. Kierkegaard correlates faith with passion, and passion with risk. I will not dispute his correlation of faith and passion but it seems to me that the correlation of passion and risk requires far greater scrutiny.

To begin with, it seems to me that Kierkegaard was correct in his correlation of passion and risk in at least some areas of human behaviour. The example which immediately springs to mind is that of gambling. consider the example of John, an avid punter who follows form and is considered quite knowledgeable in racing circles, and let us place him into the following situations:

- A. John places a bet of \$5 on a horse which is a strong favourite to win at odds of 3/2.
- B. John places a bet of \$50 on a horse which is an outsider at odds of 10/1.
- C. John places all his life savings on a rank outsider at odds of 500/1.

In each of these situations, John has studied the form guide with great care and is not privy to any inside information. Quite clearly, we would expect John to show some interest in the race in

each situation and it is equally clear that his interest would be more passionate in B. than it was in A., and in C. than it was in either B. or A.. Why? The risk involved is a crucial factor. The amount of money riding on the race is greater in each new situation than it was in the previous one, as are the odds of that horse winning when previous form, track conditions and so on are taken into account. The greater the risk, the more intense would be John's passion. What could be simpler?

To further illustrate this point let us consider another situation:

D. John place his life savings on the same horse as he did in C., with the same odds, but with the prior knowledge that the race has been fixed and that his horse will win.

We would still expect John to be interested in this race, but we would also expect his interest to be far less passionate. Indeed, it is not difficult to imagine him watching the race with a certain amount of calm disdain, his only worry being the possibility (remote if the plan is good) of something going wrong. Here, then, at the very least, we can accept Kierkegaard's correlation of risk and passion.

This example is very instructive since it provides us with an important insight into Kierkegaard's understanding of faith. The model of faith which he presents to us is of a person risking everything, against all odds, in the hope of eternal salvation. "Without having understood Christianity," he tells us, "... , I have still understood enough to apprehend that it proposes to bestow an



eternal happiness upon the individual man."<sup>1</sup> But in order to achieve this eternal happiness the man of faith must make a blind leap into the dark; he must risk all in the hope that he may gain everything.

Kierkegaard's man of faith, then, is very much like our punter in situation C.. Both are risking everything in the hope of a future reward and neither can profess to any certainty about the result. In fact, both can profess to a great deal of uncertainty; the odds being stacked against them. The actions of both are clearly irrational in the extreme and it is precisely this irrationality that results in their passionate concern with what they have done.

It is evident, then, that a correlation of passion and risk is possible and that we can construct a model of faith based upon such a correlation. But there are still two areas in which we can challenge Kierkegaard. Firstly, even if passion and risk may be correlated successfully, must all risk be irrational and secondly, does a model of faith based upon passion arising out of risk constitute the only or even the best possible model of faith? To both of these questions I believe we can answer, No!

## VI

For Kierkegaard's man of faith, risk and therefore passion were a result of the irrationality of his fundamental conviction in the truth of Christianity. The Christian belief-system,

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1. Ibid., p. 19.

Kierkegaard argued, would be rejected outright if viewed from the standpoint of reason alone. The risk which Kierkegaard's knight of faith takes is simply that he is wrong and has committed himself to a life of illusion. The more impossible Christianity becomes, when viewed from the standpoint of reason, the greater the risk and the more intense the passion, in this way of looking at things. But, we can conceive of a model of faith in which risk is involved without it being irrational.

Kierkegaard is certainly correct in his claim that Christianity promises eternal happiness, but it can only deliver what it promises if its basic tenets are correct. In other words, we can only partake in the eternal happiness promised by Christianity if the world view that it encapsulates is accurate; if there is a God, if He is kind and loving, if Jesus was His only son, etc.. Let us suppose that the truth of these basic tenets of Christianity can be established to the satisfaction of all rational men; that their rationality is beyond question. Would a faith based upon such foundations lack passion? Kierkegaard would argue in the affirmative because he believes there would be no risk involved, but this is not strictly correct.

To achieve eternal happiness, it is not enough for a person to accept the truth of Christianity. He must also act upon it. It is not enough, in other words, that a person believe that God exists and that he is good and so on, he must also endeavour to please God in the way that he leads his life. Christianity, after all, provides us with a very good example, in the form of the Devil, of a being who has no doubt about the existence of God, but who chooses to displease rather than please Him. The Christian, in

other words, must embark upon a journey of faith that requires a conscious choice and is far from easy. But, if the journey is difficult, then there is a risk of failure and the more difficult it is, the greater is the risk of failure and with this risk, surely, there must be passion. Thus, here we have a model of faith which involves risk and passionate commitment, but which is perfectly rational.

Furthermore, it seems a complete distortion of the nature of Christianity to suggest that the passion of faith is a result purely of risk. There are many other factors with which passion may be correlated. Love is an obvious example and love, both of God and of one's neighbour, is as much a part of Christianity as the promise of eternal salvation. Indeed it is precisely through loving God and one's neighbour that the Christian hopes to achieve eternal salvation. I can see no reason why a model of faith cannot be constructed in which the passion of faith is correlated to love of God. Indeed, such a model, I believe, would provide a far more adequate model than that of the Irrationalist.

## CHAPTER TWO

### AQUINAS ON FAITH AND REASON

Having found the position of the Irrationalist wanting, we may now turn our attention to a number of the more important compatibilist positions. To begin with I will outline and evaluate an example of what may be deemed the traditional approach to Christian Apologetics. More specifically, I will consider the position of St. Thomas Aquinas.

My reasons for considering Aquinas, once again, are both historical and philosophical. The historical importance of his position cannot be overstated. It represents the dominant (although by no means only) line of thought within the Roman Catholic tradition. This is true particularly since the First Vatican Council (1869-1870) and the Encyclical, Aeterni Patris, of Pope Leo XIII (1879). This, of course, is not to say that one must be a Thomist in order to be a Roman Catholic, but it is fair to say both that Thomism enjoys a favoured position amongst Roman Catholic theologians and philosophers, and that certain tenets of Aquinas' thought are considered Roman Catholic orthodoxy. Also, Aquinas has been influential amongst Protestant thinkers, particularly Anglicans.<sup>1</sup> Thus Smart's comment that "...he is something like the

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1. See, for example, E. L. Mascall, He Who Is, (London: Longmans, 1943).

'official' philosopher of a great segment of Christendom", may not be far from the truth.'

Of more direct importance to us, however, is the philosophical importance of Aquinas' position. He is convinced of the rationality of Christianity and of the irrationality of scepticism. He argues that there is a body of evidence which settles the dispute between believer and sceptic, and that this evidence is available to any honest enquirer. On his view, it is possible to demonstrate the truth of at least some religious beliefs by an appeal to non-religious premises. It is this view that we will consider in more detail.

## I

In the Summa Contra Gentiles, Aquinas defines his task as follows.

"And so, in the divine Mercy, I have the confidence to embark upon the work of the wise man, even though this may surpass my powers, and I have set myself the task of making known, as far as my limited powers will allow, the truth that the Catholic faith professes, and of setting aside the errors that are

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1. Ninian Smart, Philosophers and Religious Truth (London: SCM, 1964), p.75.

opposed to it."<sup>1</sup>

But, if one wishes to make known "the truth that the Christian Faith professes" and set aside "the errors that are opposed to it", how is one to do it? As Aquinas points out, the methods one will employ depend largely upon the audience for which one is writing. Against Jews or heretics, he suggests, one can argue through an appeal to the Holy Scriptures. The Jews, after all, accept the authority of the Old Testament and the heretics that of the New Testament. This method, however, is limited in that "...the Mohammedans and the pagans accept neither one nor the other".<sup>2</sup> For them, any appeal to the Scriptures would be useless, since they accept neither the authority of the old Testament nor that of the New. "We must, therefore", he argues, "have recourse to the natural reason to which all men are forced to give their assents".<sup>3</sup> A full Christian Apologetic then, must begin with an appeal to considerations that all men will admit as relevant.

It is evident, that Aquinas understood the futility of a Christian Apologetic based upon an appeal to the authority of the Scriptures. Such an approach would be question begging.

To accept anything on the authority of the Scriptures "...is to accept it because God has said it; and this involves a previous

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1. St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Contra Gentiles, Book I, Chapter 2.

All quotations from the Summa Contra Gentiles come from the translation by Anton C. Pegis entitled On the Truth of the Catholic Faith (New York: Doubleday, 1955).

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

conviction of the existence of God".<sup>1</sup> Before one can accept anything as coming from God, one must have an antecedent belief that there is a God and, furthermore, that He has spoken. But, this is precisely what (in the modern context) the religious sceptic either doubts or rejects. Thus, Aquinas argues, a successful demonstration of the rationality of religious belief must meet the sceptic on his own ground; that of human reason.

Quite clearly, then, Aquinas held that human beings have a natural capacity to arrive at religious truth. Indeed, his claim that human reason, alone and unaided, can achieve knowledge of God is undoubtedly one of the central tenets of his whole theological outlook. It is, in effect, a claim that the truth of at least some religious beliefs can be established by methods entirely distinct from and independent of any appeal to Divine Revelation.

The name which Aquinas gave to these beliefs was "praeambula fidei" (preambles or preliminaries to faith) and the name of the discipline, or science, whose task it was to establish the truth of these praeambula fidei was "natural theology". As the name suggests, the function of the praeambula fidei was to prepare the way for faith by establishing, firstly, the existence and certain of the attributes of God, and, secondly, the authority of the Holy Scriptures as the Word of God.

Aquinas felt that we could have rational certitude (scientia) about the existence and certain of the attributes of God; that we could know, in the strictest sense of the word, that God exists. We could know this because of certain demonstrative arguments which

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1. E. L. Mascall, He Who Is, p.26.

establish the truth of this belief. The authority of the Holy Scriptures, on the other hand, is not established by demonstrative argument, he felt, but by an appeal to historical evidence. The occurrence of miracles, the fulfilment of the prophecies of the Old Testament and the conversion of the world to Christianity, he argued, provide strong evidence for the authority of the Scriptures as the Word of God.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, Aquinas held that Christian apologetics must begin with natural theology. But, there are two important points to make about this claim. The first by way of explanation and the second by way of expansion.

To begin with, in claiming that natural reason establish the truth of the praeambula fidei independently of an appeal to the authority of the Scriptures, he is not claiming that, without natural theology we would be ignorant of these facts. He is not claiming that the truths of natural theology are not contained within the Scriptures. Far from it. He suggests that, if this were the case, there would be certain undesirable consequences.<sup>2</sup> Firstly, only philosophers would be aware of them since most men lack either the time, the disposition, or both to undertake an enquiry in natural theology. Furthermore, even those philosophers who did discover these truths would do so only after a long and arduous process of enquiry and, even then, some might doubt the veracity of their discoveries. Thus, Aquinas argues, "...the truth about God to which the natural reason reaches is fittingly proposed

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1. Aquinas, Summa Contra Gentiles, Book 1, Chapter 6.

2. Ibid., Book 1, Chapter 4.



to men for belief".<sup>1</sup>

This point is important because it shows that Aquinas was not primarily concerned with how we acquire religious beliefs but with how we justify them. It is not the acquisition of our belief in the existence of God, for example, which occurs independently of the Scriptures, but the justification of it. Nevertheless, he is committed to accepting that knowledge of the existence of God may occur amongst philosophers totally ignorant of the Scriptures. Indeed, it is possible that he believed Aristotle to have acquired knowledge of God, albeit of an imperfect nature, in this manner.

The second point that we must be aware of is that, whilst Aquinas held that Christian apologetics must begin with an appeal to natural reason, he also held that "...in divine matters, the natural reason has its failings".<sup>2</sup> Man may have a natural capacity to achieve knowledge of God, but this capacity is strictly limited. An appeal to natural reason may be a necessary feature of Christian apologetics but it is not, in itself, sufficient. There are certain beliefs that men must adopt if they are to achieve eternal salvation which completely surpass the capacity of human reason to comprehend, let alone demonstrate. These he called the articles of faith (articuli fidei). As examples we may cite the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. The truth of these beliefs cannot possibly be established independently of an appeal to Divine Authority. We cannot possibly know that these beliefs are true in the way that we could know that the preambles to faith are true.

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1. Ibid.

2. Ibid.

We can only believe that they are true because they have been revealed to us by God. We accept them in other words, on Divine Authority through an act of faith. Through this act of faith, we come to believe that which we cannot know by independent means to be true.

Thus, faith, for Aquinas, was essentially a propositional attitude. The man of faith was one who accepted the truth of certain propositions about God and His relationship to man; those contained within the Scriptures. But, this acceptance was not based upon any rational certainty, not upon any independent evidence. Assent was not compelled, it was voluntary. There is, then, this radical distinction with Aquinas' thought between faith and knowledge. One person could not, simultaneously, know the truth of a proposition and accept it through an act of faith. To know that something is true is to have rational certainty about its truth. The man of faith does not have this certainty. Nevertheless, he believes with total conviction. This conviction is achieved through an act of the will aided by an act of Divine Grace.

This does not mean, however, that what is an object of knowledge to one man cannot be an object of faith to another. The preambles of faith are objects of knowledge to the philosopher, but, they are objects of faith to everyone else. Similarly, they were objects of faith to the philosopher before he established their rational certainty through independent means. But, the articles of faith could not possibly be an object of knowledge to any man, at least in this life. They can only be accepted through an act of faith.

Natural reason cannot establish the truth of the articles of faith, then, but this does not mean that reason has no role to play with respect to them. It has a two-fold role. This involves, firstly, making explicit that which is contained within the Holy Scriptures. To this process Aquinas gave the name "revealed theology". Secondly, it is the task of reason to defend the propositions of revealed theology against those who consider them to be incoherent or false. Although they may be beyond the grasp of reason, Aquinas argues, they are still in perfect harmony with it. On his view, it must be rational to hold them since they are contained in the Holy Scriptures and, as natural theology has shown us, the existence of God and the authority of the Scriptures as the word of God cannot rationally be doubted.

## I I

This, then, is the position of St. Thomas Aquinas with respect to the rationality of religious belief. His claim is, quite explicitly, that religious belief is rational and that religious scepticism is irrational. The method he uses to establish this claim is simple and yet, if it works, decisive. One may not be able to establish the truth of all religious claims, so the argument goes, but we can establish that God exists and that the Holy Scriptures are the word of God. Furthermore we can establish this by methods that are open to all honest enquirers. Thus, even though it may be impossible to establish the truth of everything that is contained within the Scriptures we have good

reason, in fact the best possible reason, for accepting it all without exception. This reason is simply the authority of God.

As attractive as it may be, however, this position is also problematic. Philosophers in recent times have been very quick to point out the difficulties inherent in attempting to prove the existence of God or the authority of the Scriptures. I will examine these difficulties in subsequent chapters but, for now, I wish to examine certain problems that are inherent in Aquinas' position even if we allow what he has to say about natural theology. These problems concern Aquinas' characterisation of the articles of faith and the relationship between the articles of faith and the preambles to faith.

### I I I

The first problem that I wish to deal with concerns the characterisation, by Aquinas, of the articles of faith as above reason. These truths about God, he tells us, "... exceed all the ability of the human reason."<sup>1</sup> In saying this he wishes to exclude any possibility of an independent demonstration of their truth. The problem is to understand what his ground for this assertion is.

The crucial factor seems to be one of our ability to understand the propositions in question. As one contemporary commentator puts it:

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1. Ibid., Book 1, Chapter 3.

"If the Trinity of Persons in God exceeds the capacity of human reason, it is clear that it cannot be understood, and, if not understood, it is difficult to see in what sense it can be the concern of a science or theology. The acceptance as true of what is not understood is a description of faith, and this is clearly a different mental stance than knowledge."<sup>1</sup>

Thus, it would seem that it is our inability to understand what is contained within the articles of faith that makes them necessarily objects of faith and not of knowledge. We accept them as coming from God and so we believe that they are true. But, we could not have been aware of them had they not been revealed by God and now that we are aware of them, we cannot demonstrate their truth independently of an appeal to the authority of God. We cannot do this because we cannot comprehend them, we cannot understand what they mean.

This way of understanding the articles of faith is now normative within the Roman Catholic church. They are referred to as 'mysteries', truths that "... the human reason itself is incapable of discovering or of comprehending when it has ascertained it".<sup>2</sup> But, it is difficult to reconcile with other

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1. Ralph McInerney, St Thomas Aquinas, (Boston: Twayne, 1977), p.14.
  2. Rev. George D. Smith, "Faith and Revealed Truth", in The Teaching of the Catholic Church, ed George D. Smith (London: Burn and Oates, 1952), p.7.

things that Aquinas wishes to say about the articles of faith. In particular, it is difficult to reconcile with his understanding of the articles of faith as forming the premises upon which revealed theology is built.

