

An Introduction to Medieval Christian Philosophy

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Objectives

After reading this chapter, the student should be able to:

1. State and explain the medieval project of faith seeking understanding; and,
2. Discuss the implications of this project to philosophy in general.

Introduction

The present-day belief that reason (philosophy or science) and faith (theology) are fundamentally at odds is something that would baffle most medieval Christian philosophers. These philosophers have a firm belief that reason and faith have their respective roles in our acquisition of truths.

Some of them see reason as a tool by which one could arrive at certain truths of the Christian faith. For example, some medieval thinkers think that God's existence could be demonstrated via a philosophical argument. Others see that reason could be used as a way of showing the consistency of some Christian doctrines. For example, some medieval philosophers think that there is a way of making sense of the doctrine of the Trinity. Still others see that reason could be used as a way of distinguishing between truths that we could arrive at by rational demonstration and truths that could only be acquired through faith. For example, some medieval philosophers tried to show that the truth about the virgin birth of Jesus is not something that we could arrive at by the use of our cognitive capacities alone.

In this chapter, we will examine the philosophical terrain of medieval Christian philosophy and see how faith and reason took center stage in the speculations of the great philosophers of this age.

Some Historical Background

The rise to prominence of Christianity in the 4th century and the fall of the Roman Empire in the 5th century marked a turning point not only in the history of the world, but also in the history of philosophy as well. Thinkers of this time started to square their philosophical ideas with that of the doctrines of Christianity.

Philosophers prior to this age were engaged in questions about the nature and existence of first principles (the very questions of the nature of Being), the nature of truth, and the nature of goodness. After the rise of Christianity, however, these questions were flavored with Christian doctrines. Philosophers during the medieval era have transformed the question about first principles to a question about the nature and existence of God; questions regarding the Truth became questions about the Word; and questions regarding the Good became questions about

¹ This essay is a revised version of my "*Theorice, Quaestio, and Disputatio in Medieval Metaphysics*," first published in 2008, *The Philosophical Landscape 5th edition*, edited by Rolando Gripaldo, C&E Publishing Inc.

Divine Providence. At the heart of these questions is the question about the relationship between the *truths of faith* and the *truths of reason*. The main issue at stake is whether the truths derived from the doctrines of faith are compatible with the truths arrived at by the use of natural human reason alone.

It is important to understand that this transition came at a time of great changes in the socio-political atmosphere of the western world. The political deterioration of the Greco-Roman empire during the sixth century caused a spiritual turmoil. This spiritual turmoil in turn gave rise to the political influence of Christianity, which in turn made significant changes to the mode thinking of the philosophers of that time. The prevailing philosophical questions at that time reflect this change.

A crucial feature of this transition was the change of the role of philosophy. With Christianity in the philosophical foray, some thinkers of the day were exposed to some new and quite alien ideas and concepts. A natural struggle between two opposing poles soon ensued. On the one hand, educated people of that time were trained along the ideas of the Greeks: like, Aristotle and Plato. On the other hand, a new philosophical force, Christianity, exposes them to the idea that the way, the truth and the life has come to shed light to the world. The Apostle Paul reflects this struggle:

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So, he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. Also some *Epicurean* and *Stoic* philosophers debated with him. Some said, "What does this babbling want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities." (*This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.*) So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are preaching?" (Acts 17:16-25).²

With the thirst for revitalizing their spirituality, these thinkers and philosophers asked Paul about his beliefs. Paul readily obliged:

Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through to the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god'. What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands... as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things... (*op. cit.*)

These words sparked a revolution of thought. What these philosophers were worshipping was an "unknown god." Here, then, right before their eyes, was someone telling them that what they were really worshipping was none other than the one and only God.

Giving a name to the "unknown god," however, was not the only thing that Christianity offered the Greco-Roman world. It also offered the salvation of the world through Christ. This idea

² All the primary sources quoted here came from two anthologies: Kaufman and Baird (1994) and Shapiro (1964). Where it applies, all italics in the quoted works are mine.

was repudiated, at first, by the philosophers. The question, “Why should the world be saved?” lurked in the minds of these philosophers. *The Gospel of John* tried to answer this:

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it... The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son full of grace and truth... From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known. (John 1:1-18).

What this salvation is salvation from darkness. Darkness, as it is here depicted, is our failure to acknowledge the presence of God. The idea that “the true light gave the world its life, and it came into the world in order to give grace and truth” is a crucial idea for the Christian faith because the true light—viz. Jesus Christ—came into the world to proclaim the presence of God. True knowledge, then, entails believing in Christ. Salvation is given only to those who follow him.

Of course, not everyone accepted this idea. For some philosophers, it was poorly constructed thought that has no proof. These philosophers have found several inconsistencies, which they raised against the Christian faith: How can an all-powerful God actively intend to create a world such as ours? Why did a God become a man? How can the same Son be his own Father all at the same time?

When Christianity came into the western world, it brought about noticeable changes. In the early days of Christianity, philosophers trained in the Platonic and Aristotelian schools were intellectually superior to the Christians. While the former have sophisticated philosophical systems, the latter have a poorly constructed metaphysics. Such a case would lead us to think that Christianity could never come into terms with philosophy. Two points, however, are important to note here. First, both Platonic and Aristotelian doctrines are open to the possibility of integration with the Christian faith. Consider the idea of the Platonic Good and the Aristotelian Necessary Cause. If we were to extend the arguments presented for these two ideas, we could arrive at the idea of the Christian God. Consider also the Platonic idea of the Soul and the Aristotelian idea of Substance. Taken together, they lead us to the Christian doctrine of salvation. Second, given the possibility of integrating philosophy and Christianity, several interesting philosophical problems would inevitably arise. These problems distinguish medieval philosophy from other historical epochs of philosophy.

