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GREAT IDEAS FROM THE GREAT BOOKS

Mortimer J. Adler

PART V

Questions About Theology and Metaphysics

52. THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN FAITH AND REASON

Dear Dr. Adler,

People always appeal to experience, reason, or faith in support of their beliefs. I understand what reason and experience are, but what is faith? Is it an arbitrary impulse or surge of emotion? Does it go contrary to all reason and experience, or can it be reconciled with them? What do the great thinkers have to say about faith?

P. L. F.

Dear P. L. F.,

We may find some of the meanings of the term “faith” by listening to our common speech. For instance, we say of a friend, “I have faith in him,” or “I believe in him.” We also say, “I believe what he says,” or simply “I believe him.” In the first case, we affirm trust in or loyalty to a person. In the second case, we assent to certain statements. Both senses of “faith” are expressed in the Bible and in post-Biblical writings.

In the Old Testament, the term “faith” has the sense of absolute steadfastness, assurance, and loyalty. This firm adherence to God, “the Everlasting Rock,” is expressed throughout the Psalms and the Prophets. In the New Testament, the meaning of personal trust and assurance in God is combined with the meaning of assent to the Gospel message about Jesus and his works. There is also an emphasis on faith as a divine gift which enables the believer to lead a righteous life.

The great theologians and philosophers of the early and medieval Church are aware of faith as personal trust and adherence. However, their main attention is directed to faith as an assent to definite statements—the “articles of faith.” It is faith as knowledge and its relation to other sources of knowledge that is their concern.

Some early Christian thinkers consider faith and reason contradictory and irreconcilable. But the main line of Christian thought before the Reformation is that faith and reason complement each

other. Augustine holds that faith illumines the mind and enables reason to grasp the essential truths about all reality. “I believe in order that I may understand” is the way he puts it. Faith is not against reason, for Augustine. It is before it and beyond it. It inspires the intellect to carry on its work.

Similarly, Thomas Aquinas holds that natural reason requires the direction and support of religious faith to obtain truth in its fullness. For Aquinas, faith involves both the intellect and the will. In the act of belief, the intellect is determined to assent by an act of the will. To believe is “to think with assent.” In scientific knowledge, the intellect also assents to definite propositions. But in the act of faith, the decision to assent comes from the will, while in scientific knowledge, the intellect assents of itself to what is demonstrably true.

A man *may or may not* assent to the essential doctrines of the Christian religion. Whether he does or does not is a matter of his will—of personal decision, not of intellectual perception alone. But in scientific matters, the intellect *must* assent to what is either self-evident or demonstrably true.

Aquinas holds that reason can attain certain basic truths about God’s existence and nature, but that faith makes man’s grasp of these truths both more certain and more readily attainable. He holds, further, that full knowledge about God and man’s way to ultimate salvation requires faith in divine revelation. Such faith, according to Aquinas, is a gift of God’s grace. That is why faith, along with hope and charity, is called a theological or supernatural virtue.

Other Christian thinkers consider human reason incapable of attaining truths about God and hold that man’s basic religious knowledge comes through faith alone. Luther emphasizes the passive aspect of faith as an unearned gift of divine grace, which regenerates and enlightens man. Before this happens, man and his natural faculties are corrupt and blind, incapable of apprehending any truths about God.

All these religious writers, however, would distinguish faith from what William James calls “the will to believe.” For James the philosopher, whether or not we hold certain basic religious beliefs is entirely a matter of our own free will. For the theologians, God himself is the ultimate source of our will to believe when we believe in the things that God has revealed to man.

53. THE PROOF OF GOD'S EXISTENCE

Dear Dr. Adler,

It seems to me that religion and philosophy might be reconciled if there were some commonly accepted proof of the existence of God. Do the great philosophers in our tradition reach any agreement on the existence of God and how his existence can be rationally proved? What are the main philosophic views on this basically important question?