The articles of faith, we are told, are revealed to us by God and they are revealed to us for a purpose. But, what is this purpose? Aquinas offers an answer to this question in the very first article of his Summa Theologica. Here he states that:

"God destines for us an end beyond the grasp of reason; according to Isaiah, Eye hath not seen, O God, without thee what thou hast prepared for them that love thee. Now we have to recognise an end before we can stretch out and exert ourselves for it. Hence the necessity for our welfare that the divine truths surpassing reason should be signified to us through divine revelation."<sup>1</sup>

This would seem to imply that the articles of faith convey information that is necessary for our salvation. But, how can this be if we cannot possibly understand them? What information can possibly be conveyed to me by a proposition that I not only do not, but, cannot possibly comprehend? Aquinas offers the following suggestion:

"It is also necessary that such truth be proposed to men for belief so that they may have a truer knowledge of God. For then only do we know God truly

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1. Aquinas, Summa Theologica, 1a,1,1. All quotations from the Summa Theologica come from the Blackfriars edition.

when we believe Him to be above everything that it is possible for man to think about Him; for, as we have shown, the divine substance surpasses the natural knowledge of which man is capable. Hence, by the fact that some things about God are proposed to man that surpass his reason, there is strengthened in man the view that God is something above what he can think."<sup>1</sup>

The articles of faith, it would appear, individually convey no specific information to us. Collectively, however, they convey to us the general information that our capacity to understand God is limited; that we can form no concept of God as He is in His essence. In this way, revelation of them has certain beneficial effects.<sup>2</sup> Not only do they make us see more clearly that God's nature is ultimately incomprehensible to us, but they also teach us humility and instil in us a hope for greater knowledge and understanding of God in the life to come.

But, this, surely, is not all that the articles of faith can convey to us. At least, not if we are to accept Aquinas' understanding of the nature and scope of revealed theology. This understanding assigns to it the task of expressing and elaborating the articles of faith.

Christian theology, Aquinas tells us in the Summa Theologica, is a science. Like all sciences it starts from first principles. But, unlike other sciences, it "...takes on faith its principles

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1. Aquinas, Summa Contra Gentiles, Book 1, Chapter 5.

2. Ibid.

revealed by God".<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the "...first principles of this science are the articles of faith, and faith is about God".<sup>2</sup> Christian theology, then, begins with the articles of faith but its task is not to establish their truth. It does not, to quote Aquinas, "...argue to establish its premises,..., but advances from them to make something known".<sup>3</sup> But, it is difficult to see how this is possible if the articles of faith are completely beyond our grasp, completely beyond our power to comprehend.

It is difficult to see, then, how Aquinas can consistently assert that the articles of faith are completely beyond our ability to comprehend. If this were the case, then they could convey no specific information to us. But, if they can convey no information to us, then how is a revealed theology whose task it is to express and elaborate the articles of faith possible? Revealed theology would, of necessity, consist merely of restating verbatim what was contained in the scriptures in a way that would exclude any possibility of elaboration or explanation.

To be consistent, then, it seems that Aquinas must admit that we can comprehend, in no matter how limited a form, the articles of faith. But, if he does this, then it is difficult to see what it is that distinguishes them sufficiently from the preambles to faith to make our inability to demonstrate their truth a matter of principle and not of fact.

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1. Aquinas, Summa Theologica, 1a,1,2.

2. Ibid., 1a,1,7.

3. Ibid., 1a,1,6.



To begin with, it cannot be that we have full understanding of the preambles to faith. Aquinas, rightly, is adamant that we do not. The preambles, even though they are open to independent demonstration, are still propositions about God. Our understanding of them, therefore, will be as limited as our understanding of the nature of God. We can, for example, have no fuller understanding of the proposition, "God exists", than our understanding of "God" allows. Since we cannot understand God as He is in His essence, our understanding of "God" is necessarily limited. There can, therefore, be no question of a full understanding of propositions such as, "God exists".

Our understanding of the preambles to faith, then, is necessarily limited, even though they are susceptible to demonstrative proof. Now, if I am right, and Aquinas must accept that we are capable of some, albeit limited, understanding of the articles of faith, why is it that their undemonstrability is a matter of principle and not of fact? I can see no satisfactory answer to this question. If demonstrability is a function of our ability to understand then, it seems to me, Aquinas is committed to accepting either that both the articles and the preambles are, in principle if not in fact, open to demonstrative proof or that, as a matter of principle, neither the articles nor the preambles are open to demonstrative proof. Neither option seems acceptable to Aquinas.

The claim, then, that the articles of faith are above reason is problematic because it is not clear what it is about them that distinguishes them from the preambles to faith sufficiently to make their truth, as a matter of principles, undemonstrable.

#### IV

The second problem that I wish to consider concern's Aquinas' claim that, even though the articles of faith are above reason, they are, nevertheless, in harmony with it. It is, quite clearly, an assertion that, whilst the truth of the articles cannot be demonstrated, neither can it be demonstrated that they are false. The problem is, initially, to understand what, exactly, it is that he is asserting. Is it the strong claim that no argument could possibly show that the articles are false, or the somewhat weaker claim that no actual argument is successful?

This question is dealt with most explicitly in the Summa Contra Gentiles.<sup>1</sup> His position here appears to be the strong one that no argument brought against the articles could possibly be successful. He states quite categorically that "... whatever arguments are brought forward against the doctrines of faith are conclusions incorrectly derived from the first and self-evident principles imbedded in nature".<sup>2</sup> No such argument can, therefore, work and so, "...there exists the possibility to answer them".<sup>3</sup>

He is, in effect, dismissing, a priori, any possibility of an argument which is brought against the articles of faith being conclusive. This does not mean that the theologian has no duty to show why particular arguments do not work. He does, but only so that the falsehood is not perpetuated. The theologian who is

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1. Aquinas, Summa Contra Gentiles, Book 1, Chapter 7.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

grappling with such arguments, however, is justified in an a prior conviction that the arguments in question will not work. But why is this? Aquinas offers the following reason:

"Now, although the truth of the Christian faith which we have discussed surpasses the capacity of the reason, nevertheless, that truth that the human reason is naturally endowed to know cannot be opposed to the truth of the Christian faith. For that with which the human reason is naturally endowed is clearly most true; so much so, that it is impossible for us to think of such truths as false. Nor is it permissible to believe as false that which we hold by faith, since this is confirmed in a way that is so clearly divine. Since, therefore, only the false is opposed to the true, as is clearly evident from an examination of their definitions, it is impossible that the truth of faith should be opposed to those principles that the human reason knows naturally."<sup>1</sup>

This argument can be summarised into the following propositions:

What human reason tells us is true must be true  
..... (1)

We are not permitted to believe false that which we hold in faith  
..... (2)

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1. Ibid.

Therefore, there can be no conflict between that which human reason tells us is true and that which we accept in faith .....(3)

Like any argument, this one is no stronger than its premises and the crucial one, it seems to me, is ... (2). The first, it is true, reveals an unfashionable and without doubt unwarranted optimism about the power of human reason to achieve truth. It implies that we can achieve absolute certainty about the truth of many non-trivial propositions. It is this kind of certainty that Aquinas thought could be achieved about the existence of God. The reference here, however, is not so much to propositions for which we can have demonstrative certainty, but to the self-evident propositions (*principia per se nota*) from which they were derived. Aquinas was concerned with showing that nothing could be derived from these principle that is contrary to the truth of faith. Having noted this, we can proceed to the second and more important premiss.

The second premiss states that we are not permitted to believe false, that which we hold in faith. The strength of the whole argument, it seems to me, depends upon how we are to interpret this claim. Why is it that we are not 'permitted' to believe false that which we hold in faith? There are two possible answers, only one of which will do if the argument is to hold any strength.

The first way of interpreting ... (2) pertains to the psychological certainty that Aquinas held accompanied assent to propositions in faith. Faith, he held, was characterised by a conscious act of assent. This assent was what he called the inner

act of faith, that of belief (credere). This he distinguished from other acts of assent.

"Among acts of the intellect, some include a firm assent without pondering - thus when someone thinks about what he knows scientifically or intuitively; thinking of that kind reaches a finished term. Other mental acts are marked by a pondering that is inconclusive, lacking firm assent, either because the act leans towards neither of the alternatives, the case with doubt; or because it leans to one alternative, but only tentatively - the case with suspicion; or because it decides for the one side but with fear of the opposite - the case with opinion. The act of believing, however, is firmly attached to one alternative and in this respect the believer is in the same state of mind as one who has science or understanding. Yet, the believer's knowledge is not completed by a clear vision, and in this respect he is like one having a doubt, a suspicion, or an opinion."

Faith, then, is characterised by wholehearted assent and, in this it differs from doubt, suspicion and opinion. The man of faith has total conviction concerning the truth of what he believes. But, the conviction is derived neither from the rational certainty of what is believed nor from its self-evidence. The assent that occurs in an act of faith is uncompelled, it is

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1. Aquinas, Summa Theologica, 2a, 2ae, 1.

voluntary. The certainty which one has in faith is, therefore, of a purely psychological nature.

Now, if we interpret ... (2) as referring to the psychological certainty that accompanies an act of faith, then, the argument holds little water. On this understanding of ... (2), the claim that we are not permitted to believe as false that which we accept in faith amounts to a claim that to do so would be to lose faith. If one begins to doubt, then one can no longer be said to have faith. But, if this is all that is being asserted in ... (2), then the only conclusion that we are entitled to draw from Aquinas' argument is that we cannot, without losing faith, accept that there is any conflict between faith and reason. We cannot conclude, as Aquinas clearly wants to, that there can be no conflict between faith and reason.

It would seem, then, that we must interpret ... (2) in a different manner if it is to hold any water. We need to interpret it as asserting not just that we must not doubt what we hold in faith but that we are not entitled to. Why, then, are we not entitled to doubt what we hold in faith? Because, it is "...confirmed in a way so clearly divine"; because we hold it on the authority of God.

If we interpret the argument in this way, and it appears that we must, then it must be seen as an appeal to Divine Authority. Indeed, it seems only natural for Aquinas to argue in this way. Since the truth of the articles of faith can only be established through an appeal to Divine Authority, it seems only natural that it should be safeguarded in the same manner. His claim, then, that the articles of faith are in harmony with reason amounts to a claim

that, since they have been revealed to us by God, they cannot be false.

This argument is decisive, but only if the articles of faith have indeed been revealed to us by God and only if we are entitled to believe this. The argument is only as strong as Aquinas' conviction that God exists and that the articles of faith have been revealed to us by God is rational.

## V

The third problem that I wish to deal with concerns the epistemic status that Aquinas wishes to ascribe to the articles of faith. As we have seen, he felt that they could only be justified by an appeal to the authority of the Scriptures. Furthermore, it is through such an appeal that Aquinas safeguards their truth. His assertion that they are in harmony with reason, ultimately rests upon it. [The] problem is to understand the degree to which Aquinas felt that an appeal to Divine Authority is rational.

In this chapter I have interpreted him as asserting that it was rational in a fairly strong sense. This seems to me to be the natural way to interpret his position. But, as we shall see, it is not altogether unproblematic. It seems to me that Aquinas himself was not altogether clear about his position or if he was, he does not state it unambiguously.

There can be little doubt that Aquinas felt that we can assert the existence of God with complete certainty. Each of the famous Five Ways ends with a clear affirmation of the existence of God. And, if this were not enough, he then goes on to establish certain

of the attributes of God. There can be little doubt that he believed that the being whose existence the enterprise of natural theology affirms is the Christian God. But, this, it will be remembered, is only one part of his apologetics. The second part was to establish the authority of the Scriptures. This he does by an appeal to historical evidence. The difficulty is to understand what epistemic status Aquinas wished to give this evidence.<sup>1</sup>

Aquinas is far from consistent on this point. In the First Part of the Summa Theologica, for example, he states that if "...an opponent believes nothing of what has been divinely revealed, then no way lies open for making the articles of faith reasonably credible; all that can be done is to solve the difficulties against faith he may bring up".<sup>2</sup> However, in Question 5 of the Secunda Secundae he commits himself unequivocally to the view that the evidence in question can compel assent.<sup>3</sup> He does so for he must account for the belief of a group of beings, the devils, who accept this evidence but do so unwillingly and without grace.<sup>4</sup> Thus, it seems reasonable to interpret him as giving the evidence in question a very strong epistemic status. This interpretation is

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1. See Terence Penelhum, "The Analysis of Faith in St. Thomas Aquinas", Religious Studies, 13 (June 1977), p.144; and John Hick, Faith and Knowledge, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Glasgow: Fontana, 1974), p.17.

2. Aquinas, Summa Theologica, 1a,1,8.

3. Penelhum, "The Analysis of Faith in St. Thomas Aquinas", p.145.

4. Ibid.



given added weight if we consider the following words of one of the more influential of modern Thomists, Etienne Gilson:

"...we begin to discern the general features of a third position on the problem, as well as of a third spiritual family, that of the Thomists. All its members will grant that there is a true Revelation: the Christian Revelation. They grant it, but they do not take it for granted. No man would ever admit God has spoken, unless he had solid proofs of the fact. Such proofs are to be found in history, where the miracles of God, and quite especially the greatest of all: the life and growth of His Church, prove his presence, the truth of His Doctrine and the permanence of His inspiration. If truly God has spoken, His Revelation must needs be true, and it is necessary for us to believe it."<sup>1</sup>

But, whilst it is natural to interpret Aquinas as asserting that the evidence in question is rationally compelling, it is also problematic. The problem lies in the apparent inconsistency of this claim with other aspects of his analysis of faith.<sup>2</sup>

Faith, it will be remembered, involved, for Aquinas, assent to propositions in a wholehearted manner. In this way it differed from doubt, suspicion and opinion and resembled rational

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1. Etienne Gibson, Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages, (New York: Scribners, 1939), p.81-2.

2. Penelhum, "The Analysis of Faith in St. Thomas Aquinas", p.144.

certitude. Doubt, suspicion and opinion all involved assent, but without conviction. But, it differed from scientia and resembled the others in that the assent was not compelled by the evidence. Where assent was compelled by the evidence, it was involuntary and there could be no merit attached to it. This was the case with scientia, but it was not the case with faith. Assent in faith was not compelled by the evidence and was, therefore voluntary and, hence, meritorious.<sup>1</sup>

We are, then faced with a dilemma, Aquinas asserts that if faith is to be meritorious, it must be uncompelled. But, he also asserts or at least appears to, that the evidence which establishes the authority of the Scriptures is compelling. He cannot, consistently, hold both. If the evidence is compelling, then it is difficult to see how assent to the articles of faith through an act of faith can have a great deal of merit attached to it. If the evidence is not compelling, then it is difficult to see in what sense assent to the articles of faith can be rational, or, at least, any more rational than doubt or outright rejection.

## VI

There are, it would seem, problems with Aquinas' position, but let us overlook them and assume that they are not insurmountable. Our next task, then, must be to examine the process of natural

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1. Aquinas, Summa Theologica, 2a, 2ae, 9.

theology. Its first task, as have seen, was to establish the existence of God through the process of demonstrative argument. I will consider two of the more important arguments; the Ontological and the Cosmological.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

The Ontological Argument for the existence of God is an attempt to demonstrate that God exists by methods that are purely a priori. As such, it makes absolutely no appeal to experience, but argues from what it takes to be the believer's concept of God to an affirmation of His existence. It claims, in other words, to show that no one with a proper concept of God can rationally doubt that He exists.<sup>1</sup>

The argument originates with Saint Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) and has fascinated philosophers ever since. Anselm's formulation remains the most famous and widely discussed today, although many other famous philosophers, including Descartes, Leibniz and Spinoza, have formulated versions of it. It has also had its critics. The first of these was Gaunilo, a contemporary of Anselm's. His critique of the argument, together with Anselm's reply to it, have survived. They afford added insight into how we are to understand Anselm's position. Saint Thomas Aquinas also criticised a version of the Argument in his Summa Theologica, but the most celebrated critique is, without doubt, that of Immanuel Kant. Indeed, it is often suggested that Kant's criticism of the argument, embodied in the famous claim that existence is not a

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1. Richard Taylor, "Introduction", in The Ontological Argument, ed. Alvin Plantinga (London: Macmillan, 1968) p.vii.

'real predicate', is fatal to it.

The Ontological Argument, however, is far from dead. There have been a number of attempts to reformulate the argument in modern times. The most celebrated of these are the versions put forward by Norman Malcolm and Charles Hartshorne. Both of these philosophers have argued that Anselm, in his Proslogion, presents us with not one, but two versions of the Ontological Argument. The first of these is the one that is usually discussed and is to be found in the second chapter of the Proslogion. I will refer to it as the Proslogion II argument. The second is to be found in the third chapter of the Proslogion and in his reply to Gaunilo. I will refer to it as the Proslogion III argument. There is no evidence to suggest that Anselm distinguished between the two. Nevertheless, both Malcolm and Hartshorne argue that the two are distinct and that, whilst the first may not be sound, the second is. Contemporary debate has, accordingly, shifted to an examination of this new claim. I will begin, however, with an examination of the Proslogion II argument and the classical critique of it, since an understanding of it is important if we are to understand the contemporary debate.

## I

Anselm opens the second chapter of the Proslogion, titled "That God truly exists", by outlining what he takes to be the ordinary believer's understanding of God.