Faith and Reason

Throughout the epochs of medieval Christian philosophy, there have been different formulations of the relationship between faith and reason: theology and philosophy. These

formulations can be grouped into four types: extreme fideism, moderate fideism, moderate rationalism and extreme rationalism.

The Church Fathers and the Mystics belong to the first type.³ The Greek Christian Apologist, Clement of Alexandria, sees that relationship between faith and reason as follows:

Perchance, too, philosophy was given to the Greeks directly and primarily, till the Lord should call the Greeks... Philosophy, therefore, was a preparation, paving the way for him who is perfected in Christ... Philosophy... exercises the mind, rouses the intelligence, and begets an inquiring shrewdness, by means of the true philosophy, which the initiated possess, having found it, or rather received it, from the truth itself. (*Stromata*, Bk. 1, Ch. 5).

Extreme fideism is the idea that it is impossible to reconcile faith and reason inasmuch as true knowledge of things is concerned. Reason, on the one hand, only exercises the mind and rouses the intellect. Thus, it would lead only to agnosticism or non-knowledge. Faith, on the other hand, leads to true knowledge, for its truths came from the truth itself (Christ himself). Thus, faith is superior to reason when it comes to knowledge.

The second type includes Augustine and Anselm. In the *Proslogium*, Anselm formulates the relationship between faith and reason as follows:

I do not endeavor, O Lord, to penetrate thy sublimity, for in no wise do I compare my understanding with that; but I long to understand in some degree thy truth, which my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this also I believe—that unless I believed, I should not understand. (*Proslogium*, Ch. I)

Moderate fideism is the idea that reason and faith can be reconciled inasmuch as true knowledge of things is based on faith. Reason functions not as the source of true knowledge; it is, rather, a vehicle for understanding what is already known by faith. Faith is the basis of all our just beliefs. Reason, on the other hand, makes us understand more what we already believe. Thus, we only need reason to gain an understanding of what we already believe. Hence, Anselm states that “...unless I believed, I should not understand.” Reason, therefore, is not used to ascertain some of our beliefs; we use reason, rather, to understand our knowledge acquired through faith.

The pre-Scholastics, like Abelard and Albert the Great, and the Scholastics, like Aquinas and Dun Scotus, are typical of moderate rationalists. Aquinas argues that reason and faith are compatible:

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...it is impossible that the truth of faith should be opposed to those principles that the human reason knows naturally. (*Summa Contra Gentiles*, Bk. I, Ch. 7).

³ The Early Church Fathers also include the Christian Apologists. There have been well-known apologists from the Greek and Latin traditions (See Gilson 1955, Parts 1 and 2). The later medieval period featured the loss of confidence of many Christians to the power of reason to account for truths of faith. This was epitomized by the mystics such as Nicholas of Cues, Bonaventure and Meister Eckhart.

Moderate rationalism is the idea that the truths derived from reason are compatible with the truths acquired through faith. Aquinas's argument suffices to support this claim. What is true can never be false. The truths arrived at by use of reason and the truths acquired through faith are both true. One truth is always compatible with another—since only what is false is incompatible with what is true. Hence, both these truths are compatible with one another.

The fourth type includes the Latin Averroists⁴ such as Siger of Brabant, and the later Scholastics such as William of Ockham, Roger Bacon, and Nicholas of Autrecourt. William of Ockham formulates the relationship as follows:

...[A]ssuming that every truth necessary for salvation is theological, I maintain that the same specific theological conclusion cannot be proved in theology and in natural knowledge, if we understand 'knowledge' [as the possession of just one conclusion, whether this is a natural or theological]... because there are as many distinct cognitions as there are distinct conclusions known. Hence, just as there cannot be different acts of knowledge of one conclusion, since plurality must not be asserted without necessity, so also the same conclusion cannot be proved in different sciences. (*Quodlibeta*, V, Q. 5)

Extreme rationalism is the idea that truths arrived by reason are incompatible with truths acquired through faith. Given that they are independent from one another, it seems that there is no longer a need to reconcile the two. Ockham's argument precisely shows this. Truths of reason were arrived at in a different manner from those truths acquired through faith. No particular truth, however, could be arrived at using different devices; i.e. two devices can never lead to the same truth. Thus, truths arrived by reason is necessarily independent from the truths acquired through faith. But, independence of truths entails incompatibility of those truths. Hence, truths of reason are incompatible with truths of faith.

These different formulations arrive at different strategies in solving different philosophical problems. But it should be noted here that each formulation assumes that there are truths of faith and truths of reason. Granted this assumption, each formulation should be seen as an attempt to state the relationship between these two truths. The philosophical problems which medieval problems tried to answer exist precisely because of their attempt to reconcile faith and reason. Corollary to this, these problems would not exist if such reconciliation were not attempted in the first place. This latter sentiment is evident in both extreme fideism and extreme rationalism.