R. C.

Dear R. C.,

There is no agreement among the authors of the great books concerning the existence of God, any more than there is agreement on any other important problem. Some of them think that God's existence can be proved; some that it cannot be proved. And even those who think God's existence can be proved differ greatly in the proofs they employ.

We can divide the proofs for God's existence into two major types. One is the so-called "ontological argument." It is also called an *a priori* proof, because it depends in no way on our experience but only on our conception of God. According to Anselm, God cannot be conceived except as the supreme being; in other words, as "a being than which nothing greater can be conceived." Such a being, he maintains, not only must exist in the understanding, but must also have *real* existence. To support this contention, Anselm asks us to consider the consequences of supposing that God does not really exist but is only a conception in our minds.

If that than which nothing greater can be conceived, he explains, were to exist in the understanding alone, then it would lack the perfection of real existence. Hence it would not be the supreme being that we set out to conceive. Therefore, Anselm concludes, the supreme being must exist in reality as well as in the mind. A slightly different version of this argument is offered by Descartes in his *Meditations*.

Aquinas rejects this argument. In his view it amounts to saying that God's existence is self-evident to us, which he does not think is the case. The argument may show that we are unable to conceive a supreme being without conceiving such a being as having real existence; but Aquinas, and later Kant, maintain that we cannot validly

infer God's existence from the fact that it is impossible for us to think of a supreme being without thinking that such a being must exist.

The second main type of argument for God's existence consists of all the causal or *a posteriori* proofs. These are all arguments from effects to causes. They are *a posteriori* in the sense that they start from the known facts of real existence, and from them infer the existence of a cause which conforms to our notion of God.

Let me give you one example of this mode of reasoning. We observe that the things of this world come to be and pass away. This leads us to see that their natures are such that it is possible for them *not* to exist. This would not be the case if their existence followed from their natures. Hence something outside their natures must be the cause of their existence—that is, of course, if we accept the proposition that everything which exists or happens must have a cause of its existence or happening.

What can be the cause of the existence of that which does not exist of its own nature? Another thing of the same sort? Hardly; because if such a thing does not exist of its own nature, it cannot cause the existence of anything else. If this last statement is true, then it follows that the cause must be found in a being which exists by the very nature of what it is. But such a being is what we conceive God to be; that is, a supreme being the absolute perfection of which involves existence.

The validity of this mode of argument is rejected by those who think that the world as a whole does not come into being or pass away and so does not need a cause of its existence. It is also questioned by those who think that we cannot use the principle of causation to infer the existence of causes beyond our experience from the existence of effects within our experience.

Philosophers, such as Hume and Kant, who reject both the ontological and the causal arguments for the existence of God, tend to be agnostics rather than atheists. While denying that we can know God's existence by the evidence of reason or experience, they do not deny that God exists. Our belief in God, in their view, comes not from reason or experience but from other sources. For Hume, the source is "faith and divine revelation." For Kant, God's existence is a matter of rational faith, a postulate of the practical reason. "It is morally necessary," he says, "to assume the existence of God."

54. THE EXISTENCE AND NATURE OF ANGELS

Dear Dr. Adler,

The idea of angels interests me. Where did the idea originate? What exactly is an angel? Is it a purely mythical being? Is there any rational justification for the idea?

A. W. D.

Dear A. W. D.,

The original meaning of the term “angel” is “messenger.” In the Bible, angels are the messengers God employs to communicate his will to man.

In earlier Biblical writings, “the angel of the Lord” consoles Hagar, restrains Abraham from sacrificing Isaac, speaks to Moses from the burning bush. In such cases the angel is practically the sensible presence of God.

In later Biblical writings, angels are clearly intermediary beings who act as messengers from God to man. Such is the role performed by Gabriel and Michael in their appearance to Daniel, and by Gabriel in the Annunciation to Mary.