"Well then, Lord, You who give understanding to  
faith, grant me that I may understand, as much as You

see fit, that You exist as we believe You to exist, and that You are what we believe You to be. Now we believe that You are something than which nothing greater can be thought."<sup>1</sup>

This conception of God as 'something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought', as the greatest possible being, is an indispensable part of his argument. He argues that, to understand God in this fashion, is to see that there can be absolutely no doubt concerning His existence. Notice, however, that this conception of God is distinct from the Augustinian conception of God as one 'than whom there is nothing superior'.<sup>2</sup> Anselm's claim is that God is not just the greatest actually existing being, but the greatest possible being. The point is an important one. Although it is true by definition that the greatest actually existing being exists, there can be no guarantee that this being is God. In formulating his definition of "God", Anselm was trying to give a precise expression of the ordinary believer's understanding of God as the only proper object of worship.<sup>3</sup> If God were to be understood as the greatest actually existing being, then it is conceivable that some being should approach God in greatness and

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1. Saint Anselm, Proslogion, 2.

All quotations come from M.J. Charlesworth, St. Anselm's Proslogion (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965).

2. The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, s.v., "Ontological Argument for the Existence of God" by John Hick.

3. Terence Penelhum, Religion and Rationality (New York: Random House, 1971), p.13.

even that, in the future, some being might surpass Him. But, if we see God as the greatest possible being, then there is no possibility of this. Nothing could ever approach God with respect to greatness and nothing could, therefore, be a more proper object of worship.

This, however, raises a problem for Anselm. How does one know that such a being exists? What does one say to the Fool of the Psalms who says in his heart that there is no God? Anselm's answer to this question is that, if we understand God as the greatest possible being, then we will see that He could not fail to exist.

His argument for this conclusion goes through two distinct stages. The first stage is an attempt to demonstrate that the greatest conceivable being exists in the mind. The second, more important stage, argues that, if this is the case, it is self-defeating to claim that it exists in the mind alone. We must admit, in other words, that the greatest conceivable being exists both in the mind and in reality.

This distinction between existence in the mind (in intellectu) and actual existence, or existence in reality (in re), seems an odd one. It would appear to imply a distinction between two distinct modes or levels of existence. The point that Anselm is making when he draws this distinction, however, is fairly straightforward. He is simply drawing our attention to the difference between formulating a concept and knowing that something corresponding to that concept actually exists. The mere fact that we have a concept does not guarantee that anything in reality corresponds to that concept. A painter, to use Anselm's example, can plan a picture before he actually paints it. He can, in other words, form a

concept of what the picture he is going to paint will be like. When he does this, the picture is said by Anselm to exist in the mind, but not yet in reality. When he sits down and paints the picture, it will exist both in the mind and in reality. This point can be seen even more clearly if we examine Anselm's argument for the conclusion that the greatest conceivable being exists in the mind.

"Even the Fool, then, is forced to agree that something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought exists in the mind, since he understands this when he hears it, and whatever is understood is in the mind."

Whatever is understood, Anselm tells us, is in the mind. This proposition appears to be tautological for him. If some word or phrase is understood, then the thing to which it refers is said by him to exist in the mind. It may not exist in reality, the thing to which it refers may not be a real object, but we can imagine what it would be like if it did. We can, other words, form a coherent concept of it. If, then, we hear of unicorns being referred to as single horned creatures resembling horses, and we understand this description, unicorns will be said by Anselm to exist in the mind even though there may not be any real as opposed to imaginary unicorns. Similarly, if we hear of God being described as something-than-which-none-greater-can-be-thought, and we understand this description, then God will be said by Anselm to exist in the mind. Now, Anselm had little doubt that even the Fool would understand this description of God when he heard it and so he

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1. Anselm, Proslogion, 2.



concluded that even the Fool must admit that God exists in the mind.

It is clear, then, that for Anselm this first stage of the argument was trivial. Its task was merely to lay the foundation for the second and more important stage. He merely assumed that his formula was a coherent one and that no-one would really doubt that this was the case. It is by no means clear, however, that he was entitled to make this assumption and we will have occasion to call it into question later. To say, however, that God exists in the mind is one thing, but to say that He also exists in reality is another. How, then, does Anselm make the transition?

"And surely that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought cannot exist in the mind alone. For if it exists solely in the mind even, it can thought to exist in reality also, which is greater. If then that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought exists in the mind alone, this same that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought is that-than-which-a-greater-can-be-thought. But this is obviously impossible. Therefore there is absolutely no doubt that something-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought exists both in the mind and in reality."<sup>1</sup>

Anselm, then, wishes to argue that it is self-defeating to assert that the greatest conceivable being exists in the mind alone; that we can formulate a coherent concept of such a being but that the concept is not instantiated. If this were the case,

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1. Ibid.

then our concept would not be of the greatest conceivable being for we can conceive of it as existing both in the mind and in reality and this is greater than existing in the mind alone. The greatest possible being, then, is one that, as a matter of necessity, exists both in the mind and in reality.

The argument is ingenious, but it leaves us feeling somewhat uneasy. We feel that it must be mistaken somewhere, but it is not so easy to see where. This feeling is well summed up by Mascall.

"The reaction that most people feel when they are first confronted with this example of the reductio ad absurdum is very similar to that which they feel when they see a conjurer extract a rabbit from an apparently empty hat. They cannot explain how the rabbit got there, but they are pretty certain that the conjurer introduced it somehow."

The trick, we feel, lies somewhere in the transition from conceptual reality to actual reality; from what can be conceived to exist, to what actually exists. Is it legitimate to move purely from the examination of a concept to an assertion that the concept is instantiated, as Anselm does in the second stage of his argument? Moreover, can we really form a coherent concept of 'something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-conceived', as Anselm claims in the first stage of his argument? Traditional critiques of the Ontological Argument have centred around these two questions, and it is to them that we will now turn.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Mascall, He Who Is, p.32.

2. Penelhum, Religion and Rationality, p.134.

The first question I wish to consider concerns the coherence, or otherwise, of Anselm's formula. Is it really true, as Anselm assumes, that even the Fool will understand the phrase "something-than-which-none-greater-can-be-thought", when he hears it? It is interesting to note that his first critic, Gaunilo, a believer writing on behalf of the Fool, questions him precisely upon this point.

"...upon hearing it spoken of I can so little think or entertain in my mind this being (that which is greater than all those others that are able to be thought of, and which it is said can be none other than God Himself) in terms of an object known to me either by species or genus, as I can think of God Himself, whom indeed for this very reason I can even think does not exist. For neither do I know the reality itself, nor can I form an idea from some other things like it since, as you say yourself, it is such that nothing could be like it."

Gaunilo, then, points to the uniqueness of the being described by Anselm's formula and asks whether we can really formulate a coherent concept of such a being. It is an important point. We formulate concepts by reference to objects around us. But, the being to which Anselm refers is said to be unique. How, then, can we formulate a clear idea or concept of it? Moreover, if this cannot be done, how is it possible to affirm that something

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1. Gaunilo, A Reply on Behalf of the Fool, 4. Quotations are from Charlesworth, St. Anselm's Proslogion.

corresponds to the concept? The point is an especially acute one when we consider that Anselm argues that this affirmation could be achieved purely by an examination of the concept in question.

Having made this point, Gaunilo goes on to distinguish between three ways in which a person can be said to understand a particular phrase or proposition.<sup>1</sup> (i) He can understand the words employed without comprehending their real meaning and, therefore, without understanding that what they signify actually exists. (ii) He can understand the words employed and comprehend their real, meaning, but without understanding that what they signify actually exists. (iii) He can understand the words employed, comprehend their real meaning and understand that what they signify actually exists. Now, Anselm, in the first stage of his argument, assumed that his formula could, at the very least, be understood in the second of these three ways. The Fool, he believes, understands what is meant by "God" but rejects His actual existence. He then goes on to argue, in the second stage of the argument, that he cannot do this without contradiction. Gaunilo, however, argues that the formula can only be understood in the first and most trivial way. But, if this is the case, then the Ontological Argument does not get off the ground. If I cannot really understand the word "God", then there is no real sense in which God can be said to exist in the mind and I cannot, therefore, argue from this to God's actual existence.

This question of our ability to understand, in any real sense, Anselm's formula has subsequently been taken up by a number of

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1. Charlesworth, St. Anselm's Proslogion, p.87.

writers. Many have argued that the formula is incoherent. One of the most succinct critiques is, without doubt, that of C.D. Broad.<sup>1</sup> He raises a number of serious problems which cause him to doubt whether the formula is a coherent one.

Broad begins by pointing to an ambiguity within the formula. The phrase "most perfect (conceivable being)", he tells us, can be interpreted in either of two ways. The first is what he calls the comparative interpretation. On this interpretation, the phrase is equivalent to "a being such that nothing more perfect is logically possible". The second way he calls the positive interpretation. On this interpretation, the phrase is equivalent to "a being which has all positive powers and qualities to the highest possible degree". He then goes on to argue that unless all positive characteristics are mutually compatible, neither interpretation will do. His argument proceeds as follows:

Suppose, for example that it was impossible for an extended substance to be conscious and for a conscious substance to be extended. If this were the case, then it would be impossible for there to be a substance with all positive properties and, therefore, the phrase "a being which has all positive powers and qualities to the highest possible degree" would be so much "meaningless verbiage". The positive interpretation, then, would be incoherent. But this, he tells us, is also true of the

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1. C.D. Broad, "A Critique of the Ontological Argument", in Philosophy of Religion: Selected Reading, eds. William I. Rowe and William J. Wainwright (New York: Harcourt, Bruce, Jovanovich, 1973).

comparative interpretation.

Let us suppose this time, that there are three and only three positive properties; X,Y,Z. Furthermore, that any two of these are compatible but that the presence of any two excludes the third. Now, Broad argues, if this is the case, then we would have not one most perfect being, but three most perfect beings. The phrase, "the most perfect (conceivable) being", then, would be inappropriate. We would need to talk of "the most perfect (conceivable) beings".

It is clear, then, that nothing can answer to the phrase "most perfect (conceivable) being" unless all positive characteristics are compatible. It is equally clear that nothing can answer to the comparative interpretation unless it also answered to the positive interpretation. For, if we conceived of a being that did not have all positive characteristics, it would be logically possible to conceive of another being that had all the characteristics of the first together with some that the first lacked.

It is of absolute importance, then, that all positive characteristics be shown to be mutually compatible. But, Broad goes on to argue, even if this can be shown it must also be shown that all positive attributes have intrinsic maximums or upper limits of degree. If they do not, then the phrase "most perfect [conceivable] being" is as meaningless as the phrase "highest possible integer". Moreover, it is not absolutely clear that they do. Positive properties such as length, temperature or pain, for example, do not seem to have any intrinsic maximum or upper limit of degree.

This argument of Broad's is masterful. The question of whether or not Anselm's formula can be understood in any sense other than the trivial one that Gaunilo pointed to is by no means an unproblematic one. Broad has shown us a number of very strong reasons why this is the case. He has not, however, shown us that the formula is an incoherent one. Anselm might reply in one of two ways. Firstly, he could argue that his formula needs to be understood in some sense other than the two which Broad points out. Secondly, he could argue that, contrary to Broad's suspicions, all positive characteristics are mutually compatible and do have an intrinsic maximum or upper limit of degree. I am not sure just how he could go about either of these two tasks but, equally, I am not sure how one could rule out either possibility.

Anselm, then, is faced with a problem that haunts all theists; that of giving sense to any assertion or statement about God. But, it seems to me, Anselm is faced with this problem in a particularly acute fashion. Broad, as we have seen, argued that unless all positive characteristics are mutually compatible and have an intrinsic maximum or upper limit of degree, the term "most perfect being" is an incoherent one. It is incumbent upon Anselm, then, to show that they are, or alternatively, that his formula can be given another meaningful interpretation before he can go on to argue that God exists. This is because his method is purely a priori, proceeds purely by an examination of the implications of what he takes to be the believer's concept of God. Someone like Aquinas, however, who argues a posteriori from certain features of the world to the existence of God is not faced with this problem in as acute a fashion. It seems possible for him to accept that our concept of

God is incomplete but is, nevertheless, sufficient for us to demonstrate that a being exists who can reasonably be identified as God. If, then, our concept of God is such that it requires all positive characteristics to be mutually compatible and capable of an intrinsic maximum or upper degree, since we have good reason to believe that God exists, we have good reason to believe that they are. It is interesting to note that Gaunilo appears to make a similar point;

"That is why it must first be conclusively proved by argument that there is some higher nature, ..., so that we can also infer everything else which necessarily cannot be wanting to what is greater and better than everything."<sup>1</sup>

### I I I

Our second question concerned the transition from the conceptual to the real. If we grant that the concept of "something-than-which-none-greater-can-be-thought" is a coherent one, can we really establish purely by examining the logical implications of this concept, that this being actually exists? Our instinctive reaction is to say no, but a purely instinctive rejection of his argument is not likely to trouble Anselm too much. He would agree that this step is one that we would not normally be justified in taking, but would argue that in this one case, of the greatest conceivable being, it is one that we must make. The

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1. Gaunilo, A Reply on Behalf of the Fool, 4.



debate between Anselm and Gaunilo is, once again, informative on this point.

Gaunilo begins his critique of Anselm on this point by isolating what he takes to be the crucial premise in Anselm's argument.

"That, however, (this nature) necessarily exists in reality is demonstrated to me from the fact that, unless it existed, whatever exists in reality would be greater than it and consequently it would not be that which is greater than everything that undoubtedly had already been proved to exist in the mind".<sup>1</sup>

Gaunilo is, quite clearly, correct. Anselm does make the transition from the claim that the greatest conceivable being exists in the mind to the claim that it also exists in reality through an implicit assumption that it is greater to exist both in the mind and in reality than in the mind alone.<sup>2</sup> It is only on the basis of this proposition that Anselm is able to conclude that it is self-defeating to claim that the greatest conceivable being exists in the mind alone. Given that it is greater to exist both in the mind and in reality than in the mind alone, the greatest conceivable being could not possibly exist in the mind alone. The central question, then, concerns the admissability or otherwise of this premise. Gaunilo argues that it is inadmissible since we could employ it to demonstrate the existence not only of God, but

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1. Ibid., 5.

2. This point is made forcefully by Charlesworth, St. Anselm's Proslogion, p.59.

of any number of things.

"For example: they say that there is in the ocean somewhere an island which, because of the difficulty (or rather the impossibility) of finding that which does not exist, some have called the 'Lost Island'. And the story goes that it is blessed with all manner of priceless riches and delights in abundance, much more even than the Happy Isles, and, having no owner or inhabitant, it is superior everywhere in abundance of riches to all those other lands that men inhabit. Now, if anyone tell(s) me that it is like this, I shall easily understand what is said, since nothing is difficult about it. But if he should then go on to say, as though it were a logical consequence of this: You cannot any more doubt that this island that is more excellent than all other lands truly exists somewhere in reality than you can doubt that it is in your mind; and since it is more excellent to exist not only in the mind alone but also in reality, therefore it must needs be that it exists. For if it did not exist, any other land existing in reality would be more excellent than it, and so this island, already conceived by you to be more excellent than others, will not be more excellent."

Gaunilo, then, uses Anselm's reasoning to demonstrate the existence of an island "more excellent than all other lands". His

example, however, is unfortunate. Anselm's argument, after all, was intended to demonstrate the existence of a being greater than any other conceivable, not actual, being. Nevertheless, we can easily reformulate the argument to take this discrepancy into account. The argument would now be that, since it is greater to exist both in the mind and in reality, the greatest conceivable island would, of necessity, exist in reality if it exists in the mind. But, as Gaunilo points out, this argument is readily seen to be absurd.

"If, I say, someone wishes to persuade me that this island really exists beyond all doubt; I should either think that he was joking, or I should find it hard to decide which of us I ought to judge the bigger fool - I, if I agreed with him, or he, if he thought that he had proved the existence of this island with any certainty."<sup>1</sup>

Anselm's reply to this argument of Gaunilo's is as follows:

"Now, I truly promise that if anyone should discover for me something existing either in reality or in the mind alone - except that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought - to which the logic of my argument would apply, then I shall find that Lost Island and give it, never more to be lost, to that person."<sup>2</sup>

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1. Ibid.

2. Anselm, The Author's Reply to Gaunilo, 3. Quoted from Charlesworth, St. Anselm's Proslogion.

Anselm, then, stands by the logic of his argument, but seems to be denying that it applies to any case except that of 'something-than-which-more-greater-can-be-thought'. But why need this be the case? If we can really formulate a coherent concept of an island more perfect than any other conceivable island and if actual existence really is a perfection, why should we be prohibited from concluding that such an island truly exists? Anselm's answer, presumably, would be that an island is a finite thing and that even the most perfect conceivable island would contain only a finite number of perfections. Just which perfections such an island would have, therefore, would be a matter of conjecture. Equally, it would be a matter of conjecture whether or not it possessed the perfection of actual existence. The greatest conceivable being, however, is the sum of all perfections. There can be no doubt, therefore, that it would also contain the perfection of actual existence.

Thus, it seems possible for Anselm to reply to Gaunilo's argument, although the reply retains much of the oddity of the Ontological Argument itself. The problem seems to be Anselm's assumption that actual existence is a perfection like any other perfection that a thing either has or lacks. Modern criticism of the argument has amounted to a denial of this assumption. The most famous of these is Kant's claim that existence is not a real predicate.