Quaestio, Disputatio and Theorice

Medieval philosophers, influenced by Plato and Aristotle, developed a unique blend of philosophical speculation (*theorice*). Philosophy *qua* philosophy is distinguished from other forms of theoretical speculations and explorations by its method and subject matter. For medieval philosophers, the primary project is to explain the possibility of reconciling faith and reason. From this basic question, several other questions can be pursued. As regards to their method, medieval

⁴ Latin Averroists, also known as the Integral Aristotelians, became a philosophical force by the late 13th century. They hold that there are two truths: truths of reason and truths of faith. The latter are for those who are intellectually inferior, while the former are for those who are intellectually superior.

philosophers developed two unique methods of philosophical speculation: viz. *quaestio* and *disputatio*.⁵

Quaestio can be transliterated as “investigation” or “inquiry.” As a method in philosophy, *quaestio*, like any investigation or inquiry, starts out with some basic question about some particular subject matter. A hypothesis is then given to answer it. To test this hypothesis, different possible objections are raised against it. If it passes the first set of objections, another set will be raised. If, again, the hypothesis passes this, then a probable conclusion about the original question is arrived at. This conclusion is probable in the sense that, in the course of the *quaestio*, there is still room to deny it.

There are two exposition styles of the *quaestio* method. The first type is a philosophical dialogue. Most medieval philosophers influenced by Plato used a dialogue-style of exposition. Augustine’s *On the Free Choice of the Will* is an example of this. The second type is a philosophical treatise. Medieval philosophers influenced by Aristotle used this type. Aquinas’s *Summa contra Gentiles* is an example of this.

Another method of philosophical speculation, and often acknowledged as *the* method of medieval philosophizing, is called *disputatio*. *Disputatio* can be transliterated as “debate” or “dispute.” This method traces its history from Abelard’s *Sic et Non* and Lombard’s *Sentences*. *Disputatio* is characterized as a meeting of two opposites. Abelard’s version starts with an inquirer presenting two contradictory positions regarding a particular subject matter. Arguments for each position are then given to support each claim. Each argument is then analyzed and scrutinized in order to test its validity and soundness. To settle the issue, logical consistency is the only factor. A logically consistent position is often declared as the most reasonable position; and hence is the right position. If both positions are logically consistent, an appeal to scriptural authorities—biblical Scholars and/or the fathers and doctors of the Church—is needed to settle the issue. If both positions are found wanting of logical consistency, in order to settle the issue the only recourse is to appeal to the Holy Scriptures (and not merely to the Scriptural authorities). Ever since Abelard’s work became an established primary text, most medieval philosophers who came after him used his method to present their *theorice*.

Aquinas is often acknowledged as an exemplar of the *disputatio* method. His version of it starts with a general question (*quaestio*). It serves as the main topic of the inquiry. It is then divided into several articles (*articulos*). Each article is formulated in a question form. Instead of answering each of these directly, one proceeds (*proceditur*) with a tentative answer contrary to what one intends to give later (*propositio contrarium*). This tentative answer is then supported by a set of arguments called “objections.” The whole inquiry then will subtly change with a counterpoint (*sed contra*). This is done usually by quoting an argument or a proposition made in the Holy Scriptures or by an intellectual authority (like Aristotle). What this does is to introduce the intended answer that is being put forward. The whole argument then for the intended answer is given (*respondeo*). After showing this argument, the inquiry proceeds by meeting each of the objections. This is done by giving a reply to each of the points of each objection. This ends the *disputatio*.

Some early medieval philosophers used the *quaestio* method to present their *theorice*. But in the course of the history of medieval philosophizing, the *disputatio* method became a more

⁵ See Adler and van Doren (1972, 280-285) and McKinney (1983).

preferred method for the late medieval philosophers. William of Ockham, Siger of Brabant, Duns Scotus, and Jean Buridan exemplify this.

Natural Theology, Divine Theology, and Metaphysics

Although medieval philosophy is often dubbed as theo-centric (God-centered), it is not, however, purely concerned with topics under what we now call as “theology.” Etymologically speaking, “theo-logos” is defined as “the reason behind God.” If we follow this definition, we might say that theology is the examination of the reasonability of our idea of God.

It is, however, important to note that the word “theology” only attained its meaning through its usage during the medieval period. Some prominent medieval philosophers owe much of their conceptions of theology from Greek philosophers, especially Aristotle. Thus, it is probably important to discuss, although quite ironically, how Aristotle viewed the nature of theology. And it is from his *Metaphysics* that we will see how he arrived at this idea.

Aristotle’s investigations concerning theology could be reconstructed as follows:

“All human beings by nature desire to know. Desiring knowledge leads to desiring wisdom. Wisdom now is the knowledge about certain first principles and ultimate causes. To engage in the pursuit of wisdom is to engage in philosophy. Hence, human beings begin to philosophize because of this basic human nature. Puzzled people often think of themselves as ignorant. They philosophized, then, in order to escape such ignorance. That is, they want to have knowledge. To acquire knowledge is to know the first causes of things.

“There are four senses of the word “cause.” A cause may be a material cause, which are the materials that make up a thing. It may be a formal cause, which are the essential features of a thing. It may also be an efficient cause, which is the author or maker of some particular thing. It may even be a final cause, which is the purpose of some particular thing.

“Knowledge of the first causes of things makes possible real knowledge. But if there had been an infinite number of causes, then real knowledge would have been impossible. Hence, if we have real knowledge, the causes of things are neither an infinite series nor infinitely various.

