

WHY BELIEVE?

LECTURE TWO: BELIEF, REASON AND GOODNESS

INTRODUCTION

Last week we began this lecture series by highlighting that 500 years ago the question as to why we should believe would have made little sense. We then looked at some of the major social, political and economic factors that made the questioning of religious belief not only understandable but inevitable.

We also looked at some of the major thinkers who changed the outlook of the Western world in terms of the question of God. Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud and Darwin all called into question traditional Christian belief, and made it appear that atheism was the only authentic stance to take in response to their critique of religious thinking. Science has disenchanting the world. The Enlightenment has exiled religion from the domain of human knowledge. The theory of evolution has made supernatural explanations of the world redundant. Psychoanalytic theory has exposed our religious feelings and sentiments as nothing other than a response to the fears and uncertainties of human living.

We saw that in many ways the criticisms offered by these thinkers offer a serious challenge to believers, how easily religious belief can be nothing other than a form of wish-fulfilment or an escape from harsh reality. However, the conclusion reached at the end of the last lecture was that none of the thinkers dealt with succeeded in disproving the existence of God. To that extent therefore, the question of God remains open.

However, the cumulative effect of the criticisms of religious belief, particularly in the 19th century was to undermine any sense of certainty and optimism about the rationality of religious belief in a world that was seen to be supremely indifferent to human concerns. Indeed, we now live in an age and environment which makes belief in God more difficult to proclaim or justify, and one which forces us not simply to presume the rightness of a religious perspective on life but to find, if we can, reasons to believe.

THE ROMANTIC REACTION TO DISENCHANTMENT

In order to move towards an answer to the question why we should believe, it is important that we recognise a very significant response to the disenchantment that resulted as a result of the scientific and philosophical revolution of the 19th century. It must be acknowledged that many people took great delight in a sense of liberation from what was perceived to be forms of religious superstition and slavery. Many claimed that the scientific outlook gave people a new sense of human dignity, based no longer on a religious perspective but on the human ability through reason to live in a scientifically based humanism. We respect one another because of our understanding of human beings as autonomous rational agents.

However, there is another side to the story, one that also needs to be heard if we are to fully understand the truth of human nature and to properly assess the validity of religious belief. While many people welcomed the new environment of unbelief as liberating and necessary in the light of scientific knowledge, many others felt a deep sense of loss. This loss was not understood to be just about religious faith but about a whole dimension of human being: our ability to feel, to be in communion with one another and nature. There was a very strong sense that the accomplishments of science and reason, while telling us important facts about our world, had also brought about a loss of the sense of transcendence, that there are possibilities of reaching the truth through our feelings and emotions and desires. It is against this loss of transcendence that the poets of the Romantic reacted, urging us not to lose sight of essential aspects of human nature and of the world.

One of the most famous of the Romantic poets of the 19th century was Matthew Arnold. In his poem **Dover Beach** he described the sorrow that comes with a loss of religious faith and the loss of a feeling for the transcendent.

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

Arnold here laments the fact that the loss of religious faith brings with it a sense of hopelessness and gloom. The grief that Arnold manifests is a result of his view that a purely scientific account of reality cannot adequately express this need in human beings to be open to the transcendent, to find meaning in the best qualities of human nature. He ends his poem by pleading that we might hold on to love, because in love we are moved beyond ourselves into the deeper truths of life.

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

In Arnold's view, the scientific rationalist world-picture is a world of cold abstract emptiness. It is a world that is disenchanting, one that has no room for beauty and love and truth. He is left clinging to his love as the true living symbol of the fact that human beings by nature are open to a reality beyond the self, that we are open to the transcendent.

The poets of the Romantic age all share in Arnold's concern about the loss of significant aspects of human nature and the devastating consequences that might bring. Wordsworth used his poetry to show that the beauty of our natural environment is itself a means of transcendence, that in drawing close to the wonders of nature we are taken beyond ourselves into deeper levels of truth and wonder.