In all of these cases, angels are the agents whereby God manifests his will and power in the world. In the earlier accounts, angels are often seen in human form visiting and living with men. Angels’ wings, symbolizing their role as messengers, and the angelic halo, symbolizing spirituality, are additions of later ages. Later Judaism set up a graded hierarchy of angels which included cherubim and seraphim and distinguished archangels from the other angels. In Christianity, the angelic hierarchy was expanded to nine orders: Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones, Dominations, Virtues, Powers, Principalities, Archangels, Angels.

The rich material of religious tradition, expressed in highly colored and elaborate imagery, was subjected to methodical interpretation by the medieval theologians. The theologians were aided by the previous speculation of Greek philosophers on the existence and nature of immaterial beings. Plato, for one, affirms the existence of a realm of eternal ideas beyond the changing, sensible world of physical things.

Theologians employ this basic philosophical framework to interpret traditional religious beliefs about angels. Aquinas, for instance, who wrote a whole treatise on the angels, defines them as immaterial and unchanging substances. But for him, unlike Plato, they are not eternal ideas, but created beings—pure intelligences existing apart from matter.

Most modern thinkers ridicule any consideration of angels as utterly useless speculation about purely imaginary things. Whatever we may think about the actual existence of angels, however, we may find the idea of angels illuminating in our thought about the world. Speculation about a realm of immaterial creatures—of pure minds or spirits—may help us to understand better the world of matter in which our minds and spirits are immersed.

The speculation of philosophers about utopian—purely ideal—human communities helps us to understand the actual political and social order. Similarly, speculation about the nature of angels may tell us a good deal about human nature. For instance, angels, if they exist, are supposed to have immediate, intuitive knowledge of things, and the society of angels is entirely governed by the law of love. This should indicate to us the type of knowledge and the kind of society which are not available to creatures made up, as we are, of both flesh and spirit. It is just as important for us to understand that we cannot know or live like angels as it is to know that we should not act like beasts.

Of course, angels are not merely useful hypotheses for philosophical speculation. The term “angel” has an essentially religious meaning. In the Biblical tradition, angels are a matter of concrete experience. Hagar, Abraham, Moses, and Mary hearken not to hypotheses but to the messengers of God.

55. THE NATURE OF THE SOUL

Dear Dr. Adler,

The term “soul” seems very vague to me. It doesn’t seem to have any definite meaning, or, rather, it seems to have many meanings, differing with the person who uses it. What exactly does the term “soul” mean for the great thinkers in our tradition?

M. S.

Dear M. S.,

The word “soul” originally meant the animating principle that gives life to things. The literal meaning of the word in many languages is “breath” or “life.” The Book of Genesis refers to animals as “living souls,” and Aristotle ascribes souls to vegetables and animals as well as to men. Plato thinks that the whole universe has a soul, which makes it a “living creature.” For the ancient Greeks, the heavenly bodies, too, have souls, which give them life and movement.

For us, a more familiar meaning of the term is “mind,” which is usually ascribed to man alone. For some thinkers, soul as “mind” may include rational thought, intuition, sensation, imagination, memory, feelings, emotions—all the psychological functions. For other thinkers, soul as “mind” means rational thought alone, which is the essence of man. Descartes, for example, regards the soul as a thinking substance, not a living being.

A third meaning of the term “soul” is “self,” the principle of personal identity. This meaning of soul is expressed by idealist philosophers such as Berkeley and Kant. It is also expressed, though with a quite different emphasis, in the Bible. In the Old Testament, a man’s soul is his personality as a whole.

Apart from the Old Testament and a few philosophers, Western thinkers distinguish between the soul and the body as the immaterial and the material. They disagree, however, on how the body and the soul are related.

Plato and Descartes, for example, think that the soul is a distinct entity, essentially separable from the body. Plato says the body is a prison house from which the soul escapes when the body dies. In this view, man is composed of two separate substances—body and soul.

On the other hand, Aristotle thinks that man is a single substance, composed integrally of body and soul. Aristotle *sees* the relation between body and soul as similar to that between matter and form. The unity of body and soul in living beings is like that of clay and shape in a pot. The shape makes the clay this definitely shaped pot, and the soul makes living matter a man or plant or animal.