“We are seeking the principles and the causes of things that are. We could seek them through natural sciences, which are concerned with facts of the world; mathematics, which is concerned with formal truths; and theology, which is concerned with what is divine and beyond nature. If there is no substance other than those which are formed by nature, natural science will be the first science. But if there is an immovable structure, the science of this must be prior and must be first philosophy, and universal in this way, because it is first. And it will belong to this to consider being *qua* being. There is such an immovable structure. Therefore, a first philosophy, which is concerned with the principles and the causes of things, exists.”⁶

This first philosophy is, as it was interpreted by medieval philosophers, nothing else but theology. Since, a first philosophy deals with questions like “Why is there something rather than nothing?” it seems that, for medieval philosophers, theology ought to answer such questions as well.

⁶ The following are taken from Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* (982a-1026a).

Theology, properly understood, has two senses.⁷ First, theology is understood as a body of divinely revealed knowledge giving an explanation for everything. There are two ideas here that obviously need some clarification, viz. “divinely revealed” and “explanation for everything.” What is meant by “divinely revealed” can be seen in relation with the idea of God. Knowledge divinely revealed is nothing more than knowledge coming directly from God. So, the sense of theology here being described is that God directly gave us knowledge, and such knowledge is the explanation for everything. But how do we understand the idea “explanation for everything”? An explanation for everything is none other than God himself. So, in effect, what this sense of theology is trying to point out is the fact that we have knowledge of God (explanation for everything) from God himself (divinely revealed). This is now what is called divine theology. This, however, is hard to fathom, since we may ask how such knowledge can be arrived at.

Divine theology speaks of no other source than faith. Truth is attained through God’s revelation. And this truth can be attained only by faith. God, who revealed himself to us, is taken as a basic idea. We no longer need to prove the existence of God. And the doctrines of faith (*Sacra Doctrina*) will justify this. What is philosophically interesting here, however, as some medieval philosophers of the moderate fideism type held, is that knowledge about God seems to entail paradoxical problems. These include the consistency of attributing to God the property of being All-Good and All-Knowing, understanding the Holy Trinity, and understanding the idea of creation *ex nihilo*. These problems would be entertained by the medieval philosophers, and later would produce the discipline called philosophical theology.⁸

The second way of understanding theology is called natural theology. One contemporary philosopher describes this as follows:

Natural Theology is the enterprise of providing support for religious beliefs by starting from premises that neither are nor presuppose religious beliefs. We begin from the existence of the world or with the definition of the concept “God” ... and we try to show that when we think through the implications... we are led to recognize the existence of God. (Alston (1991, 289)).

Natural theology need not support any religious doctrine. It seeks to answer the fundamental philosophical questions by the use of unaided human reason. In this sense, natural theology is akin to what Aristotle pictures as first philosophy, where reason is the source of knowledge and rational arguments are used to prove some fundamental fact. The idea of God is not taken as basic; it is seen as a natural consequence of philosophical inquiry.

The difference between natural theology and divine theology lies solely in their starting points regarding the knowledge of God. Divine theology can be seen as a top-down philosophical enterprise. That is, it starts with the idea of God and from there all things follow. On the other hand, natural theology can be seen as a bottom-up philosophical enterprise. That is, it starts with what we

⁷ Kretzmann will be our guide in distinguishing between the two senses of the word “theology”; viz. Divine Theology and Natural Theology. See Kretzmann(1997, 1-53) (1999, 1-29). His basic claim is that natural theology is strictly a philosophical discipline, while divine theology is properly part of theology, as we understand the term. There is a debate, however, concerning the status of natural theology as a philosophical discipline. For more information about this see Kretzmann (1997, 1-22), van Inwagen (1995, 1-8), and Matthews (1964).

⁸ Geach (1994) and van Inwagen (1995) described the philosophical aspect of divine (or revealed) theology. They both undertook a philosophical analysis of the problems in philosophical theology. Examples of these are: Trinity, Incarnation and Resurrection.

know unaided by faith, and deduce from there whatever necessarily follows, which usually is God. This difference is akin to the difference between moderate fideism and moderate rationalism.

Most medieval philosophers are found in the middle to the spectrum of faith and reason (moderate fideism and moderate rationalism). These philosophers are either engaged in seeing the philosophical implications of their faith (i.e. a philosophical theology) or whether reason can produce truths held by faith (natural theology). By contrast, the opposite ends of the spectrum of faith and reason (extreme fideism and extreme rationalism) are not concerned with either problem.

Metaphysical Problems in Medieval Christian Philosophy

The medieval project of reconciling faith and reason produced several philosophical problems. What is of great interest with these problems, however, concerns their very existence. The following problems would not have been raised if there were no insistence to reconcile faith and reason.

The problems presented here are metaphysical inasmuch as they are concerned with the implications of reconciling faith and reason on the question of the ultimate explanation of things. One of the problems presented here is of the natural theological sort: viz. God's existence. The other problems are problems in philosophical theology: creation and eternity, freewill and God's Foreknowledge and the Problem of Evil. Another problem is the problem of universals which is a peculiar medieval metaphysical problem. This problem, supposedly, came about because of the problem of understanding the nature of the Holy Trinity and the nature of Jesus Christ.

God's Existence

For moderate fideists, God's existence is no longer a problem. The problem, however, lies in understanding what this implies for everything else that we know. As Augustine puts it: "They (people) do not yet understand how things were made which came to be through you (God) and in you." (*Confessions*, Bk. XI, Sec. xi). So, we can say that moderate fideism is not interested to provide any proof for God's existence; rather, they want to provide an understanding of what this entails. As Anselm has put it "...I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand." (*Proslogium* Ch. 1). One is not to prove God's existence in order for one to believe in God; rather, one already believes in God and seeks to understand what this implies.