William Blake is another of the Romantic poets who reacts against a strictly scientific rational perspective. He goes even further than Arnold or Wordsworth in arguing that the world and human life is inherently religious and filled with transcendent meaning.

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.

It is my view that the Romantic poets were articulating an essential truth about human nature and about reality. While we have made huge progress in terms of our scientific knowledge of how the world operates and our world has become an easier place in which to live through the achievements of technology, there is in human nature a longing for meaning and significance. We are aware of our finitude and we are open to transcendent values, whether expressed through poetry and art, or through religion and music. In the rest of this lecture I will examine this openness to the transcendent to see if we can find within this aspect of our nature good reasons to believe.

OPENNESS TO THE TRANSCENDENT

Aristotle defined human beings as rational animals. There is much truth to this definition but it is perhaps not entirely complete as a definition of human nature. The contemporary philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre takes Aristotle's definition further by stating that we are dependent rational animals. By this he wants to show that while science easily leads to our viewing of ourselves as rational and self-sufficient beings, we are always dependent beings. This notion has often been expressed through the idea of contingency. This is the view that we cannot account for our being through our own being, that we are dependent on some other even for our existence. A proper understanding of ourselves as contingent and dependent beings can already open us to the notion of transcendent values that help to shape our being.

One immediate truth that becomes apparent through a sense of our contingent dependent nature is that human beings did not create themselves. This in itself is enough to provide us with a sense of wonder at the very fact of existence. The 20th century philosopher Heidegger makes this same point when he states that it is not **how** the world exists but **that** the world exists that is the real source of astonishment. The fact that there is something rather than nothing can already evoke in us a sense that the world is wonderful, that there is beauty and meaning and value to be found in the simple fact of existence.

To be human then is to take note of the sense of wonder that emerges whenever we come to a deep realisation of our contingency and dependence. This same sense of wonder has a remarkable ability to create in human beings the idea that there are significant objective values that allow us to flourish as human beings in a world of mutual dependency. Values such as love, compassion, mercy, truth, justice courage, endurance and fidelity are often seen not just as moral choices but as values that express our true human nature.

One can reasonably argue that precisely this sense of our own contingency and of the values that help to add meaning to our existence tell us something that is fundamentally true about human life. It suggests that by nature we are open to the transcendent, to the fullness of life which is made valuable precisely through our dependency.

We are dependent and vulnerable creatures who achieve fulfilment and happiness through values, such as love, truth and beauty, which best express our proper human nature. If one accepts this understanding of reality then one can be immediately struck by the extent to which religious belief offers a home for our deepest longings. Theism, in its traditional form as found in the three great Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, suggests that there is a real match or fit between our hopes and dreams for a fulfilled life and our idea of God as the source and the destiny of human life.

According to this view, our human nature is such that we can only find true happiness and fulfilment when we are able to acknowledge God as the ultimate source of our existence and future destiny. This is most famously expressed by St Augustine in his statement: You have made us for yourselves O Lord, and our hearts are restless till they rest in you. This belief is of course based on a huge impulse of trust that the world and each human life is ultimately meaningful because, as Wordsworth claims, God is our home.

The possibility is here for us to find life both meaningful and filled with value. We can respond to the beauty of our natural world with a sense of communion and thankfulness. We can feel ourselves in close relation to our fellow human beings and find a call to morally responsible behaviour, caring for the weak and the needy, building relationships based on respect and justice.

Of course it may be argued that simply because human beings have a sense of the transcendent and a sense of wonder and beauty, along with a sense of moral duty, does not prove that there is anything objectively real beyond our subjective feelings. This point has to be conceded. Our feelings of awe and wonder, our feelings of dependency and the impulse towards the transcendent do not succeed in proving the existence of God as both the source of our being and our ultimate destiny.

