

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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## A PHILOSOPHER THINKS ABOUT GOD

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**D**oes God exist? Do you believe in God? These are questions that most people answer -- affirmatively or negatively -- without giving them much thought. Their answers stem from habits of belief or disbelief, from childhood conditioning, from emotional yearnings or aversions, but not from sustained reasoning or reflective thought.

Do we have reason to believe that God exists? Can reasons be given for our belief in God? These are questions that cannot be answered without a great deal of thought.

Philosophers have tried to answer them since Greek antiquity. From Plato and Aristotle right down to the present century, every philosopher of eminence has tried his hand at it -- arguing not for or against God's existence, but for or against the reasonableness of the belief that there exists in reality a being that corresponds to our

notion of God. And in our century, eminent scientists, toward the end of their lives, have had their say about it, too.

So far as thinking goes, it is not an easy matter. In fact, it is one of the most difficult problems to think clearly and cogently about. I have spent more than fifty years of my philosophical life thinking about how to think about God; and now, toward the end of it, I feel that I have at last found out how to come up with a solution that makes belief in God's existence reasonable -at least beyond a reasonable doubt.

Since I was a student at Columbia University in 1921, when I first read the "Treatise on God" in the Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas, I have been fascinated by arguments for God's existence. If one likes to think, the two great subject to put one's mind to work on are mathematical physics and speculative theology. And, in our century, the advances in physics and cosmology help us in our thinking about God. If the human mind can infer the existence of such imperceptible and even undetectable physical things as black holes, perhaps it can reach a bit further to infer the existence of a being that lies beyond the whole of physical reality.

For fifty years I have worked over the arguments for God's existence again and again, reading and re-reading the books of the great philosophers and theologians. But at every stage of my own intellectual development, I have found grave faults in what I thought earlier. I mistaught class after class of college students who, at various stages in my career, I tried to persuade that this or that argument did the trick, only to discover later that these arguments were full of holes and wouldn't stand up.

Once a student properly gave me my comeuppance. Conducting a seminar on Aquinas's "Treatise on God, " I announced to the class that until I had succeeded in persuading every one present that Aquinas had demonstrated God's existence, I would not move on to other questions about God's nature and attributes. One by one they gave in -- either from conviction or plain weariness -- but one, Charles Adams, indomitably held out.

Finally, my colleague in the course, Professor Malcolm Sharp called a halt and suggested that, instead of sticking to my guns, I should tell the students about Aquinas's life. So I told them of this robust and remarkable mediaeval monk and scholar who churned out, in a career of less than 20 years, works of the highest intellectual quality, which would fill much more than a five-foot shelf. He did this without the convenience of a typewriter, electric lights, a

decent library, and all the while travelling back and forth on mule-back across the Alps from Paris to Rome.

When I finished, Charles Adams spoke up. "You should have told us all this about Aquinas to begin with," he said, "instead of wasting our time with those no-good arguments." When I asked him, "Why?" he replied: "Because, obviously, Aquinas could not have done all that without God's help! "

In the two score years since I gave up college teaching, I have delivered elaborate lectures about the proofs of God's existence to popular audiences all over the country. I mention this fact because the experience has taught me how widespread and intense is the popular interest in the subject.

Announce a lecture on the proof of God's existence and you get a standing room only audience, even if, as happened once in Chicago, a Marilyn Monroe film is playing in the theatre right next door. No other subject attracts as much attention or sustains it as well. When the lecture builds up to the statement of a proof, you can hear a pin drop in the hall.

Let me say one more thing about these popular audiences and the lectures I gave. The audiences included people who already believed in God by virtue of their, religious faith. Their interest was in learning if reason, quite apart from faith, can support their belief. The audiences also included people who did not believe in God but were sufficiently openminded to be interested in learning whether thinking, totally unaided by faith, can produce reasons for belief. The lectures I gave tried to satisfy both parts of the audience by approaching the question of God's existence in the light of reason alone and without any help or guidance from religious faith.

In the course of the last 40 years, the lecture got better and better, but never good enough. At least, it never satisfied me, even though it sometimes appeared to satisfy the audience. I knew better than they did that the thinking still fell short of its goal. Only in the last couple of years have I finally reached home. That is why I have at last published a book on the subject, the writing of which I have been putting off for more than a quarter of a century.