There is, however, a curious facet of understanding the concept of God according to Anselm:

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, and that You are what we believe You to be. Now we believe that You are something than which nothing greater can be thought. Or can it be that a thing of such a nature does not exist, since "the Fool has said in his heart, there is not God" (Ps. Xiii, 1, lii, 1)? But surely, when this same Fool hears what I am speaking about, namely, "something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought," he understands what he hears, and what he understands in his mind, even if he does not understand that it actually exists. For it is one thing for an object to exist in the mind, and another thing to understand that an object actually exists... 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. 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 be 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. *Proslogium* (Ch. 2)

Anselm gave an understanding of what the concept of God entails. It entails something-that-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought, or that which nothing can be greater. And this is what we call God. God's existence is not a mere conceptual existence (or existence in the mind alone), but an actual existence (or real existence), since real existence is greater than a conceptual one, and since God is the greatest being.

There have been several objections raised against Anselm's argument. An example of this is Gaunilo's: To say that existence in the mind entails existence in the actual world is fallacious, since we could think or conceive of a perfect thing, such as a lost island, that does not actually exist. Hence, if God's existence is as such, then his existence could be only a conceptual one and not an actual one. (*In Behalf of the Fool*).

Anselm replies that such a lost island is not something-that-which-nothing-greater-can-be thought. In short, Gaunilo's analogy missed the point. God is the greatest being. And only to God could we attribute perfection.

Moderate rationalists have another take on the problem of God's existence. For one, Aquinas proved that God's existence is not a self-evident idea as moderate fideism claimed. Rather, it is a derived idea. Derived, that is, from what actually exists and by the use of our natural human reason. This is what is commonly known as a cosmological way of arguing for God's existence.⁹

Aquinas gives us five proofs for the existence of God.¹⁰ The first three arguments have the same argument form. Each claims that only one existing being could be the source of existence in the world, which we call God. The fourth argument claims that perfection comes in degrees, the highest of which is God. And the fifth argument claims that the whole universe has a purpose or a great design, and if there were such a purpose, there must be a designer, which we might call God.¹¹

The first argument is the so-called First Mover argument. It starts with the claim that some things in the world are in motion. It is evident that these things are put into motion by something other than itself. If such were the case, then everything in motion must have been put into motion by something other than itself. But it is impossible that the series of things that cause something else to move and things that are moved by something else to go into infinity, since no movement would be possible. Therefore, there must be one thing that is not moved by something else and yet causes something else to move, and this is what we call God.

This argument shows that every created thing derives its capacity to move from something other than itself. Thus, if we were to have a series of things being moved and things that move them,

⁹ See Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (1st Part, Q. 2).

¹⁰ See Aquinas, *op cit* (1st Part, Q. 2, Art. III).

¹¹ Due to a lack of space, I shall only give the summarized form of the first and fifth arguments.

then we could arrive at one mover that was not moved by any other thing and yet is causing movement of subsequent all things. And this is God.

In the history of medieval philosophy, there have been attempts to show that invalidity of this argument. One example is from Nicholas of Autrecourt. He claimed that there is no real connection between what is caused and the agent of cause. That is, there is no necessary connection between causes and effects. In effect, the counterargument is simple. One cannot deduce the existence of the first cause of all movements in the world simply from the fact that something is moved.¹²

The fifth argument of Aquinas is called the Argument from Design. There are things in the world that lack intelligence and yet act as though they have intelligence. That is, they act towards some end or purpose. Hence, these things are designed in such a way that they obtain such ends or purposes. But if they act toward some end, then something or someone must have designed them to do as such. And this is what we call God.

This argument does not presuppose that God created the world. It only assumes that things that lack intelligence seem to act purposely. And from this the argument concludes that there must be a designer of those things. Many contemporary philosophers see this as the strongest of all Aquinas' arguments. However, we can point to a little weakness. The assumption that the world moves purposely lacks much justification. It might have been the case that things in the world really do not move purposely; it just looks as if they do.

There were other medieval philosophers that were concerned in either proving or understanding God's existence. Augustine pointed out that God is the bearer of truth. And we could not know the truth without knowing God. Duns Scotus followed Anselm's move that God is that-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought to understand what the concept entails. Some other philosophers tried to show that we can neither prove nor understand God's existence since it is simply beyond human comprehension. Philosophers such as Nicholas of Cues and Meister Eckhart held this view. Present day thinkers may take different ways in trying to address the problem of God's existence, but it is quite amusing to think that these often neglected medieval philosophers had already paved the way of making sense of the problem itself.

Creation and Eternity

The idea that God *created* the world is a problematic one especially if we see its philosophical implications. Augustine's formulation will help us understand what the philosophical problem is. He (*Confessions*, Bk. 11, v (7)) stated this as follows:

How did you (God) make heaven and earth, and what machine did you use for so vast an operation? You were not like a craftsman who makes one physical object out of another by an act of personal choice in his mind, which has the power to impose the form which by an inner eye it can see within itself. This capacity it has only because you have so made it.

¹² The modern philosopher, David Hume, also made a similar counterargument.