"'Being' is obviously not a real predicate; that is, it is not a concept of something which could be added to the concept of a thing, or of certain determinations, as existing in themselves. Logically

it is merely the copula of a judgment. The proposition, 'God is omnipotent', contains two concepts, each of which has its object - God and omnipotence. The small word 'is' adds no new predicate, but only serves to posit the predicate in its relation to the subject. If, now, we take the subject (God) with all its predicates (among which is omnipotence), and say 'God is', or 'There is a God', we attach no new predicate to the concept of God, but only posit the subject in itself with all its predicates, and indeed posit it as being an object that stands in relation to my concept."

The argument is somewhat technical and obscure, but the point that Kant is making is clear enough. If I make an assertion such as "God is omnipotent", I am predicating a certain characteristic or attribute of God: In doing so, I am adding to or enlarging my concept of God. If, however, I assert that God exists, the "exists" in the proposition "God exists" does not function in the same way as does the word "omnipotent" in the proposition "God is omnipotent". I am not predicating any new characteristic of God, I am not adding to my concept of God by asserting that He exists. Rather, I am asserting that something real corresponds to my concept; that the concept is instantiated. Thus, although they may perform the same grammatical function, they do not perform the same logical function.

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1. Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason, translated by Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1929), p.504.

Kant, then draws out attention to a distinction which Anselm himself drew; the distinction between the conceptual and the real. But, in opposition to Anselm, he claims that one is never justified in making the transition from the former to the latter purely from an examination of the conceptual. One could only do this if the concept of existence could be contained analytically within another concept; if existence could be a defining characteristic of some object. But, it is not and cannot be a characteristic of any sort, let alone a defining characteristic. No existential claim, then, can be analytic.

This argument is a strong one and has often been considered fatal to Anselm's argument. It is not altogether clear, however, that this is so.

"...in the form in which it is usually proposed 'existence is not a real predicate' means no more than that 'exists' is not a predicate of the same kind as other predicates, 'round', 'red', 'six feet tall', &c., and that it cannot be 'contained' analytically in the notion of any subject in the same way as, say, the notion of 'plane figure containing two right angles' is contained in the notion of 'triangle'. In this form of the principle it is clear that neither Anselm nor Descartes is touched by it, for both admit that it is only in one unique case that 'exists' can be analytically contained within the notion of a subject."

Once again, then, it seems that Anselm would be able to resurrect his argument by an appeal to the uniqueness of the case in question. I am not sure, however, that Anselm is untouched by the Kantian critique. It is certainly true that most arguments for the claim that existence is not a real predicate reach this conclusion by pointing to logical differences between the way in which the word "exists" functions in proposition of the form "x exists" and the way in which other words which we would normally allow as real predicates, function in sentences of the same or a similar grammatical form.<sup>1</sup> It is also true that to have shown this is not necessarily to have shown that there is no sense in which "exists" can function as a real predicate. However, the issue is surely not whether "exists" can be considered a real predicate, in any sense, but whether it can be considered a real predicate in any sense that is helpful to Anselm's argument.

The natural way in which to interpret Anselm's underlying assumption, that existence is a perfection that the greatest possible being must have, is that our concept of such a being must contain the notion of existence. Now, if it is conceded that existence is not a predicate in the way that roundness, redness, or whatever, is and that it cannot be contained analytically within the notion of a subject in the same way that "plane figure containing two right angles" can be in the notion of "triangle", what is required is an explanation of how it can be. What is required, in other words, is an explanation of how we are to

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1. See for example, G.E. Moore, "Is existence a predicate", in The Ontological Argument, ed. Plantinga.

understand the claim that it is greater to exist both in the mind and in reality than in the mind alone.' In order to see the oddity of this claim, let us retrace Anselm's argument in the light of what Kant has had to say.

The argument, it will be remembered, began with a definition of God as something-than-which-none-greater-can-be-thought. Having formulated this definition Anselm went on to assert that, since it is possible to understand this definition, it is also possible to formulate a coherent concept of God. God, to use Anselm's terminology, was said to exist in the mind. Now, whether or not we wish to accept Anselm's conclusion, it is clear that the argument in its first stage is intelligible. This, however, is not obviously the case with the second stage of the argument.

Anselm begins the second stage of his argument by claiming that "...if it (something-than-which-none-greater-can-be-thought) exists solely in the mind even, it can be thought to exist in reality also, which is greater." This sentence is somewhat puzzling, but it seems to me that it contains the following three propositions which are important steps in his argument:

If (1) our concept of God is of a being that is not real  
then (2) we can formulate a concept of God as a being that is  
real.

but (3) our concept of God as real is of a being that is  
greater than our concept of God as not real.

The transition from propositions (1) and (2) to proposition (3) is by means of the hidden premise that it is greater to exist both in

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1. Charlesworth does, indeed, go on to make this point.



the mind and unreality than in the mind alone.

From proposition (3), Anselm concludes that our concept of God as not real is incoherent since God is, by definition, the greatest conceivable being and this particular concept is not of such a being. It cannot, therefore, be a concept of God. The importance of the Kantian critique, however, is to show that whilst this line of reasoning may be employed to show what other attributes God must have, it cannot be employed to show that He has the attribute of existence.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Kant gives us a reason why it cannot be used to do this.

Let us allow, for the sake of argument, that the definition of "God" which Anselm supplies us with is both accurate and coherent. Suppose, then, that we wished to determine whether or not God was omnipotent. We could, it seems to me, use the argument outlined above to show that this was the case. We could do this by simply substituting the words "is omnipotent" and "is not omnipotent" for the words "is real" and "is not real" in propositions (1), (2) and (3). We would then have an argument something like the following.

If (4) our concept of God is of a being that is not omnipotent  
then (5) we can formulate a concept of God as a being that is  
omnipotent

but (6) our concept of God as omnipotent is of a being that is  
greater than our concept of God as not omnipotent.

The transition from propositions (4) and (5) to proposition (6) assumes, of course, that a being which is omnipotent is

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1. This, of course, is to allow more than Kant would have allowed; i.e. that existence is an attribute.

greater than a being that is not omnipotent. This assumption, however, seems to be a fair one. We can conclude, then, that since our concept of God is of the greatest conceivable being, our concept of God as not omnipotent is an incoherent one. From this we can go on to conclude the our concept of God must be of a being that is omnipotent. But, there seems to be an important difference between this argument and Anselm's. To bring out this difference, compare propositions (3) and (6). Proposition (6) is perfectly intelligible. Our concept of God as omnipotent is certainly of a different and, what is more, greater being than our concept of God as not omnipotent. What about proposition (3)? Is our concept of God as real of a different, let alone greater, being than our concept of God as not real? Surely not. Surely our concept, in both cases, is of the same being. But, if this is the case, then it is difficult to see how Anselm can make the transition from propositions (1) and (2) to the claim that the concept of God as not existing is an incoherent one. Furthermore, unless this transition can be made, the argument fails.

#### IV

The Proslogion II argument, thus, fails not because it can be demonstrated that there is no sense in which existence can be a real predicate, but because it is difficult to see that it can be in a sense that will help Anselm. But, what about the Proslogion III argument as developed by Malcolm and Hartshorne? I will now turn to a consideration of this question. In doing so, however, I will limit my discussion to Malcom's formulation of the argument

since my basic criticism of this, I believe, is also applicable to Hartshorne.

Malcolm finds evidence for his new version of the Ontological Argument in the following passage from chapter 3 of the Proslogion.

"And certainly this being so truly exists that it cannot be even thought not to exist. For something can be thought to exist that cannot be thought not to exist, and this is greater than that which can be thought not to exist. Hence, if that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought can be thought not to exist, then that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought is not the same as that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought which is absurd. Something-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought exists so truly then, that it cannot be even thought not to exist.

And You, Lord our God, are this being."

He then goes on to give his interpretation of this passage and the argument he believes it to embody.

"Previously I rejected existence as a perfection. Anselm is maintaining in the remarks last quoted, not that existence is a perfection, but that the logical impossibility of non-existence is a perfection. In other words, necessary existence is a perfection. His first ontological proof uses the principle that a thing is greater if it exists than if it does not exist. His second proof employs the different principle that a

thing is greater if it necessarily exists than if it does not necessarily exist."<sup>1</sup>

The Proslogion II argument, in other words, rests upon the assumption that existence is a predicate and Malcolm believes that this criticism is fatal to it. The second argument, he claims, is based upon a different assumption, that necessary existence is a perfection. This assumption, he holds, is independent of the first and, as such, not subject to the same criticism. The crucial premise in this new argument, then, is that "a thing is greater if it necessarily exists than if it does not necessarily exists". Having made this point, he then goes on to make the following statement.

"What Anselm has proved is that the notion of contingent existence or of contingent non existence cannot have any application to God. His existence must either be logically necessary or logically impossible. The only intelligible way of rejecting Anselm's claim that God's existence is necessary is to maintain that the concept of God, as a being greater than which cannot be conceived, is self-contradictory or nonsensical."<sup>2</sup>

The crucial feature of Malcolm's argument, then, is the notion of necessary, as opposed to contingent, existence. Now, it is certainly true that the concept of God employed by many if not most

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1. Norman Malcolm, "Anselm's Ontological Arguments", in The Ontological Argument, ed. Plantinga.

2. Ibid., p145.

religious thinkers is that of a necessary being, but what exactly is meant by this term? As Hudson points out, there are at least two important ways in which it could be understood.<sup>1</sup> The first is that of a logically necessary being, the second of a factually or ontologically necessary being. A logically necessary being is one whose existence it is impossible to deny without contradiction. If, then, God is said to be a logically necessary being, the denial of the proposition "God exists" would be of self-contradictory. A factually or ontologically necessary being is one whose existence is not dependent upon any being other than itself. To talk of God as a necessary being in this sense is to talk of God as a being whose existence is totally independent of the existence of any other being.

Now, in which of these two ways did Anselm employ the term? There is some dispute concerning the correct answer to this question. Malcolm clearly believes that Anselm's concept of God was that of a logically necessary being; or, at least this is what is implied by his identification of the terms "necessary existence" and "logical impossibility of non-existence". Hick, however, has argued forcefully that Anselm conceived of God as a factually necessary being.<sup>2</sup> Quite irrespective of which answer is the correct one, however, is the important question of whether or not the claim that necessary existence in either sense of the word is a

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1. W. Donald Hudson, A Philosophical Approach to Religion (London: Macmillan, 1974), p.32.

2. John Hick, Arguments for the Existence of God, (London: Macmillan, 1970), p.86.

characteristic that God, as the greatest conceivable being, must have can salvage the Ontological Argument. It is my belief that it cannot.

Let us begin by examining the claim that God is a logically necessary being. This, as we saw, amounts to a claim that the proposition "God exists" is necessarily true. But, how can it be unless existence is a predicate which can be contained analytically within the notion of a subject? Malcolm, as we have seen, agreed that existence was not a real predicate, but it is difficult to see how the notion of logically necessary existence can make any sense unless we accept that it is. It is difficult to see, in other words, how Malcolm's argument differs from the first except in the matter of wording.'

What about factually or ontologically necessary existence? If God's existence were seen to be necessary in this way, then He would be conceived as existing in a totally independent fashion. That is, His existence would not be dependent upon that of any other creature. Now, it is my belief that existence can be meaningfully predicated of God in this sense, but we cannot conclude from this that God actually exists. All that we are entitled to conclude is that, if God exists, His existence is such that it is independent of the existence of any other being.

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1. Malcolm does, of course, present arguments to show that they are distinct. Due to considerations of space I have not been able to include these. For an excellent examination of them, however, see Penelhum, Religion and Rationality, p.365 - 375.

We can conclude, then, that the Proslogion III argument is not successful as a sound Ontological Argument.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

The Cosmological Argument, for the existence of God attempts to establish that God exists a posteriori. Thus, it differs from the Ontological Argument which was a purely a priori attempt to demonstrate the existence of God. The Ontological Argument, as we have seen, argued from what was taken to be the ordinary believer's concept of God to an affirmation of His existence, without any reference to human experience. The Cosmological Argument, however, takes as its initial premise some very general fact or set of facts about the world which, it is argued, are derived from experience. The existence of God is said to follow rationally from these facts.

Cosmological Arguments are amongst the oldest of all theistic arguments.<sup>1</sup> Early versions are to be found in the works of the great Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle. It was also a popular form of argument amongst medieval Arabic and Jewish philosophers. The most famous versions of the Cosmological Argument in the western world, however, are those of St. Thomas Aquinas. It is to his versions of the argument, accordingly, that I will confine my attention.

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1. For an excellent historical treatment of the Cosmological Argument see Willam Lane Craig, The Cosmological Argument From Plato to Leibniz (London: Macmillan, 1980).



In the Summa Theologica Aquinas offers five ways in which he believes that the existence of God may be demonstrated. These are the arguments from motion, causality, contingency, degrees of perfection, and design. Each of these five ways is in some sense a Cosmological Argument, although the first three are generally considered to be more typical of the argument as it is known today. For this reason I will confine my discussion to them.

## I

The first of Aquinas' five ways, and the one which he thought to be the most obvious, is the proof ex motu: from motion or change. It proceeds as follows:

"The first and most obvious way is based on change. Some things in the world are certainly in process of change: this we plainly see. Now anything in process of change is being changed by something else. . . . Moreover, this something else, if in process of change, is itself being changed by yet another thing: and this last by another. Now we must stop somewhere... . Hence one is bound to arrive at some first cause of change not itself being changed by anything, and this is what everybody understands by God."<sup>1</sup>

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1. Aquinas, Summa Theologica, 1a,2,3.

The argument, then, begins from the simple everyday observation that change occurs. From this initial premise, Aquinas proceeds to argue in the following manner: If change occurs, then there must be a cause of its occurrence and this cause must be external to the object undergoing change. Now, this cause of change must itself be an object which is either undergoing change or not undergoing change. If it is not undergoing change, then we have arrived at a first cause of change. If it is undergoing change, then, in turn, there must be an external cause of this change of which the same question may be asked. Thus, we are faced with two alternatives. Either we arrive at some first, uncaused cause of change, or we are forced to posit an infinite series of objects causing change and being caused to change by another. But, Aquinas argues, an infinite series of this sort is impossible. We are, then, forced to arrive at a first, uncaused cause of change. This, Aquinas tells us, "everybody understands by God".

The argument, then, in its most basic form, consists of the following propositions:

- (1) Change occurs.
- (2) Whenever change occurs there must be a cause of that change external to the object undergoing change.
- (3) An infinite series of objects causing change and being caused to change is impossible.
- (4) Therefore, we must arrive at a first, uncaused cause of change.

The same argument, in a somewhat extended form, is to be found

in the Summa Contra Gentiles.<sup>1</sup> Here Aquinas attributes the argument to Aristotle. Here also he acknowledges that the crucial premises are propositions (2) and (3). Proposition (1) he saw as an indisputable truth, guaranteed by the senses. One need simply observe the world around us, Aquinas felt, to see that some things are in the process of changing from one state to another. The first premise, then, is felt to have its basis in experience. Propositions (2) and (3), however, do not. Nor is their truth seen to be self-evident. Aquinas felt it necessary to provide additional arguments to support the truth of these propositions. Before examining these, however, it will be useful to elucidate precisely what Aquinas understood by the word "change".

The term motus has been translated variously as either "motion" or "change". Thus, the proof ex motu is referred to sometimes as the argument from motion and sometimes as the argument from change. In the past, the most common translation of motus was in favour of the term. This translation, however, is somewhat misleading. "Motion" is generally used, today, to refer specifically to local motion; that is, to change in spatial location. This, however, is only part of what Aquinas wished to convey by the term motus. He also used it to refer to any qualitative or quantitative change in an object. A hand moving a poker was an example of motus for Aquinas, but so was a poker getting hot in a fire. Equally, physical growth and decay were examples of motus. For this reason, modern commentators have

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1. Aquinas, Summa Contra Gentiles, Book 1, Chapter 13.

tended to translate "motus" as "change". It is the translation which I will adhere to in my treatment of the argument.

Proposition (1), then, should be interpreted as a claim that some physical objects are subject to change in a qualitative sense, in a quantitative sense and with regards to spatial location. This Aquinas considered to be an empirical fact and he is surely correct.

Having said this, we may turn to consider propositions (2) and (3). I will begin with a consideration of his argument in favour of proposition (2). It proceeds as follows:

"Now anything in process of change is being changed by something else. This is so because it is characteristic of things in process of change that they do not yet have the perfection towards which they move, though able to have it; whereas it is characteristic of something causing change to have that perfection already. For to cause change is to bring into being what was previously only able to be, and this can only be done by something that already is: thus fire, which is actually hot, causes wood, which is able to be hot, to become actually hot, and in this way causes change in the wood. Now the same thing cannot at the same time be both actually x and potentially x, though it can be actually x and potentially y: the actually hot cannot at the same time be potentially hot, though it can be potentially cold. Consequently, a thing in process of change cannot itself cause that same change; it cannot change itself. Of necessity therefore

anything in process of change is being changed by something else."<sup>1</sup>

This argument is based upon an Aristotelian understanding of change as a movement from potentiality to act. Whatever is in process of change towards some state, y, is said to be potentially in that state, but actually in some other state, x. When the process of change is complete it will no longer be potentially in y, it will now be actually in y. But, since it is now actually in y, it is no longer actually in x. At the best, it is now only potentially in x. Thus, a poker when placed in a fire is said to be actually cold but potentially hot. When it has been in the fire for some time, it will be actually hot and, at the best, only potentially cold. Now, Aquinas argues, nothing which is potentially y can become actually y unless there is something already in y causing it to do so. Our poker cannot become hot unless caused to do so by something already hot, for example, a fire. Furthermore, nothing can be both potentially and actually y at the same time. Our poker cannot be both hot and cold at the same time. It follows, therefore, that nothing can cause itself to change, but must be caused to do so by something external to itself. Thus, we arrive at the general principle that anything in process of change is changed by another.