Since the nineteenth century, many thinkers, especially psychologists and social scientists, have considered the notion of soul or spirit as illusory or useless. Modern psychologists have developed a psychology without a psyche, that is, without a soul. William

James, foremost among modern empirical psychologists, says that he finds the concept of soul useless in explaining psychological processes.

James and other modern critics of the idea of soul usually have in mind the rarefied idealist notion of soul as a thinking substance. But, as we have seen, that is only one of the ways in which men have viewed the soul. The critics have not paid attention to the notion of soul as the animating and formative principle of living things. Aristotle, who gives classical expression to this view, was an empirical biologist and psychologist, as well as a philosopher. He was interested in explaining the concrete world of actuality, not in playing with empty abstractions.

56. THE PROBLEM OF IMMORTALITY

Dear Dr. Adler,

The survival of the individual after death seems to have been a common belief in former ages. I can understand why men desired personal immortality, but I find it hard to conceive just what they had in mind. Was it the soul or some other immortal element that was supposed to survive the death of the body? But how can there be a soul or mind apart from the body?

A. J. A.

Dear A. J. A.,

Belief in immortality depends on a certain view of the human soul. If the soul, or its essential element, is thought to be immaterial and capable of existence apart from the body, it is also thought to be imperishable. However, those who believe in the immortality of the soul differ about what it consists in. There are three main theories.

One is that the soul returns to its original source (Spirit, God, etc.) at death. According to this theory, the individual soul does not survive as such. It becomes a part of the whole from which it was temporarily separated.

Another theory is that the individual soul has always existed and will always exist. It is eternal, like God. The soul goes through an endless series of existences, occupying a different body in each existence. This doctrine of transmigration or reincarnation was

widely held in the ancient world. Plato gives it classical expression in Western philosophy.

The third approach, and the one most familiar to us, is the Christian doctrine that the individual soul is immortal but not eternal. It did not always exist but it will always exist. It comes into existence by divine creation. It is uniquely infused into one human body, but it can exist separately from that body and survives that body after its death.

The Christian doctrine is completed by the notion of the resurrection of the body at the Last Judgment. This is made necessary by the Christian idea of the unity—and interdependence—of body and soul. In this respect the Christian notion of immortality differs from the Platonic, which views the soul as a spiritual substance completely independent of the body and alone worthy of judgment and redemption.

Philosophers offer various arguments for immortality. Plato argues that the soul is a purely spiritual substance, simple and without parts, and hence imperishable. The soul literally “animates” the body, is the principle of life, and cannot itself perish. Aristotle holds that the intellectual aspect of the soul may be separable from the body, since what the intellect knows is immaterial and eternal. Aquinas follows Aristotle’s argument to show that the soul as a whole exists apart from the body after death, but he also appeals to the soul’s “natural inclination to be united to the body” in arguing for the resurrection of the body.

Another type of argument for immortality has been the moral one. This life is not sufficient to mete out perfect justice. For that an afterlife with eternal rewards and punishments is necessary. In one of Plato’s dialogues, the soul stands naked before the divine judge, revealing the marks of evil the dead man has done in this life. Virgil portrays an Elysium for the blessed and a Tartarus for the damned. And we encounter similar descriptions and prophecies in the New Testament.

Immortality is not always conceived in terms of the endless existence of the individual human soul. Spinoza attributes immortality to the individual who achieves participation in eternity through his knowledge, or “intellectual love,” of God. Plato and Aristotle recognize that men seek immortality in their descendants or in their creative works. Indeed, the ages have put Plato and Aristotle themselves among the “immortals.”

The mode of immortality may be perpetuation through one's progeny, survival in the memory of mankind, through the knowledge of God, or in the subsistence of the individual soul. But whatever the mode, man's desire for immortality expresses his dread of disappearance into utter nothingness. He feels a need to be joined with the enduring, the eternal, and a revulsion against total annihilation.

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