It is hard to fathom why God created the world. But we could appreciate the problem of creation by seeing it in a different light. Taking Augustine's cue, we could thereby ask "Where was God before he created the world?" "What was he doing then?" "When did God create the world?"

These questions are really tricky since if we have an answer for them, then we could say that God did not really create the world; rather he was in the world. That is, he was somewhere at sometime. But to say this would run contrary to the doctrines of faith, which clearly stated that God created the world. It was the task of Christian Philosophers of the medieval period to make sense of this seeming contradiction.

Augustine's attempt to address the question made him ask the question, "What is time?" It made sense for him to say that he knew what time is when no one asks him about it, but when some do ask, he could no longer describe it. In the *Confessions*, Augustine tried to answer the question, "When did God create the world?" His answer was a philosopher's answer; the question does not make sense. To ask the question "when?" is to suppose that God is in time. But God is outside time. Time only measures the duration of created things, and since God is not part of creation, he was not in time. He is eternally present. Time started when God created the world. Time will end after the world is gone. In effect, Augustine's ingenious solution is simply to make the question ridiculous. There's no point of debating whether God is doing something before he created the world since doing something implies duration. And because duration cannot properly be attributed to God since he is eternal, then the question does not make sense.

Augustine's solution to the problem of creation and eternity became a landmark in medieval speculation. Many philosophers, such as Aquinas and Peter Abelard, followed the Augustinian trend of thought. It is curious to think that this simple question really perplexed many medieval philosophers; maybe it is because they speculated how to reconcile God with philosophical reasoning.

Freewill and God's Foreknowledge

The problem of the freedom of the will can be stated in the words of Augustine (*On the Free Choice of the Will*, Bk. III, Ch. 3):

Surely this is the question that troubles and perplexes you: how can the following two propositions, that (1) God has foreknowledge of all future events, and that (2) we do not sin by necessity but by free will, be made consistent with each other? "If God foreknows that man will sin," you may say, "it is necessary that man sin." If man must sin, his sin is not the result of the will's choice, but is instead a fixed and inevitable necessity. You fear now that this reasoning results either in the blasphemous denial of God's foreknowledge or, if we deny this, the admission that we sin by necessity, not by will.

How do we reconcile the idea that God knows everything that will happen to us, and, at the same time, we have freedom of choice? If God knows something that will happen, he knows it for a fact. Since he knows it, then can we really have a say on how things would inevitably be.

There are three medieval solutions that I wish to consider here. But before that, I wish to tell you about the story in the Bible about the sheep and the goat. In the end of time, God will judge those who will go to heaven and who will be punished in hell. As the story goes, the sheep will go to

heaven, while the goat will burn in hell. Question: Are you a goat or a sheep? If you were born a goat, could you suddenly turn into a sheep? Or if you were born a sheep, could you be turned into a goat? It is obvious that in neither case is it possible that you can suddenly turn into something that you are not. Hence, to say that God already knows who you are even before you were born is to say that God already determines your nature.

This problem has a huge bearing on our next problem, which is the problem of evil. Since we cannot be free in determining our actions, then it logically follows that we can never offend God. To offend God is to freely do something contrary to God's divine will. And since we cannot do this for we are not free, then we cannot sin. Now since we are not free, therefore, we cannot offend God. Hence, we cannot commit sin.

Augustine has a way around this problem. In his *On the Free Choice of the Will*, Bk. III, Ch. 6, Sec. 13, he stated that there is such a thing as an inner sense or a conscience that would tell us either to do or not to do a particular thing. This idea is akin to the Greeks' idea of a daimon. This conscience, which is the voice of God, tells us what we should do. But we could choose either to heed, or not to heed our conscience's mandate. In short, the mere fact that we can opt to sin is a fact that proves the existence of our free will. But this does not mean that God does not know what we will opt to do. It only shows that God does not intervene in our decisions. He gave us the choice to either do what is good, or what is contrary to it. That's why we are still held liable for our actions.

Aquinas's take on the matter is slightly different. His solution is found in his *Summa Theologiae*, Part 1, Q. 14, Art. 13. He writes:

...a contingent thing (created being) can be considered in two ways. First, in itself, insofar as it is already in act, and in this sense it is not considered as future, but as present... In another way, a contingent thing can be considered as it is in its cause, and in this way it is considered as future, and a contingent thing not yet determined to one... Now God knows all contingent things not only as they are in their causes, but also as each one of them is actually in itself... Hence, it is manifest that contingent things are infallibly known by God, inasmuch as they are subject to the divine sight in their presentality; and yet they are future contingent things in relation to their own causes.

We can interpret this text as saying that God knows both that which is a contingent (possible) thing and that which is a necessary (actual) thing. But to say this is to say that God knows them does not mean that he wills what will happen to them. That is, even though God's knowledge is complete and absolute, it would not follow that he willed them to be the case. So, in effect, we are still free.

A third take on the problem of freewill is found in William of Ockham. In his *Predestination, God's Foreknowledge, and Future Contingents*, Q. I, he argued that our ideas of predestination (destined to eternal bliss) and reprobation (destined to eternal damnation) are poorly thought of. We cannot hold consistently that we are either predestined or reprobated since it has not come yet. We can only know whether this is the case if it has come to pass. Now, even if God knows who are predestined or reprobated, it does not mean that we could ever know it. That is, even if our lives are already directed towards some determined end and this end is already known to God, but since we don't have access to this knowledge, then it would not follow that God determined us. Hence, we are free.