This argument, shed of its Aristotelian terminology, may be put as follows:

- (1) Whenever change occurs, an object moves from some state, x, to another state, y.

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1. Aquinas, Summa Theologica, 1a,2,3.

(ii) No object can move from state, x, to state, y, unless caused to do so by something already in state, y.

(iii) No object can be both in state, x, and in state, y, at the same time.

(2) Therefore, whenever change occurs, there must be cause of that change external to the object undergoing change.

The point of this argument is to establish the general principle that whenever we observe some object undergoing change there is an external cause of that change, by excluding the possibility that an object can cause change in itself. The argument, however, fails. The crucial premise is, quite clearly, proposition (ii). But, this proposition is problematic. To begin with, it would appear to admit to obvious counter-examples. It may well be the case that a poker can only become hot if caused to do so by something already hot, or wet if caused to do so by something already wet. But, it is not very difficult to think of examples of objects changing from one state to another that do not appear to be caused to do so by something already in that state. Is a stick moved from one position to another always caused to do so by something already in that position? Is a flower that wilts caused to do so by something which has already wilted? It is difficult to see how.

A more telling objection to this proposition, however, is that it is difficult to see how Aquinas can hold it and remain consistent. As Rowe points out, Aquinas certainly believed that God could directly cause a cold object to become hot, but he would

certainly not hold that God is in a state of being hot.'

Perhaps, however, this criticism is unfair. Craig, for example, argues that it rests upon a misunderstanding of Aquinas' argument.

"Thomas does not want to prove that a cause must actually possess the very quality it is causing in its effect; this would be utterly counter-productive, since then the unmoved first mover would have to actually possess all the qualities that it causes, which is absurd. What he wants to prove is that anything in change is being actualised by a being already actual. . . . The real thrust of the proof is that the actualising of a potential can only be done by some actual thing."<sup>2</sup>

The misunderstanding, however, appears to rest with Craig. It is certainly true that Aquinas did not wish to prove that a cause must possess the very quality it is causing in its effect, but neither did he wish to prove that anything in process of change is being actualised by a being already actual. What he wished to prove was that anything in process of change is being caused to change by something external to itself. The claim that a cause must possess the very quality it is causing in its effect appears to be an essential part of his argument for this conclusion.

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1. Willam I. Rowe, The Cosmological Argument (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), p.15.
  2. Craig, The Cosmological Argument From Plato to Leibniz, p.172.

Perhaps, however, he can reach this conclusion without proposition (ii) by formulating an argument around the following proposition:

(iia) Anything in change is being actualised by a being already actual.

The problem with this suggestion, however, is that it is by no means clear how proposition (iia) is to be understood. The phrase, "is being actualised", it would seem, refers to the object undergoing change. But it is not clear what meaning we are to give to it. If it means that the object undergoing change moves from a state of being potentially, y, to a state of being actually, y, then proposition (iia) appears to be a claim that anything in change moves from a state of being potentially y to a state of being actually y and is caused to do so by something actually in y. But this, of course is exactly what is being asserted by proposition (ii) and is subject to the same difficulties. If, on the other hand, it means that anything undergoing change is not an actual but only a potential being and must, therefore, be actualised by an actual being, it would seem to commit Aquinas to an understanding of change that is totally foreign to him and patently absurd. Surely, if something is undergoing change it must be an actual being or there would be nothing to undergo change. But, if we allow that the object undergoing change must be an actual being and stipulate only that the cause of change must be an actual being without any reference to the qualities which that being possesses, then how can we exclude the possibility of an object causing change in itself? The answer, surely, is that we could not. But, is this not precisely what Aquinas is attempting to do?



This brings our discussion to another problem facing proposition (ii). If some being, A, is undergoing change, then there are three possibilities. Firstly, A is itself the cause of this change, Secondly, the cause of this change is some other object, B. Thirdly, there is no cause of the change in A. Proposition (ii), taken in itself, allows for the first two possibilities, but not for the third. This, as Rowe points out, reveals an important assumption underlying Aquinas' argument.<sup>1</sup> This is the assumption that the occurrence of change is never a brute fact, that there is always a cause of change. Now, it may well be that this assumption is warranted, but Aquinas gives us no reason to believe that it is. Furthermore, since there does not appear to be any absurdity in the supposition that change may occur without any cause, some reason for rejecting this possibility is necessary if the argument is to be considered successful.

Thus, it would seem, Aquinas does not successfully establish the truth of proposition (2). Nevertheless, an unsuccessful argument does not necessarily mean a false conclusion and there is some intuitive plausibility in the claim that whatever changes is caused to change by something external to itself. This being the case, we could, perhaps, allow proposition (2) and proceed to a consideration of Aquinas' argument for proposition (3).

Proposition (3) involves the claim that an infinite series of things causing change and being caused to change is impossible. Aquinas' argument for this proposition proceeds as follows:

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1. Rowe, The Cosmological Argument, p.16 - 17.

"Now we must stop somewhere, otherwise there will be no first cause of the change, and as a result, no subsequent cause. For it is only when acted upon by the first causes that the intermediate causes will produce the change: if the hand does not move the stick, the stick will not move anything else."

This argument is weak, to say the least. Aquinas begins by arguing that the notion of an infinite series of objects causing change and being caused to change excludes the possibility of a first cause of change. Now this, quite clearly, is true. In fact, the very definition of an infinite series of causes implies the impossibility of a first cause. But, Aquinas goes on to argue that if we exclude the possibility of a first cause of change, we must also exclude the possibility of any subsequent causes of change. In other words, unless there is a first cause of change, there will be no causes of change at all and, therefore, no change. But, this argument is quite clearly fallacious. Aquinas appears to be confusing an infinite series of causes with one that is very long, but finite.<sup>2</sup> In a finite series of causes, no matter how long, it is certainly true that there will be no series of causes unless there is a first cause. But, an infinite series of causes is precisely one in which causes occur without there being a first cause. Now, it may well be the case there is some inherent contradiction in the notion of an infinite series of causes, but

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1. Aquinas, Summa Theologica, 1a,2,3.

2. Paul Edwards, "The Cosmological Argument ", in Philosophy of Religion, ed., Rowe and Wainwright, p.141.

Aquinas' argument gives us no reason to believe that this is the case.

At this point, however, commentators have pointed to a certain ambivalence in Aquinas' position. The problem concerns the type of series that he wishes to exclude. The natural way to read the argument is to see it as referring to an infinite series stretching backward in time. The problem with this interpretation, however, is that Aquinas, elsewhere, admits that there is no inherent contradiction in the idea of such a series.<sup>1</sup> His view, which caused quite a stir amongst many of his contemporaries, was that although we must hold as an article of faith that the world had a beginning in time, this was not open to demonstration. But, if this is the case, how can one, by rational means, exclude the possibility of an infinite series of causes stretching backward in time? Aquinas states that one cannot. But, is this not inconsistent with his rejection of infinite causal series in this argument? It would appear that it is not. Aquinas distinguishes between two types of causal series. The first type, a causal series ordered per accidens, can, he accepts, be conceived without absurdity to stretch infinitely backwards in time. The second type, a series of causes ordered per se, he states quite explicitly, cannot.<sup>2</sup>

Now, of course, it does not matter whether Aquinas is referring to an infinite series of causes ordered per accidens or an infinite series of causes ordered per se, the argument outlined above would

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1. Aquinas, Summa Theologica, 1a,2,3.

2. Ibid.

not successfully rule out the possibility of either. Nevertheless, some discussion of this distinction is important. It may well be that when we come to understand it, we will recognise the validity of the point which Aquinas is trying to make. I will delay this discussion, however, since the same issue arises with respect to Aquinas' second way, which we will turn to now.

## I I

The second of Aquinas' five ways is the proof ex causalitate; from causality. It proceeds as follows:

"The second way is based on the nature of causation. In the observable world causes are found to be ordered in series; we never observe, nor ever could, something causing itself, for this would mean it preceeded itself, and this is not possible. Such a series must however stop somewhere ... . One is therefore forced to suppose some first cause, to which everyone gives the name 'God'".<sup>1</sup>

This argument, then, begins not with the doctrine of universal causality, as is often asserted, but with the claim that we can observe the existence of causal series within the world. This premise unless we adhere to a strictly Humean analysis of causality, can at least have pretensions to being an empirical fact. The doctrine of universal causality, quite clearly, cannot. From this basic premise, Aquinas proceeds to argue that no causal

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1. Aquinas, Summa Theologica, 1a,2,3.

series can be infinite and that, therefore, there must be some first cause, "to which everybody gives the name 'God'". In its essence, then, the argument proceeds as follows:

- (1) Causal series exist in the world.
- (2) No causal series can be infinite.
- (3) Therefore, there must be a first cause.

It is quite evident, then, that the basic structure of the first two ways is the same. In both, Aquinas begins by establishing the existence of a causal series. He then proceeds to deny the possibility of this causal series being an infinite one. From this he concludes that there must be some first cause. But, despite this similarity of structure, there are a number of differences which we need to be aware of.

Firstly, the notion of causality operating in the second way is somewhat wider than that operating in the first. The first way considers only causes of change. The second way considers not only causes of change, but also causes of an object coming in-to or going out of existence.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the first way considers the cause of change from the point of view of the effect, the body acted upon, whereas the second way considers it from the point of view of the cause or agent.<sup>2</sup>

Secondly, the first way took its point of departure from the fact that change occurs and arrived at the existence of a causal series by arguing that nothing can cause change in itself. His

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1. Anthony Kenny, The Five Ways (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), p.35-6.

2. Ibid.

argument for this, as we saw, involved the assumption that the occurrence of change can never be a brute fact. The second way, however, requires no such assumption.<sup>1</sup> The point of departure of this proof is the existence of a causal series which is taken to be an empirical fact. He then argues that if a causal series exists, it cannot be infinite but must terminate in some first cause. It is true that, in the course of his exposition of the second way, Aquinas makes an assertion that nothing can cause itself, by which he presumably means both that nothing can cause change in itself and that nothing can bring itself into existence. This assertion, however, appears to be superfluous to his overall argument except to show that the causal series cannot end in a being which is the cause of its own existence. The first cause which his argument attempts to establish, then, whatever else it may be, is not a self-caused being.

Having made these points, we may now turn to the argument itself.

Proposition (1), as we have seen, asserts that causal series exist in the world and this is taken to be an empirical fact. We cannot, however, allow it as readily as we did the first premise of the proof ex motu. The problem is that we now know that Aquinas was referring to the existence of a causal series ordered per se and not a causal series ordered per accidens. It is now time, then, to turn our attention to this distinction. Until we understand what it amounts to, we cannot make any judgment concerning the existence of a causal series ordered per se.

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1. Rowe, The Cosmological Argument, p.21

Aquinas makes reference to the distinction in the following passage taken from the Summa Theologica:

"An infinite series of efficient causes essentially subordinate to one another is impossible, that is causes that are per se required for the effect, as when a stone is moved by a stick, a stick by a hand, and so forth: such a series cannot be prolonged indefinitely. All the same an infinite series of efficient causes incidently subordinate to one another is not counted impossible, as when they are all ranged under a causal heading and how many there are is quite incidental. For example, when a smith picks up many hammers because one after another has been broken in his hand, it is accidental to one particular hammer that it is employed after another particular hammer. So is the fact that another has procreated him to the procreating act of a particular man, for he does this as a man, and not as the son of a father. For all men in begetting hold the same rank in the order of efficient causes, namely that of being a particular parent. Hence it is not out of the question for a man begotten by a man to be begotten by a man and so on endlessly. This would not be the case were this begetting to depend on another man or on material elements and solar energy and so on; such a series cannot be interminable."

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1. Aquinas, Summa Theologica, 1a,46,2.

In this passage, Aquinas does not elucidate the distinction to any great degree, although he does give us examples of both type of causal series. Fortunately, however, the distinction was a common one amongst medieval philosophers. By reference to the work of others and in particular Duns Scotus, modern scholars have been able to arrive at some understanding of the distinction that Aquinas was drawing. It is explained in the following manner by Patterson Brown:

"...each member of an essential series (except of course the first and the last if there be such) is causally dependent upon its predecessor for its causal efficacy regarding its successor. ... . In an accidental series, however, each member is not dependent upon its predecessor for its own causal efficacy - though it may be dependent in some other regard."<sup>1</sup>

Consider Aquinas' first example of a causal series ordered per se, that of a hand moving a stick which in turn moves a stone. Here, the movement in the stone is being caused by the movement in the stick which, in turn, is being caused by the movement in the hand. This causal series is an essentially ordered series because the movement of the stick is causally dependent upon the movement of the hand for its causal efficacy upon the stone. Equally, if the movement of the stone causes movement in another object, for

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1. Patterson Brown, "Infinite Causal Regression", in Aquinas: A Collection of Critical Essays ed. Anthony Kenny (London: Macmillan, 1969), p.227.



example another stone, then the first stone will be causally dependent upon the movement of the stick for its causal efficacy with regards to the second stone.

Now, let us contrast this example with the example which Aquinas gives us of causal series ordered per accidens; that of human generation. Suppose that one man, A, begat another, B, who in turn begat a third, C. Here, A is the cause of B coming into existence and B is the cause of C coming into existence. There is a sense, then in which each is a member of a causal series, since B would not have begat C unless A had begat him or he had come into existence in some other way. However, the causal series which Aquinas asks us to consider here is clearly different from the one which we considered in the previous example. In the previous example, each member was causally dependent upon its predecessor for its causal efficacy regarding its successor. Had the hand not been acting causally upon the stick, the stick would not have been acting causally upon the stone. Here, however, this is not the case. In this series, whilst it is true that A causes B to come into existence and B causes C to come into existence, it is not true that what causes B to cause C to come into existence is A causing B to come into existence.<sup>1</sup> B, then, is not causally dependent upon A for his causal efficacy with regards to C.

The question which now confronts us is whether or not proposition (1) is true; whether or not causal series ordered per se exist. The answer, quite clearly, is that they do. Aquinas, after all, gives us an example of such a series; that is, the hand

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1. Rowe, The Cosmological Argument, p.25.

moving the stick, moving the stone. Furthermore, it is not difficult to think of other examples. A stew being heated by a pot being heated by a fire is such an example.<sup>1</sup> A horse pushing a harness, pushing a cart is yet another. The question now arises as to whether or not such a series can be infinite. Aquinas, as we have seen, felt that it could not.

The first point which needs to be made is that a series of causes ordered *per se* could not possibly stretch backwards infinitely in time. From the account which Aquinas gives us of this type of series, it would appear that each member of such a series is acted upon causally by its predecessor and acts causally upon its successor at precisely the same time. In other words, it seems to be a necessary feature of any causal series ordered per se that the causal activity of all its members occurs simultaneously. In the example which Aquinas makes so much of, the movement of the hand, the stick and the stone is simultaneous. If, then, we allow the possibility of an infinite causal series of the type which Aquinas is referring to, we are allowing the possibility of an infinite series of causes acting upon one another simultaneously. This fact, however, on its own, should not trouble us too much. As difficult as it may be to attempt to trace such a series, it is certainly not obvious that the concept of such a series is an absurd one. Aquinas, however, thinks differently. In his exposition of proof ex causalitate he offers the following argument against the idea of an infinite series of causes:

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1. Brown, "Infinite Causal Regression", p.228.

"Such a series of causes must however stop somewhere; for in it an earlier member causes an intermediate and the intermediate a last (whether the intermediate be one or many). Now if you eliminate a cause you also eliminate its effects, so that you cannot have a last cause, nor an intermediate one, unless you have a first. Given therefore no stop in the series of causes, and hence no first cause, there would be no intermediate causes either, and no last effect, and this would be an open mistake."

The problem with this argument, however, is that it seems to be essentially the same as the argument against infinite causal regression which Aquinas gave us in the proof ex motu. This being the case, it would be open to the same sorts of objection. It is certainly true that if you eliminate any one member of a causal series, you will thereby eliminate all the subsequent members. This is true of both a finite and an infinite series. But, Aquinas goes on to argue that if you dispense with the concept of a first cause, you will thereby eliminate all the members of the series. In other words, without a first cause, there will be no causal activity at all. But, this is only true if one is referring to a finite series of causes. An infinite series of causes is, precisely, one which has no first member. It makes no sense to talk of eliminating the first member of an infinite series of causes. Aquinas' argument, then, merely begs the question.