To boil my best thinking about God down to its bare essentials, I will confine myself to the two steps one must take with one's mind. The first of these is to hold before one's mind the clearest notion one can form of God, so as to be able to use the word "God" with maximum precision. The second step is to formulate the question

to which God is the one and only answer. There is a third step which I will mention before I close. Rather, I should say: there is a third phase of good thinking about God which consists in acknowledging a step which one's mind would like to take but which reason simply cannot manage.

What meaning do we give to the word "God"? What notion do we have in mind when we use that word? An 11th-century archbishop of Canterbury, St. Anselm, discovered the way to answer that question. When we think about God, are we not thinking about a being than which no greater can be thought of? Thinking about God, must we not be thinking of the supreme being – the being Anselm so adroitly and precisely described by his formula: "the being than which we can think of no greater"?

Realizing that we must answer these questions affirmatively leads us to recognize other affirmations we are compelled to make. We must think of the supreme being as one that really exists, not just one that exists only in our minds.

As Anselm pointed out, if the God we are thinking of existed only in our minds and not in reality, then we would not be thinking of a truly supreme being. A million dollars that we have in the bank has more being and more power than a million dollars we may only have in our dreams of wealth. To exist in reality as well as in the mind is to have more and greater existence.

That is why we must think of the supreme being as having existence in reality. So far Anselm was completely right, and right he was also in insisting that the kind of real existence to be attributed to the supreme being must be one without beginning or end. His only error lay in supposing that from the fact that we must think of the supreme being as having real existence, it follows that the supreme being must have real existence. The second "must" simply does not follow from the first.

However, a number of other things do follow. The kind of real existence we must attribute to the supreme being is not only eternal or everlasting, but also one that does not depend upon the existence of anything else and is not limited by the power of anything else. In short, we must think of God, the supreme being, as independent and infinite. Nor would God be the being than which no greater can be thought of unless God must also be thought of as omnipotent and omniscient.

With this notion of God before our minds, we are now prepared to take the second step in our thinking. That consists in asking the one right question to which the only answer is God. Many attempts have been made to find this question. Failure to find it has produced faulty arguments for God's existence.

The one right question is simply this: Why is there something rather than nothing? The undoubted existence of the world -- the cosmos as a whole -- provides us with the undeniable fact that something does exist. But there might have been nothing at all. So far as we know and understand the nature of the world, it does not have in itself a sufficient reason for its own existence. It is but one of many possible worlds that might have been. Actual world though it is, it might have been different in a large number of respects.

The clinching step in the reasoning comes next. Whatever might have been otherwise than it is, such as the world in which we live, might also not exist at all. In place of the world, there might just be nothing. Why, then, is there something rather than nothing?

The only answer to that question is the creative action of a supreme being whose omnipotence includes the power to do what only an infinite being can do -- make something out of nothing, or prevent something that exists from ceasing to exist and being replaced by nothingness instead.

I have used the word "creative." In the strict meaning of that term, no finite being can be creative. Creation consists in making something ex nihilo out of nothing. The strict synonym for "creation" is "ex-nihilation." Human beings produce many things, but they never exnihilate, because whatever they make, they make out of something rather than nothing.

Even if the world has always existed and never began, which so far as science and philosophy can tell may be the case, its present existence -- its existence at this very moment and at every moment of its enduring existence -requires that it be preserved, kept from being replaced by nothingness. The only explanation of its preservation in existence is the "ex-nihilating" action of God.

So far our philosophical thinking can carry us, but no further. The God we have found reason to believe in lacks one essential feature of the God who is worshipped in the three great religions of the West -- an overflowing love for His creatures. The crucial defect of philosophical thinking about God is that it is not able to show us


that the supreme being, whose creative action explains the world's existence, is also benevolently disposed toward mankind.

Failing that, reason cannot bridge and cross the chasm to the warm world in which there is love and friendship between God and man. The best thinking philosophy can do leaves us out in the cold.

Disappointed that philosophy can do no better in its thinking about God, people may be impelled to dismiss it with a shrug and a "Well, then, what of it?" That is a good question and there is a good answer to it.

The leap of faith that carries one across the chasm is not, as is generally supposed, a leap from no grounds for believing in God to the attainment of such belief.

Rather it is a leap from a reasonable belief in God's existence (the attainment of which is certainly a remarkable achievement of the human mind) to a belief that lies beyond all reason -- belief in a just, merciful and loving God, and in His benevolent care and concern for man.

Philosophical thinking is not to be dismissed as futile because it cannot go the whole way in support of religious faith. On the contrary, it should be honored all the more for having acknowledged its limitations and making crystal clear the final step that only a leap of faith can take. 

***We welcome your comments, questions, or suggestions.***

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