The problem of freedom and determinism has many forms. It evolved to be a problem of reconciling the determining conditions of our actions and the freedom that we supposedly have in doing those actions. Later philosophers rekindled their interest to this problem. And presently, no one can claim that he or she has the correct answer to this problem.

Problem of Evil

The problem of evil is one of those philosophical problems that just would not go away. Augustine was the first medieval philosopher to come to terms with this problem. However, it is Pseudo-Dionysius's¹⁰ formulation that we will use in order to understand the problem. He (*The Divine Names*, Ch. 4, 18) stated this as follows:

In general, what is evil? From what source does it subsist? In which being is it? How did the good will to produce it? How was such a will possible? If evil is from another cause than the good, what cause is there fore beings beside the good? How is there evil if there is providence? How does evil come to be at all? Why is it not destroyed? Finally, how does any being desire it instead of the good?

It was Augustine's solution to the problem of evil that became the standard answer to this problem. Almost all other medieval philosophers followed Augustine lead. So it is safe to only delve in his solution.

Augustine, in his *City of God*, Book XII, was concerned with the problem of evil. His intention was to prove that it is by our own free choice that we commit sin. But we do not really desire to sin. If we know that what we are doing is a sin, then, for Augustine, we would not opt for that since we are always geared towards the good. So it follows that everything is really good. But how can there be evil?

Evil is not something that exists in itself. Nothing contrary to the good exists. That is, evil is not created by God. Only good things exist. However, as Augustine pointed out, there is a gradation of goodness. That is, there are things whose level of goodness is higher than other things. Again, Augustine's view is that everything created by a God who is all good are good. But each thing's goodness is different from some other thing. Hence, there are grades of goodness. To illustrate this let us take an example of making a choice between two good actions. First is obeying your parents, while the second is consoling a friend. However, if you choose to obey your parents, then you cannot console your friend since they've asked you not to leave the house. You have thus let your friend down, which is not a good thing. If you choose to console your friend, then disobeyed your parents, which is also not a good thing. Here is where our notion of evil, according to Augustine, comes in.

Evil does not exist. It only exists because of a defect or a lack that was brought about by the choice that we made. It is like, to use Augustine's analogy, a wound. A wound is something that does not necessarily exist. It exists only as a lack of some skin in an area that should have had a skin. This analogy serves its purpose to show that we see evil only as the privation of some good. Going back to our example above, if we take either alternative someone may get hurt, and causing such a hurt is evil.

Augustine has a distinction between two kinds of evil. One is called natural evil. That is, evil things that couldn't be helped. An example of this kind of evil may perhaps be natural calamities

that we may experience. We cannot control these things. They are evil only inasmuch as they destroy something we value. Another kind of evil is called moral evil. Moral evils are those things that we intentionally do to others. Perhaps the act of killing and stealing can be examples of this kind.

In saying that evil does not exist, Augustine already disposed off the rudimentary task of reconciling its existence with God's existence. In effect, he ingeniously shied away from the controversy of proving that there is nothing wrong in claiming that God is all good and, at the same time, evil exists. Another important contribution of Augustine's answer to the problem of evil was its manner by which to look at different philosophical problems. It seems that we could have an answer to different philosophical problems only if we could see them in a different light. And this Augustinian legacy is still evident in today's philosophical inquiries.

Universals and Particulars

The problem of universals is often depicted as *the* problem of medieval metaphysics. The other problems that we have discussed so far can be resolved by an appeal to the truths of faith. This present problem, however, is not easily remedied using such recourse.

Boethius's account of the problem of universals aptly elucidates the problem. He (*Second Edition of the Commentaries on the Isagoge of Porphyry*, Bk. I, 10) stated it as follows:

...The mind, whatever it understands, either conceives by understanding and describes to itself by reason (things that exist), or else depicts to itself in vacant imagination (those that do not exist). It is inquired therefore of which sort the understanding of genus and of the rest is: whether we understand species and genera as we understand things which (exist) and from which we derive a true understanding, or whether we deceive ourselves, since we form for ourselves, by empty cogitation of the mind, things which (do not exist). But even if it should be established that they (exist), and if we should say that the understanding of them is conceived from things which are, then another greater, and more difficult question would occasion doubt...For since it is necessary that everything which (exists), be either corporeal or incorporeal; genus and species will have to be in one of these. Of what sort then will that which is called genus be, corporeal or incorporeal?... But even when this question has been resolved, all ambiguity will not be avoided. For there remains something which, should genera and species be called incorporeal, besets the understanding and detains it, demanding that it be resolved, to wit, whether they *subsist* in bodies themselves, or whether they seem to be incorporeal subsistences *beyond* bodies and persist in their incorporeality *separated* from bodies, as God, mind, soul... Or if they have been separated from bodies, they in no manner continue to (exist).

The problem can be looked at as a special problem in logical theory. I would not go into details on this since the topic is highly technical. What I shall do, however, is to explain what the problem is all about.

The problem of universals concerns the existence of things that we call universals. Are universals existing things? But before we go into that, we should first know what universals are. Universals are concepts that pertain to collections or groups of things of the same kind. The word

“human being” is a universal inasmuch as it pertains to all things that are human beings. To understand the problem we could pose several known statements. We know that “Plato is a human being” and “Socrates is a human being” are both true statements. But what makes them true? They are true because both Plato and Socrates are indeed human beings. But what makes them human beings? This question shows where the confusion comes in.