Thus, Aquinas' argument once again falters upon the question

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1. Aquinas, Summa Theologica, 1a, 2, 3.

of infinite causal regression. But, it seems to me that, even if we allow that no causal series ordered per se can be infinite and that there must be a first member of any series of this type, there is absolutely no compulsion to identify this first cause as a God of any sort, let alone as the God of the Judea-Christian Monotheistic tradition.

Let us take, for example, the paradigm example of a causal series ordered per se which Aquinas provides us with; that of the hand moving the stick, moving the stone. If we are told that this series is a finite one and must, therefore, have a first member, why, must we go beyond the person whose hand moves the stick to find this first member?<sup>1</sup> The same consideration applies to the other examples of causal series ordered per se which were suggested above. When we look for a first cause in the series of the stew being heated by the pot being heated by the fire, or the horse pushing the harness pushing the cart, why must we go beyond either the fire or the horse respectively? There is no obvious reason why we must. Furthermore, even if such a reason exists, we would still require a reason to believe that this first cause must be a supernatural being before we could even begin to conclude, with Aquinas, that it is that "to which everyone gives the name 'God'".

The causal series which we have considered so far, however, are those which are referred to both in the first and in the second way; that is, causal series involving change. The second way, as pointed out previously, also refers to causal series involving the coming into and going out of existence of things. Perhaps here we

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1. Kenny, The Five Ways, p.45.

might discover a causal series which terminates in a supernatural being. The problem with this suggestion, however, is that it is by no means clear that a causal series of this type, which will do the job for Aquinas, even exists.

An example of a causal series involving the coming into existence of a thing is that of a person begetting another who in turn begets another. This series, however, is a causal series ordered per accidens and, therefore, not the type of series to which Aquinas was addressing himself. But, Aquinas does give us an example of a causal series involving the generation of a man which he believes is ordered per se. An infinite series of causes would be impossible were the begetting of a man "to depend on another man or on material elements and solar energy and so on."

The problem here, however, is to understand what it is that he is saying. Copleston has interpreted this passage in the following way:

"What he is thinking of can be illustrated in this way. A son is dependent on his father, in the sense that he would not have existed except for the causal activity of his father. But when the son acts for himself, he is not dependent here and now on his father. But he is dependent here and now on other factors. Without the activity of the air, for instance, he could not himself act, and the life-preserving activity of the air is itself dependent here

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1. Aquinas, Summa Theologica, 1a,2,3.

and now on other factors, and they in turn on other factors."<sup>1</sup>

The point, presumably, is that the present existence of the son is not dependent upon the causal activity of the father, but is dependent upon the causal activity of the air, the sun, the material elements and what have you. These, in turn, it would seem, are dependent upon the causal activity of other factors culminating eventually in God. But, as Kenny points out, it is by no means certain that here we have an example of a causal series at all.<sup>2</sup> What we seem to have is simply a series of necessary conditions and it is difficult to see why such a series, if it cannot be an endless one, must culminate in God. This being the case, it would seem that neither the proof ex motu nor the proof ex causalitate succeed in demonstrating the existence of God. We may now turn to the third of Aquinas' five ways.

### I I I

The third of Aquinas' five ways is the proof ex contingentia mundi; from contingency. It proceeds as follows:

"The third way is based on what need not be and on what must be, and runs as follows. Some of the things we come across can be but need not be, for we find them springing up and dying away, thus sometimes in being

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1. F. C. Copleston, Aquinas (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1955), p.122.
  2. Kenny, The Five Ways, p.45.

and sometimes not. Now everything cannot be like, this ... there has got be something that must be. Now a thing that must be, may or may not owe this necessity to something else. But just as we must stop somewhere in a series of causes, so also in the series of things which must be and owe this to other things. One is forced therefore to suppose something which must be, and owes this to no other thing itself; indeed it itself is the cause that other things must be."<sup>1</sup>

The third way, then, proceeds from the observation that some things in the world can be, but need not be. Now, a thing which can be but need not be is, to use the more common terminology, a contingent being. The first premise of the argument, then, is that contingent beings exist and this, once again, is taken to be an empirical fact. Aquinas then goes on to argue that not everything can be a contingent being, that if contingent beings exist, so must at least one being which is not a contingent being. A being which is not a contingent being is a necessary being, one which simply must be. But, Aquinas tells us that a necessary being may or may not owe its necessity to something else. By this, he presumably means that a necessary being may or may not have the cause of its necessity external to itself. If a necessary being does have the cause of its necessity external to itself, the implication is that this cause must be another necessary being which, in turn, may or may not have the cause of its necessity external to itself. Now, the argument goes, an infinite series of necessary beings, each

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1. Aquinas, Summa Theologica, 1a,2,3.

having the cause of its necessity external to itself, is impossible. There must, therefore, exist a necessary being which does not have the cause of its necessity external to itself. The final step, that this is what everyone understands by "God", we are left to make for ourselves.

The argument, then, consists of two stages. The first stage argues from the existence of contingent beings to the existence of at least one necessary being. But, Aquinas does not believe that he has established the existence of God when he has established that a necessary being exists as is sometimes asserted. Indeed, he quite explicitly allows for the existence of not just one but a plurality of necessary beings. His concept of God, then, is not just that of a necessary being, but of a necessary being which does not have the cause of its necessity external to itself. It is this which distinguishes God from other things such as Angels, souls, prime matter and celestial bodies which he also considered to be necessary beings. These other things have the cause of their necessity external to themselves. Indeed, as he informs us at the very end of this proof, this cause is God. The second stage of the argument, then, argues from the existence of at least one necessary being to the existence of a necessary being which does not have the cause of its necessity external to itself.

In its essence, then, Aquinas' argument from contingency consist of the following propositions:

- (1) Contingent beings exist.
- (2) Not everything can be a contingent being.
- (3) Therefore a necessary being must exist.
- (4) A necessary being may or may not have the cause of its



necessity external to itself.

- (5) An infinite series of necessary beings, each having the cause of its necessity external to itself, is impossible.
- (6) Therefore, a necessary being which does not have the cause of its necessity external to itself must exist.

Quite clearly, then, the argument rests upon two very basic distinctions. Firstly, the distinction between contingent and necessary beings. Secondly, the distinction between necessary beings which have the cause of their necessity external to themselves and that necessary being which does not. It is important to understand these two distinctions before we can begin to assess the argument itself.

The first point that should be established is that by the term "necessary being" Aquinas was not referring to a being whose non-existence is logically impossible. His concept of a necessary being is, indeed, that of a being which simply must be. But a number of modern commentators have argued convincingly that by this he did not mean a being whose existence it is self-contradictory to deny.<sup>1</sup> This is an important point, for it has been argued by Kant and others that the Cosmological Argument is fallacious, since it ultimately rests upon the Ontological Argument.<sup>2</sup> Kant understood the Cosmological Argument as consisting of two stages. The first stage argued that if something exists, a necessary being must also

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1. See Patterson Brown, "St. Thomas' Doctrine of Necessary Being", in Aquinas: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Kenny; and Kenny, The Five Ways.

2. Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, pp. 507-518

exist. The second stage argued that any necessary being must be an infinitely perfect being, an ens realissimum. The flaw, he felt, was in the second stage. His argument was, that to prove that a necessary being must be a perfect being amounts to proving that a perfect being must be a necessary being, which is just what the Ontological Argument was intended to do. Since, then, the Cosmological Argument presupposed the Ontological Argument, it was open to the same sorts of criticism.

More recently, J.J.C. Smart has argued that the problem is not, as Kant felt it was, in the second stage of the argument, but in the first.<sup>1</sup> The first stage of the argument, he tells us, purports to establish the existence of a necessary being, by which Smart argues is meant a logically necessary being. But, the concept of such a being is self-contradictory, he believes, for the following reason:

"Now since 'necessary' is a word which applies primarily to propositions, we shall have to interpret 'God is a necessary being' as 'The proposition "God exists" is logically necessary'. But this is the principle of the ontological argument..."<sup>2</sup>

Now, whether or not these criticisms are pertinent to some version or other of the Cosmological Argument is not important for us to consider in this discussion. What is important, however, is

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1. J.J.C. Smart, "The Existence of God", in New Essays in Philosophical Theology, eds. Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (London: SCM, 1955), p.38.

2. Ibid.

to point out that neither Kant's nor Smart's comments are relevant to Aquinas' argument from contingency.<sup>1</sup> Aquinas, after all, allowed for the existence of a plurality of necessary beings. It is very doubtful, therefore, that he would have held that every necessary being must be an infinitely perfect being. As we saw, he believed that angels, souls, prime matter and celestial bodies were necessary beings, but he certainly would not have held that they were infinitely perfect. Moreover, he explicitly states that a necessary being may have its necessity caused by another being. This seems to rule out the possibility that by "necessary being" Aquinas meant "Being whose existence is logically necessary". As Brown points out, "it would be naive to think that there could be an efficient cause for what is logically necessary".<sup>2</sup> But, if the third of Aquinas' proofs is not referring to a being, the existence of which it is impossible to deny, what kind of being is it referring to? Brown explains the concept of necessity with which Aquinas is dealing in the following manner:

"... Aquinas meant by the term "necessary", as applied to beings, that they be neither generable nor corruptible. That is to say, a necessary being is defined as one which cannot come into existence via conglomeration, construction, or (re)formation, and which cannot pass out of existence via deterioration, destruction, or deformation."<sup>3</sup>

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1. Brown, "St. Thomas' Doctrine of Necessary Being", p.160-1.

2. Ibid., p.160.

3. Ibid., p.164.

Thus, a necessary being, in contrast to a contingent being is one that is not subject to natural processes of generation or corruption. But, a necessary being is not necessarily an eternal or everlasting being. Although it may not be subject to natural processes of generation or corruption, it may come into existence through creation ex nihilo or pass out of existence by total annihilation.<sup>1</sup> Now, when Aquinas distinguishes between necessary beings which have the cause of their necessity external to themselves and that necessary being which does not, he is distinguishing between those necessary beings which have been created ex nihilo, such as the angels, souls, prime matter and celestial bodies, and that necessary being which created them, that is God. God, then, is seen as that necessary being which is eternal and everlasting and which is the cause of all other beings.

The first premise of Aquinas' argument from contingency, then should be seen as asserting that some things exist which are subject to natural processes of generation and corruption. Quite clearly, there are. The pen with which I am writing, the tree which I observe in the garden, the chair I am sitting on and what have you. But, Aquinas asserts that not everything can be like this. His argument for proposition (2) proceeds as follows:

"Now everything cannot be like this, for a thing that need not be, once was not; and if everything need not be, once upon a time there was nothing. But if that were true there would be nothing even now, because something that does not exist can only be brought into

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1. Ibid., p.165.

being by something already existing. So that if nothing was in being nothing could be brought into being, and nothing would be in being now, which contradicts observation. Not everything therefore is the sort of thing that need not be; there has got to be something that must be."

This argument takes the form of a reductio ad absurdum of the claim that everything is a contingent being. A contingent being, as we have seen, is one that is subject to natural processes of generation and corruption. From this, Aquinas appears to derive the general principle that whatever is a contingent being, at one time did not exist. But, he goes on to argue, if this is true and if everything is a contingent being, at one time nothing existed. And, if at one time nothing existed, nothing would exist now. Thus, since something obviously exists now, not everything can be a contingent being.

The argument, then, takes the following form:

- (i) Whatever is a contingent being, at one time did not exist.
- (ii) If everything is a contingent being, then at one time nothing existed.
- (iii) If at one time nothing existed, then nothing would exist now.
- (iv) Something obviously exists now.
- (2) Therefore, not everything can be a contingent being.

This argument, however, is open to challenge at each of the

first three steps. To begin with, the truth of (i) is by no means self-evident. From Aquinas' understanding of a contingent being as one which is subject to a natural processes of generation and corruption, it does not follow that every contingent being, at some time, actually generated.<sup>1</sup> The idea of a contingent being which has always existed and which is kept in existence by natural processes does not appear to be an absurd one. But, even if we concede proposition (i) to Aquinas, we cannot concede proposition (ii). Even if we allow that every contingent being is such that at one time it did not exist, it certainly does not follow that, if everything is a contingent being, at one time nothing existed.<sup>2</sup> It is not difficult to conceive of an infinite number of contingent beings coming into and going out of existence over an infinite period of time, but in such a configuration that there is no period of time in which at least one contingent being exists. But, even if we concede both propositions (i) and (ii), there is no compulsion to accept the truth of proposition (iii). Indeed, as Rowe points out, it reveals an important assumption which underlies Aquinas' reasoning.<sup>3</sup> Aquinas' reason for holding (iii) is that "something that does not exist can only be brought into being by something already existing." In other words, he quite explicitly adopts the principle that whatever comes into existence is caused to do so by something already in existence. In doing so, he rejects the possibility that the coming into existence of a thing

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1. Rowe, The Cosmological Argument, p.42.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid, p.44.

might be simply a brute fact. Now, it may indeed be true that whatever comes into existence is caused to do so by something other than itself, but, once again, Aquinas gives us no reason for holding this proposition. It is an unquestioned assumption.

Thus, Aquinas' argument for proposition (2), that not everything can be a contingent being is unsuccessful. This being the case, the first stage of his overall argument fails. Aquinas gives us no reason for believing that at least one necessary being must exist. But, even if we allow him the first stage of the argument, there is no reason for allowing him the second. The crucial proposition in this stage of the argument is proposition (5); that an infinite series of necessary beings, each having the cause of its necessity external to itself is impossible. The problem, however, is that Aquinas gives no new argument for the truth of this proposition. He feels that the argument offered in the first two ways against the possibility of infinite causal regression will suffice. "Just as we must stop somewhere in a series of causes", he tells us, "so also in the series of things which must be and owe this to other things".<sup>1</sup> But, it might be replied, since the arguments of the first two ways were unsuccessful, so is the argument of the third.

It would seem, then, that Aquinas fails to establish the existence of a necessary being which does not have the cause of its necessity external to itself. But, if he had succeeded, there would still be a question which he would need to answer. This question concerns how we are to understand the notion of a

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1. Aquinas, Summa Theologica, 1a,2,3.

necessary being which does not have the cause of its necessity external to itself. Either, it would seem, it must be the cause of its own necessity or there must be no cause of its necessity. Both of these answers, however, seem problematic. The problem with the first is that it is not clear how we are to give any meaning to the concept of a being which is the cause of its own necessity. The problem with the second is that firstly, we have no reason for accepting that only one such being exists and secondly, we have no reason for identifying such a being as supernatural, let alone as God. It seems equally feasible to think of the universe as necessary in this sense. Thus, the third of Aquinas' Five Ways fails in the same way that the first two did.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### RATIONALITY WITHOUT PROOF

In the preceding chapters I argued that the Ontological and the Cosmological arguments for the existence of God were inconclusive. This does not destroy natural theology, but it does cast doubt upon its ability to perform its traditional function in Christian apologetics. What must now be considered is the question of whether or not this entails the further conclusion that religious belief is irrational.

On the face of it, the claim that religious belief is irrational in the absence of a successful theistic proof is an entirely justified one. It is a common assumption amongst philosophers that the tailoring of belief to evidence is an essential feature of rationality. To be rational, on this view, is to proportion the degree of assent which one gives to a particular proposition to the amount of evidence confirming its truth. If we accept this assumption, we would also have to accept that it is irrational to hold any proposition with greater conviction than the evidence allows. Since the traditional arguments for the existence of God seem inconclusive, it seems to follow that positive acceptance of a theistic belief-system is irrational.

This argument, or something very similar to it, is what Alvin Plantinga has referred to as the evidentialist objection to theistic

belief.<sup>1</sup> Religious belief is irrational, the evidentialist argues, since the available evidence does not confirm its truth. It is this objection to theistic belief which I now wish to consider. I will do this by asking, whether or not religious belief can be rational even if the believer is unable to produce evidence for his belief.

In this chapter I will consider this question by examining the arguments of two contemporary philosophers, Norman Malcolm and Alvin Plantinga, who have defended religious belief against the evidentialist objection by answering it in the affirmative.<sup>2</sup> Whilst there are significant differences between their respective positions, both point out that evidence must end somewhere and argue that belief in the existence of God belongs to that set of beliefs which does not require evidence.

## I

In a recent paper Norman Malcolm has defended religious belief against what he calls "the obsessive concern with proofs" exhibited by its philosophical critics.<sup>3</sup> His basic contention is that

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1. Alvin Plantinga, "Rationality and Religious Belief", in Contemporary Philosophy of Religion, eds. Steven M. Cahn and David Shatz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p.258.
  2. See Norman Malcolm, "The Groundlessness of Belief", in Reason and Religion, ed. Stuart C. Brown (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977); and Plantinga, "Rationality and Religious Belief".
  3. Malcolm, "The Groundlessness of Belief", p. 154.

religious belief is groundless. By this he means not only that it is fruitless to seek grounds for religious belief, but also that it is a mistake to do so. Religious belief, he claims, is intellectually respectable even though the believer is unable to provide a rational justification of it, since the demand for justification is an inappropriate one.