Many 20th century philosophers, especially those of the existentialist approach have described human life as basically absurd because we have these longings for meaning and transcendence in a world that is ultimately meaningless and without purpose. Camus, in his **Myth of Sisyphus**, tells the story of a man condemned to spend eternity rolling a rock up

a steep mountain. Each time he reaches the summit of the mountain the rock rolls down again and he has to start the whole process again. Forever and ever. So, for Camus, each of us spends our whole life trying to create meaning in a world that lacks meaning. So our life is just as absurd as that of Sisyphus. And it is that absurdity which grants to human beings a tragic dignity.

BELIEF IN THE REALITY OF THE TRANSCENDENT

At this point I believe we come to a crucial crossroads in terms of how we are to describe and understand reality. The poets and the artists offer us a view of human life based on the concepts of beauty, truth, wonder and transcendence. But we have no guarantee that these aspects of human life relate to something necessarily true about being itself. It may be that our longing for value and meaning is nothing other than an expression of our tragic dignity in an essentially heartless meaningless world. But it might also be that these deepest human longings for value and love and meaning themselves indicate something true about reality. It can be maintained that our human nature itself points to transcendent truths about reality and our place within the world. The crossroad is reached and points in two directions. Either life is meaningful or not. Either there is value and purpose in the universe or there is not. Making a choice about which road to take, which approach to accept, itself involves an act of faith even prior to the question of whether or not to understand the world and our being in religious terms.

For myself at least, I am happy to take the risk of believing that life is meaningful. I am happy to believe that there is value in our world, and that as human beings we can be open to the truth of values such as truth, beauty and goodness. I am committed to the view that our best human values point us beyond ourselves to a sustaining source of being as the ultimate truth and beauty and goodness of the world.

The idea of a unitary source of meaning and truth in beauty in the world has ancient roots. Both Plato and Aristotle in different ways accepted this view, and argued that human beings could not achieve fullness of being or happiness until they understood the source of meaning and all being as God. Christian thinkers were happy to make use of the ideas of Plato and Aristotle to suggest that the truth of God found in revelation is in harmony with what philosophy can tell us about human nature. The Christian thinker who offers us the clearest arguments to reconcile faith in God and human reason is Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). His views might still today offer us a way of answering the question why we should believe.

AQUINAS AND THE FIVE WAYS

Aquinas was a noted philosopher and theologian of the Middle Ages. He attempted to show that given our human nature as contingent beings who cannot account for ourselves, we can even through reason come to the truth about nature, and that the existence of God is a rationally possible account of the truth of both our existence and our openness to the transcendent. In the famous argument of the five ways he offered not philosophical **proofs** of the existence of God but rather **demonstrations**, based on our own human experience, to suggest that the existence of God is not only plausible but indeed offers us a satisfactory explanation of our human existence and all that is implied by that.

The First Way: Argument from Motion

1. Our senses prove that some things are in motion.
2. Things move when potential motion becomes actual motion.
3. Only an actual motion can convert a potential motion into an actual motion.
4. Nothing can be at once in both actuality and potentiality in the same respect (i.e., if both actual and potential, it is actual in one respect and potential in another).
5. Therefore nothing can move itself.
6. Therefore each thing in motion is moved by something else.
7. The sequence of motion cannot extend *ad infinitum*.
8. Therefore it is necessary to arrive at a first mover, put in motion by no other; and this everyone understands to be God.

The Second Way: Argument from Efficient Causes

1. We perceive a series of efficient causes of things in the world.
2. Nothing exists prior to itself.
3. Therefore nothing is the efficient cause of itself.
4. If a previous efficient cause does not exist, neither does the thing that results.
5. Therefore if the first thing in a series does not exist, nothing in the series exists.
6. The series of efficient causes cannot extend *ad infinitum* into the past, for then there would be no things existing now.
7. Therefore it is necessary to admit a first efficient cause, to which everyone gives the name of God.