Some medieval philosophers, like William of Champeux, believe that both Socrates and Plato share something in common with one another. This common feature is something that is independent of the both of them. But both of them share it. This common feature is being a human being. Being a human being exists independently of both Plato and Socrates since we cannot say that only Plato and Socrates are human beings. This position is known as realism. Realists believe that universals like “redness,” “being a chair,” and the like exist independent of things that are red or things that are chairs. We know that each particular thing is red or a chair inasmuch as they participate in the universal red or chair.

Some other medieval philosophers, like Roscelin, would say that universals are nothing but words. We label things using general words in order to group them together. But these words do not exist independently. We made these words. What exist though are particular things. They exist independent of the words we make of them. If, for example, I see a particular thing right in front of me, and I call it a “chair,” then I did not use the word “chair” to illustrate something that exists. Rather I used the word to label something right in front of me. This position is called nominalism. Nominalists believe that universals are nothing more but words. They do not correspond to anything, but are mere words that human beings made in order to label different particular things.

Still others concerned with solving the problem of the existence of universals would say that universals are concepts that exist in our minds. But they are not mere concepts we made, but in order for them to have any theoretical worth they must have something that makes them capable of describing something in the world. This thing is what makes each universal concept attach itself to the object being described. In effect, what this means is that universal concepts are concepts that mediate between a particular thing and the human mind. This position is what is called moderate realism or conceptualism. Conceptualists, like Peter Abelard, firmly believe that to say that universals either exist only in the mind or some other-worldly space is putting the matter quite ludicrously. The fact is more complicated than that.

We do not call something as a chair because we just want to label them as such. There must be something that makes them a chair, a common feature that all chairs have. But neither can you say that there exists the ultimate chair which every other chair corresponds to or participates in. The conceptualists offer a middle ground. A chair is a chair because such concept applies to such a thing. Such application is unique to it. We cannot call any particular thing as a chair since there are things that are not chairs. That is, not all concepts would apply to some things. Some concepts apply only to some particular things.

The debate on the existence of universals have a bearing in the debate concerning the concept of the holy trinity, the divine and human nature of Jesus Christ, and the doctrine of the transubstantiation of the bread and wine to the body and blood of Christ. Summarily, how do we interpret the relationship between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit? If all of them are but one, then how can a father be, at the same time be his son? If Christ is really both human and divine, how is it possible that those two utterly contrary natures (universal characteristics) exist in one being? Did the bread change its quality of being a bread when it turned into the body of Christ? How is that possible? These questions are questions in philosophical

theology, and to answer them would take much of our limited space. Needless to say, the importance of the problem of universals in medieval philosophizing not only led to different appreciation of Christian doctrines, but also it led to great changes in logical theory and metaphysical speculation as well.

Conclusion

By the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, the medieval project of reconciling faith and reason has been abandoned, or was utterly forgotten. There are two reasons for this. First was held by proponents of extreme fideism, while the second was held by proponents of extreme rationalism.

Extreme fideism's attack against the medieval project is simply that human reason can never encapsulate truths of acquired by faith. Mysticism grew out from this persuasion. Mystics, such as Nicholas of Cues and Meister Eckhart, repudiated any attempt to rationally justify any truth of faith. Faith alone can give us truth, nothing more, nothing less.

Extreme rationalism's attack against the medieval project concerns the incapacity of medieval philosophers to think scientifically about everyday matters. Roger Bacon, a proponent of extreme rationalism, argued that Aristotle's doctrines were only arrived at via deductive reasoning, but what a scientific conception of the world ought to be produced by inductive reasoning. Experience, and only experience, can tell us what the case is and what the case is not. Jean Buridan, a later extreme rationalist, argued further that any attempt to establish any truth whatsoever should not be relied upon doctrines accepted through faith or by arguments. Rather, they must be well experimented thesis. The rise of the natural sciences gave the final blow on the decline of the medieval project.

Today's scholarship on medieval philosophy, however, would like to stress on the positive contributions that the medieval philosophers offered in the philosophical gourmet. These contributions range from topics in logic to topics in politics and ethics. If we were to reread the classics of medieval philosophy we shall see that their philosophical speculation is almost the same, if not better than, today's philosophical endeavors. Needless to say, medieval speculation paved the way for university philosophers to have the status they have at present.

The medieval metaphysical problems are alive and well in current philosophical discussions. The problems of evil and free will are two of the most thought-provoking problems that philosophers ever asked. And we have to thank the medieval philosophers for pointing them out to us. The problem of God's existence and creation may not receive as much attention as medieval philosophers gave to them, but we can be assured that these questions are still being asked in the discussions of freethinking Christians.

The medieval project of reconciling faith and reason may not be as fashionable as it was 800 years ago. But being fashionable is not what matters. Medieval philosophy has given and will continue to give philosophically interesting ideas so long as we continue renewing our interests to their speculations and inquiries. No matter how old or antiquated an idea is if there are still people who will take time and understand them, they may still, in one way or another, give us some little philosophical surprises.

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Questions and Activities for Reflection

1. Consider again the different formulations of the relationship between faith and reason. Is there any other way of formulating this relationship?
2. Review the problem of divine foreknowledge. Which solution do you think best accounts for it?

3. Review the discussion about natural and divine theology. Make a list of Christian doctrines that fall under natural theology and a list for doctrines that fall under divine theology. Compare the two lists. How do they differ?