Malcolm begins his paper with some general remarks about the nature both of justification and belief. Taking his inspiration from Wittgenstein, he makes the observation that it is difficult to realize how much "mere acceptance, on the basis of no evidence, forms our lives".<sup>1</sup> The obvious example, he believes, is that of small children who must accept much of what they are told unreflectively before they can even begin to consider evidence or doubt the truth of what they are told. But Malcolm also claims that the lives of educated, sophisticated adults are formed by beliefs for which grounds are not sought; beliefs, furthermore, which lie at the very foundation of our conceptual scheme. The example which he cites is of the belief that familiar material objects do not cease to exist without some physical explanation. This principle, he tells us, "is an unreflective part of the framework within which physical investigations are made and physical explanations arrived at".<sup>2</sup> It is a principle, he holds, for which we would not seek grounds. It is what he calls a framework principle, one which defines the very boundaries of our

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1. Ibid., p.143.

2. Ibid., p.145.

belief-system. Malcolm's position, however, is not just that we do not seek grounds for our framework principles. He holds the much stronger position that it is a mistake to seek or to demand a justification of them. It is only within a belief-system, he argues, that we can ask questions, carry out investigations and make judgments. It is only within a system, in other words, that justification can occur. Since framework principles define the very boundaries of our belief-systems, it would be inappropriate to demand a justification of them.

Malcolm's claim is that each of us must live and think within a group of framework principles. Each of us, therefore, must accept some set of beliefs which are groundless. This is an inescapable feature of human existence. But, he argues, the particular set of framework principles which we operate with is not one of our choice. It arises out of the community within which we live and is accepted by us without reflection.

"We grow into a framework. We don't question it. We accept it trustingly. But this acceptance is not a consequence of reflection. We do not decide to accept framework propositions. We do not decide to live on earth, any more than we decide to learn our native tongue. We do come to adhere to a framework proposition, in the sense that it forms the way we think. The framework propositions that we accept, grow into, are not idiosyncracies but common ways of speaking and thinking that are pressed on us by our human community. For our acceptance to have been withheld would have meant that we had not learned to

count, to measure, to use names, to play games, or even to talk."<sup>1</sup>

Thus, it is appropriate to ask for the causes of our adherence to a particular set of framework principles, but it is not appropriate to ask for our grounds for holding them. Of course, there may be changes to our set of framework principles, but where such changes occur, Malcolm asserts, it will not be as a result of reflection upon evidence. It will be as a result of such factors as education, culture, family upbringing or even personal disasters.

Malcolm's main concern is to establish that the religious believer operates within a set of framework principles that are groundless and that he cannot be blamed for this, since everyone must do the same. The scientist, Malcolm asserts, is faced with a similar situation.

"Religion is a form of life; it is language embedded in action - what Wittgenstein calls a 'language-game'. Science is another. Neither stands in need of justification, the one no more than the other."<sup>2</sup>

Malcolm makes quite a lot of this comparison between religion and science. This is highly understandable from his point of view. There is, after all, very little serious dispute about the intellectual respectability of science. Indeed, scientific inquiry is often presented as the very paradigm of rationality. If the

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1. Ibid., p. 147.

2. Ibid., p. 156.

scientist must work within a set of framework principles which are groundless, one could hardly criticise the religious believer for doing the same.

The basic line of argument which Malcolm uses in defending his claim that religious belief is groundless, then, may be summarized as follows: Firstly, he argues that all belief-systems are based on framework principles which are groundless and, therefore, must ultimately be considered groundless themselves. Secondly, he argues that, since religion is itself a belief-system it must also be considered groundless. Now, it seems to me that we can readily accept that religion is a system of belief in some sense of the word. What must be considered, therefore, is the claim that all belief-systems are groundless.

Malcolm, as we have seen, makes much of the parallel between science and religion. It may be useful, then, to consider what he has to say about science in order to come to grips with his more general claims about belief-systems. In his critique of Malcolm's paper, Colin Lyas has done precisely this.<sup>1</sup> Lyas argues, firstly, that Malcolm's favoured scientific framework principles are not obviously groundless and, secondly, that although some framework principles may be groundless and may well occur in religious contexts, this will not support the claim that religious belief as such is groundless.

Lyas' argument rests upon a distinction between two very different types of framework principle. The first type he calls

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1. Colin Lyas, "The Groundlessness of Religious Belief", in Reason and Religion, ed. Brown, p.165.

"constitutive principles", the second "regulative principles". As examples of constitutive principles, Lyas cites principles such as, "It is wrong to ignore the result of a properly conducted experiment" and, "If there is a contradiction in a scientific theory it is worthless". These are principles, he argues, which are constitutive of scientific procedure (hence their name). To spell out these principles, he suggests, is to articulate what it means to engage in rational empirical enquiry and to question them is to question science itself. As examples of regulative principles, Lyas cites principles such as those which Malcolm used as examples of groundless beliefs in his paper. These are the principles that "things don't just vanish" and that "nature is continuous". These principles differ from constitutive principles in that we can imagine changes in them without undermining science itself. To imagine changes in this type of principle, Lyas argues, "is not so much to change the meaning of the term 'science' as to produce a change in the scientific theories that occur within the framework of scientific inquiry".<sup>1</sup> The difference between constitutive principles and regulative principles, then, is that constitutive principles define the range of activities included in scientific investigation, whereas regulative principles are the basic presuppositions upon which scientific theories are built.

Having drawn this distinction, Lyas goes on to argue that, whilst both may be deemed framework principles of science, it is not obviously the case that both are groundless. The constitutive principles, he suggests, may well be groundless, but the regulative

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1. Ibid., p. 168.

principles, those which Malcolm draws his examples from, do not seem to be.

Lyas gives two reasons for holding that the constitutive principles are groundless. Firstly, the constitutive principles include the groundless laws of logic, such as the law of non-contradiction. Abiding by these laws, he argues, is a condition of rational thought, and therefore it makes no sense to suppose that we might set them aside until they were proved rationally. Secondly, the constitutive principles define what "justification" means and, therefore, it makes no sense to demand a justification of them.

"Suppose someone queried these methods and asked us to justify them. We might ask him what 'justification' would mean here. If he replied, and it is difficult to see how he could avoid doing so, that he wishes to have them tested experimentally, wished them to be shown free of contradiction, and wished empirical evidence to be adduced in their support, then we would reply that in querying the methods of rational empirical enquiry (of which science is a formalized variety) it was these very test procedures he was questioning. ... . These constitutive principles are groundless in that our only reply when asked to justify them is that without them justification makes no sense. They are what 'justification' means."

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1. Ibid.



According to Lyas, then, constitutive principles are groundless and I think that we could well accept his position on this matter. But what about the regulative principles? These principles, Lyas argues, do not seem to be groundless. His main reason for adopting this view is "that there does seem to ... be such a thing as a fundamental change in theories of science".<sup>1</sup> These changes, Lyas argues, amount to a change in regulative principles.

"Consider the problems which have led scientists to worry about such apparently fundamental beliefs as that the speed of light cannot be exceeded or that events cannot move backward in time or even that two events in different places can happen simultaneously. Consider, too, the problems which have led cosmologists to worry about the principle that something cannot just come into existence, a principle whose rejection might seem as much an affront to common sense as would the rejection of Malcolm's principle that things can't just cease to exist. Yet if I understand the matter, some cosmologists do talk of the continuous creation of matter. In all these cases scientists come to question basic beliefs."<sup>2</sup>

Thus, it would seem that principles of the sort which Malcolm cites as examples of groundless belief can be and are questioned. Furthermore, Lyas argues, when they are questioned, this often

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1. Ibid., p. 169.

2. Ibid.

leads to a change in them and this process does not occur groundlessly. By "using the constitutive procedures of rational empirical inquiry (science) scientists discover that a principle, hitherto unreflectively accepted, is less scientifically justified than another whose scientific credentials or grounds are less suspect".<sup>1</sup> It is by no means self-evident, then, as Malcolm seems to assume, that the regulative principles of scientific inquiry are beliefs for which no grounds can be sought or are sought. Indeed, this claim would appear incorrect.

Now, what relevance has all this for Malcolm's claims about the groundlessness of religious belief? To begin with, Lyas has shown good reason for believing that not all scientific framework principles are groundless. If he is correct on this score, then Malcolm can no longer argue from the premise that all framework principles are groundless to the conclusion that religious framework beliefs are also groundless. Since it is not obvious that all framework beliefs are groundless, what is now required of Malcolm are specific arguments to support his claim that religious framework principles are. Failing this, we have no reason to accept his defense of religious belief against the evidentialist objection. Nor is it possible, as Lyas points out, for Malcolm to argue that religious framework beliefs are like the constitutive principles of science, principles which we have accepted as groundless.

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1. Ibid., p. 170.

"What I have allowed to be groundless in science is, so to speak, the rules of scientific proof. If the claim is that the groundless principles in religion are principles like these, then to concede this claim is to concede only that the rules of proof that are used in religious contexts are groundless. Now, whether or not the rules of proof that are used in religious context are like those that are used in scientific contexts, I cannot see that any religious apologist has anything to lose by conceding that such rules of religious proof are groundless. For just as a scientist might accept that his procedures of proof are groundless while yet maintaining that other important scientific beliefs, e.g., the belief in the continuity of nature, might be the subject of inquiry by these procedures, so the religious apologist might accept that his procedures of proof are groundless while yet maintaining that other central religious beliefs, e.g., belief in God, might be the subject of those procedures of proof."

This argument of Lyas' seems a plausible and a correct one. Malcolm, however, does not think so. In a reply to Lyas' paper he makes the following, somewhat ambiguous comment:

"I won't attempt to follow Lyas' distinction between "constitutive" and "regulative" principles. A pie can be cut in many different shapes. In any case, I do not think the distinction applies to religious

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1. Ibid., p. 172.

belief, which is Lyas' main concern. Religious belief, as I understand it, is not composed of some set of framework principles. Belief in a God who creates, judges, and loves humanity is one form of religious belief. Belief in a mystical principle of causality according to which good produces good and evil produces evil, is another form of religious belief. Those perspectives on reality are not hypotheses for or against which evidence can be marshalled."<sup>1</sup>

Our initial problem with this reply of Malcolm's is one of interpretation. It is not entirely clear what position he wishes to adopt. There seem to be two alternatives. Firstly, he might be arguing that there is no set of beliefs common to all religions which may be deemed the framework principles of religious belief as such, even though there are beliefs which may be identified as the framework principles of the particular religions or religious traditions. Secondly, he might be arguing that there is no set of beliefs at all which may be deemed the framework principles of religion, that the religious believer, no matter which particular religion he might adhere to, does not operate within a set of framework principles. Neither of these two alternatives, however, present a successful reply to Lyas' objection.

The first alternative, it seems to me, just misses the point. Religious believers may or may not operate within a common set of

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1. Norman Malcolm, "Postscript", in Reason and Religion, ed. Brown p. 188.

framework principles, but the question of whether or not they do is irrelevant to Lyas' position. Malcolm's main argument in favour of his claim that religious belief is groundless, it will be remembered, consisted of two premises. The first premise was that all belief-systems are founded upon framework principles which are groundless and must therefore be considered groundless themselves. This premise, together with the claim that religion was itself a belief-system, was intended to generate the conclusion that religious belief is groundless. The main thrust of Lyas' objection was directed at the first premise. By showing that not all of what we might call the framework principles of science were obviously groundless he hoped to undermine Malcolm's claim that all framework principles are groundless and, in this way, to call into question Malcolm's conclusions about religious belief. The question of whether or not all religious believers adhere to the same set of framework principles has little or no bearing on this matter.

The same cannot be said of the second alternative. If there is no set of beliefs which may be called the framework principles of religion, then Malcolm would be correct in his rejection of Lyas' criticism as irrelevant. The problem with this alternative, however, is that, prima facie, it would seem to be mistaken. The belief that God exists, for example, certainly appears to operate as a framework principle of the Christian religion. Moreover, it is difficult to see how we are to understand the claim that religious belief is groundless, if we accept that there is nothing which may be deemed a framework principle of religion. Nevertheless, Malcolm makes some interesting points with respect to these questions and it would be amiss not to consider them in

greater detail. I will accept for the time being, then, the possibility that religious believers do not operate within a set of framework principles and explore further the claim that religious belief is groundless given this possibility. From my reading of his two papers it seems to me that what he might have in mind is something like the following:

To begin with, Malcolm makes much of a distinction between the particular doctrines and creeds of a faith and what he calls the framework or attitude of religious belief. Furthermore, he claims that there may indeed be evidence for or against particular doctrines or creeds, but that this only occurs within this framework, which itself is groundless.

"Many people who read about incidents in the life of Jesus, as recounted in the Gospels, or events in the lives of Hebrew prophets, as recounted in the Old Testament, do not believe that the incidents actually occurred. But it is also possible to believe that they occurred without regarding them as religiously significant. That a man should die and then come to life again is not necessarily of religious significance. . . . The miracles recounted in the Bible can be regarded as events of merely scientific interest. They can be looked at from either a scientific or a religious Weltanschauung. It is only from, or within, the framework of religious belief that they have religious import."

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1. Ibid., p. 186.

What Malcolm appears to be saying is that the fundamental difference between the believer and the sceptic resides in the fact that the believer adopts a particular way of looking at and interpreting the world, a particular Weltanschauung, which the sceptic does not. A sceptic, Malcolm tells us, may accept that all of the incidents which are described in both the Gospels and the Old Testament actually occurred without regarding them as religiously significant. He is looking at and interpreting them from a different, non-religious, perspective. What distinguishes the believer and the sceptic, then, on this interpretation of Malcolm, is not the fact that the believer accepts a set of framework principles which the sceptic does not, but the fact that the believer adopts a particular way of looking at the world which is significantly different from the sceptic's and which, like that of the sceptic, is ultimately groundless.

There is much of value in what Malcolm has to say. To begin with, we can, with some qualification, accept his assertion that the believer and the sceptic can be thought to reach agreement about the occurrence of the events described in the Scriptures. The qualification is that the Scriptures are not interpreted literally. It is inconceivable, for example, that the sceptic accept the creation story as it is presented in Genesis. Nevertheless, many believers do not accept a literal interpretation of this story either and it is here, perhaps, that he has a point. He is not arguing, after all, that all religious believers and sceptics will agree about the actual occurrence of all the events described in the Scriptures, merely that they could and perhaps he is not too far from the truth on this matter. Modern

biblical criticism has, after all lead to a complete reassessment of how the Scriptures are to be understood, for many believers. But, and this is important, if believers and sceptics should ever reach agreement about what actually did and what did not occur of the events described in the Scriptures, it seems to me that this will come about as a result of believers coming to reject the miraculous rather than the sceptic coming to accept it, as Malcolm seems to think. This is a process which is already occurring in some quarters.

Whatever the correctness of Malcolm's views on this matter, however, it seems indisputable that believer and sceptic may agree about the actual occurrence of many of the events described in the Scriptures. Many sceptics, for example, would certainly accept that a person called Jesus bar Joseph actually lived approximately 2,000 years ago, and he spent the last years of his life preaching, that he was crucified by the Romans and that there were reports of his subsequent resurrection. It is also indisputable that a significant difference between the believer and the sceptic concerning these events is that the believer interprets them as having religious significance whereas the sceptic does not. But what is involved in attributing religious significance to some event? This is the question which must now be asked.

If I am interpreting Malcolm correctly, his answer to this question is that the believer looks at the world from a certain perspective, a perspective which may be termed religious, but which is not to be defined in terms of any set of framework principles. But, if it is not to be defined in terms of any set of framework principles, how is it to be defined? Perhaps in terms of certain



attitudes, such as those of reverence and awe, or certain actions, such as those of worship and prayer, which the believer characteristically exhibits. Malcolm is far from explicit on this point, but it appears that this is what he has in mind. This, however, cannot be the complete story. If the Christian sees the events described in the Scriptures as worthy of awe and reverence, or responds to them in worship and prayer, it is because he sees them as being manifestations of God's presence, an intervention by Him in the affairs of the World. But this, of course, presupposes a belief in the existence of God. It is this belief which, for the believer, makes his response an appropriate one.

The belief that God exists, then, certainly appears to be a framework principle of Christianity. Without it one could hardly consider oneself a Christian. But, if it is a framework principle, must we accept that it is a groundless framework principle? Only if we agree that all framework principles are groundless, or are presented with independent reasons for believing that religious framework principles are. As Lyas has shown, Malcolm does not provide us with either.

## I I

The second defense of religious belief against the evidentialist objection that I wish to consider is that of Alvin Plantinga in his paper, "Rationality and Religious Belief". Plantinga's basic contention is that religious belief is properly basic; that, under certain circumstances, it is perfectly rational for the theist to hold that God exists even though he may not be

able to appeal to any evidence in support of his belief. To this extent, then, he agrees with Malcolm. Where he disagrees is on the question of whether or not religious belief is groundless. He holds, as we shall see, that a belief which is properly basic is not necessarily one which is groundless.

Plantinga's paper is comprised of two distinct sections. The first is an extensive critique of the evidentialist's position, the second, a defense of his own claims about religious belief against possible objections. Since I consider that which Plantinga has to say in the first part of his paper to be substantially correct, I will concentrate my attention mainly upon the second part. Nevertheless, a summary of his critique of the evidentialist's position is essential to a full understanding of his own claims about religious belief and I will begin with this.