The Third Way: Argument from Possibility and Necessity

1. We find in nature things that are possible to be and not to be, that come into being and go out of being i.e., contingent beings.
2. Assume that every being is a contingent being.
3. For each contingent being, there is a time it does not exist.
4. Therefore it is impossible for these always to exist.
5. Therefore there could have been a time when no things existed.
6. Therefore at that time there would have been nothing to bring the currently existing contingent beings into existence.
7. Therefore, nothing would be in existence now.
8. We have reached an absurd result from assuming that every being is a contingent being.
9. Therefore not every being is a contingent being.
10. Therefore some being exists of its own necessity, and does not receive its existence from another being, but rather causes them. This all men speak of as God.

The Fourth Way: Argument from Gradation of Being

1. There is a gradation to be found in things: some are better or worse than others.
2. Predications of degree require reference to the “uttermost” case (e.g., a thing is said to be hotter according as it more nearly resembles that which is hottest).
3. The maximum in any genus is the cause of all in that genus.
4. Therefore there must also be something which is to all beings the cause of their being, goodness, and every other perfection; and this we call God.

The Fifth Way: Argument from Design

1. We see that natural bodies work toward some goal, and do not do so by chance.
2. Most natural things lack knowledge.
3. But as an arrow reaches its target because it is directed by an archer, what lacks intelligence achieves goals by being directed by something intelligence.
4. Therefore some intelligent being exists by whom all natural things are directed to their end; and this being we call God.

We see here that Aquinas offers only philosophical reasons to suggest the reasonableness of religious belief. It is his view that any human person reflecting rationally on human experience will be led to the clear knowledge that God exists, and is the source of our being and our final goal, which is eternal happiness. However, he demands that we be careful about what is actually being said in his five ways. He makes it very clear that as human beings we can know **that** God exists, but that we cannot, unaided, know **what** God is like. For that we depend on God revealing his nature to us, which in terms of Christian faith, is understood to have taken place in the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Revelation is what allows us to move from the philosophical idea of a Supreme Being who is the source of being to the notion of God as loving Creator who is in personal relation with each of us, and leading us to the fullness of life in His love.

Aquinas is therefore arguing that self-reflection will lead us to the idea of God as source of all being and the ultimate explanation of all being. In other words, he is claiming that there are true objective reasons for us to believe in God. Aquinas was just as concerned as Feuerbach, Marx and Freud about the dangers of creating God in our own image, or in using God as an unreflective response to the dangers of human life. But rather than deny the existence of God, he argues instead that we have very good reason to believe in God. What are some of the implications of taking Aquinas' approach to the existence of God?

One of the most important implications is the firm denial of relativism. If an eternal, necessary being exists and is the source of all order and truth in the world, then we cannot at the same time claim that truth is relative, or that morality and ethics are entirely subjective. This relativism is often highlighted by Pope Benedict XVI as one of the most devastating results of the loss of faith in the western world.

Another significant aspect of finding that we have reasons for religious belief is that we are able to ground our intuitions and feelings about ethics, the good life, the moral demands made on us as stemming from some objective truthful source rather than seeing them as contingent inclinations and desires without a proper base in the true nature of things. This allowed Aquinas for example to develop a marvelous approach to ethics as based on the natural law, on our being the kind of beings that we are by nature.

Aquinas therefore highlights that we have very good reason to believe in God, reasons that are philosophically resilient and consistent. He claims that religious belief provides us with a framework that makes sense of human experience, one that frees us from the absurdity of a meaninglessness and empty existence.

We can conclude therefore that it is possible to find good and consistent reasons to suggest that God is the best and most adequate explanation for being, the beginning and end of all that is. We do have reasons to believe.

The existence of God can be proved in five ways.