Plantinga begins his critique of the evidentialist's position with an observation that it rests upon a general philosophical position which he calls "classical foundationalism".

"The evidentialist objection is nearly always rooted in classical foundationalism, an enormously popular picture or total way of looking at faith, knowledge, justified belief, rationality and allied topics. ... . We may think of the classical foundationalist as beginning with the observation that some of one's beliefs may be based upon others; it may be that there are a pair of propositions A and B such that I believe A on the basis of B. Although this relation isn't easy to characterize in a revealing and non-trivial fashion, it is nonetheless familiar. I

believe that the word "umbrageous" is spelled u-m-b-r-a-g-e-o-u-s: this belief is based on another belief of mine; the belief that that's how the dictionary says it's spelled. . . . Some of my beliefs, however, I accept but don't accept on the basis of any other beliefs. Call these beliefs basic. I believe that  $2 + 1 = 3$ , for example, and don't believe it on the basis of other propositions. I also believe that I am seated at my desk, and that there is a mild pain in my right knee. These too are basic for me; I don't believe them on the basis of any other propositions. According to the classical foundationalist, some propositions are properly or rightly basic for a person and some are not. Those that are not, are rationally accepted only on the basis of evidence, where the evidence must trace back, ultimately, to what is properly basic."<sup>1</sup>

This position is familiar enough. Included amongst its adherents, as Plantinga points out, are such great philosophers as Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Descartes, Leibniz, Locke and, more recently, Roderick Chisholm.<sup>2</sup> Not all of these philosophers, of course, were critical of theistic belief. But there has been a common assumption amongst both sceptics and believers that belief in God is rational only if it is accepted on the basis of propositions which are properly basic; that it is not properly

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1. Plantinga, "Rationality and Religious Belief", p. 259.

2. Ibid.

basic itself. This is the assumption underlying Aquinas' five ways, for example. But why must we accept this assumption? Why are we prohibited from holding that belief in God is properly basic? There is no reason at all, Plantinga suggests, unless we accept the classical foundationalist's criteria for proper basicity. Accordingly, his critique of classical foundationalism and, hence, of the evidentialist objection, focuses upon these criteria for proper basicity, as embodied in the following proposition:

"a proposition p is properly basic for a person S  
if and only if p is either self-evident to S or  
incorrigible for S."

Plantinga has two objections concerning the acceptability of this criterion of proper basicity.<sup>2</sup> Firstly, he argues that it is self-referentially incoherent. The foundationalist wishes to argue that self-evident and incorrigible propositions are properly basic and that only propositions of this sort are properly basic. But, Plantinga asks, why should we accept this criterion? It does not appear to be self-evident and it is certainly not incorrigible. Furthermore, he argues, it is very difficult to see that it either follows from or is evident with respect to propositions that are either self-evident or incorrigible. Hence, Plantinga argues, the

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1. Ibid., p. 265.

2. Richard Grigg, "Theism and Proper Basicity: a Response to Plantinga", International Journal for Philosophy of Religion 14 (1983), p. 123.

foundationalist is "hoist on his own petard".<sup>1</sup>

Plantinga's second objection to the foundationalist's criterion of proper basicity is that there are numerous beliefs which we would normally accept as properly basic that do not satisfy it. Particular perceptual beliefs, memory beliefs and beliefs which ascribe mental states to other persons are the examples which he cites.<sup>2</sup> Consider the following statements of belief:

- (1) I see a tree
- (2) I had breakfast this morning
- (3) That person is angry

Such beliefs are basic, they do not arise out of other beliefs that we hold, but they are neither self-evident nor incorrigible. They do not, therefore, satisfy the foundationalist's criterion of proper basicity, but it seems ridiculous to suggest that we are not rationally entitled to hold them until we can provide evidential support for them.

As I have already indicated, these objections of Plantinga's appear to me to be substantially correct. Before going on to consider the second part of his paper, his defense of the claim that belief in God may be taken as properly basic, however, there are two points which must be made. Firstly, Plantinga does not consider himself to be making an entirely original contribution to the philosophy of religion when he asserts that religious belief may be taken as properly basic. He sees himself as merely

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1. Plantinga, "Rationality and Religious Belief", p. 269.

2. Ibid., p. 270.

articulating a position which he feels is implicit within the tradition of Reformed theology.<sup>1</sup> He believes that Reformed theologians, in their outright rejection of natural theology, should be interpreted as rejecting classical foundationalism. Accordingly, he draws heavily upon the Reformed tradition of theology and, in particular, upon its founder Calvin.

The second point that I wish to make is that Plantinga's rejection of classical foundationalism does not entail a rejection of foundationalism as such. In an earlier paper, he distinguished between classical and weak foundationalism.<sup>2</sup> Adherents to both of these positions, he argues, accept that a rational noetic structure is one which has a foundation; that is, one which is based upon a set of beliefs which are properly basic. Both also accept that a rational noetic structure is one in which non-basic belief will be proportional in strength to support from the foundations. The weak foundationalist, however, will accept amongst the foundations of a rational noetic structure beliefs which are neither self-evident nor incorrigible. Plantinga, as I understand his position, is rejecting classical foundationalism in favour of some form of weak foundationalism.

Having made these points, we may now turn to the second part of Plantinga's paper; his defense of the assertion that belief in God may be taken as properly basic. In particular, he wishes to

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1. Ibid.

2. Alvin Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology", American Catholic Philosophical Association Proceedings, 1980, p. 56.

make two points. Firstly, he argues that even though the believer may have no evidence for his belief that God exists and even though this belief may be neither self-evident nor incorrigible to him, this does not mean that it is gratuitous or arbitrary. Secondly, he argues that, even though he is unable to replace the classical foundationalist's criterion of proper basicity with one of his own, this does not mean that he cannot include belief in God amongst the set of beliefs which he accepts as properly basic, or that, if he does, he is committed to accepting just any belief.

Let us take each of these points in turn. To begin with, he claims that a belief which is basic, but which is neither self-evident nor incorrigible, is not necessarily a groundless one. Consider the following case:

"Upon having an experience of a certain sort, I believe that I am perceiving a tree. In the typical case, I do not hold this belief on the basis of other beliefs; it is nonetheless not groundless. My having that characteristic sort of experience - to use Professor Chisholm's language, my being appeared treely to - plays a crucial role in the formation and justification of that belief. We might say this experience, together, perhaps, with other circumstances, is what justifies me in holding it; this is the ground of my justification, and, by extension, the ground of the belief itself."

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1. Plantinga, "Rationality and Religious Belief", p.271.

Thus, in the case of perceptual beliefs such as the belief that I see a tree, there is a condition that confers justification upon my belief; there is a circumstance which stands as the ground of justification. In this case, the condition in question is that I am appeared to in the appropriate manner. This, of course, is not the only condition. There are other conditions; for example, that I have not taken any hallucinogenic drugs. Nevertheless, the important point which Plantinga wishes to make is that a belief is properly basic only under certain conditions which may be taken as the ground of its justification. The same, he claims, may be said of belief in God.

"When the reformers claim that this is properly basic, they do not mean to say, of course, that there are no justifying circumstances for it, or that it is in that sense groundless or gratuitous. Quite the contrary. Calvin holds that God "reveals and daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe", and the divine art "reveals itself in the innumerable and yet distinct and well ordered variety of the heavenly host". God has so created us that we have a tendency or disposition to see his hand in the world about us. More precisely, there is in us a disposition to believe propositions of the sort 'this flower was created by God' or 'this vast and intricate universe was created by God' when we contemplate the flower or behold the starry heavens or think about the



vast reaches of the universe."<sup>1</sup>

These are not the only circumstances which Plantinga believes will call forth belief in God.<sup>2</sup> When reading the Bible, he argues, one may be impressed with a deep sense of God's presence. Doing what I know to be wrong may lead to feelings of guilt in the eyes of God, repentance may lead to feeling forgiven by Him. A person in danger may turn to God, asking for his assistance and protection. A person at peace with himself may feel a sense of gratitude to God and may praise Him for his goodness. There are many other conditions, Plantinga suggests, which call forth belief in God, but this, he feels, is enough to convey the sort of thing he is talking about.

Strictly speaking, then, it is not the belief that God exists that is basic, but beliefs such as those expressed in the following statements:

- (4) God is speaking to me
- (5) God has created all this
- (6) God disapproves of what I have done
- (7) God forgives me
- (8) God is to be thanked and praised.

These propositions, Plantinga argues, are properly basic in the right circumstances, but we are still justified in speaking of the belief that there is such a person as God as properly basic even though to do so would be to speak somewhat loosely.

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1. Ibid., p. 272.

2. Ibid.

Plantinga's argument, then, consists of an analogy between belief in God and those beliefs which few would dispute the proper basicity of such as perceptual beliefs, memory beliefs and beliefs ascribing mental states to other persons. These beliefs, he argues, are not arbitrary or gratuitous because there are certain circumstances or conditions which serve as the ground of their justification. The same is true, he argues, of belief in God. There are certain circumstances or conditions out of which theistic belief arises and which serve as the ground of its justification. For this reason, he holds, it may be described as properly basic. Now, I think that we can readily accept what Plantinga says about perceptual beliefs, memory beliefs and beliefs ascribing mental states to other persons but there are important questions which need to be raised about theistic belief. These questions, I believe, concern the conditions or circumstances which serve as the grounds for belief in God. Let us begin, then, by examining them a little more closely.

The first point I wish to make is this: When Plantinga talks about the conditions or circumstances which give rise to theistic belief, he is referring to experiences which are had not only by theists, but also by sceptics. Consider some of the examples ~~which~~ he cites: ~~For example,~~ the experiences of contemplating the beauty of a flower, beholding the vastness and complexity of the universe, or reading the Bible. These are experiences which are had both by sceptics and believers. But, if this is the case, then there is an important difference between them and the experiences which give rise, say, to perceptual beliefs.

"...while nearly everyone who has experience x is led to the belief that he or she is seeing a tree, experience y leads some to a particular belief about God but leads many others in different directions. . . . For example, many persons have had the experience of being awed by the beauty of the universe without being led to believe in a wise creator. The theist might argue that his own response is the natural one, that, after all, it has been a nearly universal response through the bulk of Western history and that the modern unbeliever is an aberration and must self-consciously oppose this very natural belief. But this argument does not take account of traditionally nontheistic religions such as Taoism, Confucianism, or Theravada Buddhism."

Plantinga argues that there is a natural tendency or disposition within us to believe propositions such as "this flower was created by God" or "this vast and intricate universe was created by God" when we contemplate a flower or think about the vastness and complexity of the universe. But, if there is this natural disposition within us, we would expect theistic belief to be an almost universal phenomenon. The fact that it is not, surely, undermines Plantinga's claim.

Reformed theologians, of course, have been fully aware of the fact that many people do not believe in God and that many

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1. Grigg, "Theism and Proper Basicity: a Response to Plantinga", p. 126.

believers, at times, find it difficult to maintain their belief. Their response has been to assert that the minds of those who find it difficult to believe in God, or who reject theistic belief outright, are clouded by sin. "Were it not for the existence of sin in the world," Plantinga claims, "human beings would believe in God to the same degree and with the same natural spontaneity that we believe in the existence of other persons, an external world, or the past".<sup>1</sup> The problem with this response, however, is that it simply begs the question.<sup>2</sup> It presupposes theism and, hence, will only appeal to someone who already believes in God. It will cover no ground in convincing the sceptic that what Plantinga calls a natural tendency or disposition towards theistic belief is not merely an unconscious bias towards a belief-system which has tremendous psychological appeal.

Plantinga, however, is not overly concerned by the fact that many people will not accept that belief in God is properly basic, as is evident when we consider the second point which he makes in defense of his position. Here he argues that the theist is not committed to accepting that any and every belief is properly basic if we reject the classical foundationalist's criterion of proper basicity but are unable to replace it with one of our own. A person who rejects the logical positivist's criterion of meaning and is unable to replace it with some new criterion of his own is

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1. Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology", p. 51.

2. Gary Gutting, Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), p. 84.

not thereby committed to accepting that the proposition "Twas brillig;  
and the slithy toves did gyre and gimble in the wabe" is  
meaningful, Plantinga argues. Why, then, should the Reformed  
epistemologist be embarrassed by his own inability to replace the  
classical foundationalist's criterion of proper basicity with  
one of his own? He is not, Plantinga argues, committed to holding  
that just any belief, belief in the Great Pumpkin or in Voodoo, for  
example, is properly basic as a result of this. The important  
question, he feels, concerns the way in which we are to develop  
criteria for proper basicity and the correct way of doing this,  
he argues, is inductive.

"We must assemble examples of beliefs and  
conditions such that the former are obviously properly  
basic in the latter, and examples of beliefs and  
conditions such that the former are obviously not  
properly basic in the latter. We must then frame  
hypotheses as to the necessary and sufficient  
conditions of proper basicity and test these  
hypotheses by reference to those examples."

The theist, then, is not committed to accepting that just any  
belief is properly basic. The fact that he accepts as one of his  
examples of properly basic belief, the belief that God exists,  
Plantinga argues, does not commit him to accepting that belief in  
the Great Pumpkin is also properly basic. The theist is quite free  
to propose belief in God as one of his examples of rational basic  
belief and belief in the Great Pumpkin as one of his examples of

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1. Plantinga, "Rationality and Religious Belief", p. 276.

irrational basic belief. Furthermore, Plantinga suggests, we should not expect that everyone will agree with the theist in this and, more importantly with respect to our argument, we should not be too concerned by this fact.

"...there is no reason to assume, in advance, that everyone will agree on the examples. The Christian or Jew will of course suppose that belief in God is entirely proper and rational; if he doesn't accept this belief on the basis of other propositions, he will conclude that it is basic for him and quite properly so. Followers of Bertrand Russell and Madelyn Murray O'Hare may disagree, but how is that relevant? Must my criteria, or those of the believing community, conform to their examples? Surely not. The theistic community is responsible to its set of examples, not to theirs."

Plantinga's method of dealing with the fact that not everyone will accept belief in God amongst their examples of properly basic belief, then, is to assert that an epistemologist's stock of examples will be community relative.<sup>2</sup> He would appear to be claiming, in this passage, that what may or may not be accepted as properly basic is a function of the community to which one belongs.

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1. Ibid.

2. J. Wesley Robbins, "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?", International Journal for Philosophy of Religion 14 (1983), p. 246.

The fact that not everyone will agree with the Christian or the Jew when they claim that belief in God is properly basic is not a consideration that they need to take account of, he is arguing, since the theistic community must conform to its set of examples not to the set of examples of people outside this community.

The problem with this response, however, is that it would appear to be in direct conflict with his claim that belief in God is properly basic only in virtue of the fact that we have a natural disposition to believe certain propositions about God under certain circumstances or conditions.<sup>1</sup> This would appear to be a statement to the effect that proper basicity is a function of and grounded in objective facts. Plantinga must decide which of these two conflicting positions he wishes to adopt.

This problem is a very real one for Plantinga and there are difficulties whichever position he adopts. If he adopts the position that proper basicity is a function of the community to which one belongs, then all that he is saying when he asserts that belief in God is properly basic is that the theistic community accepts it without question.<sup>2</sup> If, on the other hand, he wishes to assert that proper basicity is a function of objective facts, then he cannot ignore the fact that many people do not come to believe propositions about God under the circumstances which he cites.

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1. Ibid.

2. Ibid., p. 247.

## CONCLUSION

Having reached the end of this dissertation, it is important to decide what exactly it is that we are entitled to conclude.

At the very least, we can say that each of the positions considered here is problematic, that none of the thinkers examined have succeeded in providing a satisfactory defense of the rationality of religious belief. However, I think that we can go further than this. In so far as each philosopher considered has been historically influential and representative of a broader philosophical position, it is my opinion that we are entitled to draw the further conclusion that our findings cause some doubt about the possibility of ever finding a successful defense of the rationality of Christianity.

Does this mean that religious belief can be dismissed as irrational? I think not. There are two important areas, or types of argument if you like, that we have not considered. The first of these is the cumulative case argument. Basil Mitchell, for example, has argued that:

"What has been taken as a series of failures when treated as attempts at purely deductive or inductive arguments could better be understood as contributions to a cumulative case. On this view the theist is urging that traditional Christian theism makes better sense of all the evidence available than does any alternative on offer, and the atheist is contesting the claim. The



dispute concerns what Gilbert Ryle calls 'the plausibility of theories' rather than proof or probability in any strict sense."<sup>1</sup>

Mitchell holds, then that a successful Christian apologetic might be possible if we look at the over-all picture and treat each individual argument as part of a cumulative case.

Another important area that we have not looked at is that of the rational appraisal of religious experience. As Yandell points out, appeals to incorrigible religious experiences as guarantees of truth are as old as religion itself.<sup>2</sup> They require due attention and consideration before we can dismiss Christian Apologetics altogether.

Our general conclusion, then, is gloomy for the believer without being damning. It suggests dead ends that can be avoided but cannot rule out the possibility of a rational defense of Christianity altogether.

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1. Basil Mitchell, The Justification of Religious Belief

(London: Macmillan, 1973), p. 39.

2. Keith E. Yandell, "Religious Experience and Rational Appraisal," Religious Studies 10, p. 173.

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