The first and more manifest way is the argument from motion. It is certain, and evident to our senses, that in the world some things are in motion. Now whatever is in motion is put in motion by another, for nothing can be in motion except it is in potentiality to that towards which it is in motion; whereas a thing moves inasmuch as it is in act. For motion is nothing else than the reduction of something from potentiality to actuality. But nothing can be reduced from potentiality to actuality, except by something in a state of actuality. Thus that which is actually hot, as fire, makes wood, which is potentially hot, to be actually hot, and thereby moves and changes it. Now it is not possible that the same thing should be at once in actuality and potentiality in the same respect, but only in different respects. For what is actually hot cannot simultaneously be potentially hot; but it is simultaneously potentially cold. It is therefore impossible that in the same respect and in the same way a thing should be both mover and moved, i.e. that it should move itself. Therefore, whatever is in motion must be put in motion by another. If that by which it is put in motion be itself put in motion, then this also must needs be put in motion by another, and that by another again. But this cannot go on to infinity, because then there would be no first mover, and, consequently, no other mover; seeing that subsequent movers move only inasmuch as they are put in motion by the first mover; as the staff moves only because it is put in motion by the hand. Therefore it is necessary to arrive at a first mover, put in motion by no other; and this everyone understands to be God.

The second way is from the nature of the efficient cause. In the world of sense we find there is an order of efficient causes. There is no case known (neither is it, indeed, possible) in which a thing is found to be the efficient cause of itself; for so it would be prior to itself, which is impossible. Now in efficient causes it is not possible to go on to infinity, because in all efficient causes following in order, the first is the cause of the intermediate cause, and the intermediate is the cause of the ultimate cause, whether the intermediate cause be several, or only one. Now to take away the cause is to take away the effect. Therefore, if there be no first cause among efficient causes, there will be no ultimate, nor any intermediate cause. But if in efficient causes it is possible to go on to infinity, there will be no first efficient cause, neither will there be an ultimate effect, nor any intermediate efficient causes; all of which is plainly false. Therefore it is necessary to admit a first efficient cause, to which everyone gives the name of God.

The third way is taken from possibility and necessity, and runs thus. We find in nature things that are possible to be and not to be, since they are found to be generated, and to corrupt, and consequently, they are possible to be and not to be. But it is impossible for these always to exist, for that which is possible not to be at some time is not. Therefore, if everything is possible not to be, then at one time there could have been nothing in existence. Now if this were true, even now there would be nothing in existence, because that which does not exist only begins to exist by something already existing. Therefore, if at one time nothing was in existence, it would have been impossible for anything to have begun to exist; and thus even now nothing would be in existence — which is absurd. Therefore, not all beings are merely possible, but there must exist something the existence of which is necessary. But every necessary thing either has its necessity caused by another, or not. Now it is impossible to go on to infinity in necessary things which have their necessity caused by another, as has been already proved in regard to efficient causes. Therefore we cannot but postulate the existence of some being having of itself its own necessity, and not receiving it from another, but rather causing in others their necessity. This all men speak of as God.

The fourth way is taken from the gradation to be found in things. Among beings there are some more and some less good, true, noble and the like. But "more" and "less" are predicated of different things, according as they resemble in their different ways something which is the maximum, as a thing is said to be hotter according as it more nearly resembles that which is hottest; so that there is something which is truest, something best, something noblest and, consequently, something which is uttermost being; for those things that are greatest in truth are greatest in being, as it is written in *Metaph. ii*. Now the maximum in any genus is the cause of all in that genus; as fire, which is the maximum heat, is the cause of all hot things. Therefore there must also be something which is to all beings the cause of their being, goodness, and every other perfection; and this we call God.

The fifth way is taken from the governance of the world. We see that things which lack intelligence, such as natural bodies, act for an end, and this is evident from their acting always, or nearly always, in the same way, so as to obtain the best result. Hence it is plain that not fortuitously, but designedly, do they achieve their end. Now whatever lacks intelligence cannot move towards an end, unless it be directed by some being endowed with knowledge and intelligence; as the arrow is shot to its mark by the archer. Therefore some intelligent being exists by whom all natural things are directed to their end; and this being we call God.